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other voices

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Baby

Neal Lulofs

Baby was close enough to touch, but the nursery window separated us. Dressed in my blue scrubs, I leaned against the glass with my shoulder and forehead, my breath steaming the window as I exhaled, evaporating as I inhaled. The face mask I had worn during the C-section was pulled down around my throat, still tied behind my neck. I looked at my watch and laughed nervously: Two months ago at this time of the morning I would have been in P.E. instead of here. Anywhere but here.

Baby lay under a heat lamp. Her oblong head came to a rounded point of slick, dark hair. Her feet and hands were purple and there was a white film in the crevices of her elbows and neck that looked like the skin on boiling milk. Her eyes were opened wide, and she waved clenched hands in front of her face as if she were shadowboxing. The nurse snapped her finger against the bottom of Baby's foot, and she let out two small cries that sounded like a squeaky hinge on an opening door, but then she quieted down. The nurse suctioned Baby's nose and mouth with a blue rubber syringe. Then she gave her a shot in the thigh. Baby screamed and a tiny droplet of blood formed.

Just forty-five minutes earlier I had been sitting in a black vinyl chair in the labor room, bouncing my legs up and down. A nurse came for me.

"It's time," she said. "Put your face mask on."

I tried to swallow, but my mouth was dry. "I can't go in there," I told her. My lips felt stuck together. I tried wetting them with my tongue. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Come on," she said, "you don't want to miss seeing your baby born."

I was still tying the mask behind my head when I walked into the delivery room. A bright light over Mary drew my attention to the opening in her midsection. I turned away quickly, focusing on the vacant stool next to her, concentrating on each step I took. It felt like I wasn't really there, as if I were watching a documentary on public television and could change the channel if it got too bloody.

Mary was surrounded by nurses and doctors, some dressed in white, some like me in light blue, their eyes peering over their masks. The only one I recognized was Dr. Jansen. She was so tiny that she

stood on a stool, her hands holding stainless steel that seemed to disappear in Mary's stomach.

I sat down next to Mary, my face at the same level as hers. She was the only one not wearing a mask.

"Can you see it?" she said.

I glanced at her stomach. "Not yet," I said, wishing I could go get a drink of water.

"Tell me when you can."

I nodded. "You okay?"

"Fine," she said. "I can't feel a thing. Just some pressure on my chest."

"Me too."

A man sat next to me, directly behind Mary's head. He watched numbers and wavy lines crossing several monitors to his right. He leaned close to Mary and said, "You're doing great."

"I'm going to need some pressure," Dr. Jansen said to him, her eyes calm. She set down an instrument and reached her hands inside Mary, working them back and forth as if she were mixing a salad. The man next to me stood up and pressed his hands on Mary's chest, just above her breasts, which made her shoulders flatten against the table.

"Christ," I said loudly.

"What?" Mary said. "What is it?"

"A head." I leaned close to her ear. "It's just like in *Alien*." I wanted her to laugh but I knew as soon as I said it that it was the wrong thing to say.

She turned her head to me and closed her eyes, a pained expression on her face. "Your child is being born and you're cracking jokes?"

A faint cry sounded. Dr. Jansen had one hand at the back of Baby's head and the other under her jaw. She tugged at Baby and Mary's body seemed to lift off the table. "You applying pressure?" Dr. Jansen said to the man next to me.

"Yes," he said, pressing harder on Mary.

Dr. Jansen pulled so hard that I thought she'd break Baby's neck. But this time a slimy, reddish-purple body squirted out of Mary the way a wet bar of soap jumps from your hand in the shower. "A girl," Dr. Jansen said, her voice full of hope. She held Baby up in the air a moment for us to see. Baby cried and kicked, tiny hands clenched on either side of her face.

"A girl," I said. I leaned over and kissed Mary, but all I felt was my mask, which smelled sterile, like a Band-Aid.

Mary shook her head back and forth and whispered, "Oh my God, oh my God."

I blinked my eyes rapidly, trying to see through the tears. I couldn't stop looking at the umbilical cord, still joining Mary and Baby together, so much longer than I'd imagined it would be.

Dr. Jansen was in the nursery checking on Baby. She saw me and waved me in with her arm.

"Should I put the mask back on?" I said.

"No need." She pointed to an oak rocking chair along the wall. I sat in the chair and the doctor held out a tiny bundle wrapped tight in a white blanket. I hunched my shoulders and lifted my arms. "Don't worry," she said, "you won't break it."

I'd held babies before. My sister's boy, for instance. But nothing then or ever since can compare to that first time I held Baby in my arms. I won't even try to explain it; I'm not sure I could. I just remember Baby staring at me, her eyelids half-closed, slanted like an oriental child's. I wondered what she thought of the boy staring back at her, if she recognized her father. Even I had a hard time understanding it—how one mistake could result in a human being. I remember when Mary told me she was pregnant and I said that I wanted to do the right thing.

