

Mothers and Others

I am perched on the edge of my unmade bed and I am holding this baby close to my chest.

The sweet milk scent that wafts from his swaddle. The tufts of soft hair that make him resemble a fuzzy duck. Those glorious cheeks, so chubby I want to pinch them and leave nail marks buried in his skin.

This is my baby. By sheer force of will, this is my baby.

He coos softly in his dreams, surely a sign of ease and comfort, and I know I will not lay him down. What kind of mother would let something this precious slip through the slots of a dime store crib and into the arms of a perfect stranger? One I am grateful for, certainly, but not one I am inclined to emulate.

My husband – well, he's not really my husband. He promised me Forever behind the bleachers at graduation. I wore my sister's dress and my mother's shoes and had to duck so my hair wouldn't be caught in the stubbornly sticky gum that dotted the metal rails like a faded pox of halitosis. He gave me a band of moissanite in exchange for my undying love and support. That was seven years ago, and we kept putting off the wedding until things were stable, but I took it as a sign to stop planning when the moissanite began fracturing into my finger. I think I'll start wearing the ring again, though, so people know my baby has two parents, at least one of whom will tether him to love. Michael cannot say no to my darling boy.

I can hear him parking the car outside, a Frankenstein of junkyard parts on the corpse of a 2005 Honda Odyssey. His students at the high school give him shit for driving a mini-van, but she's a work horse – soccer moms don't play around with their kid's safety.

Maybe my baby will want to play soccer. Maybe he'll be the best midfielder AAA has ever seen.

Michael comes inside and I am counting the steps from the front door to the bedroom, where I sit with my baby asleep in my arms.

He doesn't notice us, not at first. Too preoccupied with shedding the cotton canvas of his Converse in our ever-shrinking closet. When I clear my throat, he gifts me a side-eyed glance. And then it registers. "Abigail," he sighs, shrugging off his sports coat. "What are you doing with a baby?"

"Shhh, he's sleeping. I'm letting him sleep."

"You know damn well that's not what I'm asking."

"He's my baby."

He pauses, and I can feel him shuffling through his mental rolodex of questions. "Abby, I'm pretty sure I would've noticed if you were, you know, pregnant. And went through labor."

"You don't have to give birth to become a mom, you should know that better than anyone."

Michael meets my eyes, but I can't tell what he's thinking. His tone is light but there's something more sinister behind the plastic black frames of his glasses. "The difference there, is that my parents went through a year-long adoption process. Where did you get the baby, Abigail?"

I won't let him say no to my baby. This baby is my angel, my Gabriel, and he has given me a child. Even now, as he sleeps in my arms, I know that the minutes I have spent with him

have altered me on a molecular level. This, *this* is the love that parents feel for their children. An all-consuming, illogical pull towards the protection of a singularity that you helped to create, via biology or via nurture.

“He’s my baby Michael, he doesn’t have to be yours too.” I am not deluded enough to think that he will welcome my miracle into his arms.

I am perched on the edge of my unmade bed and Michael kneels before me. There are ink smudges that decorate his fingers like the sloppy stick-n-poke tattoo on my ankle. He is twenty-six, still young, but his hair started to recede a few years ago. What ages him, if he does not give his life to a child?

“Abigail,” he surrenders his palms to me. “I’m sure he’ll be fine if you set him down for a moment and then we can speak. That’s all I want right now, just to talk through some things.”

Oh, but I do not trust that he will not take my baby and run. Teachers, now they know how to negotiate with terrorists and confused children, but I am neither of those things. I’ll play his game and pretend to love and cherish him the way I do with my Gabriel.

I do not have a crib, just a bathtub in our claustrophobic bathroom. Michael births a nest of pillows and blankets in the basin and I am Mama Bird, leaving her precious cargo the mercy of the wind and the trees. I close the door behind me.

“You don’t have to sit in front of the door, Abigail. I’m not a SWAT team.” But I am a statue, Madonna without her Child, and I will not be pilfered from my post. He climbs down next to me, back against the wall. “Where did you get the baby?”

“Gabriel.”

“Where did you get Gabriel?”

“I didn’t steal him from anyone, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m worried why you’re not answering the question, Abby. He didn’t materialize like a Messiah, did he? Someone, somewhere, is looking for this baby. Who is?”

“No one is looking for him, I promise. Gabriel is an anomaly, Michael, so no one will realize he was ever not completely, truly mine.” I know he doubts me, but he should not. I have no reason to lie, not ever again.

