Her Third Baby [1]

November 4, 2013 Short Stories [2]

Short Story by Nicole Simonsen



[3]

> It is no accident that the photographer becomes a photographer any more than the lion tamer becomes a lion tamer.
>
> —Dorothea Lange

My mother should have died during the birth of her third daughter, after she hemorrhaged in the delivery room. “There was a great flood of blood, more than you can possibly imagine,” my father kept saying as a way to highlight the miracle of her survival. She stayed in the hospital for two weeks, then came home in a wheelchair, weak, pale, a ghost of herself. But it was a miracle, everyone said, and we had to be patient for the miracle to complete itself. Like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, the conditions had to be right, and so my sister and I had to keep quiet and

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

invisible. We were not to pester her with questions or for hugs or for snacks. I was eight, and Charlotte was six, old enough to fend for ourselves. We learned how to boil water, and so we ate soggy meals: broccoli, carrots, beets. I stood on a giant dictionary, staring into the pot while the color drained from the beets and stained the water a neon red. The colors were so pretty I thought we could paint our mother a happy picture. But the colors didn't set right; they bled all over the page and mingled together into a pale, sopping mess.

Day after day, our mother stayed in the back bedroom. Every afternoon our father brought the baby out in her bassinet so our mother could sleep. We pretended she was our baby, Charlotte the mother, and me the aunt or neighbor. Even then it felt unnatural to be a mother. I didn't have Charlotte's knack for cooing and clucking over her. I didn't care about dressing her in matching outfits, and I couldn't decipher her various cries. Hungry, lonely, tired, wet—they all sounded the same to me. While Charlotte could stand endlessly over her crib, admiring her fuzzy yellow hair and adjusting her blankets, I found it more boring than church. The baby didn't mind Charlotte's fussing when she slept, but when she woke, she screamed until someone took her behind our mother's locked door.

Something was wrong with our mother. This I had pieced together from bits of whispered conversation. Like the baby, she cried too much, but unlike the baby, her crying was inconsolable. I didn't know what that word meant, so I looked it up in the dictionary. *To be heartsick, heartsore, wretched.* Something was wrong with my mother's heart.

Aunt Noreen, my mother's older sister, said they should take her back to the hospital. "Maybe they could give her something to make her stop crying," she said.

I pictured my mother on the other side of the door, crying all day and night until the room filled and she floated in her own tears. Had she been that unhappy after my birth? Or Charlotte's?

"There's medication–"

"No!" my father said, his mouth a grim line. They stared at each other until Aunt Noreen finally looked away, sighing.

"They can help her, Joh—"

"No! We take care of our own," he said.

"Is that how they do things in this country? Let their women die of grief?"

She crushed her cigarette into the ashtray, handed my father the baby, and turned to the doorway where Charlotte and I were standing. In those days, we were always in the threshold, in neither one room nor the other.

"Charlotte wants a sandwich," I said.

"Oh, I didn't know you were there!" Aunt Noreen said. "You're hungry. We forgot about dinner, didn't we?" She glared at my father until he put his cigarette out. Then she rummaged through the refrigerator, pulling the lids off containers and sniffing the contents. Finally, she went to the pantry for a can of soup. With his free arm, my father pulled Charlotte onto his knee. He tried to make room for me on the other knee, but the baby was in that arm, and he couldn't quite balance us both. I leapt off. I didn't like the way she took up his whole other arm.

