

Post

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A final violent scream wipes out all the air in my lungs and I can feel my body heat radiate off of me. I can barely focus on not hyperventilating as I suck down breaths. My hands are still gripping the sides of the bed, and even though I can barely feel them, I force them to relax.

There is an overwhelming sound of chatter; everyone around me is talking. An unholy wail rises above the voices. It's unfamiliar.

The sound swims around the back of my head like an alarm clock in a dream. I read books on what is supposed to happen, but I'm not sure what's going on. I read books, though. That should count, right? Three, I think. Two and a half, maybe, because I skipped all of the pictures. I won't see all that anyway, really. Right? But I read books. So I guess I should be more prepared. I mean, I am prepared, I just don't *feel* prepared. I'm not really ready, I guess, but it's too late for that now.

I can't feel my legs.

Fluorescent lights really look like the sun if you stare at them long enough. I stare for a while. It's almost like I really am outside. My eyes trace the long shape of one of the lights above me. My hair sticks to my forehead and neck.

One of the doctors laughs as he cracks a joke to a nurse, who also laughs. He takes his position in front of me again. "All right, time to deliver the placenta now, sweetheart." Sweetheart. I'm twenty-six.

"Oh, you didn't do that yet?" My husband asks from his chair by

the door. He wanted to get the “best angle,” he told me. For the delivery and the game. “Picture-in-picture,” he laughed. I didn’t. I barely lift my head up to look at him. A blur of bright greens and blues.

“Nope, not yet,” the doctor winks at him. Some secret exchange between men. Two men and the woman whose only purpose to either of them is her “child-bearing hips.”

The placenta is delivered and I never want to talk about it again. They tell me to eat it but I don’t want to because the books I read said that I don’t have to. But I guess it’s like the whole breastfeeding versus formula debate. My husband wants me to breastfeed because it’ll keep my breasts larger for longer and because his mom did it that way, so therefore it’s the right way to do it. I don’t really want to think about it, but I bought a pump and have no formula, and what I can supposedly make is free, and I’m secretly afraid of all of those rumors on Facebook about the negative effects of formula. Reading them makes me more scared.

Something feels wrong, very wrong, but I can’t explain it, and even though the room is full of people, there is no one here to help me.

I’m bleeding through the mattress, I think. I call over a nurse two times before she comes over and I ask her to check if there’s a Jordan River of blood soaking the nice white sheets. She takes a few steps back, lifts the sheets, glances over, and tells me that everything is normal. I ask her what normal is and she says that I have nothing to worry about. I should drink more water, that’s what I need. The beaded condensation on the clear plastic cup makes me sick looking at it.

My eyes are drawn upward again. Years go by. What do they do if you die in a hospital?

Quiet cheering on the screen. “Damn it!”

I tell my husband I’m sorry for doing this on a Sunday. He doesn’t laugh.

Another nurse ducks her way into view. “Hey, Mama!” She does not know my name. “Ready for skin-to-skin?”

I say yes because the books told me to do that. She sets the squirming little thing on my open chest. It is a little cold, I think. I can’t remember what I’m supposed to do about that. The nurse shifts its blanket and my paper-thin hospital gown for warmth. Ah.

“A beautiful baby girl, seven pounds and two ounces. Have you thought of a name?”

I don't say anything because names have power and I don't really feel like I have that right now.

My husband walks over and, for the first time in the past ten hours, his skin brushes mine. A different skin to skin. He calls it cute and then jokes that if we keep this up, we're going to have to adopt a boy. I tell him that there is no "we" and that it's the male's job. He doesn't respond.

I finally look down at my chest. No hair, pink skin. Its eyes are closed. I am suddenly very aware of my breathing and have to do it manually instead of automatically. I hold back the yawn in my throat because I'm scared I'll accidentally move it and mess up somehow. I hold up my hand to make sure the fluorescent lights don't cast down on it. And, seeing its breath sync with mine, this wholly vulnerable creature, I start to think that maybe I can love this fear of mine. I know I'm supposed to, but it's not as automatic as everyone says it is. I mean, I don't think I could lift up a car or anything. But maybe I could just love it and that would be enough.

They tell my husband to take his shirt off and take the child away from me so he can do skin to skin too. The books agree that this is good. His face lights up as he stares down at our creation, and for a moment, I fall in love again, and I think that, maybe, my fears were made up, hormones or something. Then his eyes flicker up.

