You're Not from Around Here, Are You?

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Well, Just Be Careful . . .
For a few days everything was different. I awoke full of energy and appetite. I ate vegetables and drank milk. I went to the gym every day. I gazed at my body in the mirror as I ran on the treadmill. Every muscle was toned. My stomach was flat and hard. My legs flashed as I stepped up the speed. I threw my head back. I was pregnant. There was nothing I couldn’t do. I ran mile after mile, clocking my times. I was unstoppable. My reflection shone in the mirror, radiant with life. I was going to do it. I was going to have a baby. I was going to be strong. I would be a suit of armor for this baby. The blood surged through my body, flooded my head with a dizzying clarity. I was pregnant. Nothing was going to stop me now.

The truck pulled out in front of us without looking and slowed immediately to a crawl. It backfired and exhaust filled our car. Connie grimaced and closed the outside air vent. “What about the Pennsylvania inspection laws?” I said. “That’s what I want to know. Aren’t they supposed to be strict?”

Connie snorted and shifted down yet another gear. “Who knows?” she said. “Who the hell knows?” We were driving back from the mall, making our way up Route 414 from Liberty. Pennsylvania towns must have been named in a burst of great optimism, back when the pioneers were streaming through, en route to the territories: Liberty, Bethlehem, New Jerusalem, Promised Land, Prosperity. Any number of saints. Except for the one a couple towns over from us: Job’s Corner. It’s hard to maintain a lot of optimism in the face of so little light.

The road was narrow, lined on either side by a thick spray of trees, the remaining leaves dark gold in the half light from the setting sun. The truck in front of us was a dilapidated old white American truck driven by a dilapidated old white American man. We reached a hill and he slowed even more. As we watched, he cranked his window down and hacked a hunk of chew out into the road. “Yech!” we said in unison.

Passing was impossible. The road was so narrow and winding that you never knew if another car might be coming around the
bend. People died on these roads every year, usually while trying to get around some driver just like this one. I’d learned a long time ago that it was better just to allow a lot of time and settle in to wait. However annoying the drivers around here were, they weren’t worth dying to avoid.

The truck sputtered as the driver downshifted. I wondered if he’d even make it up this hill. How did people drive these junkers in a place like this, where every road crested a mountain at some point? The driver lit a cigarette and swerved into the other lane. Then I noticed his bumper sticker: “Elect David Duke.” Without even thinking about it, I cupped my belly in my hands, as if to keep it safe. “Do you see that?” I asked Connie.

Her face paled slightly. She shook her head. “Well, this is militia country,” she said, looking around uneasily. I drew closer to her. The trees around us were black and cold in the draining light. I imagined militia men riding out of them, clad in buckskin and brandishing rifles, surrounding our car. Then I remembered that somebody’s house had been stormed by the FBI not too long ago; the officers had found dozens of weapons stockpiled in the living room. It wouldn’t be rifles. It would be assault weapons. I locked my door. “It’s clear up ahead,” Connie said, pressing the accelerator. “I’m going to pass.”

We sped around him, picking up speed as we went. I stole a glance through his window as we passed. He stared straight ahead, both hands knotted around the top of his steering wheel, his cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. There was a whiteness around his lips, as if he were used to pursing them hard. Connie and I were silent the rest of the way home. I cradled my stomach in my hands. Somewhere deep inside a life was forming. I wondered what I thought I was doing, bringing it into a world like this one.

I dreamed that night that I was running through a ghetto neighborhood just like the ones I used to organize, past housing projects and decaying buildings, and that people were staring at me. I tried to run faster, but my feet grew heavier and heavier, until I could barely lift them. I heard shouts behind me and saw a man running as fast as he could. “Thief! Murderer!” shouted the people chasing him. I was so relieved that they were chasing someone else that, as he passed me, I too began to yell, “Thief! Murderer!” But then he disappeared from view, and when I looked behind me all the people in the mob had faces, and they were all chasing me, all screaming at me.

I woke up without opening my eyes. Nausea rolled through me
like a tide, leaving me breathless and gasping for air, clutching at the sides of the bed as if at a ship’s rails. My head ached. I lay motionless, my eyes closed. Here I’d been congratulating myself for not having morning sickness. I knew I wouldn’t be one of those women who succumbed. I’d been confident my body could handle pregnancy. One of my pregnancy books suggested that the type of woman who suffered from morning sickness had been found to be hypnotizable, easily suggestible. That wasn’t the kind of person I was. I’d been planning to go to the gym all the way up till I went into labor. I was going to do everything right. I’d watched my pregnant neighbors pushing their strollers up the street, pulling their dogs along behind, their stomachs huge and proud, their faces flushed with the exertion. I was going to exercise regularly, eat vegetables every day, drink four glasses of milk. I was going to read the information in the pregnancy books as religiously as if I were combing the Bible, searching for the answers to my life. I was going to be educated. I was going to be fit. I was going to be invincible, bringing my child into the world like an Amazon. Somewhere deep inside I was arming myself, just in case the hospital wouldn’t take me, just in case the nurses wouldn’t deliver me, just in case my doctor was shot dead trying to help me. I wanted to be strong enough to deliver my baby myself, if need be, squatting in a field and pulling my child from me with both hands. I wanted to be able to do it by myself. So what if I was a pregnant dyke in God’s Country. I didn’t need laws to protect me. I didn’t need acceptance. I could do this on my own. No matter what.

