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# Baby Baby

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## Baby Baby

LARRY MOSS

Sun blinding, right in my eyes. Crossing Mississippi now, going west, back home: Dubuque. Can't see, sun mixed with tears: don't drive right off side of bridge. Maybe should, a fitting end: justice. Radio: some rap: girlfriend dresses bad, other guys lookin' at her: how to kill her? Aaaacchh!!! Not this, not now. Maybe never. New station: OK: some classical stuff, don't know what it is, helps—some. Car ahead slamming brakes, screeching tires, and this face—coming right at me: my face! No, her face, oh my God, it is my face. Her face is my face. She's screaming: can't hear her screaming. No: screech was me screaming, the face: my reflection in the windshield. Breathe. Focus. Moving again: see the other end

of the bridge? Not far to safety: feel safe again, safe back in good old Iowa. Feel: river flowing, flow beneath me, feel: pull of the current, pulling me down, down: pulling me in: I want to be in. Feel it flowing all around me: flowing with it; it flowing in me, through me, feel it flowing out of me and between my legs . . . Oh God! Her face again. Her face: my face. Tiny fingers, tiny toes, and the red, red river keeps flowing, flowing, never-ending: current pulling us both along. Pulling us down, down. No! Just focus. Keep going: you can make it. God! I'm wet, wetness pulling down, down. Drowning in this, we're drowning in, drowning. Can't breathe. Red flowing down, down. Ah! off the bridge, place beside road: pull off, stop car. Collapse. Uncontrollable tears welling up through my guts, from below, in my car on the side of the road, back home in Iowa, good, safe Iowa. Just breathe, one Breath At a Time control yourself. Oh God: pad's leaking. Of course. It's saturated. Full. Full of life—mine. Full of death—hers. That's where she pulled off the road, but she won't be continuing on, she won't be coming back to good, safe Iowa, that was her last stop. I'm a mess: on the outside, a mess on the inside, an even bigger mess even further inside. Can't believe I did it. My choice. How could you do it? She never had a choice. Why? How did you get here? She: to this place?

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Bill and I met about two years ago in a bar in Galena. I was there with

my friend, Sherry. We were having Long Islands, celebrating my twenty-first, and dancing with whoever would ask us. Some guys we knew, some we didn't. If nobody asked us, we just danced with each other. After we'd been there an hour or so I saw a group of guys come in, maybe six or seven of them together. I'd never seen such a collection of gods on Earth before. Each one an Apollo, an Adonis, Hercules, Achilles. I thought I'd died and gone to Olympus. And then in the middle of the crowd I saw Bill.

He was the god among the gods. I'd never seen anyone before who just instantly took my breath away, until then. He was tall, about 6'3", and he had the broadest shoulders I had ever seen on a mortal, but then he was not a mortal. And the deepest blue eyes, blue as midnight, and as deep as the sky. Little did I realize at that moment that I was about to fall into that sky, and freefall through space, captured and set free at the same time.

I turned to Sherry, who had also noticed them, "Fresh blood," she said.

"Hold my hand," I said, not sure what I meant.

The guys began walking across the lounge toward our table, and began to seat themselves at the empty table next to ours. Bill walked straight over to me, and indicating an empty chair by us, said to me, "May I have this chair?"

"I'd love to," I said, and led him onto the dance floor.

\* \* \*

Getting control now, now, back on good, safe Iowan soil. Dry your eyes, check your mascara in rearview, start the car: pull back onto the highway. Just want to get home and clean myself up. Doctor said driving all the way back from Joliet by myself was a bad idea, three and a half hours behind the wheel in my condition: too risky. You'll still be losing blood for a while: shouldn't be doing anything stressful: like driving. Stay overnight, have a friend drive you back tomorrow. But he doesn't know: not something I can share with . . . even Sherry: certainly not Bill. Bill would be too freaked out if I'm not home by the time he is. He's under a lot of stress now: classes start in two weeks: don't want to add to that stress.

\* \* \*

Bill proposed to me in May. We were in Chicago for a romantic weekend: shopping the Mag Mile, a couple of shows, dinner at the 95th on Saturday night overlooking the twinkling lights of the north lakeshore.

It was here that he popped the cork: Over dessert and Champagne Framboise.

"Allyson, I've been thinking about going back to school and getting my medical degree. What do you think?"

I was taken completely by surprise. I wasn't quite sure how to respond. I didn't have the slightest idea he was even considering such a thing. "I don't know," was all I could sputter out. Then finally, "Where would you go? How

long would you be gone? What about us?"

