

Fresh Hell

Motherhood in Pieces

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1. Surprise

WHEN A BABY HAS THE BIG ONE, the special, the surprise, you can't help but feel tricked. You're stripping off what appears to be a perfectly ordinary diaper. There are no ominous musical chords, nothing to warn you. The baby too is perfectly ordinary, screeching or waving its arms agreeably depending upon the time of day, alignment of the stars, alien messages being piped into its baby brain and other factors you will never in a million years comprehend.

Then you catch it. Your first glimpse. No, you say. Like a child you comfort yourself: you imagined it, everything's fine. But as you continue to peel back the diaper you morph into a horror-film heroine, sheer white nightgown and all, starting down the shadowy cellar stairs with inadequate candlestick in hand.

Now it's the audience that hears those ominous chords, wills you to go back, slam the door and bar it for good measure. Here your own body and brain attain a rare unity; your own senses yell at you to refasten the Velcro, turn around, go out the door and don't come back. Because down there, It awaits. The Blob. Viscous, pitiless, spackling baby's crevices and oozing out the sides. And now comes the first sly waft of a miasma that will soon enough fill up the room, creamy and soured: your sweet milk turned dark.

Wrappings unpeeled, you face it at last: the horror. Every inch of formerly pristine cotton (and you decided to use cloth, you self-righteous fool you; now look what you've done) is

coated in Harvest Gold. Then the creases, each one to be swabbed. The outrage. The insult. And even as you gape and gasp the baby continues to goo, untroubled by the sensation of cold poo packed into its backside like a perverse beauty treatment and utterly unconscious of the great wrong it just committed. Why should baby care? It's your problem now. You're looking around for the candid camera, waiting for the punchline, wondering how long before the curtain rises and someone arrives to say it's all a joke and nobody in their right mind would expect you to clean up that horror. That hell.

So when there's no reprieve, no laughing audience, nothing to do but face the thick and evilly scented facts and mop up as best you can, you go in search of your fellow sinner. Would a responsible parent take it out on the baby? After all, you are, or should be, happy she delivered what appears to be the entire contents of her intestines to your unwilling attentions. Think of the alternative. Best not wonder if they even make tubing that small. So now it's down to him. Your loved one, your dearest, your darling, that prick. Not the baby's father, true, but near enough: anyway, he's around now and you have nobody else to blame. See, you definitely have something to say, not about the shit—of course that's not his fault, any rational person knows that—but about the diaper bucket. How he's thoughtlessly placed it too far from the bed, or too close to it. The lack of a change table itself a reliably picked bone. If only he'd agreed to drive to Abbotsford that night, get the one off Craigslist, who cares if it was midnight, didn't he understand about the baby's need for modular furniture, your needs? And speaking of needs, you add, as you round the doorway and catch him mid-act, what the hell is he doing thoughtlessly answering his email at seven o'clock at night, instead of divining this emergency and rushing to assist: boiling tub, swabbing cloths, hazmat suit?

And as your voice rises, there in the doorway, you hear the voices of all the women before you, querulous, harsh, rich with

complaint. And you understand this isn't about the baby, about the missing washcloths or about how he spends his time. It's about the great cosmic injustice of everything. Other people are lining up at restaurants where the hostesses are really nice and wearing makeup even, imagine, the kids are using some app you've never even heard of, much less figured out, gals like your neighbour you've never met are getting into cabs at nine o'clock in the morning wearing mirrored sunglasses and beige pants—you saw her, this very morning, doing that very thing, and for a long time afterwards you would have killed to be her, going to Cancun on a cheap package deal, heading for the airport, eating breakfast out. That would be the answer, wouldn't it, just escape, just get away from it all.

And as you slam the door on his pissed-off back and, gazing satisfied into the bathroom mirror, discover the source of the lingering smell in a swipe of violently mustard-coloured poo above one eyebrow, you remember: This is what you've always wanted.