

The Belly

Julie sat on top of the dryer, matching socks and smoothing the wrinkles from blue jeans as the load of bed sheets spun softly beneath her. She hummed softly, content with the quiet monotony. These chores made her feel normal. They were a break from her emotionally exhausting world of paintings and galleries—and something nice she could do for Marshall. She finished and slid down, catching her skirt before it revealed all that was private beneath it. She was wearing her faded grey-blue laundry dress, the one that hugged her breasts enough to allow her to go braless and had a long and loose enough skirt to hide the absence of panties. The goal was to get as much laundry done at once as possible and besides, she didn't mind going seamless once in a while. She had sensitive skin.

She pressed her hand into her stomach distractedly. The dream was clinging to her, as it always did, her maternal instincts temporarily breaking the dam of consciousness and flooding in.

Lately, the dream was always the same. The pinching in her abdomen forced her eyes open. The bedroom was dimly lit, only the grey light of dawn seeping through the slats of the blinds. The pains escalated inside of her, a rude thick finger poking and poking until her breath became uneven and choked by tears. She stretched, pushing her toes down into the cold foot of the bed, pressed her fingers against the jabbing and there it was, a cushioned walnut just below her navel. The pain ceased and joy washed over her. She could feel it. The bump. The baby. Then every time, she would wake up, frigid and unsettled next to her sleeping husband. She would listen to his soft snores and try to feel the rhythm, to lull herself back to sleep, to fall back into the dream. She hated the dream. She loved it, she hated it, it was a strange addiction. It made her feel sickly ecstatic, nauseatingly hopeful...and worst of all, it lingered for a long while, no matter what distractions she presented herself.

She perched the hamper on her hip as she left the community laundry room and walked, flip flops slapping against the soles of her feet, around the leasing office, past the dirty, leaf-filled pool and up the stairs to her apartment. Child bearing hips, an ex-boyfriend had said as he held them in bed. It was a comment that had both disturbed and thrilled her. It implied that her hips were wide, which she of course associated with fat, but he had said it in such a way that she understood he found her sexy regardless...or perhaps because of those hips. Because of the potential they held. Maybe she was a natural for motherhood. She wondered, suddenly, if her own mother had ever such a desire for pregnancy. It was too late to ask now, though, mom long dead and barely a mother before that. Julie wondered if she had been wanted, had been yearned for, as she so desperately yearned for a child of her own now.

She worked through the tiny bedroom, placing carefully folded T-shirts into their proper drawers, untangling empty hangers, arranging newly dressed pillows, humming loudly now. She caught her reflection in the closet mirror and paused. In her laundry dress, actually, maybe she did seem maternal, or at least pregnant. The dress remained taut over her breasts with its failing elastic, loosened into its generous skirt above her waist. If she pushed out her stomach, leaned back just so...well, close. But no. Despite her hourglass curves, she was thin, and for once she resented it. She wondered briefly if she actually wanted an infant as much as she simply wanted to be pregnant—to balance that belly, to know that she was responsible for nourishing life, to feel life within her, to feel that strength, the glow.

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They had spoken about it time and time again. Marshall, when can we have a baby? She would attempt a casual tone at dinner, prodding her tummy under the table, feeling for the absent bump.

He always responded the same way. You know we can't afford a baby. We can't even support ourselves, hardly. We'll have kids, eventually. We just have to work hard and be patient. She knew he was right. She did. But it didn't stop her from bringing it up. It didn't take away the sting; it didn't lessen the desire.

Tonight he was trying to turn it into a joke. "You just need to sell some more paintings, Sugar Momma. Now, tell me about this deal with Barney Colburn. Is he just buying your one piece?" She sighed, said yes, and the conversation turned regular, like always.

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Then she found The Belly. It was not intentional. She was at a thrift shop searching for colored glass bottles or jars for a mixed-media piece when she saw it. It was lying in a crate marked costumes, a discarded tool from a parental planning class or a community theatre or perhaps a failed Halloween outfit. It was black, the edges ragged, one of its Velcro straps in need of repair.

It remained in the trunk of her car for a long while.

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"You know," Sarah mock-confided, "Marshall was a pure accident. A happy one of course, but unplanned just the same. He came at the perfect time. Dan had just gotten a promotion and we got our first car paid off, and boom! I was preggers. It was like God had waited until just the exactly right moment, when we were off-guard but ready. You just have to be patient, and when you two decide together that it's right, God will bless you."