• • •

The next morning, my mother tried to kill herself. At least that is how I remember it, but my memory of those days is compressed like a photo album of a family vacation—only certain moments preserved, whole days forgotten. It may have been days or even a week later when she slit her wrists with the antique boning knife. All we were told was that she got sick, "had taken a turn," and had to go back to the hospital. For the first time in what felt like months, no one stopped me from going into her room. I stood at the threshold. There were her things: her bed, her dresser, her vanity table with the oval mirror where she sometimes let me sit and put on lipstick. Maybe it was the light flooding in through the window above her bed, or maybe it was her mysterious absence, but the room seemed flat and two-dimensional, like a photograph. But the smell. The air was thick, stale, almost curdled, as if a whole gallon of milk had spilled and

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

rotted in the carpet. I took a deep breath and stepped inside. I sat at the vanity table and looked over at her unmade bed. There was blood on the sheets. I reached out and touched a spot with my index finger. Her blood stuck to me, the same color as the beet juice paint I had tried to make, only much thicker. A crazy and shameful thought occurred to me. I could paint a get-well card with my mother's blood, and since her blood was so thick and dark, I knew it would take. Maybe receiving a message in her own blood would call her back. That's what I was thinking when Aunt Noreen found me with my bloody finger.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh, Lydia! You shouldn't be here. You shouldn't have seen this." She held my head and drew me in to an embrace so hard the buttons on her blouse left an imprint on my cheek. It felt like punishment. She steered me to the bathroom and washed my mother's blood down the drain. I was crying, but couldn't say why. She tucked me into my own bed with the clean white sheets and told me to rest. I exhausted myself with all that crying, just like my mother, and fell into a deep sleep. When I woke, I knew what we had to do. I wondered whether or not Charlotte could keep a secret.

"It's the only way," I said with enough authority that she followed me into the bathroom. There I had stashed a small, glass bowl, and the same boning knife my mother had used. "Hold out your hand," I told Charlotte. She stood mute, eyes on the knife.

"You first."

"Come on. Be brave."

She shook her head, lips quivering.

"Fine." I swiped the blade across my index finger. Though it stung, I refused to wince. We watched the blood drip into the bowl. It was a magical serum, but it wouldn't work alone, I told her. We needed the blood of all our mother's daughters. "Yours especially," I said, "because you look just like her." It was true. Charlotte, with her tiny mouth, her wide green eyes, her freckles, was a smaller version of our mother. I had more of my father, his dark hair and eyes, his long chin.

Charlotte held out her hand and turned her face away. Quickly, I drew the blade across her white skin. She bled generously. It wasn't until she turned to look that she began to moan.

"Shhh! We're almost done," I whispered. Tenderly, I wrapped a band-aid around the cut, then held up my own bandaged finger. "We're twins now."

Getting the baby's blood was harder than I expected. Women we hardly knew, women from church, the neighborhood, were passing her around as if she were a prop. They were all smoking and whispering and saying things like "such a shame," and "how sad," and telling stories about cousins and aunts who, too, had fallen prey to this inexplicable sadness.

Finally, Aunt Noreen put the baby down for a nap in our parents' room. Someone had put mittens over her hands.

Charlotte cooed to the baby in a low voice while she removed the mittens. "Don't worry, sweetie. It will only hurt for a few seconds."

"You hold the bowl," I told Charlotte. "And don't move." I didn't need a lot of the baby's blood, just a few drops, since ours had flowed so freely.

I made the final cut to her pinky. At first, nothing happened. Gently, I squeezed the cut, pale as a fish gill. Still, nothing. What if the baby didn't have any blood at all? What if she was some kind of bloodless monster? Charlotte must have been thinking the same thing because she was staring at the baby, confused and afraid. I squeezed again.

"Maybe I should try another finger?" I picked up the knife.

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

But then Charlotte said, “Look!”

A single drop had welled out. I tapped her little finger against the rim of the bowl before it finally fell and mixed with our blood. Just then she screamed.

“Shhh! Shhh!” I whispered, trying to get the mitten back on.

Aunt Noreen burst in. “What’s going on in here?” She looked into the bassinet, at the baby’s red, screaming face.

“Nothing!” I said. “She woke up on her own.”

Charlotte hid the bowl behind her back. I prayed that she wouldn’t spill it.

“It took me an hour to get her to sleep, and now you’ve gone and woken her.”

