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EDGES

STELLA STEPPED OFF THE CURB and saw a car plow into her stroller, sending it and her baby flying. The force of it ricocheted up her arms into her teeth. She held her breath and imagined the moment between knowing and not knowing. The thought was so forceful, so vivid, she squeezed the stroller's handlebar and looked both ways twice, then three times, confirming again and again and again that the sleepy, leafy street was clear before going.

The next day, with Cam buckled in his buggy, she stepped onto the sidewalk and stopped three feet from the curb to keep away the vision. There were no cars, but a tightening wound her throat, so she turned and went home.

But then when she climbed the stairs, she saw Cam tumble from her arms, his head bashing against each step as he careened head over heels.

Later, safe in their dining room, he began screaming and would not stop. His wails burrowed themselves so deep inside her body that nothing remained of her but a scream. She felt his weight release from her arms and saw how his little body thudded against the wall and went limp and silent. She pressed her lips against his downy skull. He thrust his fists against her chest. She moved to stand with him in the thin light that came in through the window. "I love you," she said. "My good boy. I love you."

They would go out. Always good to try, try again. She went to the doorway, lowered him into the stroller, pulled the straps carefully around his shoulders. He took three quick inhales and stopped crying. "Ga!"

"Yes, we'll go for a walk." She quickly slipped the plastic rain cover over his stroller. Outside, grey drizzle enveloped her with silence and relief.

But a car careened at the corner, and all at once her body thrummed with the vision—the skidding, the stroller, how it flew. She turned left, searching for a safe crossing. She circled the block, slowing at each corner until the vision hunched at the edge of her mind. On her third lap, she finally

crossed, quickly, almost deaf with fear. On the other side, she said, “There! Safe and sound.” Cam moaned, whether with displeasure or joy she couldn’t tell.

She worried about the next corner but then noticed the painted wooden sign of the bar. She’d always meant to pop in, but since the pregnancy and then the baby there’d never been much of a chance. “Let’s treat ourselves for a change.”

She dragged the stroller up two short concrete steps and pushed the door open with her bum. Inside, yellow-blond wood, iron fixtures, and carefully placed spotlights reminded her of the trendy places where she and Jack used to go to. The music was calm and instrumental.

“Hey,” nodded a tattooed woman wiping down a table. She had short, bleached hair and wore black jeans, a fuzzy grey wool cardigan, and Doc Martens—the kind of thing Stella used to wear before Cam, and the kind of thing she would still wear if only her body would go back to normal. Instead, she was still in maternity jeans, ruched button downs, and pastel T-shirts, her hair piled into a matted mess on top of her head.

Stella nodded. Cam bounced in his stroller, and she parked him at a table for four, peeled off the plastic cover, and unzipped his jacket. He leaned back, tilted his head towards the window, and relaxed.

Stella felt herself relax too, as if Cam’s muscles controlled her own. She shook off her rain jacket and pushed back her hair. A small shiver ran through her. The bartender came up, cocked her hip, and said, “What can I get you?”

It had been a long time since Stella had taken a drink, but she felt like one now. Just a taste to warm herself. She gave a mild squint, as if asking permission. “Scotch?”

The bartender smiled broadly, “Of course. And here’s the food menu in case you get hungry.”

Stella turned the sticky laminated page in her hands. She looked over at Cam, who’d already fallen asleep, his pink mouth a small “o,” his neck slumped at an awkward angle. Watching him sleep always opened up something expansive inside her chest.

When the bartender brought her scotch in a crystal glass etched with small diamonds, Stella asked for grilled cheese. She let the scotch’s burn roll around her mouth before swallowing. The bartender sat on a tall stool and looked at her phone. A bell rang somewhere in the kitchen, and she

vanished behind the wooden doors. Stella tipped back the rest of her drink.

The bartender slid the grilled cheese down. “Another?”

“I think I will,” she said, as if the idea had only just occurred to her.

Cam shifted, and his head slumped into an even more impossible angle. Normal life seemed possible when he slept. Seeing the pink pout of his lip, she could almost forget the way he was when he was awake and they were alone.

