

# Fatherhood

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Anne and I sit silently in our Subaru. We listen to the air conditioner run. Out the window I see a granite monument stuck in the ground outside the clinic. On the granite is carved a fetal child, curled up as if in the womb. IN MEMORY OF THOSE LOST TO ABORTION is carved below.

Anne says something to me. I ask her to repeat it and she says, “What did they talk to you about?” When we’d entered the clinic they took Anne to the back for the pregnancy test and ushered me into a side room where a man with thick rimmed glasses grilled me for a half hour.

“Your general stuff. My job, am I financially stable. My, um, willingness to have a baby.”

“And you said?”

I hadn’t said anything. “I told him I was excited. Scared, of course, who wouldn’t be, but excited.”

“So you’re willing.”

“Yeah, all that to say I’m willing.”

More silence. An urge to get out and walk to the monument comes over me, an urge to run my fingers over the carving, the perfectly formed little representative of all the unwanted pregnancies, all the clusters of cells, fetuses, people, whatever, who never got their chance.

“What about you, are you willing?”

She isn’t looking at me. “We’re Catholic, there’s no willing about it. I didn’t even want them to talk to me. Just the test.”

“Well, it’s settled then.” I smile at her but she still won’t meet my gaze. I take her hand. It’s cold like a corpse.

I wait for what seems a long time for her to respond. I get nothing. The day is quiet. I put the car in reverse, pull out of the parking spot.

I will be a father. I can’t keep my mind away from that monument stuck in the grass, I can’t stop thinking of all those children who will never live.

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Days have passed since Anne took the test. We haven't told anyone yet. She read online that it's best to wait eight weeks, or ten weeks, something, to make sure that the baby will survive, that it won't be lost too soon, the whispered word spoken fearfully, with reverence, miscarriage.

Anne invites me to pray with her and I agree. We kneel at the foot of our bed, the scratchy pale pink of the carpet rubs against our knees. Anne's eyes are fixed on the crucifix hanging on the wall, the bleeding Jesus with his crown of thorns. As she contemplates the cross I close my eyes and contemplate the memorial we saw at the clinic, the little child never born.

When we're in bed she presses herself against me. I think of my own birth and my life opens before me, every event, every action, every word and thought. If I was offered, I know that I would reject my life, I would say no to the world, to being myself. But no one asked me. We are brought into the world screaming and as we live that scream turns from external to internal, an endless horrified scream in our hearts, a scream that turns to a whimper, then turns silent and cold.

Tears leak from my closed lids as I pray to my silent God, my endlessly suffering, endlessly redeeming Christ. I remember my childhood priest clutching my shoulder and telling me that to be redeemed is to be ransomed, an unfettered slave. We cannot escape from bondage, our Father must ransom us, a price must be paid.

Again and again I open my mouth to speak, to confess my fears, but each time I lose my words in the dark, they're too cumbersome to escape my lips. I feel that if I could just confess my fears, my misgivings, I could be forgiven. But it won't come, my words have abandoned me, I am alone. Anne's breathing is steady and deep and I focus on that until I lose consciousness and join her in dreaming.

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In my dream Anne is big, ready to pop. She has her shirt pulled up and her distended belly is shifting. I can see our child shifting, pressing against her, the outline of a little hand visible for the briefest moment.

"She wants out. She wants to be free," Anne says.

"What is it to be free?" I ask.

"Can't you see she's trapped? Held in this world against her will? She's already desperate to be ransomed from her body, and she's barely had her shot at a life. Her soul was plucked from Heaven and dropped into a world of pain, and she's taking it out on my organs. Little lady loves to kick."

And I see my father, he's come alive again in my dream, reliving his last days. Crippled legs hidden under a Tartan blanket, wrinkled hands twitching in his lap, old beyond his years. His rancid breath on my face as he begs me to be free. He is a prisoner in his body, in my body too, and in my child's.

And then I am my father, Anne is my mother. I'm in the hospital holding myself, my fragile little body still covered in goop. I am my father watching me grow up, watching my pain, an inherited existential ache, I am my father dying, leaving me nothing but my pain, my struggle. I am my father, and I am his father, and on and on through the annals of history. Living, hurting, dying, and all are the same.

I wake up, the dream ends. Anne is curled up in bed, fast asleep. She doesn't notice me slip away. The sun isn't up yet, I have hours until work starts. I sit in the overstuffed chair in the corner of our bedroom and try to read a book, a mystery novel, a classic whodunit. The words swim in front of my eyes. I can't focus. The book makes a little thud on the carpet when I drop it. I stare at Anne's sleeping form until her eyes open and as I look at her I pray to God to be redeemed, to be freed.

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After our baby shower we lug a carful of gifts back to our home. We unpack everything carefully in the nursey, a little square cell painted pink by the previous owner. A white crib, a white rocker with white seat pads.

"White, because babies are famous for not causing messes," Anne tells me as I drive screws into the white glider where our baby will swing within a matter of weeks. We're in the "any day now" period and it shows. Anne waddles from room to room, disinfecting everything, hanging pictures, reading directions and making sure I put everything together correctly.

She goes to bed early, before the summer sun is below the horizon. I stand alone in the nursery, the little pink room for my little pink baby. My heart is broken open at the sight of these little clothes, this little bed. I feel a shocked, panicked love, a howling animal's love. My love for this yet to be child eclipses the universe and leaves me in complete darkness.

I stare into the empty crib where I will deposit the best part of my soul, the little creature I will defend until I am breathless, until I am forgotten, until she is the last little piece of me in existence and beyond.

I leave the nursery, closing the door as softly as I can. Anne shifts but does not wake as I slide into bed beside her. I put my hand on her belly. My child is kicking, knocking on the door of existence.

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Anne goes into labor early in the morning. I drive bleary-eyed to the hospital, a byzantine downtown complex, the only place our insurance allows for us. We check into our little room with the adjustable bed and nurses zip in and out. They comfort us, shepherd us, manage us. I am a pawn to be moved, the least important part of what's happening. I am a hand to hold. Time is frozen in our little room. Anne keeps shifting position. I apply pressure to her hips as she bends over the bed and she moans, just a little relief. The doctor enters and things move fast, all the time that was not passing now goes quickly, too quickly. Before I know it Anne is holding my child, passing her to me.

Her little eyes blink confusedly. She wriggles in my arms. I hold her close to my chest, I feel her breathe. My heart expands in my chest, it is overfull. I think of the Grinch cartoons, of his heart tripling in size. My heart will never stop expanding, my love is as endless as time. I cry happy tears.

I am redeemed.