We backed out of the room, hurried down the hallway into our room and shut the door. I found the paint brushes and a piece of paper, which I folded in half to make a card, but my hands were trembling so much I had to redo it three times. Silent and watchful, Charlotte sat on her heels. I lifted the bowl high so that the light streaming through the window lit the blood just like the Druid priestess in my mother’s book of Irish stories.

“There’s not much. We can’t make any mistakes,” I said.

“Then you do it,” Charlotte said. “I’ll watch.”

My mother always wore a silver necklace with a Celtic knot that her mother had given her before she left Ireland. I knew it represented the holy trinity, but I thought it could represent her daughters, too. I painted it as best I could, three interconnected loops with a point at the ends. I considered the messages *we love you* and *we miss you*. *We miss you* expressed need but, for the first time in my life, I wasn’t sure if my mother was capable of meeting my needs. So I settled on *we love you* because it required nothing of her. I had just enough paint left to draw a heart at the bottom, a real heart, I thought, full of real blood. The card was a simple one, but full of longing, and I hoped that she would hold it in her hands and feel the tug of her children.

Charlotte leaned over the page and urged me on. “Hurry, hurry.” She worried that someone would come in and catch us, but I knew no one would. We were temporarily forgotten.

Later that afternoon, a neighbor took us to her house and sat us down in the front of the TV. A breeze blew white curtains up. I held the card. The neighbor, Alice, made us sandwiches and apple slices. When her sons came home from school, she spoke to them in hushed tones. They came out and asked if we wanted to play Monopoly. We shrugged. I had a streak of bad luck, and Charlotte wanted only the cheap purple properties, and once she had them, she was content to go around the board, collecting $200 and paying rent. They looked at us contemptuously.

“Don’t you understand the purpose of Monopoly? You’re supposed to buy up as many properties as you can.”

“I don’t want to,” said Charlotte.

“She doesn’t want to,” the older boy repeated, incredulous. They shook their heads and wandered off.

With the game over and the TV off, we had nothing to do. Time had stopped. We would sit there for an eternity; we would grow stale as old biscuits, waiting for news, for our mother to come back, for something.

Aunt Noreen came that night and took us home, the three of us walking quickly through the rain, the first storm of the season. She slept on the couch, our father at the hospital, but he came home in the morning long enough to nap for a few hours, shower, and leave again.

Just before he left, he put his hat on and stood looking at himself for a long time in the hallway mirror. He grabbed his

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

coat from the rack, muttering something in a low voice. He always muttered. It was something our mother used to tease him about, how he would sometimes talk to himself in a made-up language, and she never knew what he was saying or if it was about her.

“Daddy, we made Mummy a card.” I handed it to him. I thought that he would ask about the paint, its unusual color, or where it had come from, but he barely looked at it before he tucked it inside his coat.

“Don’t bend it.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” he assured me. “It’s a very nice card.”

“Make sure you give it to her.”

“Yes, okay.”

“Don’t forget.”

“Okay, Lydia. I won’t.”

In my bed, I found Charlotte curled up, sucking on the tip of her blanket.

“Don’t’ worry,” I told her. “The card will work. It will bring her back.”

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');



[4]

• • •

All day long, we waited for her at Alice's house. Alice told us to roam around, to play in the backyard, if we wanted, or in her sons' rooms, but we liked her wood-paneled living room best. It was a forest, and, perched on the arm of the sofa, we were small woodland creatures on high alert.

Alice brought us a tin of butter cookies. To be polite, we ate one, wiped the corners of our mouths, and said "thank you." She frowned and took the tin away.

Our father came just before dinner. He took off his hat as he stepped into the living room and thanked Alice for watching us. We burst past him, to our house, hoping to find her in the kitchen, but only Aunt Noreen was there with the baby, that ugly baby who had brought all this on us, the baby nobody wanted, especially me.

• • •

The north wind came that night and assaulted the trees and anything unfortunate enough to be left outside. I couldn't sleep and, for once, was allowed to stay up late. "That is the devil's own wind," my father said. "Only a witch would be out on a night like this."