At the moment, however, I couldn’t imagine sitting up, let alone getting out of bed. “You’ve got to eat something,” Connie said, setting a plate of soda crackers on my nightstand. I shook my head. I couldn’t remember when I’d last eaten; just the thought made my stomach lurch. I wondered what I’d gotten myself into, how I’d ever finish what I’d started.

“Don’t do it,” Connie said, watching my hand hover above the telephone. “Don’t call your mother and tell her you’re pregnant.”

I paused and looked at her, my fingers poised to punch out the numbers that I had known so well my entire life. “What do you mean?” I asked halfheartedly. I knew what she meant.

“Don’t call her,” Connie said. “Send her a card. Give her time to digest.”
She was right. Deep down I knew she was right. I looked at the receiver longingly. I just wanted to call her so much, wanted to hear her voice on the phone, resonant with warmth, wishing me the best in my life. Never mind that I couldn’t remember her ever actually having done that.

“You’re making a mistake,” Connie said, and even as I listened to the familiar electronic rhythm of the buttons I had pushed, I knew she was right. But I had to tell her. I waited longingly for her to pick up and when she did I almost hung up. “Mom?” I said. I shifted the receiver from one hand to the other and wiped my palm on my thigh. My hand shook. “I’m pregnant,” I said. I closed my eyes. The enormity of it overwhelmed me. I had finally done it. I was pregnant. I was pregnant with her grandchild. I was pregnant with my child, just as she had been pregnant with me. I was finally a real adult. Falling in love with Connie hadn’t done it, our pretend marriage hadn’t done it, but surely this would. This would be the thing that would bring me real recognition, transform me in my mother’s eyes from child to voting, taxpaying, mortgage-holding adult. My eyes closed. I imagined her joy, the delight she’d take in the news. I imagined her hand extending across the divide that separated us, to help me over to her side. Moments passed and there was no response. “Mom?” I said, opening my eyes.

I could hear her on the other end, inhaling with slow and careful precision. “Well,” she responded. “Just be careful.” Her tone was level, cold as frost.

“What do you mean?” I asked slowly.

“Well, your sister said that once too!” my mother said.

I could feel the excitement leaving my body like a bird. “What do you mean?” I said again, enunciating carefully. My tongue felt wooden, my body empty, its rooms left open, doors swinging on their hinges, sprung of the life that had filled them only moments before.

“Well, she lost it,” my mother said.

“You’ve lost five pounds,” Dr. Gordon said sternly, flipping through his chart. “Have you been eating at all?”

I mumbled something and looked away. I couldn’t eat. How could I eat? Thanksgiving had come and gone without even a glass of wine to mark its passing. The turkey carcass sat on the table, grease collecting beneath it. Our guests sat together on the couch
watching the football game, while Connie washed the dishes. The house was filled with warmth and cheer. Normally, I loved Thanksgiving, the one holiday without any real family baggage. Granted, it was a celebration of a nation’s genocide, but it was a happy one. Squanto had shared his maize with us. For a long time I thought that was all there was—we’d moved in, and the Indians had moved over, pleased to teach us how to survive in this new land and then politely disappear while we found our footing. My third-grade teachers had never mentioned the smallpox-infected blankets as we colored in our construction paper pumpkins and wove our multicolored potholders to give our mothers. Now the day seemed bleak and stormy, the skies swelling with withheld snow and the wind wild for revenge. I pulled my sweater more tightly around me and watched our friends curled happily on our couch, until I just had to go to bed and suffer through another night.

“She’s not eating at all,” Connie informed Dr. Gordon, as if I weren’t even there. I glared at her when his back was turned. Traitor.

“How important is nutrition right now?” I asked him. “Not important at all,” he responded, “for the first fourteen weeks.” He made another mark in his chart. What was he always writing down in there? “Are you tolerating the prenatal vitamin?”

Oh, that evil horse pill that got stuck every morning halfway down my throat. “No,” I said a little petulantly.

“You can discontinue it until week fourteen,” he said. Behind his back I threw Connie as victorious a look as I could muster. “In the meantime,” he said, washing his hands in the sink, “eat whatever you can.”

My department chair ducked his head in the door of my office. I was sitting at my desk staring down a pile of soda crackers. Just one bite. I thought I could chance one bite. The crackers lay there, innocuous, as if they would not immediately turn to lead once I actually swallowed them. “Hi, Roland,” I said, looking up at him. I tentatively nibbled a corner of soda cracker, as if making an offering. Who knew whether it would be accepted? “How are you?”