In the beginning, birth had thrown a fleece blanket around her, making her feel cozy and protected. It was all going to be just as she’d hoped in her wildest, secret dreams—that a baby would make her a better person, one of those efficient women in cleaning product commercials. And for the first six weeks it did.

Cam remained mostly mute for those first weeks. Some soft pig squeal of a cry when hungry, but mostly Stella predicted his needs before his grunts became cries. It was easy—Cam felt like an extension of her own body, as if his hunger were located in her belly, his yawning need for touch located on her skin. She spent hours studying him. The long skinny fingers and legs were so much like Jack, who was so tall his pants left two inches of exposed sock when he stood and rode halfway up his shins when he sat. But Cam’s face was all Stella. His fat bottom lip, tiny blue eyes, and black hair made her feel triumphant.

But after six weeks, everything changed. They were watching *Survivor*, and when Stella removed Cam from her breast his face twisted into red rage, and he released a curdling wail. They burped him, held him like a football, paced the room, passed him between them, patted his back, whispered in his ear, played music, fed him, popped a pacifier in his mouth, bounced on an exercise ball, but he only grew angrier. When Jack slipped him into the carrier and said, “I’ve gotta get out of here,” Cam’s eyes grew wide, like a squirrel suddenly alert to a fox.

When Jack came home, his face bright and proud, he opened his mouth, victory dancing around his lips, but then Cam looked at Stella, went red-faced, and howled. They placed him on the couch between them, making sure he could feel the warm press of their thighs, and watched his writhing, screaming body with helpless despair.

“He didn’t cry at all outside,” Jack whispered.

Stella knew this was true, as he was only crying because of her.

Night after night, at six o’clock, after he’d finished feeding, Cam’s face

mottled red, his tiny nose and eyebrows scrunched into furious folds, and he howled his discontent. Jack walked him when the weather permitted, but mostly they remained locked inside their private hell.

After two months, as suddenly as it started, Cam's crying migrated to the daytime, erupting at unpredictable moments, forcing Stella to flee cafés and parks. Once, she dropped her grocery basket in the middle of an aisle and raced to the exit. Then, when evening came, Cam was all smiles and hugs. Though she knew intellectually that the baby couldn't be punishing her specifically, she couldn't help but feel that he was.

Cradling Cam in his arms, Jack would say, "He's a baby," then, smiling as if he had entirely forgotten their hellish nights, added, "Babies cry."

She knew that—she wasn't an idiot—but other babies did not shove their fists against their mother's chests, pounding for them to go. If only Jack saw what she had to put up with, what a battering she took. And though she hated to acknowledge it, she'd grown a grudge as palpable as scar tissue—a keloid line that traced along her brow down to her ears. In the evenings she became aware of it circling her skull, and she would kiss Cam, as if kissing him would soften the scar.

The bartender came by again, and Stella thought, live a little. The rain fogged the window, so she could only see halos of headlights pass on the road. Puddles hissed up from the wheels. Hunched shadow forms mumbled along the sidewalk. But the cozy bar and the warm scotch protected her, like the fleece that had enveloped her those first weeks after birth.

Cam stirred, stretched his limbs, and settled again. Stella leaned back, pulled out her phone, and read a book she'd started over a month ago. A lovely distance separated her from herself, like a layer of cotton shielding her mind from her body. When the third scotch came, she held it in her left hand, her phone in her right, and by the time she'd read fifty pages the scotch was long gone, and Cam was stirring again. His half-moon eyes popped open. Stella braced herself for a scream, but instead he looked around, then to her, and his face lit up.

"Hey there, baby." She rubbed his belly. "Shall we?" She pocketed her phone and dug for money. On the walk home, it did not occur to her that a car might run them over or knock Cam's stroller flying.

He did not cry when they walked in the door, as he normally did. Instead, he smiled, turned his head coyly and everything inside of her went happy. She unbuckled him and lifted him high.

“There’s my boy. There you are.” She brought his face to her own and gummed his cheek. He laughed, so she did it again and again. She did not imagine herself dropping him or bashing his head into the wall.

By the time Jack came home she already had supper ready, and Cam was clean and tidy.

“How was your day?” Jack kissed her forehead.