"Well, I've been accepted at Northwestern, and I can start this fall. It would take me about six years, and I'd have to live here in town. That is we'd have to live in town, if you would come with me," he faltered a little, which was totally out of character for him, "What I'm trying to say is . . . that is, uh, 'about us' you asked . . . well I'd like you to be my wife." I started to hyperventilate and he handed me the champagne flute. As I started to lift it to my lips, there floating atop the strawberry was the most beautiful diamond engagement ring I had ever seen.

I could feel the lump in my throat, and tears welled up from somewhere below my waist and filled my eyes.

"Will you marry me?"

"I don't know. I mean. I don't know how to respond. What to respond. to. first." I was totally at sea. "I want to, I mean, I want you, yes, but, how . . . how can we . . . you . . . I? I . . . no, I mean yes I will, do. But, how?"

"First: was that a yes?"

"To what?"

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes."

"Good." He took a deep breath. He fished the ring out of the glass and slipped it on my finger. "OK," he continued, "now we can work everything else out together."

He leaned over and kissed me and I was completely his. I became a candle: inside I could feel the flame surging from far below, upward to where our lips met and entwined; and at the same time I could feel the hot wax melting and dripping downward, slowly and steadily, flowing until it began to puddle. I was sure that I was making a wet spot on the back of my dress, but I didn't care.

We didn't talk any further about med school. Tomorrow, in the light of day, we could talk it all over. Now, we just wanted to be.

Somehow I remember floating out of the restaurant on a cloud, through the window and out across space to our hotel room, where we were both ensnared into a vortex of passion and bliss. Two bodies in space, without spacesuits, floating, attracted to one another by our own personal gravity. Drawn by an irresistible force into each other. Two otters in the water, whirling, turning, diving, swimming together as one. We devoured each other ravenously: Each touch of lips or tongue sending seismic shock-waves from toes to scalp and back: a seche, rolling from one shore of the ocean to the other. His breath in my ear: an equatorial breeze rolling in on the crest of each wave. And deep inside I felt his life surge into me, and combine with mine, and a new life begin.

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Almost home now. Familiar streets. Right on Lombard. Like sitting in a

lake. My clothes are ruined, the car seat, oh God: how will you explain that? Left on Algoma. Why must women always live with blood? Couldn't there be a tidier emblem of femininity? Past St. Joseph, patron saint of fathers. What will you say? How will you start? Marion Street. It was the right thing. He'll understand. He'll support me. It's for him, after all.

\* \* \*

His plan is to go back to school and get his medical degree. It had always been his plan, but after earning his Bachelor's in Biology, he said he was just burned out. He just couldn't face another four years of school and residency and all. He had been working as a Paramedic for the last four years, out on the front lines: street medicine. But we had talked about starting a family and he didn't want to try to scrape by on what he was making driving an ambulance. Six more years and he would be finished with his residency and could hang out his shingle. He let me know that it would be a tough row for a while, but if I would stick by him we could start our family after he was finished with school. I agreed to his plan. In six years I would be only 29 and still young enough to be having my first, Bill would only be 34. We would struggle for a while, but we would be together.

\* \* \*

Last turn: finally home. Bill's Blazer not here. Dad's car: the DeVille. What's up with that? What's he doing here? How to clean up this mess, without him seeing? The basement: downstairs bathroom to clean up. Must be something clean down there. Which key is it? Shhh. Don't make noise. Inside. Thank God: clean towel on the dryer. How about panties, slacks? I think there's a pad under the sink. Should just burn these clothes. Never want to see them again anyway. Shower. Yes. Don't make noise. All the hot, a little cold. Quiet. Peel away the slacks. Careful now, don't drip all over. This pad: like Depends. Like an old lady. Oh! Never had pain like that down there. Down where all the trouble began. Ended. Try not to think of it. Of the little hands, the little toes. Stop it! The face. No! Stop!! This shirt, too, this bra. All of it. Oh, warm water feels good. Flowing down over, flowing down under. Gently. Still sore there. The red stream circling the drain, like Janet Leigh. But where is Norman Bates when I need him. No, it was right: had to be right. Both knobs left. My body in the mirror: still good. No stretch marks: never got there. God, you look bloated. Like a sperm whale. No. A Jelly donut. My breasts: still firm, but fuller, the areola darker: that'll change back. The towel is—how's that? April fresh?—soft against my skin, against my neck, my breasts, stomach, legs, gently there, though, gently. Where are they? Ah, panty shields. It'll get you upstairs. Fresh skivs, the black slacks, get by without a bra, just this T-shirt. Better clean up the eyes a little. Dad might not notice, but Bill will. OK. Ready to go up.

