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A PROGRAM OF THE  
MAINE HUMANITIES COUNCIL

PUBLISHED WITH FUNDING FROM  
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES  
ANTHEM BLUE CROSS AND BLUE SHIELD  
MAINE HUMANITIES COUNCIL  
MORTON FAMILY FOUNDATION  
HAWAI'I COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES

# Imagine What It's Like

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A LITERATURE AND MEDICINE ANTHOLOGY

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A BIOGRAPHY MONOGRAPH  
PUBLISHED FOR THE BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH CENTER  
BY THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I PRESS  
2008

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Printed in the United States of America

13 12 11 10 09 6 5 4 3 2

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Imagine what it's like : a literature and medicine anthology / edited by  
Ruth Nadelhaft, with Victoria Bonebakker.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8248-3317-6 (pbk. : acid-free paper)

1. Medicine—Literary collections. I. Nadelhaft, Ruth L., 1938—

II. Bonebakker, Victoria.

PN6071.M38143 2008

808.8'03561—dc22

2008011874

University of Hawai'i Press books are printed on acid-free paper  
and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the  
Council on Library Resources

Designed by Lori Harley  
Printed by Edwards Brothers, Inc.

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# MILK

EILEEN POLLACK

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How many nurses cared for her needs? The first dressed Bea's wound, a puckered red mouth silenced with staples. A second nurse brought her a cup of chilled juice to wash away the sour taste in her mouth. A third nurse, a man, massaged her sore back.

Then a fourth nurse came in, a small dark-haired woman with a pen in her curls. She knelt beside Bea's bed and covered her feet with paper slippers, then helped Bea to stand and shuffle to the bathroom. Bea's bladder was bursting, but everything below her waist was so numb that nothing came out. When she finally gave up, the toilet bowl was gory with blood and clots of tissue. Had a mess like this really come from her body? Even as she stood there, blood dripped to the floor. She bent to wipe it up and nearly passed out. Too embarrassed to ask the nurse to do this for her, she left the blood on the tiles. The nurse handed her a belt and a sanitary napkin as thick as a book, then helped Bea lie down.

"If you need anything at all pull that cord by your bed and ask for Patrice." The nurse tapped a pill into Bea's palm. "Do you want your baby?" she said.

She was asking, of course, if Bea wanted to see him. But the question Bea heard was: Do you want to keep the baby you've just given birth to?

She hadn't conceived him on purpose. She had slept with a man without taking precautions, like any ignorant schoolgirl. But she had decided to keep him. She had worked with abstractions for so many years that she had forgotten it was possible to sometimes catch a glimpse of the thing in itself. When she realized that a fetus was growing in the universe deep in her womb, she couldn't bear to abort it. She talked to it for months, asking it questions. She looked forward to meeting it as she would have looked forward to meeting an alien who could tell her what life on another planet was like.

But for now she was tired. She swallowed the pill, then slept like a woman who has been up for three days and has just given birth to an eleven-pound child.

\* \* \* \* \*

She awoke to a gong. Cheering. Applause. A floor-length blue curtain surrounded her bed. From beyond it came the sounds of a television turned up full volume.

An orderly brought soup. The warm, salty broth tasted so delicious that Bea savored each sip. Then she turned to watch the sun set above the river; the buildings dissolved until only the lights in their windows were visible. A distant observer would have guessed that the city was nothing more substantial than a few panes of glass with light bulbs behind, as earthly astronomers had assumed for so long that the universe was made of comets and stars, of things they could see. Instead, it turned out that all but a fraction of the cosmos was dark, invisible matter—black holes, some new gas, giant cold planets.

Bea looked around, as if someone could see her thinking about invisible matter instead of about her child. She heard her roommate say: "Lie still, stop your wiggling." Bea was certain that if only she could watch another mother diaper her baby she would learn to do this herself, but the heavy blue curtain blocked her roommate from view.

In fact, Bea didn't see her roommate until late that afternoon, though the woman's TV was on the whole time—soap operas, game shows, even cartoons. Every so often the woman groaned. Then, about four, the curtain rings squealed, and Bea's roommate emerged. She was short but so broad that her johnny wouldn't close, exposing a dark swatch of buttocks and spine. She was thirty, maybe older, her hair short and shapeless. Crooked in one arm was a half-naked child; in the other hand, a diaper. She scuffed to the bathroom in her blue paper slippers without glancing at Bea. After ten or fifteen minutes, she opened the door and scuffed back beyond the curtain.