Roland stayed in the doorway. “I was just wondering,” he said, “how you’re planning to take off next fall semester?”

I had enough sick days saved up to cover a semester of maternity leave. I’d told Roland about it as soon as I found out I was
pregnant. I almost told him about it before I told him I was pregnant. I didn’t know which I was more excited about—having a baby or taking a semester off from work. The baby was due in July. Taking off the fall semester would give me the first six months at home. I imagined them longingly from time to time, as I watched the neighborhood women strolling the streets with their children, looking at the leaves. But something about Roland’s tone was ominous. “What do you mean?” I said, the cracker leaden the minute it hit my saliva.

“You can’t use your sick leave for maternity leave,” Roland said. I stared at him, my mouth open slightly. I could feel the crumbs clinging to my lips.

“What are you talking about?” I said.

“Child-care leave is unpaid,” Roland said. His face was pinched with worry.

I stared at him. Nausea roiled up in me like a flash flood. “But I read the contract, Roland,” I said. “I can use all the sick leave I’ve accumulated with a note from my doctor.”

“I don’t think so,” he said, drawing himself back until his feet were barely inside the door. My heart began to beat. Waves of nausea rose to my head. I could feel myself growing faint. I imagined giving birth in July, then reporting for the first day of classes barely four weeks later. And that was if the baby was on time. What if it was late?

“But I’ll check with the provost about it,” he said, ducking back out of my office. I sat there for a moment, staring after him. In my mouth was the taste of ashes.

“They have to let you use your sick leave for maternity leave,” Dr. Gordon informed me cheerfully. “It’s the law. I’ll be glad to write a letter,” he added, patting my knee. The office was warm, one wall papered with posters showing the stages of development. I studied the embryo’s early stages. At first glance the baby looked more like a salamander than a human being, its little hands up by its face, its eyes huge in the side-view drawing. But what was that? I looked a little closer. An ear. A baby’s ear. We were just beginning month two. I gazed at the picture in fascination. There were eyelids, a nose, lips, a tongue. It weighed one third of an ounce; it was about an inch long. And it already had fingers and toes—tiny hands and feet. A studious gaze. I pictured it looking up at me, its little lips half open. Well? it might have been saying. Here I am. What are you going to do about it?
Well, Just Be Careful . . .

I left the office with Dr. Gordon’s letter in my hand. A cold wind blew, invasive as a knife blade. “We’ll sue them if we have to,” Connie said. I fingered the letter in my hand and thought about the baby in my womb. Dead leaves matted beneath my feet, sodden with rain. The mountains hunkered down around us, violet with the lack of sun. I took a deep breath. Crisp November air filled my lungs. The wind stung my face, making me gasp from its bite. We had conceived this baby in a wind like this. I closed my eyes and imagined our baby hurtling into my body, thrown there on a breath of wind, taking root like a seed.

I took another breath and drew the air as deep into my lungs as possible. My waistband felt snug. My stomach was expanding. I felt a swell of love for it. I could see it now, rooted deep within me, a stubborn little horseshoe crab clutching my uterus with its claws for dear life, embedded for good. My mother’s words washed away and with them Roland’s words as well. I wasn’t powerless. I wasn’t going to lose this baby. I was full of its life, immersed in it. I was going to carry to term, I was going to give birth, and I was staying home for the first six months, even if I had to sue the hell out of the university. I slid one hand around Connie’s waist and reached covertly beneath my sweater with the other and undid the button of my pants. I was big, walking through the parking lot of Dr. Gordon’s office. I was big and huge and I took up space. I was going to have a baby. I took a deep breath and felt that new life flood my body. I was a writer, I was Connie’s partner, and before too long I was going to be a mother. I could do it. I could do it all. Nobody could stop me.

The next day I woke up without morning sickness for the first time. Maybe it was gone for good. I went into my office and wrote in my journal for an hour. My manuscript lay on one corner of my desk, waiting for my touch. I could almost hear it calling me. I put down my pen and gingerly opened it to the first page and began to read through the editor’s pencil marks. They didn’t seem as bad as they had at first. Maybe she had a point. Maybe the sentence did read a little more smoothly that way. And that correction—I didn’t buy it, but maybe if I did this instead. I picked up my pen and touched it to the page. What about this?

It took me a week to make the changes. Most of the editor’s remarks I agreed with, some I didn’t. I added my own marks to hers, crossed out her suggestions and substituted my own changes, and made notes on a separate piece of paper to include in the letter I
would write to accompany the new manuscript. There was something exhilarating about it, this reexamination of my work, something energizing about defending the words that I had written. When I mailed it off, I felt like I’d been given new life. *Amnesty* was done. The book was written. Now it was in someone else’s hands. I could turn to something new.