

Breach

It had been two weeks and five days, and the baby still did not have a name. Marjorie had seen him rushed into the NICU during the first few minutes of her shift; she had helped to prod his newborn skin with the appropriate needles and to nestle him into an incubator, had shushed and cooed at him through the tough plastic until his wailing soothed into sleep. The baby had been delivered three weeks prematurely and had been treated for a severe case of sepsis with a steady deluge of antibiotics. As he fidgeted now beneath the glare of the fluorescent lights that bathed him in warmth, Marjorie reviewed his chart for the third time that morning. The little boy had been eating properly, breathing without the help of the respirator, and displaying a normal temperature for the past 48 hours: he was ready to be discharged. And yet he still did not have a name.

Marjorie glanced up at the clock through her bifocals, its plastic-coated face brushed with the blinking glare of the NICU's countless monitors and machines: 3:32 pm. She would need to have the baby's discharge papers signed and ready by 5 o'clock. By five o'clock she would need to complete his birth certificate. And by 5 o'clock she would need his name, inky and final within the blue-black lines of the document. As the minute hand on the clock ticked to 3:35, Marjorie looked at the doorway. And, like every day for the past two weeks, a girl appeared in the glass of the door, her black curls askew and her chest heaving as if she had been sprinting. *She probably has been sprinting*, Marjorie thought as she turned the metal knob of the door with a gloved hand.

"Hi, Nurse Reeves," breathed the girl, struggling to catch her breath. *Susan*, Marjorie mentally chided herself. *Her name is Susan*. Since her son was always just *the Baby*, Marjorie could not help but think of his mother as *the Girl*. The Girl got pregnant and gave birth to the

Baby, and the Girl rushed to the NICU every afternoon during visiting hours to see the Baby. It all made sense, and, at 65, Marjorie was too set in her ways to desire change with any amount of seriousness.

“For the last time,” said Marjorie in a gruff voice, “you can call me Marjorie.” Susan ducked her head in embarrassment.

“Okay.... Marjorie.” The girl formed the word with care, pronouncing every syllable so that the letters dropped from her lips like small, round pebbles. “Marjorie. Okay.” She flashed the nurse with a quick smile that created creases around her large, dark eyes. Marjorie shook her head slightly. The girl was certainly pretty, in a flighty sort of way. She was naïve, too. Marjorie supposed that these characteristics had slammed together and jostled inside the girl’s brain. Marjorie supposed that the pregnancy at 17 made sense.

“How is he?” asked Susan. She did not look into Marjorie’s face or even at the baby encased in plastic in front of her. She looked at her hands, worried the ragged cuticles with unkempt nails, bit her chapped lips.

“The kid’s doing great,” said Marjorie after a beat. “He’s been eating regularly and doesn’t have a fever anymore, not for the past two days. We’re discharging him.” She continued, almost as if it were an afterthought, “As soon as you name him.” As she spoke, she took the little boy into her gloved hands and handed him to his mother like the ordinary miracle that he was.

“Great,” Susan whispered, her voice turning thin and soft.

Every day was the same. The girl arrived, breathless, in the NICU, after hurtling two blocks from where the city bus dropped her off at the Whole Foods. The glass of the door framed her expectant face; Marjorie let her in, handed her the baby amid the sighs of infants’

slumber and the bleeping of the machines that could keep them alive in ways their mothers couldn't. The girl tenderly held the baby, cupping him in her trembling hands like two halves of a broken heart, until her parents came to pick her up promptly at 6:30 pm. The girl's parents never came to see the baby, although they had attended the birth with a graveness Marjorie reserved for funerals; the father, specks of grey lightening his bushy black beard, had cut the umbilical cord with solemn hands, as if taking communion, or pulling a weed. Marjorie had wanted to ask about the baby's father, but had finally learned the necessity of polite silence after nearly 40 years of being a nurse.