When Bea hobbled to the bathroom to use the toilet herself, she saw a mustardy smear on the lid of the trash can. Why hadn't the woman wiped up her baby's feces? Well, maybe some people just weren't clean. Then she chided herself for thinking this. Wasn't it more logical that her roommate simply hadn't noticed the dirt? Or she still was too weak to juggle a baby and a wet paper towel? Probably, she had left the smear where it was in the confidence that the janitor would wipe it away. Though the next time he came, he left the smear on the can, and the stain of Bea's blood on the tiles beside the bowl.

\* \* \* \* \*

The nurse rolled a Plexiglas crib through the curtain. The baby inside was swaddled in blankets. His eyes were screwed tight but his mouth was wide open, like the mouth of a pitcher waiting for someone to fill it with milk.

"He's hungry," Patrice said. She laid the child in Bea's lap, across her incision.

*This is my son*, Bea repeated to herself, but the fact seemed unreal. He was heavy and round, with a triple chin and jowls; she was gaunt, with high cheekbones. (Did he look like his father? She could barely recall.)

"What's his name?" Patrice asked.

"Isaac," Bea told her, and, as she named him, he suddenly seemed real.

"Isaac," Patrice repeated. "Biblical names are so full of meaning."

Bea didn't bother to explain that she had named her son after Sir Isaac Newton.

"Time to get started," Patrice said. "Your milk won't come in until tomorrow, at least, but you both need the practice."

Bea weighed a breast in one palm: it felt like a Baggie with a spoonful of milk in the bottom. She lifted her son. He was crying from hunger but wouldn't turn his head to suck.

"Here's the trick," Patrice said. Gripping Bea's nipple, she rubbed it across the baby's cheek.

As if by arrangement, Isaac turned toward the nipple and opened his mouth. But when he clamped down his gums, the pain was so intense that Bea cried out and jerked back. He was wailing more shrilly. She let him latch on again, steeling herself not to push him away. The pain abated slowly. Still, as he sucked, she felt a vague irritation, as if a beggar kept pulling at her arm.

"That's enough," Patrice said, just as Bea started to feel more at ease. "I'll take him to the nursery. Here's a pamphlet to study." The cover showed a mother in a lacy white nightgown smiling down at an infant nuzzling her breast. "A bruiser like this will want to eat every hour," Patrice said. "He'll be an eating machine. You've got to relax!"

\* \* \* \* \*

It was after eleven but Bea couldn't fall sleep. In another few days she would have to take her child home. She had never been alone with a baby. Her mother lived in Cleveland and was legally blind. Few of her friends or colleagues had children. She had read books about babies, but she sensed that a new kind of knowledge was called for.

Still, she might have been able to fall asleep if only her roommate would turn off her TV. Bea hated to ask, but maybe if she asked *politely*, pleading the strains of their common ordeal. . . .

She crossed the room, barefoot, and nudged aside the curtain.

The woman sat with her knees drawn to her chest, her baby propped against her shins. She was watching a talk show whose dapper black host Bea knew she ought to recognize. He said something about a basketball player named Larry, and the woman snorted through her nose.

"I didn't mean to disturb you. It's just, well, it's late."

The woman seemed to expect that Bea would do what she had to do—take her pulse or draw blood—and leave her alone. She stared at the screen with such a fierce gravity that no light leaked out.

"Your baby," Bea said, just to make herself known. But then, to determine what to say next, she had to look at the child. It wore a frilly pink dress. Thick auburn hair curled past its ears. Its coppery brown skin was lustrous and smooth. "She's pretty," Bea said.

"Huh. That child ain't no she." The woman seemed to say this without moving her lips. Bea needed to shut her eyes to concentrate on what her roommate was saying.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't—"

"Ain't your fault. Didn't I buy all these dresses? How's anyone supposed to know a baby's a boy if he's wearing a dress?"

The thought crossed Bea's mind that only a poor uneducated woman would predict her baby's sex based on some old wives' tale. "You thought you'd have a girl?"

"Thought' nothing. Those doctors took a picture with that sound thing, said they couldn't see no johnson, I had me a girl."

Bea felt suddenly ashamed, as she did when a colleague found a mistake in a paper she had written. The baby started to fuss. Though his mother's huge breasts swelled beneath her johnny and were ringed with wet cloth, she poked a bottle in his mouth. Bea almost believed the woman did this to spite her. "What's his name?" she asked.