Julie hated her mother-in-law most of the time. Sarah made the best peanut butter fudge on the Pacific Coast and sometimes recommended Julie's art to her posh friends, but when it came down to it, she was flat out annoying.

"Well, but," Julie considered her words carefully, "it won't be an accident when we stop using protection. Right now, we are purposely in the way of nature. Er, God." The conversation was making her uncomfortable, yet she could not force herself to simply agree with the woman.

"Well, whatever you say, dear, but you can't rush these things." Julie fought to keep herself from rolling her eyes. She glanced at Marshall, but he had suddenly become very involved with his quiche. "You know," Sarah continued, "not everyone is cut out to have kids, anyway."

Julie kept her eyes lowered, studying her food. She wished she could be bolder. She wished she could throw the beautiful bone china plate across the room.

"Yes, that's what they say. So. Anyway. Would you mind terribly if I stole your chocolate mousse recipe? I have such a craving." Her eyes were filling with hot tears, but she at least had the pride to try to swallow and smile.

"Darling, I will make it for you. Tomorrow," Sarah said, smiling and patting Julie's hand. "I'm going to go make us some fresh coffee." Julie nodded and pretended to immerse herself in her breakfast. Though she enjoyed the fine food, the early morning breakfasts at Sarah's, their first-of-the-month routine, were always awkward. Julie did the math in her head: three years and five months of marriage to Marshall equaled out to forty-one breakfasts with Sarah so far. Julie found them harder and harder to sit through. When they were first married, she and Marshall had attacked these meals as a team, both working together to resist Sarah's invasive remarks, prying questions, judging eyes. Somewhere along the way, though, Marshall had faded, quietly surrendered, and left Julie on her own to lead clumsy conversations with the mother-in-law who had never warmed to her.

When Julie and Marshall had become serious and Julie prepared to meet his parents, she had been deliriously excited. She had never known her father, and her mother orphaned her when she was eight. The idea of a set of parents was thrilling, but in the end it hadn't worked out as she had hoped. Sarah obviously didn't believe Julie was up to the standard her son deserved, and now, here she was, bringing Julie a fresh mug of sugared coffee. Forty-one breakfasts, eighty-two occasions of Julie politely reminding Sarah she drank her coffee black, eighty-one instances in which Sarah politely ignored her. Sorry, dear, I forgot again, she would say, and Julie would nod and cringe as she politely took one sip then left the cup to

cool on the table.

Marshall took one last wolfish bite of his food and stood awkwardly, wiping his mouth on the linen napkin and clearing his throat. “I’ve got to go to work, ladies,” he said, taking a last swig of his coffee. Julie glared discreetly at him and he moved his eyebrows in an apologetic glance. He leaned in to kiss her on the cheek and looked at her softly, smiling a little, his eyes intense with something that could have been love, could have been sympathy.

“Don’t you have a dentist appointment this morning?” he asked her, winking.

“Oh yes! I do. I almost forgot! Thank you for reminding me.” She stood quickly, thankful that he had provided her with an excuse to leave. Maybe he was still an ally.

A series of chimes exploded into the room—Sarah’s fancy doorbell. Julie grabbed her purse and followed her Marshall into the foyer.

“It’s Gina, Mom,” Marshall called behind him when he saw the busty lady through the window. “Godmother!” he addressed her dramatically and stooped to give her a quick hug. Julie took the opportunity to slip out. She smiled politely at Gina, waved good bye to Sarah and mouthed thank you, and hurried to her car, waving vaguely in Marshall’s direction when she heard him yell “I love you.”

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Julie drove around after leaving Sarah’s, considering the idea of sitting at a bar by herself, or maybe a small restaurant. It wasn’t even lunchtime yet, though, and Julie was buzzing with pent-up energy, which, she had come to recognize, was how she responded to Sarah’s cruel comments. Then she remembered her thrift-shop discovery in the trunk of the car and steered home.

She didn’t have a sewing machine, and so she messily stitched up the broken strap by hand, fighting to push the needle through the thickly woven material, stopping mid-stitch to dig in the junk drawer for a thimble. She slid off her jeans, her t-shirt, and watched her reflection as she fastened the straps around her waist. She looked like a stranger to herself, her face colorless, the dark material contrasting with her fair skin. She rummaged through her closet looking for some loose clothing that would accommodate her new size, and the only article she found was her old laundry dress. Pulling it over her head, she smoothed the skirt down over her surprisingly large figure. For the first time, she fit the dress well. For the first time, she felt like she fit herself.