The mention of witches sent me to the window in hopes of seeing one streak by or maybe even perched in the giant

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

eucalyptus tree. Witches were, in my mind, only part human. They were part something else, bird maybe, vulture, and that's why they could fly and why they might like to sit in a tree and look down on us. The witches in all the stories I knew were evil creatures, ugly inside and out. They brewed disgusting potions, tricked people, and led them astray. But they were powerful, too, because they could make manifest their desires, and that's what I wanted, the power to bring my mother home.

"What did she say when you gave her the card?" I asked.

"Lydia, that's the sixth time you've asked me today."

"Just tell me one more time," I begged.

"She said, 'It's lovely. Lydia is an artist.'"

"Can we see her tomorrow?"

My father opened his mouth to speak, but stopped. "Well," he said after a minute, "your mother is not ready to see anyone yet. She misses you very much, but you have to wait a few more days. Let her regain some of her strength." Yawning, he looked at his watch. "You shouldn't be up this late. Get in bed, and I'll read you a story."

That night, after my father commanded me to sleep, I sat up for what seemed like hours, propped up against the headboard, and waited for my mother to come home, even though I knew that when she did it would be during daylight hours. I continued these nightly vigils for weeks, hoping they would bring her home faster, as if there was some magic in wishing. But all I got from it were dark circles under my eyes that have, till this day, never really left. Sometimes I would get up, pad softly down the hall, and sit behind the kitchen door to eavesdrop on Noreen and my father.

"There is no reason for her to be sad," my father said. "No reason! Don't I give her everything?"

"This has nothing to do with you, John. Some women get like that after they have a baby and nobody knows why. It won't last."

So, it was what I had thought all along. It was the baby's fault. For some reason, my mother did not love the baby. Maybe she only had enough love for two children, and a third had depleted her stores.

I wandered back to bed and thought of ways to get rid of the baby. I didn't want to kill her, but I had heard of people dropping babies at church doorsteps or outside a single woman's house like a gift from the stork. I thought about putting an ad in the paper. That's what people did when they wanted to get rid of something, wasn't it? Maybe a witch could take her and she could grow up to be a witch, too. But no, I thought, she might come back years later and take revenge on the sister who couldn't love her.

• • •

It was Charlotte who found her, some days later, cold and stiff, in her bassinette. She was adjusting the baby's bonnet, when she noticed that her cheeks were unusually cold. We stood over the bassinette, staring at the small lump, her blue lips frozen in a tiny O.

"Oh my! Oh no!" Aunt Noreen said, covering her mouth.

"What's the matter with her?" Charlotte shrieked.

Aunt Noreen crushed the baby to her chest and slid to the ground, rocking back and forth. Charlotte collapsed, too. I hugged her tight, burying my face in her hair to hide the fact that I was not crying. Now, our mother would be free to come home. I wished there was some way I could tell them. As if reading my mind, Aunt Noreen said, "I don't know what this is going to do to your mother." She placed a blanket over the baby's face, whispering "poor, poor dear."

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

After the baby's death, we became pariahs in our neighborhood, the family God decided to test with one tragedy after another and thus to be avoided, as if a crazy mother and a dead baby were contagious—and, if they only knew, a child who was part witch, who could conjure up her desires, even if a little clumsily. The other families on the street waved or nodded stiffly from behind their windows. When they brought us food after the baby's death, no one wanted their casserole pans or dishes or platters back.

I didn't care what the neighbors thought as long as my mother came home. I fixed my mind's eye on her, pictured her walking up the steps, one foot in front of the other, willing her return. She would rock us in her arms, like she did when we were little, singing her favorite Irish lullaby, "Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral, too-ra-loo-ra-li, too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral, hush now, don't you cry." Then she would make our favorite dinner, shepherd's pie, humming while she cooked. Our house would be noisy again with our mother's songs, our father's jokes, and our laughter. Laughter, a sound we had forgotten.