"Only name he's got is fit for a girl. Can't think of no new name until I ask his father. Man don't like it, his boy gets some name he ain't said he liked."

Bea couldn't help but think that a man who cared so much about his son's name ought to have attended the baby's birth. "Did you have a Cesarean?" She asked this for reasons she didn't like to admit: if the woman said no, she might leave the next day and be replaced by a roommate who wouldn't make Bea feel so self-conscious or watch TV all the time. "Or was it natural?" she said, to mask her suspicion that the woman didn't know what "Cesarean" meant.

"Natural, huh. Last time I was in here I had me twin girls. Doctors cut my belly open, I went home in two days. This time I had this teensy little boy, came out on his own the minute I got here, no cutting, no drugs, I can barely stand up. Hurts me down there like a sonofabitch."

The woman pushed the buttons on her remote until she found the news. A snow storm. A plane crash. The mayor of Washington had just been arrested for buying cocaine. According to his lawyer, the mayor had been framed by government officials waging a vendetta against powerful blacks.

"Huh." The woman snorted. She turned to face Bea. "What you think? Think he's guilty?"

Did Bea? Of course. "He's innocent until they prove he isn't," she said.

Whatever the test she had been given, she failed it. The woman rolled toward the curtain, her backside toward Bea and her fleshy black forearm shielding her son. Then she seemed to fall asleep as a movie about the attack on Pearl Harbor unrolled its credits over Bea's head.

\*\*\*\*\*

Someone was jiggling Bea's leg.

"I'm sorry," Patrice said, "but you'll have to get used to it." Patrice handed her Isaac. He was crying again. "I don't want to worry you, but if you can't feed him soon we'll have to give him formula. Then he won't want to suck. And if that happens, well, your milk will never come in."

His mouth worked Bea's nipple. Where was this milk supposed to come from? she wondered. Why couldn't she simply will it to be?

The baby sucked at each side for exactly eight minutes; Patrice timed him, eyes trained on the watch on her sharply cocked wrist.

"You don't have to do that," Bea said. She heard an unfamiliar edge in her voice.

The nurse stopped and stood blinking. She picked at the beads trimming her sweater. It occurred to Bea then that Patrice was as uncomfortable with people as she was. Unlike the other nurses, Patrice couldn't seem to sense what a patient might want. Bea pitied her for being so poorly suited to the job she had chosen, as she pitied the student who had been her advisee for the past seven years; he thought that *having vision* meant seeing stars clearly through a telescope.

Patrice stopped picking at her sweater. "Never mind," she said. "I can be that way sometimes. We'll try again tomorrow." She wheeled the crib toward the door. Beyond the blue curtain she said to Bea's roommate: "Wake up there. Wake up. Don't you know you could crush her? Here, let me take her back to the nursery."

"Uh-uh. You leave that baby right where he is. I don't want my baby in no nursery."

Bea wondered if her roommate really believed that the nurses would purposely try to harm her son. She was being . . . what was the word? *Paranoid*, Bea thought, then she managed to fall asleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was just after breakfast. A girl with red hair poked her face through the curtain. "Statistics," she said. She consulted her clipboard. "Are you Beatrice Weller?"

Bea nodded.

"Maiden name?"

"Beatrice Weller."

The girl regarded Bea closely. She asked what Bea "did."

"I'm a cosmologist," Bea said. She started to explain that cosmologists were scientists who studied the universe—how it formed, how it grew. But the girl interrupted.

"You do make-up? And hair?"

Bea surprised herself by saying, "Um. Sure."

"Do you mind if I ask how much you charge for making someone over? Before, you know, and after? Could you maybe do me?"

"Oh, no," Bea said. "I couldn't. I don't have my . . . tools."

The girl seemed disappointed. "Are you sure? It's important. There's this guy I just met. You'll think I'm silly, but maybe, I don't know, you could give me some beauty tips? I get paid Wednesday." She leaned forward, head cocked, her palms pressed together.

"Well. I suppose. I'll be here until Friday." She would think of something later. Already she sensed that, once you began, it was easy to say things you didn't mean.



"Oh, thanks!" the girl said. She asked a few last questions: Bea's nationality (U.S.) and her age (thirty-six). "I'm sure you had the sense not to smoke or use drugs while you were pregnant." She made a mark on a form, promised to return for her beauty consultation, then dragged a chair behind the curtain. "Hello? Coreen Jones?"