I lay back down in bed. Years go by, and I wonder if I'm too old to be a mother. Then I wonder if I'm too young. Then I wonder if it is kind of scandalous that I did this. After all, I had to have sex in order for this to happen. I remember the talks I received in high school. I was a virgin then. Now I'm twenty-six, and will have to give that speech when I'm forty. I'm going to be forty at some point. Soon, really. Am I too old to be a mother?

A nurse swaddles the child for us and my husband tries to rock it very unsteadily—little jolts instead of smooth swaying. I tell him to be careful, he could give it Shaking Baby Syndrome. He tells me that's not how it works but I disagree because I read books and he didn't. He sets it down in its clear plastic bed. A long series of high pitched dinosaur sounds fill the room as I study a new row of fluorescent lights. The weight of stares prickles my skin and I'm scared that I'm supposed to do something. I push myself up on my elbows and rub my eyes. A nurse eventually picks up the child and offers it to me. She gently pushes it in my arms, helps me sit up, and walks away.

We stare at the lights together. Even though its eyes are closed, I know it would stare if it could. I shade her eyes again. After a few minutes, I give it to my husband.

My family rushes in and my husband's family quickly follows twenty minutes later. They crowd around the child, gushing with loud whispers and clapping my husband's back. I am cold. I'm not upset at missing out on the conversation. They unwrap its blanket to count all its fingers and toes, which I realize I forgot to do. It has all of them, though. The average amount, I mean. They rewrap it, change its first diaper. Or second. I'm not sure. My mom tries to kiss it and I tell her not to because the books said it was bad for the health of something so vulnerable.

They all look up at me, startled. My father-in-law asks if he can hold it and I say sure and learn where my husband got his rocking style from. My mother-in-law coos, "She has your eyes!"

"Does she."

My husband shares the name and everyone congratulates him again. The view of their backs isn't very interesting, so I turn my head and focus on the crack in the paint on the wall in front of me, which has been bothering me since I was checked into this room.

"How are you doing, baby?" my mom asks.

"Well."

"Are you comfortable here?"

I blink a few times and slowly shift my gaze to the little table by the door. "I think some tulips would be nice."

"Well . . . we could get you some, if you'd like."

I don't respond.

"You must be tired."

"Yes," I say, and she turns back to the child.

It's seven at night and I have to pee. I managed the impossible earlier, but now this is my worst fear. I sit up in my bed and look around; there is no one in the room. I sigh and nervously press my shaking hand on the assistance button and press it again for a second time after counting to two hundred. I press it again after counting to four hundred.

I'm alone again.

Except for the child, but it doesn't count. And so I ease my legs gently over the bed, and I want to die for the millionth time today. Mak-

ing it to the bathroom was like crawling through the trenches. I can't remember how to assemble a postpartum pad, but I try my best. It is big and scary and basically a whole diaper. There is a lot of blood.

My heart stops for a second when I see a dark figure moving in the corner of my eye in the mirror. In the soft lighting, my eyes look darker and more tired. My hair is a mess. But my body, now a childless shell, looks the same. It is only for a second, but it feels like minutes.

I turn out the light before opening the door to leave.

The whole bathroom adventure took about forty minutes alone. I turn my head and my brow furrows at the little thing next to me. It doesn't seem real. It doesn't seem mine, or me, or whatever. We're roommates, really. I try to close my eyes, but sleep never comes.

"Hey, Mama!" Light pours through the crack in the door as a nurse peaks her head in.

I forgive her. I don't remember my name either.

The nurse checks and informs me that I did not, in fact, assemble my postpartum pad correctly, and shows me how to do it correctly again. I should have remembered that. It was in the books. She helps me to the bathroom again and asks me where my husband is. I tell her that he went home to sleep in a bed instead of a chair. At least, I think that's where he is. I can't remember too well. She supervises me assembling my pad correctly and helps me put on my pants, which I am grateful for beyond words. She guides me back to bed, and I grab her wrist as she begins to walk away.

I have her attention for ten seconds. I count to nine. Swallow, articulate, force the words out.

"I'm scared."

She gives me a knowing smile. "It's like that sometimes."

But I really am quite scared, and I don't think she really understands. I let go, and she leaves.

The door clicks shut.

Alone.

I write my bathroom instructions on the back of a card so I won't forget again.

The air stills whenever I look at the child. I can barely think, barely breathe. My body is as weightless as the child is. Before it can dare cry again, my eyes flutter, threatening to close.

I fall asleep looking at it.

Anna Unser is a first-year English major from Aberdeen, South Dakota. Post-master's degree, she plans to pursue a career in developmental editing. When she's not dedicating her time to speed-running her degree, she's either reading the same novel she's been trying to finish all year, watching *Dead Poets Society* again, or making yet another playlist on Spotify.