

THE BOX

When I found Diana in the box it seemed as if it had been empty longer than usual, but maybe that was just my imagination. It's not really a box, more like a wall oven lined with blankets, with a door on the outside of the building and one on our side. It reminds me of a pass through at a high security prison, or a delivery window, which I guess it is. Anyone who brings a baby to us pulls down the outer door and lays the baby inside. They ring a buzzer, and in a minute or two one of us will come down and check the box. In the time it takes us to get there, the deliverer can make a quick getaway like a school kid playing a prank.

It's a system designed around that idea, the idea of being anonymous, but next to the box is a hanging plastic bag of bar-coded bracelets. In case you're unsure, if you think you might want to come back and claim the baby, you can split a pair of them, and we'll fasten one around the baby's ankle. It's adjustable, so in theory your baby can wear that bracelet into adulthood. And if you show up with the matching bar code, you get your baby back, no questions asked. In theory. But no one ever takes them.

It was my turn to go down and check, that day. As always I heard the faintest ticking as I approached, but it faded into the gasping noises she made. Sounding like she was working herself up into a good loud cry, except I opened the door and she must have seen my big ugly smile looking down on her, blocking out the overhead fluorescents. Most of the mad pink went back into her fists and feet, and she blinked up

at me her puckered dark eyes. Someone had diapered her up pretty good and put on a little pink t-shirt besides that.

Sometimes we got babies just hours after they were born, you wouldn't believe, umbilicals not even cut proper and that dark sticky meconium stuff oozing out between their legs. Diana was a downright princess next to some of them: cleaned, half dressed, someone's milk still dribbling out the corner of her mouth. I wiped it away with my gloved finger and picked her up. That's when I saw it: the bar code band she'd been lying on.

I almost ran back with her. I was like a kid who wants to run in the halls at school so she fast-whips her walking legs instead. I handed her off to the doctor on duty -- we have a steady rotation of volunteers, it's mandated now, part of their residency -- so he could check her out. Proud and smug, like I'd done something great, I also handed him the bracelet. His eyebrows went up a little but he settled them down again quick. Doctors, who're supposed to have seen everything, didn't like to be caught out looking surprised.

He carried Diana and her bracelet away. I went back to the nursery, knowing she'd show up there in a few hours when they'd got through her health tests.

I'd already started thinking of her as mine.

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We are a full service clinic and Children's Home. That's the term they came up with, the government I guess, because "orphanage" was too old-fashioned sounding and everything else just brought to mind a mental hospital, or a school for delinquents. Bet they never guessed, when the bill to outlaw abortions went through, there would

ever be such a place, let alone at least half a dozen in every major city. But there you have it, and this is where I work.

Lots of people celebrated after the law was changed. Lots others protested, of course, and there was plenty of picketing and even a few bombs left in empty baby boxes. (I hear one ticking every time it's my turn to answer the buzzer, can't help it.) But eventually things mostly settled down and went back to how they used to be, except it was a "how they used to be" none of us had ever known. At first there were some really positive results. All those unhappy people who couldn't have babies waiting years and years sometimes just to get one, or else getting fed up waiting and going off to China and bringing home one of their unwanted. Well, suddenly all those waiting people got called up to take a baby, and pretty soon the waiting disappeared. No more hoping and praying for years and then having some regretful birth mother change her mind on you. All the waiting lines just dried up like creeks in summer. You could get your baby fast as you could blink, and no more super-strict screening process, either. No sir.

But then the scales tipped the other way, just what you'd think: too many babies, not enough childless couples. I think it had been so long, people thought real orphanages were over and the only place you'd hear about one was reading that famous Oliver Twist story. But foster care, halfway places and all that, in the end that wasn't nearly enough. We still had back-alley abortions, of course, but that was dangerous and just plain priced out for most people. So the babies kept coming and coming, dropping into these boxes like locusts into corn fields, no end in sight to them.