Since the name was so common it had the effect of making Bea's roommate seem less real, not more so, as if she weren't a person but a whole class of objects: chair, atom, Jones.

Bea couldn't help but eavesdrop. Coreen mumbled her answers, which the girl asked her to repeat again and again, her voice louder each time.

"You're unemployed?"

"No, I ain't."

"You've got a job?" the girl asked. "Where?"

"At a school."

"You've got a job at a school?"

"Don't worry," Coreen mumbled. "All I do is cook there."

And so on, until the girl asked Coreen for the name of her child.

"Ain't got one."

"Excuse me?"

"I said my baby doesn't have no name."

"She doesn't have a name?"

"It's a he, not a she, and he doesn't have a name."

*Tell her, Bea thought. It isn't your fault. You're not a bad mother.* But Coreen explained nothing.

The girl asked Coreen if her child had a father.

"Think I done it myself?"

"I meant are you married?"

"Man never needed no piece of paper to make him a father."

The girl asked for his name. Coreen mumbled an answer. "Can you spell that?" the girl asked.

"Always make sure I can spell a man's name before I have his baby." Coreen spelled the letters slowly: "N . . . A . . . T . . . E." This ordeal over, the girl asked Coreen for her "ethnic category."

"American," Coreen said.

"Oh, no," said the girl, "I mean, where were you born?"

"America," Coreen said.

"Well, what country do you come from?"

"Come from? Way back? Guess you could say Sierra Leone."

"That's not a country. It's a mountain. In Mexico."

"Sure it's a country. Sierra Leone."

"All right then, where is it?"

"West Africa," Coreen said.

"But that's not a country! You mean South Africa."

Bea heard Coreen grunt. "You so smart, you put down whatever country you want. You got any more questions?"

"Only one," the girl said. "Now, try to think hard. Did you use alcohol, or smoke cigarettes, or take any drugs at all—heroin, or cocaine, or even marijuana—while your child was inside you?"

A pause. Bea was startled to hear Coreen laugh.

"Girl, if I done all that awful shit to my baby, he wouldn't have turned out so perfect, now would he."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bea had just spent another fruitless half-hour nursing her son when a woman's harsh voice barked over the intercom that the photographer was there to take pictures of their babies, but they had to line up by the door to Room 3 within the next fifteen minutes or forfeit their chance. She usually considered taking pictures to be vulgar and vain. But if something were to happen to Isaac, she wouldn't have a picture to remember what he looked like.

From behind the blue curtain came the sounds of her roommate preparing her child. Bea took Isaac as he was, in a hospital T-shirt stamped BETH ZION, BETH ZION, as if that were his name. The two women wheeled their babies' cribs down the hall. Every few steps Coreen clutched her belly. Her forehead was wet, her face ashen.

"Are you all right?" Bea asked. "If you want, I could take him—" She was suddenly afraid that Coreen would react with the same paranoia she had shown toward Patrice.

Coreen mumbled what sounded like "tell me I'm fine" and kept pushing the crib.

They lined up behind a dozen other mothers, half Coreen's age, their hair elegantly done up in beads and braids. Their babies, like Coreen's, were dressed in fancy outfits; one of the boys wore suspenders and a bow tie. A middle-aged woman in a pink linen suit handed out brochures. When Bea saw the cheapest price she nearly turned back. But when would Isaac be a newborn again? She wiped the spittle from his mouth. He gnawed at her finger with sharply ridged gums.

"Huh," Coreen said. "How come they never tell you what things like this cost 'til you're standing in line?"

Bea expected her roommate to wheel her baby's crib back to their room. How could she afford twenty dollars for a picture? Bad enough she was spending an extra five dollars a day for TV, an expense that Bea herself, from years of living on a stipend, had elected to save.

But Coreen stayed in line. She filled out the form, holding it against the back of the woman in front of her. She let the photographer perch her son on a pillow and snap a light in his face.

"I'm not buying it right now," she told the woman in pink. "But you better take good care of it. That boy's bound to be famous. Reporters need his picture, you just might be rich."