Something always snapped in Marjorie at the sight of the girl cradling the baby in her terrified arms. It was as if a toy shovel had raked a small amount of blood and cells and bone from inside her chest. She never felt quite right afterwards, when the girl had gone home; the hole was always filled in only partially, leaving sections of her to be lapped away by the tide of her breath. Marjorie could not remember feeling like this before. She had never been broken in quite the same way; she had had no babies of her own to rend her heart in tiny, indifferent fists.

"Susan," she said, as gently as her sharp tongue could manage. The girl looked up from the baby's face, a foolish smile parting her lips. "I can't let you take him home until you name him. The boy needs a name." Susan's face fell, and worry furrowed her brow.

"Nur- I mean, Marjorie," she stammered. She took a breath as if steadying herself. "I've had nine months to get used to the idea of being a mother. I had that day on the floor of my mother's bathroom when I found out, all the way up until today, when I'm here, holding this little person. I've had so much time, and I'm still not ready. I feel like I'll never be ready. *I can't...*" Susan broke off to stifle the sob that had swelled in her throat. "I'm sorry," she gasped,

turning her face away from the infant in her hands. She knew somehow that her tears, if they fell onto him, would stain her son all his life. "Naming him makes him mine. Really mine. I can't..."

"He *is* yours," replied Marjorie sternly. "You're his mother, and he's your son. If you weren't ready to have a baby, you shouldn't have had unprotected sex. You're a smart girl- you should have known better."

"I know," breathed Susan miserably. She wiped her tears onto the sleeve of her sweater. "Everyone has been telling me that. I've heard nothing but that since April. 'You were so bright, so successful.' 'You were on the right path, you were going places.'" Susan paused, and looked Marjorie right in the eyes. "I'm not so smart. I wasn't going anywhere. I was doing what I thought I was supposed to do, and I did that well. That's all. I didn't feel good about it. None of it. I got the grades and the scores and the teachers loved me. But I felt this empty place inside of me that nothing could fill, not the A's or my friends or my family." The baby began to cry. Marjorie wordlessly handed the girl a bottle of formula across the incubator.

When the baby had quieted, Susan looked up fiercely. "You're told all your life, since you're two and dreaming of princesses and magic slippers, that there is this thing called true love out there," she said. The baby turned his face away from the bottle. "Everyone has one. And it's hammered into your brain by books and movies and pop songs. The idea is always there; it's pervasive. It catches your breath when you least expect it. It makes you sob into your cereal and in the bathroom stall at school and on the bus on the way home." She gently turned the baby onto his stomach to burp him. "You look around and everyone has it except for you. Your parents, your friends, your teachers. You find yourself 17 without ever having been loved." The baby's eyes were drooping. Susan flipped him onto his back and nestled him into the crook of

her arm. "So when a boy starts to love you, or seems to, you turn into something you've never seen. You'll do anything for him. You'll disobey your parents; you'll abandon your homework." Susan looked down at the sleeping child in her arms. "You'll have his baby..." she whispered, shutting her eyes. "Part of you won't care that he doesn't want anything to do with you anymore. You were loved," she said after a long while, opening her eyes. "You were loved, and that's important. That's vital, and that's real." She smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. She smiled, and her heart was unspooling inside of her.

Marjorie blinked. She looked at the girl, shrouded in dark hair like Hester Prynne on the scaffold. She could have had Marjorie's blood flooding her veins. The nurse carefully removed her gloves and laid them aside. She stuck out her right hand over the incubator. Susan looked at it quizzically.

"Name him Michael," said Marjorie firmly. "That was my father's name. He was kind and serious and good. Name him Michael and he'll be mine too. He'll be a part of me and a part of you. I..." she faltered, looking at her hand and its wavering reflection in the incubator. "You won't be alone. You don't have to be alone. Whenever you want my help, I'm here. You can just come in here to sit and breathe when things get too hard. Name him Michael."

Marjorie looked up into the girl's face, into *Susan's* face; she was crying. Tears leaked from her eyes, but she grabbed Marjorie's hand, mouthed *Thank you*. Marjorie had never done something like this before. She was cool and impartial usually, careful and professional. But the hole that the girl and the baby had dug in her chest was not so gaping now. It yawned politely, and was quiet.