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I skipped back to the nursery to wait for Diana. As usual, about half the babies were crying. The government allotted one of us caregivers for every four babies, and we took twelve-hour shifts, so you were either days or nights. Nights were worse. Once you got them sleeping all right they'd be a breeze but there was always new ones coming in, awake and crying for you, having no idea the difference between sun and moon and howling like wolves. Except they didn't sound like wolves, more like lambs.

On nights we had to keep the room as dark as possible, so the newcomers could adjust their circadian rhythms, and diaper changes and temperature taking and all that was done with a red emergency lantern. Something about holding the little lost babies in the night made you lose hope -- you'd look out at the big cold moon, or the half-lit office buildings tilting away into nothing, and you'd think about the stretch of their lives heading off that same way into the darkness. Daytime was better, even if it was busier. Maybe because it was busier.

Over time they'd get themselves on the same schedule somehow, little buggers, like they say women living together all end up with the same menstrual cycle. You'd have all four of 'em crying to eat at once and only one of you to give their bottles. We weren't supposed to feed them more than one at a time, we were supposed to cradle each one by itself like it was the only baby in the world, but we'd do it anyhow. One on each arm and sometimes propping a bottle into the mouth of a third who lay on his back in his metal crib.

Their crying was like a storm, the way they'd all be howling and eventually drop out of it one by one until that layer of sky had passed, and we were down to those last few drops on the roof, little hiccups into the silence. That was what we did; we were always trying to work our way down to the silence.

Since the cutbacks last year we didn't have pacifiers anymore, so most of them found their thumbs pretty quick. The ones who didn't just toughed it out, mainly, but sometimes if a little one didn't know where his own thumb was, we'd take our pinky finger and slip it into his strange gummy mouth and let him suck on that. I'll tell you a secret. We weren't allowed to handle them without gloves on, for sanitary reasons. So we had these eggshell gloves that made our hands sweat and left a powdery residue on our palms and between our fingers. Our hands always smelled a little of sweating rubber, even when we weren't wearing the gloves. But it didn't seem right to me that the babies would never be touched by bare hands at all. So I used to take my gloves off, a lot, and stroke their faces. And I'd even put my bare pinky into their mouths and that was such a feeling. If you've never done that you have no idea how strong a baby sucks, how insistent they are. I'd feel the ridges on the roof of a mouth press into the pad of my upturned finger, and I was always surprised when the baby released me that I couldn't see any ridge marks imprinted on my skin.

We have them in our room for two years, and then they move to the toddler room where they master things like spooning their own food and using a potty. I'll see my babies, sometimes, walking by the doorway out in the hall, all in a perfect line as proper as you please, like they never threw a carrot stick at anyone or fell down to the mercy of the hard floor screaming their rage. I'll see them, two and three and four years old, and

think already how they've grown, how much closer they got to being adults when I wasn't tending them. When I see them shuffle along, pretty much in unison except for the odd one turning his head this way and that, or hitching up the back of his pants making a funny out-of-place gate, it's like looking through the doorway into their future-- the tight-fitting jobs they'll one day have, which could remind them of this tight box that shaped them, even though they may not remember me.

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That day when I found Diana, the girls could tell right away something was up when I went back to the room. I picked up one of my crying babies and hid my face.

"Why you look like that?" Marianne accused. "You find a bar of gold in there, something, instead of a baby?"

I couldn't help grinning, even though Carol, she disapproved of me. She didn't think it was a happy occasion when a baby was left on our doorstep. Well, and she was right about that.

"Something better," I told them. "I found a bracelet."

They were all impressed. There were low whistles and whispers. Even the girls who wanted to act nonchalant were glancing up from the babies they rolled and diapered, wondering.

"I'm naming her Diana. She's beautiful."

I mixed up bottles for my bunch who were all going to be hungry soon, and tapped my rubber sole against the linoleum.