\*\*\*\*\*

Bea hadn't wanted anyone to see her until she had gotten the hang of taking care of her son. She disconnected the phone, but in the middle of the week a boy in a Mohawk brought her a towering basket of fruit. "Congratulations on your own Little Bang!" read the card, "from the crew." Her friend Modhumita, who worked in a lab not far from the hospital, stopped by every day. Bea caught herself hoping that her roommate would see Mita's dusky brown skin and think she was black.

Coreen's phone rang often, but no one came to visit. From what Bea could tell, none of Coreen's friends could get time off from work, or they couldn't leave their children. As the TV set blared, Coreen told a friend what she hadn't told Bea.

Her "pains" had begun on the subway to work. "Know what scared is?" she said. "Scared's thinking you're gonna drop your baby right there on that nasty old floor, all those white boys looking up your nookie." Instead of getting off at the stop near the school, Coreen had taken the train to her clinic. "Time I get inside I can't hardly walk, they say I'm still closed, I got a month to go, it's only false pains. I say, 'You ain't careful, you gonna have yourself a false little baby right there in your lap,' but they don't want to hear it. I go out and call Lena and ask could she keep the twins a while longer. Then I call me an ambulance. Time it pulls up, driver says, 'How come you people always waiting 'til the last minute? You like giving birth to your babies outdoors?'"

Her friend must have asked a question.

"Nate?" Coreen said. "He's away on some haul, don't even know yet." She complained she didn't feel well; she was all hot and cold and she "hurt something awful." Then she shushed whoever was on the other end because the announcer was saying that the police had a videotape of Marion Barry smoking cocaine in that Washington hotel room, and not with his wife.

"Huh," Coreen said. "They got his black ass by the balls. Just let him try to lie now."

\*\*\*\*\*

After dinner that night Patrice brought in Isaac. He worked Bea's nipples so hard that he raised a welt on his lip, but still no milk came.

"He's losing weight," Patrice told her. "You'll have to calm down. Just look at his face and think loving thoughts."

But the baby kept crying. His face was red as lava; his mouth might have been a crater into which Bea had been ordered to leap. According to Patrice, if Bea's milk didn't come in within twenty-four hours they would have to give him formula.

"Hey!" Coreen called. "I need me a doctor."

Patrice shot Bea a glance, then flung the curtain aside. "You're just engorged," she said. "That means your breasts are too full. We'll have to dry you up. Then you'll feel better."

Bea wondered why her roommate wasn't nursing her child. Didn't she know that it was healthier and cheaper to breast feed? Maybe she disliked the feel of a mouth tugging at her nipple as much as Bea did. Or she couldn't afford to stay home with the baby. Bea stared at the curtain. Why could she imagine what was going on at the other end of the universe but not beyond that drape?

\*\*\*\*\*

In the middle of the night Bea heard Coreen moaning, "Help me. Lord, help me. I'm freezing."

Bea stood from her bed, wobbling, and pushed aside the curtain. Coreen lay with her head thrown back on her pillow, her johnny pulled low as if she had clawed at the neck. Her breasts were exposed, hard and full, rippling with veins; they looked like twin hemispheres carved from mahogany, the North and South Pole rising from each.

"I'm freezing. I'm dying." She was shaking so violently that the bed squeaked beneath her. Her blanket lay on the floor.

Slowly, Bea bent and gathered Coreen's blanket. She drew the cotton cloth over her roommate. Her wrist brushed Coreen's arm. Bea flinched away, scorched.

She pulled the cord for the nurse, then tugged the blanket from her own bed and spread it over Coreen, whose shaking didn't stop.

Patrice came. "What's the matter? Tell me what's wrong."

"She's freezing," Bea told her. "She said she feels like she's dying."

Patrice took Bea's arm and led her back. "She's just being melodramatic," Patrice whispered. "The state gives them formula. They can't bear to turn down something for free. I'll get her an ice pack. She'll be fine, don't you worry."

Bea glanced at the curtain. "I'll get a doctor myself."

Patrice stalked from the room. Bea pushed through the drape. She didn't know what to do, so she stood there and waited. Without the window, this side of the room was so gloomy that she almost reached up to switch on the TV.

"Don't."

Her heart jumped.

"Don't let them take him." It seemed to cost Coreen a great deal to speak. "Don't," she repeated.

"I promise," Bea said. But already Coreen had started thrashing again, and she didn't seem to hear.

The baby was sleeping face-down in his crib. When Bea lifted him, he hung limp from her hands, surprisingly light compared to her own child. She carried him the way one might carry a puppy, then sat with him on her bed. Was he breathing? He

hadn't stirred. She stroked his curls, then his neck. He turned toward her belly, nestling against her thigh. He moved his lips. Her breasts tingled.