\* \* \*

"Dad?" No answer. Open the door. "Dad?"

"Hey there Sweetums, how's my girl?"

"What're you doing here Dad?"

"Well, can't I come for a visit?"

"Sure, Dad, you're always welcome. I just didn't expect you, that's all."

Quick hug: kiss on the cheek. Rough stubble scratches my face.

"Well, I was downstream fishin' today. And I just thought I'd stop by before I headed home. See how my baby's doin'? So how's everything? How's Bill?"

"Bill's great. Getting ready for school. We're getting packed. I just didn't expect you."

"Bill be home soon? Got a fish story for him."

"I expect him."

"We're trollin' mind you, just takin' it easy, lettin' the line drag. Oh, maybe two o'clock or so, I don't know, maybe earlier. Eb and I, you know Eb, don't you, Sweetums?"

"Hmm? Yeah, Eb. Dad, you want a coke?"

"Nah. Well, about two o'clock or so, I think, I get a hit. It feels like a big one, maybe a muskie, or a walleye or like that. And a fighter. I give him some line, and he takes it and runs with it. I thought he would take my whole line, you see?" When will Bill be home? "Well I let him play it out, and then I start to reel him in. Like I said he's a fighter, and we wrestle, oh for the better part of five minutes with this beast." Don't care about this. "But I finally get him up near the surface, and Eb gets the net, and we're tryin' to pull him in, and I can't figure out what it is we've got here. It's big. It's too big, in fact. Well, we finally get him into the boat, and what do you suppose it is?" He paused for effect. "It's a doggone mudpuppy. Ugliest dadburned thing you ever saw. I never seen one up close before. Well, this darn thing is so ugly that Eb grabs the paddle and just starts beating on it." Oh God! "Just bashes it over the head again and again until it finally stops wriggling. Never saw anything so ugly in my whole life. Blood and guts everywhere. Eb just kept bashin' it till it stopped movin'"

"Excuse me."

"Bloodiest mess you ever saw."

\* \* \*

Gotta get to the bathroom: quick! My insides coming up my throat. Open the lid. Gauwgh! Oh God. Gauwgh! Strain increasing the pain down there. Where's Bill? Come home. Need you here. Please God, oh please!

\* \* \*

"Honey! Allyson!" His voice: suddenly everything's alright. "Are you home?"

"I'll be right out."

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Look in the mirror. Fix your eyes. Brush your teeth. Oh God, you're a mess anyway. He'll know something's up. Just want the pain to go away. Want him to touch me. Touch me and make it all better. Open the door. Walk out. Out to the kitchen.

\*\*\*

"My dad's here."

"I know, we were talking. God, what a day! Is there any beer?"

"I'll get you one."

\*\*\*

Three steps to the fridge. Bud, top shelf: back. Twist the cap. God, it hurts. Thank God he's home. He'll make everything better. Set it down in front of him. Just staring. Quiet. Staring off through the wall: at something beyond. He's hurting.

\*\*\*

"Everything alright, Baby?"

"I just couldn't . . . I just wasn't good enough . . ."

"Good enough? For what?"

He takes a deep breath: exhales slowly. "It was a fire, over on Alta Vista. A split-level, must've been wiring, a short or something." A pause. "By the time we got there it was hopeless . . . for the house. The mother got out, but she couldn't find the little girl. Rescue is in there looking everywhere, calling, searching. Finally they find her. She's in a closet, upstairs, trying to hide. She's only . . . maybe two—three. So tiny. So they turn her over to me: weak pulse. No breath. Pupils dilated. The smoke just got to her." He pauses: a moment. "So I go to work on her. CPR. Try to get her breathing again." Tears: welling up in his blue eyes: my big strong Adonis. "I used all my tricks. I should have been able. I tried everything. I couldn't let her go." He's a wreck. He can't breathe. Rub his huge shoulders.

"It's OK, baby. Go ahead."

Finally: takes a few deep breaths. "They had to pry me off of her. All I could see was that beautiful little face, the tiny fingers." Tears really begin to flow for him now: mine too. "All the way home, I just kept seeing her face. Staring back at me in the windshield."

Nothing more to say. Just hold him. Comfort him. Nurture. This is why he needs to go back to school. He needs to save lives.