

Catastrophes

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Nine months in the womb, nine months in the crib, nine more in the ground. Her boy. She hugged the stone. Alone. Like this form nine months in the ground.

Melinda sat at the breakfast table. Her hands holding her head by the ears, bent over the noisy advertisement flyer fresh from the Saturday mailbox. “Nine Months No Interest” jumped out at her. Bedroom sets. And “No interest at all!” she sneered and stood up. Went to the screen door. The mother robin she had been admiring these past weeks pecked the grass and flew to the nest in the maple at the back of the yard. “Feeding the kid,” she said, like to the cat. Old habit. No one else to talk to. But the cat was gone with Jhanda, Melinda’s legal wife. She had put the cat and its bed in the truck as she packed her half of the stuff they had accumulated over the five years together and then without a fuss drove away. Apparently, the police told her later, to Buffalo and on to Chicago. Had left early the morning after the grave for their baby had been set with plastic flowers and Baby’s Breath. September, nine months back. “My baby” Melinda corrected her inner voice. “Fuck!” she even muttered, as if to the cat. “Mine!”

Of the two women, it had clearly been Melinda who would be the one to “carry the child” as her mother called it, who would do the hard labor of growing a new person inside her gut. Jhanda would have never. Too hard, even for her muscular body. Hips too nothing. Father from Taiwan. All that. But she was smart, Jhanda, almost Ivy League, and she would be able to seduce a “brainy donor” into doing it for free, she bragged one night in bed. She was thinking of Gerry, her senior year apartment mate in pre-med at Colgate. She had seen him recently on Facebook at a bar in Syracuse. Had texted and got his number. “Plus, sweetie, look at that face. Good jaw, thoughtful eyebrows. Mix that DNA with yours and wow!” Although, just “Good dick!” was all she had said to doctor Gerry when he had asked “Why me?” Plus: “You won’t ever have to see the kid when it comes, I mean we won’t make you.” And when he asked to meet the wife, she said. “You will. It will be dark when we will collect your gift fresh onto her. *On*, not in. OK? I will be there, I can help, like the old days with Paula, was it?” That was her idea of what would seal the deal. You had to seduce a catch like that. And she was right.

Poisoned somehow. The baby was. Lots of detective stuff. Odd chemistry, nothing sold at the hardware or even online. Maybe genetic. Who's the father. All that. They chased down Gerry in Brooklyn. Even Jhanda in Chicago. Person of interest. Now, nine months of nothing, case closed.

Melinda went to toss the "No Interest" bedroom set in recycling and on the flip side popping off the page under orange letters pleading "Please Come," a big pair of lonely green cat eyes up for adoption down in Cooperstown. "Lady. A loving older Gray, former suburban, taken from a farm this week." Nice day for the drive. June, no clouds. Jhanda's cat had been gray. They are good for lonely hearts, she felt. But this one is old. So that was a ponder. She would face another burial much too soon. "You never know," she said and went and got her.

Sunday morning, they sat at breakfast. Lady on her lap. That coldness in her chest leaking away, warmth filling in the void with the vibration and sound of the purr. "I was alone, too," she said and lifted Lady to her cheek. Lady jumped off. Sniffed the air coming through the screen door. "You're a spry one! You don't seem old." A screech and she ran hard into the screen and busted onto the back porch and froze in a crouch heading to the yard. Heading to the robin. Who flew away.

"Be a lady!" Melinda said and joined the cat in the back yard. Toys for boys still scattered there. Gifts from her family and the team at Walmart's. She had no heart for taking them to Salvation Army.

Lady back on her lap, they dozed. She thought of Gerry. The night he came. Dressed for a date. Good cologne. Darkening beard trimmed tight. Good red wine from Italy. Well made around the hips she remembered sneaking a peak when he pulled the cork. And then what they did. What they never spoke of even among themselves and lied about to parents. "A pedigreed donor, Mom, just leave it there." And the surprising stack of fresh hundreds she found on the nightstand in the morning. He had left in the chill of midnight March 14th rolling from between them as they slept. Then showed up at the Walmart checkout next day. "Good to see you," he had said. "Your face. And all. Nice. Here's my card," as he bought some motor oil. He came by after little Jered was born every other Sunday until the illness. Then moved to the City for a hospital gig, he said. His family lived in Utica. She had seen him a couple months back. Short visit.

"Jhanda chose good," she said aloud to Lady. Which woke her from their nap. She lifted her head. Ears up. Then clawed into Melinda's jeans and leapt off the porch like a one-year-old. Stopped halfway out the yard in the long grass gone to seed. Crouched in hunter mode. Melinda stood. She could see, just beyond a yellow toy dump truck, a puff of brown twitching like a leaf cluster. Bird, mouse, squirrel, rabbit? "Lady!" she shouted. But the cat was deep in the jungle and would not hear. Would not hear the calls of the woman behind her, her moaning as she saw what was fluttering in the grass, nor did she hear the crying of the robin mother and father in the tree. Melinda stepped around toys to get to the side where she could assess the fledgling. The wings worked. They made brief elevation and then fell. The incredible skill of a new bird that had never flown and on its first try hadn't quite made it from its nest overhead. The parents could no longer teach it. The moment would come, and it would fly up and balance on a swaying branch. Melinda had seen this enough times right here in this yard. But there was Lady, the not-so-old cat, a crouching tiger, within a one-second bound to the baby. So, Melinda did her own bound aiming for a spot between the bird and the cat. But no. She fell faster than the bird into the grass, a sword of pain cutting into her shin. As the cat succeeded in her own leap and took its bite. Melinda felt for the pain in her leg and pulled up a metal bucket loader. "Boys!" She yelled, her head falling back in the grass gathering herself for another leap for the bird. But the yelp told her it was gone. The scolding parents. "Their baby!"

She moaned, and lay back down on her back, holding her belly, heaving up and down, her throat aching. Weeping. Again, the weeping. Not for her leg, but yes for her leg, and not for the bird, but yes, and all of it, and all of it, and she saw the cat taking the stilled bird into her mouth and bringing it near. "No. No. OK. Thank you dear," she said, and Lady laid the bird inches from Melinda's eyes. They both resumed their nap as the sun went to a lower place in the sky and the birds in the maple no longer wept.

"Hey Melinda! Are you OK?" A man. The slap of the screen door. The touch on her shoulder. "It's Gerry."