A doctor came. Bea huddled closer to the child, partly for warmth and partly to protect him, from what she didn't know. What would she do if someone tried to take him?

The doctor asked Coreen this or that question; he called her "Miss Jones" and murmured "I see" after each of her answers. Then he slowly explained that she had an infection called en-do-me-tri-tis. "It's really quite rare for a natural childbirth, but sometimes it happens." He sounded offhand, though Bea knew this was something that women used to die from. "We'll put in an IV—that's an intravenous line—and you'll feel better before long."

The baby in Bea's lap looked up but didn't cry, as if he understood that it was in his interest to lie still. His smooth copper skin reminded Bea of the telescope her father had bought her for her twelfth birthday. She had cradled it for hours, until the sun set, certain it would bring her the power to see. The child in her lap seemed to hold this same promise. Unlike her own son, he appeared to want nothing. But how could that be true? How could a baby not want anything?

A sweet-faced young woman—Korean? Japanese?—wheeled an IV pole next to Bea's bed. She must have been a medical student—she had that overly serious expression of someone who is hiding how uncertain she feels.

"Here," the student said, "let me take . . . Is that your baby?"

Bea held the boy closer, hiding his face. "You want my roommate, Coreen Jones."

"Oh," the student said. She still seemed confused but wheeled the pole through the curtain. "Hello," she said. "Don't worry, I'll be done in a minute. It won't hurt one bit."

Bea could hear her roommate mutter, "You ain't got it in."

"Just a minute . . . right there . . ."

"Missed by a mile, girl. Might as well of stuck that thing in my ear." Coreen mumbled these words; if Bea hadn't grown accustomed to hearing Coreen's voice, she wouldn't have known what she had said.

The student kept up her patter—"See, that didn't hurt"—and Coreen stopped complaining. When Bea carried the baby back to his crib his mother lay snoring, the blanket Bea had given her pulled up to her chin.

\*\*\*\*\*

The statistician returned. "I got paid!" She waved a check. "We've got twenty-four hours to create a new me."

Bea was changing Isaac's diaper, holding his ankles in the air with one hand and swabbing yellow stool from his bottom with the other. She hadn't washed her hair since coming to the hospital. She wore tortoiseshell glasses she had picked out in eleventh grade. "I'm really very tired."

"Just one little beauty tip?"

Bea stared at the girl. What was the name of that stuff on her eyes? Liner? Mascara? "Maybe you could use less shadow," she said. As she taped Isaac's diaper and wiped his feces from her hands she searched for a phrase from the glamour magazines her mother used to buy. "Let the real you come through."

"The real me?" The girl seemed baffled. "Well, my friends always say I'm a typical redhead."

Bea could hear Coreen groan. "I meant your best self," she said. "Let your best self shine through."

"But how?" the girl asked.

Bea shrugged. "That's the same advice I give to all my clients."

The girl nodded gravely. "I'll try it," she said. She again waved the check. "How much do I owe you?"

Bea flapped her hand, a gesture that made her feel both generous and mean.

"Thanks!" the girl said. "I'll let you know how it goes." On her way to the hall she stopped to chat with Coreen. "How *are* you?" she asked. "I looked in an atlas, and Sierra Leone was right there in West Africa, just like you said!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Coreen got a visit from a tired-sounding woman who seemed to run the clinic where Coreen had received her prenatal care.

"What's this?" the doctor said. "Who put in this IV?" She summoned Patrice. "Just look at this arm, the way it's all blown up. My patient's IV has been draining into everything but her vein—for how long? Ten, fifteen hours? Where do you think all that fluid's been going?"

The doctor couldn't stay—another of her patients was about to deliver—but she gave Patrice instructions as to what to do next.

"I didn't put this in," Patrice grumbled when the doctor had gone. "I would never do a job as sloppy as this."

"Huh," Coreen said. "If I treated hamburger meat as sloppy as you treat the folks in these beds, they would fire my ass."

\*\*\*\*\*

Coreen was feeling better, but her baby still was sick. "He shits all the time," she told the pediatrician.

"Oh, all newborn babies have frequent movements," he said. He sounded like the same well-meaning young intern who had given Isaac his checkup. ("The nurse tells me that you and your baby aren't bonding. Is there anything I can do?," as shy as a boy whose mother has asked him to unhook her brassiere.)