She did not tell him about the bar, or how for the first time in ages she felt like a good mother. Instead, she said, “I think things are turning.” She touched her hair. Then, bracing herself to receive his misery, she said, “And you?”

“You know,” he mumbled, looking at the floor as if he were Sisyphus facing eternity.

After graduation, they had both expected that he would find work at a top law firm, shoot to the top, and pull in six or maybe even seven figures within two years. When that didn’t happen, he became sullen. He took a position at a small accounting firm and spent his days thinking about loop-holes.

After dinner, they plopped Cam on the play mat and searched for themselves in him, as if he were a tarot deck or astrological chart. When he studied a doll, running his finger over every last detail, she said, “That’s like me. Detail oriented.” When he threw his arms in the air, laughing, celebrating life, Jack said, “That’s me.” Stella thought this unbridled joy was nothing like either of them but was instead something Cam had suddenly learned all on his own. Then, when Cam looked at her with a toothless grin that was all her, she thought, “No, maybe that’s really like me before the world crashed through.” And when he finally began whining, Stella thought, “No, there I am.”

The next day, when Cam fussed, Stella’s blood sped, and she bundled them out of the house. She looked three times at the corner and then circled the block three times before finally crossing. The day was blue cold, not the grey it had been for weeks.

When she arrived, she pushed the door open with her bum. She hadn’t known this was where she was heading when she’d left home.

“Hey there.” The bartender smiled and set two glasses on a shelf. “Scotch and grilled cheese?”

Stella blushed. “Sounds good.” She went to the same table. Cam’s face teetered between curiosity and upset. Her jaw clenched, ready for his cry,

but instead he turned towards the window, settling his gaze in the distance.

By the time her order arrived, Cam was asleep.

“They’re good when they’re like that,” the bartender said with an ironic smile.

Stella laughed, “Oh, he’s a good boy,” suddenly feeling defensive.

She drank her scotch, counting two minutes between each sip. Something about the way the bartender sat on her stool, waving gently back and forth as she read a thick paperback, reminded Stella of herself before graduation, before her mind had turned gruesome.

“Another?” the bartender called when Stella emptied her glass.

Stella nodded. She lifted her hand after she finished her second, and the bartender brought a third. Three was not a lot—just enough to take the edge off. She hated that phrase, but that’s what it was: enough to file down the edges of her mind.

A car honked wildly outside as she paid, and Stella jumped and touched her hair. “Drivers around here are so crazy.”

The bartender nodded vaguely and inspected Stella’s face. “I guess.”

Stella flattened her palm on the bar. Then, as if her mouth were operating separately from her mind, she said, “Sometimes I think they’re going to run us right over.”

“Life is risk,” the bartender said impassively, returning Stella’s bank card.

The next day, Stella did not return but instead walked farther down the road to a pub. It was tiny, the decor a nonsensical mishmash of red plastic chairs and antique tables. A grey-faced man leaned over an empty pint glass, staring blankly at his table. The lighting was so dark she could not read the chalkboard behind the bar. A hulking bartender stared from behind the counter. “White wine, please,” she said breezily. Scotch would make her feel too seedy.

The bartender slid the wine across and rested his thick red hand on the counter. She took two large mouthfuls. “Thanks.”

The bartender held her gaze, glanced at Cam kicking his legs in the stroller. “No problem.”

As long as they walked during the day, as long as she could get a drink by noon, as long as she could keep her nerves steady, Cam was happier and her mind didn’t turn. She’d read that babies benefit from mothers’ self-care. It didn’t matter what the mother did, as long as she called it self-care. Wine

was like that for her. Cam was growing into the kind of happy child she'd always dreamed of. And she herself was becoming the kind of happy mother she'd always known she could be. That hard keloid grudge smoothed to something pale and flexible.

Some nights, she cooked meals that required wine—boeuf bourguignon, risotto, and once, after a particularly difficult day, penne alla vodka. While Jack entertained Cam in the living room, she took long gulps, then rinsed her mouth afterward. When dinner was on the table she would say, "I think I'll have a glass of wine for a change. You?"

Jack would say, "Just a little," and tell her to stop when she'd poured two fingers. It annoyed her how measured he was, how his lips pinched when she poured herself another glass.