You may be wondering how I came to name her Diana. Our rule was, whoever found the baby in the box was responsible for naming, and we went alphabetically, like they do for tropical storms. So I just had to pick a name that began with whatever letter we were on, and then they all got the same last name: Doe. When they got to be eighteen they could go ahead and change that but they mostly didn't, I hear, because what other name would they choose? Doe got to be a popular name, even more than Smith. They were like clansmen, all these abandoned, as if they'd all come from the same place.

I guess Doe was the name they used to use, back before the mandatory dental and DNA registry came in, if they found a dead body with no identification. There is no such thing as dying unidentified, anymore. John or Jane Doe, those were the names. When we're on the J names we never use John or Jane. It's considered bad luck.

I don't have any of my own, in case you're wondering. You might want to know why, with all these babies up for grabs, I don't just help myself. There are a few different reasons. I'm not married, so I'd have to figure out care for my baby when I'm not home, if I had one. I could bring the baby to my work, of course, but then it would be living just as bad as all these poor abandoned and I wouldn't like that. I don't make much money doing this job, that's another thing. And to be honest, until I saw Diana, none of them ever really appealed to me that way.

But the only reason that matters is the fact I once used a baby box myself. Not here, it was far from here, but it has always made me feel strange. I had a good reason, at the time, so no regrets. But part of me has always sort of thought I gave away my

chance with that little one, and maybe I wasn't supposed to get a second. Give a child up like that, maybe you don't deserve another chance, I'm thinking.

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When they finally brought Diana in my arms were full and one of the other girls went to take her. But she brought her right over to me so I could see her face peering out of her swaddler, just like we all agreed she was going to be mine. I had four already, but Tina said she could take Wendy over for me, and that would make a space for Diana. In another two months our oldest crew would be moving into the toddler room and some of our cribs would be empty.

Right away I could see my Diana was a bright one. She was alert all the time, looking around at us and all the other babies, studying on them. She cried some like any baby but mostly stayed quiet so she could do her watching. The doctors said she was about one month when we got her, so she was already starting to take notice. She could smile even; I'd swear it wasn't just gas. She would gaze up at me and take my own smile, like she could thief without using her hands.

Like you'd expect, we have a mixed bag of babies, some real quick and smart, others more slow and plodding, but we do have more kids with problems than you'd find in the general population. I hate to say but we probably get quite a few that come from incest, so we get more than our share of mental retardation, cleft palate and things of that nature. We all, those of us who work in the Children's Homes, have extra training in special feeding techniques, and a lot of classes to help us prepare for the slow

development. We see a lot of kids here with Down Syndrome, too. Some people, when they saw they'd given birth to a kid like that, just gave them up because they figured they didn't want that sort of child. Some people had a way of thinking a child like that couldn't belong to them, and they told themselves that lie so strong it came out like truth, and it wasn't hard to give away a wrong child, someone whose face was small and flat and just looked to them like a mistake.

None of it really matters anyway because they were given up to us, so no one cares how fast they learn. Plus mostly the Down's kids tend to take their life in stride; they're content to sit on the floor and take it all in. They don't fuss much or get upset when other kids get things first, or take their toys from them. So all in all I'd say in a queer way they make things easier on us.

Diana was far and away the smartest, and I'm not saying that just because I wanted her to be. Everyone knew it. She could sit on her own when she was only five months, and walk at only ten, which here in the Home, where the kids spend too much time in their cribs, is almost unheard of. She studied every toy she could get her hands on: stacking rings, shape sorters, the big wood alphabet puzzle. But what really convinced me of her smarts was just this look in her eye. When she was still real small I held her and gave her her bottle, and while her tongue pulled on it she stared in my eyes a kind of thank you, like she knew what to say but didn't have the words yet. Most kids the older they got the less they looked at you during bottle time, the more they looked round at the world, and when they could they reached up and took the bottle with their own hands. You could put them down with it, in the crib, and run to the bathroom or pick up the next baby in line. Diana knew she didn't want that. She never stopped

looking at me that thank you, and also questions about me, about the world, I had this feeling she'd have liked to ask. She always reached up and touched my face; she wasn't interested in grabbing the bottle. She was putting all her feeling and all her questions into me through her hand, very light and gentle, and I was looking all my answers back into her with my eyes, just like that.