"An abortion, you mean?" she'd said.

"No." I was surprised she'd thought I meant that. "Why, do you want one?"

"At first I did," she'd said, "but I don't see how I can punish the baby for something it didn't have any control over."

I guess I felt that way, too.

So here I was holding my child in my arms—the child who almost wasn't—and I thought that if my parents wouldn't have had me, or even if they would have had sex a day later, then I wouldn't exist, which meant that Baby wouldn't be here now. One thing affects another, which affects another, and so on, and it seemed to me that I had no control over my life, that the really important events were frighteningly random, one tumbling into another like dominos in a falling chain.

That's what I was thinking the first time I held Baby. After a few minutes, I didn't mind being in that room, isolated, surrounded by newborns, bright lights overhead, the steady background noise of the air conditioning system. I began to rock back and forth, looking at Baby and speaking to her quietly. I told her my name and about how Mary and I were going to take care of her, but that she would have to stay in the hospital awhile before she could come home with us. Then I kissed her, and I was surprised at how soft and warm her skin was—how real she felt at that moment.

Through the nursery glass I saw Mary's mother, Kate, her right hand pressed up against the window, the other dabbing a tissue to her nose. I felt like she had intruded on us, but still I held Baby up for her to see. Her lips formed a circle and then she shook her head as if to say, "What a shame."

When Mary and Baby came home, it wasn't easy—learning how to feed Baby and what to do when she cried and how to bathe her. Kate helped out a little—she let us live with her in her apartment—but she said we should have given Baby up for adoption because we were too damn young to know what we were doing. I told her age had nothing to do with it, that we were old enough to make Baby so we were old enough to keep her. She said that all men think with their pricks.

That's how Kate was. She had a hard time with men, I think, because her husband walked out on her when Mary was just four years old. I remember asking Mary if she missed her father and she said you can't miss what you never had.

After a month the pediatrician told us Baby needed to be hooked up to a monitor because she wasn't breathing right and he was afraid she would stop breathing one night in her sleep. He called it SIDS. He said we don't know what causes SIDS but that it might have to do with the mother smoking during the pregnancy. I told him Mary didn't smoke. "That's good," he said.

Then a black man came out from Chicago with a monitor. He showed us how to attach the patches and cords to Baby. One patch over the heart and one at the bottom of the rib cage, secured by a band of foam that wrapped around Baby and was held in place with Velcro. He said she wouldn't even know the band was there. He fiddled with the controls on the monitor to demonstrate the sound it would make if Baby stopped breathing and the sound it would make if Baby's heart stopped and the sound it would make if the cords came loose. Then he showed us what to do if these things happened, and here we were, blowing into a plastic doll with a mouth that tasted like rubbing alcohol, yelling, "Baby, Baby, are you all right?," like it was an everyday occurrence.

That night Baby slept in a bassinet in our room. The cords stretched from underneath her blanket to the monitor on the tray table. One green light on the monitor flashed rapidly with every heart-beat. The other green light flashed a little slower with every breath. I lay on my side, my back to Baby, and watched the green lights flash on the wall, thinking that as long as I saw them I knew she was alive.

"Maybe we should take turns watching her," I said, "to make sure she's breathing."

"That's what the monitor is for," Mary said.

We had tried making love earlier but she said she was still too sore from having Baby. I said Christ, how long does a man have to go without, and she got mad and told me to go play with myself if that's all I was interested in.

I could understand why she was uptight, I guess, with everything happening so fast. She said we had to put some order in our lives. We used to talk about going to college, and having a big church wedding after we graduated. She was going to wear a white lace dress. We even had the wedding party picked out, and where the reception would be held.

But that was before Baby.

We were married at the courthouse. My parents didn't come—just Kate and two of Mary's friends as witnesses. I quit school and got a job at Ace Hardware, working in the paint section.

I couldn't sleep. I was up every fifteen minutes to see if Baby's chest was moving. After a few hours she woke up so Mary disconnected the cables and brought her to bed. Baby felt Mary's nipple on her cheek so she turned her head and started sucking away. Mary smiled and leaned her head against Baby, and I fell asleep watching them like that.

Then the monitor went off, its high-pitched alarm filling the room. Mary must have thought the telephone was ringing because she picked it up and said hello, hello.

I woke up and was out of bed before I knew what I was doing. I yelled Jesus when I saw that the flashing green lights on the monitor had stopped, a red one now lit. I gave Baby a shake and yelled something. Her arms raised in the air with a start, her fingers fanned like peacock feathers. Then she slowly lowered her arms and began to cry, the best sound I've ever heard.

I leaned on the bassinet with both arms, breathing heavy, my heart pounding in my chest. Mary picked up Baby and held her close. She looked at me and said, "It's okay, Baby. It's okay."

