You're Not from Around Here, Are You?

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Just Make Sure Your Water Isn’t Leaking
OK," the painter said cheerfully, as his crew packed up their supplies. "I think we’re all finished here."

I watched as they loaded up their truck, brushing the plaster dust from their pants with paint-splattered hands. "We’ll send you the invoice," he said, rolling down the driver’s window and backing carefully out of the driveway. "Thanks for the business."

Thanks for the business, indeed. Connie shot me a glance from the corner of her eye as we turned back to the house. Well, so, OK, I’d run out of energy halfway through the project. At least I’d managed to tear down all those ceiling tiles and take them to the dump. It wasn’t until I’d looked up at that huge exposed ceiling, filled with holes and leaking plaster dust everywhere, that I’d realized I couldn’t go on. I lay on the couch for the next three days with the fan on me, watching them work. I’d saved us some money, anyway, hadn’t I?

“Hey,” Connie said. “You want to go get some lunch?”

The flags waved up and down Main Street. It was July in Wellsboro again, and we were doing it up right. Granted, we didn’t have any display of fireworks in our town for the Fourth, but we knew how to fly our flags. Nobody could say we didn’t know how to put a face on things, even if we didn’t pack any firepower to back it up. Between the flags and the annual Prayer Meeting on the Green, we had all the bases covered. Every year I fantasized about going to the prayer meeting myself, falling to my knees before the Winken, Blinken, and Nod fountain, and crying: “Praise Jesus, thank you for making me a lesbian!”

“Look,” Connie said, as we stopped at the light. “There’s Judge Anderson.” I watched him crossing the street in the company of several other men, all talking and laughing, their neckties waving in the breeze.

“He looks like an actor, doesn’t he?” I said, “playing the role of a good moral judge in a small town.”

“That’s exactly what he looks like,” Connie said. “The guy in To Kill a Mockingbird, about to face some moral dilemma.”

I watched him walk down the street, tall and thin and vital, gesturing with his hands while the other men listened with respect. Of
course, I thought, suddenly. He is about to face a moral dilemma, when we petition for Connie’s adoption of Zoe. An adoption by a same-sex couple had never happened in this part of Pennsylvania. The light changed, and Judge Anderson and his entourage approached the diner. I watched the door swing closed behind them. I wondered what decision he would make, when it really came down to it, when he was really faced with taking such a public stance. The name change was one thing, the adoption entirely another. Which side of the line would he end up on, when all was said and done? Connie and I headed for another diner down the street, just a little less local, just a little less visible, just that much farther from the line of waving flags reminding us of where we were.

“Do you want a glass of water?” Connie asked me, appearing in the screen door as I sat rocking on the porch.

“Do I look like I want a glass of water?” I snapped. What the hell did she think, I was just sitting there longing for water?

“I was just asking,” Connie said, retreating quickly. Her tone was sharp. I watched her disappear through the screen, and terror seized me. What if she left me? How would I manage? How would I ever get along without her? Tears stung my eyes. I could feel them running down my cheeks. I brought my hands up to my face and sobbed. I needed her so much. I could barely get up out of the chair without help. How would I manage after she was gone? I wept and wept, until Connie had reappeared at the door, pushed it open, gathered me up into her arms, and pressed my head against her chest, until all my tears had gone.

The contractions were constant, coming and going like the sunshine, sometimes sharp and painful, sometimes a dull ache like menstrual pain. I practiced my Lamaze breathing till I felt like a pro, wondering all the time how I would ever know when I was really going into labor. Every day I looked for a sign, some indication that labor was about to start. I’d had no idea everything would be so vague. It would be so much easier if there were some kind of road sign: This Way, Ladies—Labor Starts Here!

As it was, I progressed in a constant state of confusion. One morning nineteen days before Zoe’s due date I got up and found vaginal discharge on the sheets. I stared at it in wonder. The books talked about “bloody show,” the rupturing of the capillaries as the cervix effaced and dilated, giving the mucus a hint of pink. Some
women experienced bloody show, and others never did, the books said. Bloody show—it sounded like the punch line to a Monty Python joke. I hauled my body into the bathroom. When I went to flush the toilet I saw a glob of mucus floating around. Something tightened deep in my stomach. Was this the mucus plug? The books said that as the cervix began to thin and open, the cork of mucus sealing the opening of the uterus could become dislodged and be passed through the vagina a week or two before the first contractions. Or it could be passed just as labor started. I stared at it in panic. Which was it? Now or later? I’d read the section in the books on false labor symptoms and real labor symptoms so many times I thought I had them memorized, but now I couldn’t remember anything. I stared at it more closely. Was it the mucus plug or not? I’d pictured it as larger somehow—like a great big drain stopper. According to the books, however, it could be passed in parts, through increasing discharge. I forced myself to leave the bathroom. I didn’t flush, though. Maybe Connie would want to see it.