• • •

Charlotte grew quiet. She took her blanket with her everywhere now, even to kindergarten, refusing to put it in her cubby.

Our father sat on a chair so that he could look her in the eyes, the blanket in one hand. "Your teacher called. You cannot take this to school anymore." He shook it around.

Charlotte sucked in her breath. "But I need Blanket."

"No, you don't. You're too old for it now."

She surprised us both by leaping at the blanket and wrenching it away. Then she buried her face in it. Her crying was sharp, almost metallic.

"Charlotte," he said, in the firm voice he used when he was losing patience. "Charlotte, sit up, please."

There was no response.

"I'm not going to ask again."

"Please, Lottie," I said, "Sit up." Lottie was our mother's nickname for her.

When she lifted her head, we saw that her forehead had broken out into red splotches and her bloodshot eyes glowed. She seemed wild or possessed. It must have scared him, because he smoothed her hair and kissed her forehead and said, "All right, Lottie, you can have it at night, but you will have to take something else to school."

"Wha—what could I take?"

He took us to Spag's convenience store and said we could get anything we wanted. Charlotte walked up and down the toy aisle and finally picked a baby doll dressed in frilly pink pajamas. She came with a plastic bottle and a hat.

The doll was too lifelike, too much like the baby we had just buried.

"What about this bunny?" he asked.

Charlotte shook her head and crushed the box to her chest. On her face was a fierce determination I had never seen before. He noticed it, too, because he said, "Oh, all right. Fine." He turned to me. "Well, Lydia?"

I shrugged. While Charlotte had been walking up and down the aisle, I noticed in myself a cool detachment, a strange lack of desire for any of these toys. I had forgotten how to want anything besides my mother.

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

We wandered to a row of TVs all showing a scene from a daytime soap opera, a beautiful woman in a silk gown. She was scowling and holding a letter to a flame. Smoke curled around her face. She watched the flames eat the paper, then tossed it into a fireplace. She had a face that was made to scowl, with sharp cheekbones and haughty arched eyebrows. We could not take our eyes from the image of her, repeated over and over on all the TVs. Here's a woman, I thought, who had no use for crying. Did such women exist in real life?

Opposite the TVs was a glass case of cameras: Kodaks, Nikons, Minoltas. They were small and black, with dark lenses that seemed mysterious and alive, like the pupils of a dragon.

"Would you like to look at one?" the sales lady asked.

I nodded. "That one."

She handed me a small, black Minolta.

"How does it work?"

She showed me how to push the little button down, how the door swung open, how to put the film in, how to advance the film after I took a picture, how to turn on the flash. Here was something I could actually use. She showed me another, this one with an adjustable lens, and let me hold the camera to my eye. I pretended to take a picture of her, of the shoppers milling about, of my own shoes, then I turned around and took a picture of my father, who was still transfixed by the hard woman.

"Lottie, stand next to Daddy," I ordered. "Hold his hand."

Reluctantly, they turned around.

"Click," I said. Though there was no film in the camera, I consider that my very first picture. I can see the moment in my mind's eye: They look like refugees to me now, Charlotte with her dirty dress and mismatched socks, my father with his sunken eyes and scrubby beard. They look like people for whom worry and longing had become a permanent state, something that had to be endured like a drought.

"Let me see it," my father said, holding out his hand. He turned it over and over. "How much?" he asked the lady.

"Seventy dollars."

He whistled. I showed him where the film went and how to turn on the flash.

"Minoltas are sturdy cameras," I said, mimicking the sales lady. "And look at what it says on the box: 'When you are the camera and the camera is you.'" I loved the symmetry of that line and repeated it to myself over and over like a kind of mantra: *when you are the camera and the camera is you, when you are the camera and the camera is you.*

"Boy, it's good to see you smile again," he said. He turned to the lady. "We'll take this one."

I could hardly breathe, I was so excited.