I shut the monitor off, its shrill alarm echoing in my ears.

It was 9:30 by the time I got home from work the next night. Kate watched TV while Mary gave Baby a bath on the kitchen table. She stroked Baby with a washcloth. Sometimes she would hold the washcloth in the air above Baby and squeeze water onto her stomach and legs. Baby would smile and kick her legs frantically.

I threw my coat on a chair and sat down at the table. "Did you talk to the doctor?"

"Hand me that towel, will you?" Mary said, motioning with her head. She spread the towel out on the table and laid Baby on

top. "They're going to do another pneumogram next week," she said, not looking at me. "Meanwhile, we just keep giving her the theophylline."

"Jesus, there's so much to know," I said.

Mary finished drying Baby and wrapped her in the towel. She carried her to our bedroom and laid her on the bed.

"Let me dress her," I said.

"No," she said. "I'll do it." She opened up the towel and put a diaper on her. After she attached the patches and cords, she kissed the bottom of Baby's feet and waited, expecting a response. But Baby just rubbed her eyes. Mary dressed her in a sleeper with a drawstring at the bottom, the cords dangling alongside the string. Baby started crying so Mary sat down on the La-Z-Boy in the living room and unbuttoned her shirt. Her breasts were so much larger than when we were dating. She didn't like me to touch them, though, because they hurt so much. Baby breathed loudly through her nose as she ate. In a few minutes she was asleep, and Mary put her in the bassinet and connected the cords to the monitor. Then Mary said she was tired and went to bed.

I made myself a sandwich and watched an "All in the Family" rerun with Kate. Every time I laughed she told me I'd wake up Baby. During the commercials she told me about what Baby did that day: how she waved her arms, how she enjoyed swinging in the chair, how many dirty diapers she had. I could tell Kate loved her. She fed her, took her for walks, played with her.

I don't think she trusted me with Baby. When I held Baby she'd say things like, "Make sure you support the neck." Or when I fed Baby, she'd tell me when to burp her. One time I changed Baby and left her lying on the living room floor on top of a quilt. Kate saw her and said, "Who put this diaper on? Just look at it. It's all bunched on the side. First time this child goes, the mess will be all down her legs." Then she adjusted the diaper to the way she wanted it.

Kate fell asleep during David Letterman's show, sitting upright on the couch, mouth hanging open, head snapping forward. I woke her up and told her to go to bed. "Don't forget to turn off the lights and turn the heat down," she said.

They say that if you want to know what your wife is going to be like when she gets old, just look at her mother. The thought of being married to Kate scared the hell out of me.

I situated myself on the couch so I could see the flashing lights on the monitor. The couch, still warm where Kate had sat, smelled of the coconut cream she put on her face every night. I wasn't tired. Besides, I was afraid to go to sleep, afraid that the monitor would go off and I wouldn't hear it. Or maybe that I would hear it and wouldn't

know what to do. Sitting there like that—watching the TV, thinking about being married the rest of my life, wondering if Baby was breathing—that's when it first hit me, as if a voice went off inside my head and I couldn't shut it up.

The key slid into the lock of my '77 Olds as easily as a knife entering a piece of cake. I turned it to the left. Through the window I saw the silvery knob rise and I heard a simultaneous "click." As I opened the door, the light on the dome shone brightly. I tossed my nylon sports bag across the front seat and quickly closed the door behind me.

A tall street light cast a soft glow into the car. I looked around the parking lot, but couldn't see anyone. At the back of the lot sat a boat on its trailer, covered by a blue tarp. Next to it was a yellow Ryder truck, backed into its space, ready to move someone the next day.

As I fumbled for the ignition key, the voice told me it would be better this way. Better for everyone. I held the keys up to the light and caught sight of myself in the rear view mirror: cold, startled eyes stared back at me.

I ran my fingers along the teeth of the key. From the highway behind the apartment complex I heard a truck accelerating, shifting gears, blowing fumes. Gusts of wind whipped against the car, shaking it.

I thought of how Mary and I used to park in our favorite cul-de-sac. It was dark and secluded, surrounded by trees on one side and train tracks on the other. One night we were in the back seat, just talking, and a train roared by so fast we felt it vibrate the car. And as I listened to the rhythmic clicking of the train against the tracks, holding Mary tight, I felt shivers run up the back of my neck. Mary asked where I thought the train might be going and I said New Orleans maybe, or Florida. Then she leaned her head against my chest and I knew we were both imagining ourselves on that train, surging forward, straight and determined, bound for some far-off destination and a life together. I saw the caboose pass us, speeding down the tracks, getting smaller as it pulled away, its red lights flashing on and off, eventually disappearing. The silence left in the train's wake was overwhelming, as if a firecracker had exploded next to me, and all I could hear was a dull, hollow ringing that I hoped would soon pass.