One day, after their walk, Stella felt light with possibility. At home, she pushed open the door, humming. She unbuckled Cam, lifted him high in the air quickly, joyfully, and then without thinking tossed him up so that for one moment he was an inch above her fingertips, suspended, a look of joy then surprise then fear sweeping his face.

"Oh," she said and felt her face tighten. Cam studied her, and she quickly transformed her expression into pure bliss, "Yay! Wasn't that exciting!" He paused and then threw his head back in laughter.

She did not have another drink over dinner. Afterward, they sat in front of the TV, and she felt twitchy, like she'd drunk Red Bull. *Superman* came on. When he found himself unable to defeat Lex Luthor, he gave up the superhero thing and vanished from the public eye, clouding the faces of every one in New York City, then America, with disappointment, Stella recognized herself in both the disappearance and the disappointment, and the recognition dislodged something inside her that she hadn't known was stuck.

After Jack went to bed, she slid open the liquor cabinet. What harm in having a drink after everyone had gone to bed? The next night, then the one after that, and then every night afterwards, she selected a different bottle so Jack would never notice. It felt illicit and fun, like she was a teenager stealing from her parents.

Summer came quickly, and a heat wave settled in one week after an ice storm. The whole city came out to play. In the morning, she poured a bottle of pinot into a blue thermos and packed a picnic for the park. She thought about how the lawn would dampen her bum, how Cam could press his hands into the tickling blades of grass.

The park was full of mothers and babies alongside university kids playing frisbee, smoking joints, and drinking beer. The mothers were hunched and harried or bright-eyed and ethereal, depending on the moods of their children.

Stella spread the beige blanket on a slope near the shimmering pond.

Cam pressed his whole body against the stroller straps and raised his arms. “Op, op,” he said and then smacked his lips together again and again. She took the thermos from under the stroller and tipped it into her mouth. Cam wailed and pulled at his red bodysuit.

“Okay,” she said, unbuckling and lifting him. On the ground, he bound for the blanket edge towards the grass. She pictured glass shards, cigarette butts, and goose shit. “No,” she said sharply, pulling him back.

Cam thrashed against her to pry himself free, so she let him down on the blanket, but he crawled straight to the grass. Why had she thought he would stay put? She couldn’t get the thought of cigarettes and glass out of her mind, and she pulled him back.

A frisbee skidded onto their blanket, and suddenly the bartender stood over them.

“I know you.”

Stella blushed.

“Grilled cheese and scotch,” the bartender said. “I’ve got one of those memories.”

Stella nodded and waited for the bartender to say something else, but instead she just gestured to the frisbee, grabbed it, and trotted back towards a small group of women. Stella watched them jump and dive. Their laughter erupted so readily. She drank deeply from the thermos. One day that could be her again too.

What had she said to the bartender about cars? What stupid thing had the bartender said in response? Life is risk. Something like that. As if there were nothing to be done about it. Cam pushed his palms against his eyes. He yawned and pressed his head into the blanket. She placed a thin cloth on him, shielding him from the sun. She rubbed his back, hummed softly, until he settled into sleep. She realized that she no longer felt as if her own body and Cam’s were all tangled up as one. When had that happened?

She took three long gulps from the thermos, as if it were water. She counted out sixty seconds, then took three more. The frisbee flew towards the bartender. She leapt and caught it, as if her body were built for leaping

and catching. One day, Stella thought. She lightly shook the thermos, and a few drops sloshed against the side. Might as well finish. She tipped it back and then tucked it under the stroller. Cam sighed, turned, and settled again. A patch of red bodysuit peeked out from beneath the blanket. A nap would be good. The advice to all mothers: sleep when they sleep. Stella had never taken that advice, but she would now. She turned to her stomach, buried her face in her arms, Cam's small body curved against her ribs, moving in gentle waves, up and down, up and down. The spring breeze, the low hum and chatter of the park, the wine warming her from deep inside, made her cozy, as if wrapped in that fleece blanket. She didn't even think of Cam when the air chilled her ribs, when a commotion sounded from far, and she lived, instead, suspended in that moment between falling and landing, knowing and not knowing.