"You're going to have be careful with it," Dad said, putting a check on the counter. "If you drop it, it'll break. It's not a toy." He continued with his list of warnings, not to take it to the bathroom or near water or school, not to let other kids use it. This was a real camera, he kept saying. I held that knowledge inside me, a real camera, not a baby toy, something adult and grown up. *When you are the camera, and the camera is you.*

Charlotte and I followed him out to the parking lot into the wind and rain, each of us holding our boxes tight. That afternoon, absorbed in our new things, we didn't talk about our mother, and we didn't think about our dead sister.

• • •

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

When our mother finally did come home, weeks later, I took a picture of her from the window as she navigated the front steps in a long, wool coat I had never seen. It was winter and had been raining steadily for two weeks. She wore no makeup, and her nails were bitten down to the flesh. Her weak, papery hugs disappointed us, but she did sit down on the couch and listened as we told her about our days, about the book Charlotte was reading, the camera Daddy had gotten me. I was going to be a photographer, I told her, and one day travel around the world. She nodded politely, like a visitor from another country who understands only every other word. She didn't feel like our mom anymore; she had lost so much weight her bones poked through her skin.

No one said anything about the baby. The day before she came home, Charlotte and I watched my father carry all her things to the basement so that our mother would not have to be reminded. It was as if the baby had never existed at all except in a feverish communal dream. There was not even one photograph of her, nothing to put in an album. But she had existed. Charlotte kept one tiny mitten in her drawer as proof, and sometimes she took it out when she thought no one was looking and rubbed it against her cheek.



[5]

• • •

For a week, it rained, until one morning we discovered that the basement had flooded. The baby's things floated on the brackish water like the remnants from a shipwreck: her bassinette, a bonnet, pajamas, a rattle, a little dress she never got to wear, even a little plastic doll, the kind that closed its eyes when laid flat.

My mother stood on the middle step, ankle deep in water, then sat down with a thump. "Oh my," she said.

I had made it my mission to follow her around because I was afraid that, if I let her out of my sight, she might hurt

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

herself again or else walk out the front door and never come back.

She stood up and, without saying a word, walked into the middle of the basement, the water up to her waist. She gathered the baby's dress, wrung it out and placed it in the floating bassinet.

"Come out, Mummy. You'd better come out now." I took one step into the water and immediately stepped back out. The water was frigid, but she showed no signs of noticing. "Mummy, please come out," I pleaded.

I might as well have been dead, too, for all she noticed me. Then I realized that she was sinking, lower and lower until the water closed over her head. I could just make out in the dim light her white skirt pulsating around her. I wanted to scream, but I was frozen, unable to move or even let out a breath.

Just then my father appeared behind me.

"Lydia, what are you doing here? Where's your mother?"

I pointed to the water.

He took his glasses out of his pocket, put them on, and squinted. "What's that?"

She burst out of the water then, her chest heaving. In her hand was a tiny shoe.

"Cora?" My father's voice trailed off.

She didn't seem to hear him. She turned her back to us and continued to fold the baby's clothes, as if it were the most natural thing to be doing in a flooded basement.

Sucking in his breath, my father splashed in after her. "Go get a couple of towels," he barked at me.

When I came back, they were already standing on the top step, dripping and shivering. He was murmuring to her in a low steady voice, words that I could not make out, but she seemed to agree, because she was nodding and crying at the same time. He took a towel and began to dry her off. He was tender with her, gentle. I remember that.

"You go to your room now," my father said.

I hesitated. Behind them, floating in the water was something I hadn't seen before: the baby, her baby, my dead sister, floating in her white burial dress. She was awake, but silent, serene as she never was in life. Then, imperceptibly, she began to sink until the water closed over her tiny nose. I grabbed my father's elbow and pointed, but when he turned to look, she had already vanished into the cold water.