"Ain't just frequent," Coreen told him. "And the color ain't right." The pediatrician started to say that all newborn babies had odd-colored "movements," but Coreen stopped him. "Don't you think I know what a baby's shit looks like? Didn't I raise myself twins?"



His voice tensed. "I'll look into it. But I'm sure if the nurses had seen anything amiss, I would have been notified."

Bea assumed that he was right, until she remembered that even at her sickest, Coreen had changed her baby's diapers herself.

\*\*\*\*\*

Coreen's boyfriend came to visit. Bea saw nothing but his running shoes, caked with dry mud, as they moved back and forth beneath the blue curtain. She could hear when he kissed his son, then kissed Coreen.

"Go on," Coreen said. "I'm too sore for that stuff."

The boyfriend, it seemed, drove a moving van or a truck. He had been away on a trip to some city out west. How could he have known that Coreen would give birth to their child five weeks early? When no one answered at home, he called the hospital from a pay phone, but someone at the switchboard kept cutting him off. He drove without stopping until he reached Boston.

They talked about names. The man suggested Mitchell, after a younger brother who had died. But Coreen wasn't sure. "This boy ain't lucky as it is." She spoke softly but didn't mumble. "I can feel it in my bones." Bea heard something in Coreen's voice that she hadn't heard before. Or maybe she was hearing Coreen's voice as it really was.

"Never mind your bones," the boyfriend said, laughing. "All you women, nothing you like better than worrying. Hell, we got us a son. Come to Daddy, little Mitchell. First thing's gonna happen now your daddy's come back, he's gonna buy you some pants!"

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Coreen's fever returned, no one knew why. The doctors spoke to her kindly, but they said she couldn't leave the hospital. She told them that her twins were only three years old. She might lose her job if she stayed away too long. Precisely, they said. What she needed was rest, which she wouldn't get at home.

In the middle of the night, Coreen changed her baby's diaper for the third or fourth time. Then she rang for the nurse.

"Look at these diapers! You tell me his shit's supposed to be red!"

"Oh! Oh my!" Patrice said, startled. Bea heard the nurse's shoes slap the linoleum as she ran down the hall. She returned with a doctor whose voice Bea didn't recognize. He had a rich, soothing accent—English, or Australian. He paused between phrases as if to gauge the responses of someone whose reactions might be different from his.

He was . . . concerned, he told Coreen, that her son might have . . . a serious form of diarrhea. An infection in the bowel. Not so rare, really, especially for babies like hers, who had been born premature. They were taking him to Children's Hospital, just down the street. She could see him as soon as she was feeling "more perky." In the meantime, he said, they would send word how he was.

An orderly wheeled the child out the door. Bea thought of pushing through the curtain to comfort Coreen, but what could she say? That the doctors at Children's were the best in the world? That she hadn't broken her promise not to let them take him?

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Early the next morning Bea dressed herself, then dressed her son. Bundled in the snow-suit Bea's mother had sent, Isaac seemed thoughtful, as if contemplating this latest change in his life. She took a deep breath and pushed aside the curtain, holding the gift her colleagues had sent; she had eaten one pear, but the rest of the pyramid of fruit was intact. She waited for her roommate to say *Keep your damn apples*. But Coreen didn't remove her gaze from the woman in sequins spinning a shiny wheel on TV.

Bea set the fruit on the night stand. "I hope you feel better soon. I hope your baby is all right." She tried not to wish that her roommate would thank her. "Is there anything I can do?"

Coreen turned to face her. For some reason, Bea thought that her roommate would tell her to pray. But Coreen shook her head no and turned back to the spinning wheel on TV.

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From the moment Bea came home she had no trouble nursing. She locked the doors and pulled down the shades. She peeled off Isaac's diaper, T-shirt, and hat and gave him a bath. Seeing him naked and whole the first time, she felt a catch in her throat, a pressure in her chest. She assumed this was love, but the word seemed too weak, as if she had grown up calling pink "red," and then, in her thirties, seen crimson or scarlet.

Isaac slept by her side. Whenever he was hungry she gave him a breast. Milk spurted in his mouth so quickly it choked him; she needed to pump out the excess, which sprayed from each nipple like water from a shower head. He would have sucked half an hour at each breast, if she had let him. How could she watch his face for so long and still not be bored? Her elation, she knew, was hormonal. But who would have thought that a chemical substance could produce this effect? If vials of oxytocin could be bought at a store, who would drink or use drugs? She hadn't suspected that of all the emotions a human being could feel, this tenderness would be the one she craved most.