Then she was out of Los Angeles, heading north. She drove until her tank dipped into empty, then parked at the Santa Barbara Pier. It was still early in the day. She unfastened her seatbelt, got out of her Honda and stretched. Heat was radiating off the black paint of the car.

It was nice. Really nice. Every where she went, someone would stop her, tell her how beautiful she was, how fortunate she was, to wish her luck, to say wow! at the size of The Belly.

“Oh, how far along are you?”

“You look just about to bust!”

“You’re carrying low. That means it’s a boy! Am I right?”

The Belly chafed a little on her sides, but it felt good. She felt good. Pretty. Whole. Beautiful, actually. Gorgeous.

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In the next few weeks, whenever she felt the need, Julie would leave L.A., take the 101, drive until she was far enough away that she felt safe, don The Belly and one of her new maternity dresses, walk the beach, browse the shops, drink lemonade, and watch the kids at the zoo. Seven months, she would tell people. Then eight months. A boy. Patrick Swain. Oh, yes? Have you any advice for me then? She would smile brightly, knowing that the glow truly was enveloping her. She explored art galleries: The Artamo, The Santa Barbara Museum of the Arts. She went to local cafes, where she became something of a regular, a pregnant woman visiting to soothe her heinous craving for their special gorgonzola walnut salad or mango mousse, which of course only they could satisfy. She visited antique shops and bookstores, walked the beach until her feet were swollen. People who were employed in the downtown area knew her by name; they inquired about her baby’s health, asked when they would get to meet her husband. She assumed they took her for a bored, inflated housewife attempting to escape the mundaneness of maternity leave.

She had backaches and rib pain and cravings. She was shocked and frightened and fought to rationally contain herself one day when she discovered her bloodied panties. When she was forced to abandon The Belly and head home, she felt lost, empty, diminished. Her breasts were tender, and, she thought, a bit bigger. At times she could swear she felt the baby moving and that she was rapidly gaining weight in her midsection, though one side of her brain struggled to remind the other that it was all pretend.

When the afternoons began to shine caramel and the city traffic shifted to the freeways, she would leave just before rush hour, make it home right around the time Marshall did. Oh, I was just at Kathy’s, she would say. She had an argument with Bill and so we had a cup of coffee and a chat.

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Her mind changed slowly. She began to feel she was trapped, married too young

and exhausting the last years of her youth by wasting away in a neutral-toned, white walled apartment in a city full of strangers. Her husband did not want the things she wanted, and she couldn't decide if she wanted to waste more time waiting for him to change his mind. More and more, she began to rely on the comfort and consolation of The Belly. She lusted for it like a lover and relished that simple and calming moment of "Oh, honey, you are just glowing!"

The apartment was a mess. She never cooked anymore—hell, she could barely feed herself. She was putting hundreds of miles on her poor car and she was ignoring work. Ignoring art, she thought, how awful. When did art become work? When did simply being awake and living become work?

And anytime she did force herself to begin a piece she would paint women, swollen with child and glistening in golds and crimsons, shining acrylics, bright with too much effort. Their faces were turned away. She could never complete them. They were missing something, but she couldn't figure out what it was.

How was your day? Marshall would ask her, and she would recall a fabricated day. She was stuck, she told him, struggling to produce any art of any worth, and she wasn't selling anything. He would nod, attempt a sympathetic smile, quietly go to bed.

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"Are you cheating on me?" Marshall asked her one day, bluntly, sullenly, over another round of take-out Chinese. These were the first words he had spoken to her since he had gotten home from work and turned on CNN.

For a horrifying moment, she considered saying yes. How fantastic it would be, how relieving, to get his scrutinizing eyes off of her, forever. To never again have to be polite to his mother. To never have to pick up his damned socks off the bedroom floor. To never have to clean his soapy hairs out of the shower. To be free.

"No," she said, without playing the game of asking how he had found the audacity to question her fidelity.

"Yes, you are," said Marshall. "It's obvious. You've racked up thousands of miles on your odometer. You don't work anymore, you don't paint. You've been in a completely separate world from the rest of humanity, you totally changed. You're a wall. I can't stand it. Who is it? That asshole assistant manager at the gallery on Wilshire? An ar-teest? A rich fucking painter who doesn't have to dirty his hands at work like I do?"

She felt herself soften toward him. She wondered how long he had been contemplating this, how long he had been convinced of her adultery. She opened her mouth

to reassure him. She didn't mean to say it...it was almost like it flopped out of her mouth on its own: "Artists get very dirty sometimes, you know."