• • •

The baby's ghost mostly hovered at the kitchen window and watched us eat. No one noticed she was out there. How long would she haunt us? What would make her stop? If I acknowledged her presence, I worried she'd come inside and take her place at the table. Maybe she was angry that she hadn't been given a proper funeral with all the standard mourners, my mother the most conspicuously absent. It had just been my father and Aunt Noreen who watched as her small coffin was lowered into the ground. But what did a baby know of funerals? A baby wants its mother, simple as that. Although I understood her need, I wanted her gone. We couldn't go back to normal until she stopped haunting us. Or maybe she was only haunting me, the sister who wanted her dead, who felt only relief when they took her body away.

I tried to take the baby's picture, to prove to myself that she was really there, but when I got the film developed, the pictures were of empty rooms, mainly the window onto the porch or the small kitchen window with the big elm that blocked most of the light. There was an odd, haunting quality to the photos, as if the people had walked right out of the picture.

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

“If you’re just going to waste film, I’m not going to buy you anymore rolls,” my father said, shaking his head.

Before the baby, our mother would have said, “Oh, John! Relax!,” and she would have winked at me. Now she looked at the pictures, saying nothing at first.

“I think you’re going to be an artist,” she said. “There’s a real eye behind these photos.”

“An artist!” my father said. “An artist, my ass.” He threw the pictures in the trash can and slammed the lid shut.

• • •

It was around this time that my mother found her escape in books. She read indiscriminately and flamboyantly, draped over a chair in the living room while the lamb chops burned and the corn turned so hard it could crack a tooth. She talked about the characters in her books as if they were real people, old friends who had written her long, elaborate letters. She read romance novels and works by serious women writers side by side, but what she liked best were the classics, Joyce especially, who she said was a genius. She read the stories in Dubliners again and again and would even quote them. *“My body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires,”* she might say. Charlotte and I would ask her to explain, and then she’d tell us all about the poor, lovesick boy over burnt dinners, desserts missing essential ingredients—cakes without sugar or flour—hard, flat soufflés that lacked whipped egg whites. It was how she learned to talk again. These stories brought her back to us, not the way she was before, but new, reinvented.

She also read to us late into the night, Charlotte and I tucked into our beds on opposite sides of the room, the baby hovering at the window, my mother seated between us. Like an actor at an audition, she read with gusto and intonation, making accents and silly laughs. The baby was out there listening, but I kept my back to her. The less I looked at her, the fainter she became. It was as if she needed an audience to be real, and because I had chosen to look away, she was fading like a photograph left in the sun.

During the day, I slung the camera around my neck and used it as a shield. Every time I saw her ghost, I aimed the camera’s lens at her and shot. She didn’t dare show her face in a photograph. Worse was when I heard her crying; the camera was no defense against that, and so I distracted myself with another pursuit: capturing my mother on film. She was indulgent about my “picture taking.” She even bought me film, took me to get it developed, and later, in high school, paid for a photography class where I learned the elements of formal composition and how to develop my own film. Photography, I learned, was a witch’s art, practiced in a darkroom with heady chemicals, the images slowly coming to life like an unholy apparition.

Sometimes, if my mother was in the right mood, if the book she’d been reading ended happily, she’d let me take her portrait. I craved these moments because I could touch her freely. “Stand like this,” I’d say, turning her shoulders, tipping her chin up or down. Then I’d arrange her flyaway hair into a clip. I could make her exactly as I wanted her. I could command her face into a smile or a frown or what I called “your haunted look.” “Look as if you’d just seen a ghost,” and she’d widen her eyes and suck in her breath, her lips parted.

When she wasn’t in the right mood, I took secret pictures of her. I hid behind the sofa, under the table, inside the closet. I wanted to harness her image, but these pictures captured only her vagueness. They were fuzzy, blurred, out of focus, or underexposed because I’d forgotten to turn on the flash. Still, I kept every single one and put them in a shoe box. When I missed her, even when she was in the next room on the other side of the door, I would look at these secret pictures to remind myself that my mother was real. She was still with us; I had the proof in my hands.