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When she felt a bit stronger, Bea telephoned the hospital and asked a nurse in obstetrics if Coreen Jones had gone home. Yes, she had, the nurse said. And her baby? Bea asked. "Just a moment," the nurse said. A few minutes later she got back on the line and said that the baby had been transferred to Children's Hospital. That was all the information she could release.

When Bea called Children's, she introduced herself as Dr. Beatrice Weller, which, technically, she was, and learned that a patient listed only as "male infant Jones" had died two days earlier. She said, "Yes," then hung up.

That afternoon, she borrowed a pouch from the family next door, strapped Isaac inside, and walked to the T. As she stood by the turnstile, struggling to get some change from her pocket, someone behind her said, "Honey, don't rush. What a mother really needs isn't a pouch, it's an extra pair of hands."

The woman who had said this was at least six feet tall, with soft, sculpted hair and perfect brown skin. She wore a yellow cashmere suit and enormous brass earrings. Bea wondered if she might be one of the anchors on the local evening news, then decided that such a celebrity wouldn't be taking the T.

The woman dropped a token in the box for Bea's fare. Bea tried to repay her. But the woman lifted one palm, pushed through the gate and, briefcase to chest, ran to catch her train.

When Bea got to the hospital she went straight to Room 3. She said that she had come to buy a picture for a friend who was ill, wrote a check for twenty dollars, and was handed a portrait in a flimsy pink folder with bears along one edge. Clipped to the front was the form each mother had filled out: MOTHER'S NAME . . . ADDRESS. . . Coreen's writing was shaky; Bea remembered her leaning on the woman in front.

She opened the folder. Yellow pinafore. Curls. Full lips. She thought of mailing the portrait but decided to follow through with her plan. To hand a person an envelope and offer your condolences for the death of her child seemed a minimum requirement for living on earth.

She took the subway to a neighborhood she had never been to before. The three-decker houses weren't all that much different from the ones where Bea lived, but the smallest details—a pair of red sneakers dangling from a telephone wire, an unopened pack of gum lying in a gutter—seemed enlarged and mysterious. Most of the houses here were enclosed by steel fences. German shepherds and Dobermans strained at their leashes and barked as Bea passed. As he slept, Isaac stirred; with her cheek to his soft spot she could feel his brain pulse.

She finally found the right address. Three rusty mailboxes hung askew on the porch, an eagle on each: HERRERO, GREEN, JONES. Had Bea really believed that she could ring Coreen's doorbell and explain why she had come? When Coreen saw the photo of her dead son, she would scream. Maybe she would faint. Besides, Bea was holding a healthy baby in her pouch, and that, more than anything, would make Coreen hate her.

A light flickered on behind a third-story window. Bea pictured Coreen lying on her bed, stone mute with grief. Her boyfriend came in. *Don't worry, sweetheart, we'll have us another baby. It wasn't your fault.* Bea wondered where the twins were. And Lena? Coreen's mother? What about Coreen's job? Would they allow her time off? How useless the eye without the imagination to inform it, to make sense of all the darkness surrounding the light.

A child started crying in the building next door. Bea's breasts began to tingle; in his pouch Isaac stirred. She slid the folder in the mailbox. Milk flowed from her nipples,

soaking her blouse. She hurried to the T station, where she zippered her parka so that only Isaac's head poked from the top.

During her last night in the hospital, Bea had lain with her hands pressed against her ears as Coreen had changed her baby's diaper again and again. By then, Bea herself had come down with a fever. Every joint ached. Her breasts had swollen grossly. They were lumpy, rock hard, as if someone had pumped them full of concrete. Another few drops of milk and they would burst.

And yet they kept filling. Every time Coreen's baby whimpered, milk surged into Bea's breasts, pushing through ducts that felt tiny and clogged, like irrigation ditches silted with clay. In another few moments, she would be forced to get up and stagger down the hall and try to stop Patrice from feeding Isaac the formula she had warned Bea that she would give him. Bea longed to feel her baby's mouth sucking at her nipples, sucking and sucking, easing her pain. In the meantime, she lay there, palms against her ears, her breasts filling with milk for another woman's child.