He can polish his glasses all he wants, but I know that he is still blind to the reality. He purses his lips like I’ve thrown cayenne on a canker sore, streaks of regret from the question he feels compelled to ask. “Did his family die? Is he an orphan?”

Gabriel can never be an orphan. Orphans lack parents, yes, the absent fathers and mothers who surrender you at fire stations, but Gabriel will never know this origin story, because I am his divined mother. The one who coaxed a quivering teenager out of her car and into the fire station, the one who promised to fill out the proper forms so she could get to school before the late arrival bell dinged her conscious further. The one who could feel the infinite promise of an infant in her arms. The one who refused to jeopardize such love and devotion.

And I whisper Michael this story, afraid that he will know Gabriel’s surrogate and drive me to the house of a girl in his third period homeroom. But he only sinks further into a contemplative coma after, and I am scratching the planks of the hardwood floor waiting for a reaction.

“Abby, I love you. More than anyone. You know that, right?”

“I know.” *But do you?*

He is waiting for me to say more, to verify that I love him too.

“I love you, so I’m trying really hard to understand something right now,” he cautiously grabs my left hand, with the absent ring. He clasps it in his own and applies steady pressure – an anchor, a tether to keep me from floating away. “Why do you want to have a baby right now?”

My mother told me to marry someone smarter than I was if I wanted to be sure he truly loves me. This way, I could spend Forever knowing that he authentically, unapologetically chose to love me.

Never marry someone smarter than you if you want to control your own destiny. You’ll spend Forever trying to decipher the right answers for the questions that really matter.

I want a baby for the same reasons everyone does. I want to hold eight pounds of potential in my arms. I want to sculpt him into a human that does Great Big Things for the world. I want to write letters from the Tooth Fairy when I win his first gap-toothed grin. I want to stand in line at the mall for hours on Christmas Eve to buy him his first sled. I want to brag on him in grocery stores, PTA meetings, graduation parties. I want to send Christmas cards with my perfect son gracing the cover. I want my family to be the envy of every other mother in the world. I want to wake up each morning and look into the eyes of the life I created and feel unadulterated, undying, unconditional love.

I want a love I do not have to re-certify. Not that I am unwilling to put effort into a relationship; rather, that I can do everything right in the world and wake up next to a man that has grown to love someone else. I want the freedom to do everything wrong in the world and still find love from an angel.

I want the beautiful, unbreakable love of a child. One who cannot abandon you because you have restructured their DNA. One who does not know your flaws because you are their standard of humanity.

I cannot say these things to Michael. Michael, who harbors under the delusion that I can do nothing to diminish his love for me. Michael, who has never seen family torn apart by infidelity and jealousy like I have. Michael, who is so calm and strong and logical that there is always an answer that controls the chaos. I cannot fracture the foundations of us; I cannot cut the cord and be left behind again.

I am sitting on the ground with my back to bathroom door and I am carving my nails in the skin of Michael's hand, writing my reasons through osmosis.

Romantic love cannot last, and he will break from me like the moissanite engagement ring. Gabriel will need me, at least for a few years. He will need me, and I will teach him to love me. I will be loved.

Michael pulls his hand away and he is guarded. He stands and offers me his hands, ten crescent moons cuts flushed in his palms. "Do you trust me Abigail?"

I do. Michael will not love Gabriel, but he will not hurt him either. I am hauled upward, and Michael embraces me. Another anchor, but this time he is compressing my nerves, so I am simultaneously grounded and lightened. A paradox of being.

Michael breaks away and the semblance of certainty I felt is ripped from me, a moment of agony while the skin remembers solitude.

What is he thinking? What can I expect from this man who claims to love me?

*“Abby let's keep him. Let's raise a child.” A whisper of hope.*

*“Are you crazy? Are you certifiably insane?” A rupture of faith.*

“Abby, I love you. But he isn't yours to keep.” This one is real, the level-headed response.

He breaks the seal on the bathroom door and gingerly lifts my angel in his arms. I do not look as they walk by me, mirages in my peripheral vision, and I can see that Michael is right. That a real mother could never let someone take their baby away. That while I am splintering in place, I am still standing and that means I did not love Gabriel enough.

I am automated, walking to the bathtub and drowning in the pillows and blankets that lay left behind. I fill my lungs with the air that still smells of that baby. I float untethered for minutes, hours, days, months, years, Forever.

I am unsure if I'm still fighting for air when Michael returns, cold from the car ride. He climbs in and holds me like a lifeguard, an angel, clinging to their rescue.

“I love you, Abigail.”

And for a moment I surface.