One day when Diana was about six months old we were looking at each other in just that way, when Marianne came and whispered in my ear, low and mean, "You just love her so much because of that bracelet. You think that makes her special, because none of us ever saw one of them wearing that before. And you only love her because you know you can't ever have her. Not like that."

As if I didn't know. "I love all of them," I told her loftily, and that was true as well.

Afterward I took the train home like always. There's this empty field it passes on the way into town, which slices up between two long stretches of storefront. I can never figure out why no one's invested there yet, but I'm glad they haven't because in spring time I look forward to it every day. I watch the way it shifts slowly into green, and then one morning when it gets warm enough, I'll see it. In last night's darkness a whole crop of dandelions dotted the whole thing over, and there they are, uneven like constellations of stars, confused, who think the world is in endless night.

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We weren't allowed to photograph our babies, so I practiced seeing Diana's face when I closed my eyes. As she got older and I could better make out her features -- the

round brown eyes, the curl to her hair, the set of her mouth when she concentrated -- I tried to draw pictures of her, in my spare time at home. I don't know what the Children's Home officials would have said about that, but they didn't need to worry about me coming up with a likeness. It was a thing I could do over and over and never get right, but I liked trying. I could spend hours drawing, and over the months I piled up plenty of them, not even one of them right. I kept them in the deep drawer of my night table. After spending the day with her I would switch on my bed side lamp and look at them all in the circular light, and I could see what the trouble was. I knew how to draw a face, but a baby face was something I couldn't quite conjure. Their features were soft and fuzzy, whereas mine were dark and angled, the sharp corners of a nose set too square into her cheeks, the hatched outline of her mouth, the thick black eyebrows. Eventually I figured out the best parts of all my pencil drawings were the places I accidentally smudged with the side of my hand. Any place her jaw line blurred or her nose had a smear of smoke on the end of it, only those places looked like the real Diana to me. When I tried to draw the folds of her neck or her smile, my lines just came out like wrinkles and it looked like the face of a little old woman, over and over as I flipped through them, this old bald woman was grimacing pain again and again.

Maybe I drew Diana because I worried for her; she was always taking sick. First it was a whole mess of ear infections, one after the other, and those changed her. She screamed all the time, cried and threw herself around like a bucking horse. At first I thought maybe she'd just reached that stage, with the tantrums and fits. Then she ran feverish and started pulling on her ear like crazy, like there was something buried in there she needed to rip out before it swelled and burst her. The policy was no antibiotics

the first few times; the doctors didn't want them overused, and except for Tylenol she had to suffer through. She couldn't sleep, just cried and cried, pushed her own ear till it was angry and red on the outside as it must have felt inside her. The infections kept on coming, so they relented some and let her have amoxicillin to clear them up.

I came to hate her for crying so much. I'm sorry to say. I used to hold her, rocking her through the pain you know, and she would look up at me out of her pain-squinted eyes, her pink face damp with it, like she wanted to know why I didn't fix her. And her hollering was so bad and constant it started to fill my head, too, took root inside me until I was sore as well, like I was the sick one.

And then the infections wound their course and she seemed to get better. Once she could hear properly again she was fast picking up words, just like she'd been fast at everything else. She said "Go-go" first. It was as close to Jojo as she could get, which was what all the girls called me, short for Joanne.

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All the while I was waiting on Diana's mother, knowing one of these days she'd come and claim what she'd left, like a woman with a coat check ticket. It happened from time to time, even without the bracelets. Sometimes a mother who left her baby inside our box, she would come back. She might look ashamed, or indignant, or just plain stunned, like she woke up to a mistake she'd made while sleepwalking.