And that is how I walked into adulthood, with one eye to a lens.

• • •

We only mentioned the baby once, more than twenty years later, when I was trying to explain to everyone in my life, my husband especially, why I didn’t want to have a baby.

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

“Well, why don’t you?” my mother had asked. I still remember the way she looked when she asked that question, an apron around her tiny waist, her flyaway hair now mostly grey. She seemed forever fragile to me, and to Charlotte, too. The two of us had conspired to keep all trouble in our lives from her. Even when she learned to laugh again and to carry on polite conversation with other women, we were too afraid to test her with normal teenage drama: boyfriends, breakups, none of it intruded on her world. She never asked about any of it either, except for one day when she wanted to know why I didn’t want a baby.

“Witches never have their own babies,” I said. “They always steal them.” I snapped a picture of her just then with her eyebrows raised, her pointed stare.

“Stop hiding behind that camera.”

She was right. The camera allowed me to see people, to zoom in and focus. Without it I’d be too afraid to look.

“When I think of babies,” I said slowly, “I see my dead baby sister. I hated what she did to you.” There was a ringing in my ears, an alarm. Careful, I thought.

“What *she* did to *me*?” She frowned and bit her lip. “What do you mean?”

“You almost died.”

“That had nothing to do with her, poor baby.”

“It had everything to do with her. You had to give up too much of yourself.”

She actually laughed. “Is that something you read in a book? I had a terrible case of post-partum depression, but we didn’t have a name for it back then.”

“No,” I said. “It was much more than brain chemistry.”

She didn’t say anything for a minute. “I tried to write a book about that time, but after awhile, I decided that dead babies just aren’t that interesting.”

“Neither are live babies,” I said. “They don’t do anything except suck all the energy and life out of you. I would probably abandon a baby,” I said recklessly. “Or cut it out of me before it even was a baby.”

“Lydia!”

“That’s what you should have done. You should have had an abortion. It wasn’t post-partum depression—”

She slapped me just then, hard, with the heel of her hand. “Don’t ever speak like that. Never!”

I put my hand to that cheek, feeling the white-hot blast of her anger, the heat of my own blood. All my life I’d wanted her to touch me. I could probably count on two hands the number of times since her breakdown that she’d reached out to squeeze my hand or brush a hair from my eyes or rub my shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Children are a blessing. I never regretted any of my children. Not once.”

Then she stood up and said she was tired and needed to rest. She bent down and kissed my forehead, murmuring, “Poor Lydia.”

Poor baby, she had said. *Poor Lydia*.

I had a long drive back to my husband, who was waiting for an answer. “Take the whole weekend,” he had said, and I

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

knew that when I drove up a day early, he would be waiting in the bedroom, hoping my early arrival brought good news, an end to our impasse. How to make him understand that when he spoke of babies, all I could see was my dead sister staring at me through pitiful baby eyes? How to tell him that a baby would make me disappear? That she was still out there, waiting for me on the other side, and I'd have no choice but to hold her tiny hand and let her lead me away.

Art Information

- "Baby [3]" © Michelle Tribe; Creative Commons license.
- "Baby 9 [4]" © Michelle Tribe; Creative Commons license.
- "Baby 1 [5]" © Michelle Tribe; Creative Commons license.

Nicole Simonsen teaches English at an urban public high school in Sacramento and lives nearby in Davis, California, with her husband and children.

Some years ago, before starting a family, she received an MA in writing from UC Davis. "Her Third Baby" is her first published story.

Source URL: https://mail.talkingwriting.com/her-third-baby

Links:
[1] https://mail.talkingwriting.com/her-third-baby
[2] https://mail.talkingwriting.com/talkingwriting-categories/short-stories
[3] http://www.flickr.com/photos/greencolander/532274048/
[4] http://www.flickr.com/photos/greencolander/530644417/
[5] http://www.flickr.com/photos/greencolander/530646023/

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');