She bit her lip. The visions she had in mind of messy charcoals and pastels fled her mind. She hadn't meant it like that. She hadn't meant to say it at all. He remained silent for a moment, studying her sadly. He calmly stood. "You," he said, "are not the woman I married." He threw his container of kung pao chicken across the room, splattering the remaining peanuts and sauce against the white wall, onto the nude carpet. It was the closest to an act of violence Julie had ever seen him commit.

"I'm not cheating on you," she said, still calm. She stood and put her hands on his either of his cheeks. "I promise," she nodded her head as if answering questions he didn't ask.

"I don't believe you," he whispered, and slammed the bedroom door before she could follow him.

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She was gone before dawn. With the highways empty, she would be there in time to see the sunrise. It was a shame, she thought, that the sun couldn't set and rise over the Pacific.

She sat on the sand, hugging *The Belly* and shivering a little in the cold morning light. The rising sun warmed her back as she watched the water's surface dance, first star-slicked and shining oil black, then fire-gold, then liquid platinum as the light moved gloriously higher in the sky. It was a beautiful day—high visibility, slight warm breeze, the fresh scent that comes along with daybreak. She felt so wonderful. Beautiful. Defiantly complete.

She took a long walk on the beach, admiring the architecture of million dollar beach front homes and energetic young families settling onto the shoreline for a long day of play. She would paint these pieces of life, if she could do them any justice. She missed her own art. She was shocked to find that she was beginning, finally, to miss her life. She felt guilty for making her husband suffer, she felt guilty for abandoning the life that she knew she had once loved. She felt guilty for having given up. Moreover, she was lonely. It was time to go home. Time to talk to Marshall.

She walked toward downtown, toward her car, but the sign for the Artamo Gallery caught her eye. One last time, while I'm here, she thought. After this I won't be back for a while. She paid her fee and made her way to her favorite exhibit. She had been so pleased to find Teri Blodgett's mixed media work featured here, and could have spent hours staring wide eyed at her pieces. They were haunting, refreshing, biting, somehow a testament to

lust and tragedy, to humanity as the encompassing of all five senses, of pleasure, of wicked dreams. They made her feel as though she were being caressed. She inhaled deeply as if the art would affect her on an olfactory level. She absent-mindedly stroked The Belly.

She leaned as close as she was allowed to the piece, wishing she could be this sort of artist, that she could capture something so completely, could harness emotion and spread it onto a canvas with paintbrush or charcoals. She couldn't even define her own feelings, much less capture them with her acrylics.

"Julie Schneider?" She started, turning around impulsively, and, she realized, mistakenly. What now? she thought. "Oh, I thought that was you, Julie, dear! How are you?" Gina Stanley was staring at The Belly.

"I...I'm good, Gina, and how are you? I'm so sorry I haven't been in touch. I have some new paintings though, for you to look at, next time we get together." She spoke just as sweetly as she could, struggling to keep her composure.

"I didn't realize, darling, that you were pregnant. Has it been that long? A month ago? Two months? Since, well, at Sarah's, yes? They grow quickly, huh? I can't believe you haven't gained more weight. And how's that Marshall? What are you doing here?"

"Well, art," she motioned to the piece she had been studying. "You know me! Art. And Marshall is great," she said. "Probably he misses your lasagna. You know, men and their appetites." She laughed, perhaps a little too loudly.

"Oh," Gina said with a hesitant chuckle, "of course. We'll all do dinner soon, okay? Must go, always a pleasure!" Gina swished away, embarrassing flowered skirt rippling over her abundant bottom. Julie left the museum with her head down. On the drive south, the late sun played off the water, its illuminations now and then filling the car.

Tomorrow, Sarah Schneider would go to church, where Gina Stanley would grab her pasty arm and yank her into a quiet corner to interrogate her, to spill what she had seen. To tell about The Belly. Julie couldn't imagine the ladies would stay for the service after finding out that Sarah's daughter-in-law had been parading herself around Santa Barbara with a fake pregnancy. Would Gina even wait until the following day? She could be on the phone with Sarah right now. Then it would only be moments before Marshall knew. Moments. And then what would she say? Could she deny ever seeing Gina? Claim insanity? Say that she was doing an experiment for her art? That she was planning a performance piece? That she wanted to be pregnant, and so invented a fetus? That she was unhappy with her life, and so played make believe? And could they really hold that against her?

She had to break hard for traffic through Oxnard, and when she did, The Belly fell from the back seat, pressing forward like a child.