“Just make sure your water isn’t leaking,” my sister dourly admonished me over the phone. “My friend Cynthia had a constant discharge the last few weeks of her pregnancy, and it turned out that her water had been leaking all along, and by the time she went into labor, it was all dried up. You wouldn’t believe the complications!”

I hung up uneasily, took my massive body into the bathroom, and felt myself carefully between the legs, as far back as I could reach. I didn’t feel anything leaking, but how would I know? Probably, Cynthia hadn’t felt anything either. I examined my underwear hourly for discharge. What if my water had already leaked out and inside me Zoe was slowly suffocating? Terror shot through me. She hadn’t moved in a while. What if she were already dead?

The temperature climbed to 100 degrees. The weather forecasters announced cheerfully that the humidity level was more than 90 percent. My stomach grew and grew, crippling my body like a huge embrace, much too tight for comfort. I couldn’t sleep, my shoulder and pelvic joints ached. When I tried to climb out of bed at night to go to the bathroom, my round ligaments seized me with a burning, throbbing pain. Nausea came and went like an unwanted house guest. My back ached down to my thighs. “Pregnancy is designed this way so that you’ll feel so miserable you’ll do anything to get the baby out of you when labor comes,” my colleague Rhoda
told me. I thought she had to be right. What was twenty to thirty hours of acute pain compared to weeks of misery? I thought that at this point I would welcome labor because at least something would be happening. Pains shot through my cervix constantly, as if Zoe’s head were butting up against it.

When the letter came from the university officially granting me tenure and promotion to the rank of associate professor, I hardly cared. It was just one more thing to check off the to-do list while I waited grimly, my body settling around me, gelatinous and sullen.

The only time I felt good was when Connie rubbed me down with a cool cloth. We went swimming in the lake, and I waded deep into the water until I was nearly submerged. Water was the only place I had some sense of balance. I’d never felt so consistently sore. Another contraction rippled through me. Big fucking deal, I thought, moving slowly through the water. When was I not having a contraction? My fingers were swollen, my ankles thick by the end of the day. When we went to bed, I thought I’d never make it through another day. And I still had nine days till my due date.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” my mother informed me by telephone. “All my babies were born right on time.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked Connie, as she rubbed her cool cloth along my stomach.

“Who knows?” She checked her watch, timing my contraction. We timed my contractions all the time, just for the hell of it, because they were never regular. They came and went at all hours, like a wayward adolescent, never giving us the courtesy of any notice. The full moon that the month before had sent me to the hospital for sedation came and went without producing a single contraction of note. Nine more days of waiting.

When I woke up, the clock said 1:55 A.M. Something was wrong. I raised myself up on my elbow and felt a trickle from my vagina. Was I pissing? Or—did I dare think it?

“What is it?” Connie asked, sitting up in bed.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Something’s happening.” Connie turned on the light and pushed back the sheets.

“Oh, my god,” she said as a gush of fluid dampened the sheets.

I stared at it in awe. “My water broke,” I said. I looked at Connie. “My water broke!” It had happened. Finally, I had my sign. My membranes had ruptured. It was official. It was 2 A.M. on July 17 and I was in labor. My stomach clenched, but it felt more like anxiety than like a contraction. I took a deep breath. “I’m in labor,” I
said. We both stared at the water gushing from my vagina and quickly turning pink.

“T’m getting a towel,” Connie said. She rushed to the bathroom and rushed back and climbed back into bed beside me.

“What now?” I asked her. All that time for preparation, and now I felt like I had no idea what to do.

“I guess we call the hospital.”

The first painful contraction came at 2:53, a combination of lower back pain and bad menstrual cramping. Panic overtook me. I’d never be able to do it. This was real pain. I’d never get through it, and it was only just beginning. “Breathe,” Connie said, taking my hand. “Breathe!” I took a deep breath and the pain subsided. Of course, I thought. It was going to come and go. It wasn’t going to be constant. I waited for the next swell of pain and took another breath. It felt like a wave. All I had to do was bend my knees and surf it through. Never mind that I had never surfed, it still felt like a good analogy.

“Come in now,” the nurse said when we called the OB floor.

“I don’t want to,” I told Connie. I wanted labor to happen at home. I was so comfortable, sitting on my towel in our wet bed. The books said to put off going to the hospital as long as possible. Connie got her guitar and I got my journal. We sat on the bed for a while, slowly soaking the sheets with pink, breathing our way through the contractions. After a while I took a shower and carefully shaved my legs and dried my hair, even as I wondered what the hell I was doing. This was labor after all, not a party I was going to. We took Ned for a walk around the block and packed up our CDs and our portable CD player. It was 6 a.m. and time to go. The excitement I felt was like a pressure in my chest, threatening to explode at any moment. It was happening. She was going to be born. Zoe Constance Sullivan-Blum was about to come into the world.