She'd come in at the front desk entrance, opposite side of the building from where she'd left her baby, and just straighten her spine and ask what happens if she's

changed her mind. Sometimes it took a little gentling and prying on the part of the office girl, to get her to come out and say it. But when she did we'd let her right on in to have her pick. She knew when the baby was left and whether it was a boy or girl, so we'd bring her straightaway to the right room. Of course we didn't get babies every day here, so we'd know exactly who she was looking for, but for some reason we never admitted that. We let her hunt. We had ourselves a bit of a guessing game. The mother would go shopping, down between the rows of cribs as if they were grocery store aisles, looking at all the faces like she was looking into little puddles, hoping to see herself reflected. She would lift the babies out one at a time and sniff the tops of their heads like trying to sniff out a ripe cantaloupe. That always did the trick. If there was no birthmark to go by or flaming red hair or hooked nose, the smell of them worked every time. That look, of a mother getting the right smell and pulling her baby back into her, that gave me a chest bubble. It didn't even matter if she had the right one -- she took home the one that she chose.

That was pretty much it. Papers were filled out and signed, and we'd say goodbye to our little child and say a prayer the house it was going to would be better than ours.

Still, we had good times together. I waited on Diana's mama every day, waited for her to come and be the end of them. When me and the girls were mostly fed up we'd take the babies down the hall for dance time, put on the radio and swirl them around the room. They loved that. Most of them would stop right crying as soon as they felt the swoop of us moving them down and around, lifting our arms up and arcing them over our heads. The older ones would stand on their own all around us and bop up and

down, bending their little bowed legs to the music, heads going like the toadstools you have to whack with a big rubber mallet in that old arcade game.

And there were also the quiet times. Diana staying awake into the evening while my other three were sleeping, sitting in my lap while I turned the bright brushed pages of a picture book for her. I pointed at things and named them so she could repeat the new words back to me, with all their closing consonants dropped off from the ends like ash.

Then sickness came and found her again. We'd been playing a game of hide-and-seek with it all this time, only we didn't know we were hiding. At first she caught a cold in her chest, and she was coughing and dribbling, bending over her wood puzzles with her mouth open tasting the stale air. She was tired and cranky, but at least she wasn't crying. I waited for the cold to trigger another ear infection. Instead, I saw her one morning hitching her head up, trying to breathe. When I checked her nail beds they'd all turned blue as little wildflowers. So I rang for the doctor on call to come up and he sent for an ambulance that took her to the hospital two miles away. She didn't come back from there.

Eventually the news blew over to us why -- she had sepsis, following pneumonia, and her organs were closing down. I went to see her, took the bus after my night shift one early morning. She was registered under Diana Doe so they knew I wasn't family, but they could guess what I was to her so they let me in. Otherwise she would have been all alone, all the time.

They'd taped the little white ventilator to her face, but I sat beside her and touched the untaped parts of her cheek. She seemed to be sleeping, but I spoke as if she would hear me.

"Baby girl," I called her. "You have to hold on. You have a mama out there somewhere coming for you. I know you always thought I was your mama, but I'm here to tell you now that isn't so." I pressed her hand. "She did leave you with me, she asked me to take care of you, but only until she could come back and get you. So you need to hold on tight to the world, or you won't get the chance to meet her."

I told her and told her, but in the end she didn't hold on tight. Maybe she couldn't.

I know this seems like a really sad story, Diana's story, but for me it's always been the joyful parts that stood out. That's why I'm telling it.

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On my train ride back home I sat on the eastern side to be sure and see the dandelions. They had all turned white, glowed in the horizoned sun, and they all had a small darkness at their centre like a thousand eyes. At home I opened my night table drawer, lifted out the pile of baby drawings I'd made and set them on the bed. Once the drawer had been emptied I saw it at the bottom, a little white surprise in a ring, as if I'd forgotten. And it dawned on me what a liar I had become. I told you right at the beginning that I'd never seen a baby wearing the bracelet before Diana. But I did. I saw one on my own, before I closed the door on him.

I like to think instead about Diana's bracelet, and the mother who is still out there, and how she is coming for her forever.