



PRINTER'S DEVIL REVIEW

Cat Ennis Sears. *Split Spine*.
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Split Spine

THE BABY IN MY WOMB ISN'T NORMAL. We know this for sure now. Henry thinks that we should terminate the pregnancy. He always says it that way. He says, "terminate." He never says, "abortion." He says spina bifida causes paralysis, the quality of life would be so low, it would be cruel to continue.

But I can feel myself getting bigger every day, I can feel the baby getting bigger. And I can't believe this baby is forming all of its organs, its limbs, its hair and eyes and teeth and gums for nothing. She's building these things because she wants to live, because she, like any other animal, wants to survive.

And it's our fault. We built her with damaged sperm and aging eggs.

We should have made this baby long ago.

Fifteen years ago, when we were twenty-five and twenty-six, we would go to the river and the trees would hang over the banks. There were rocks and sand, and warm river water. There was his muscular chest in a tight checked shirt. There was my body in black boy short underwear, tight against my skin. There were my breasts in a black sports bra; there was my flat stomach.

Henry was whistling. He was lying on a rock. And then he took off his shirt, jumped into the water, and was kicking away, pulling me towards him and we were swimming. We should have found a rock and made this baby then.

We've lived in this cold northern city for ten years. We thought we'd just stay till we got something good on our résumé, but we stayed much longer. We waited till we were in our thirties to get married. We waited till we were in our forties to have children. We waited till we had a house and enough money to take the children on yearly vacations.

We wanted everything to be just so, we didn't want to risk doing something so big without proper foresight, without planning. I've been reading books now about parenting for the last five years. I know how to do it. There are so many ways to cause damage and I know how to avoid the classic mistakes. But my body is a traitor.



I did not tell my mother about the problem with the baby. If I get an abortion, I'll tell her it was a miscarriage and she'll sympathize with me. She won't ask for details unless I want to talk about it; she'll be sensitive.

I remember my mother making Henry's parents sweet iced tea—not knowing how to do it, and soaking teabags in cold water, then adding some ice and serving it to them in mugs with milk. His parents sipping from these mugs with strained smiles on their faces, trying to be polite. My mother, embarrassed because it was obvious that she didn't know to do it, and she's tried so hard to act American, to raise us to feel at home in this country, to feel American. She has always told me that I am a bridge, that she's Lebanese, I'm Lebanese American, and my children will be American. She wants my children to feel completely at home in this country with its strip malls, its hot black asphalt, its manicured trees and its wide open blue skies. My mother told me, you might not feel completely at home here, but I did my best. I didn't know everything. I had to learn the culture, but your children, they won't be Lebanese at all.

She tells me, your roots are American now, and your children will be grateful because America is a xenophobic country. I don't want to tell her that I waited too long and that there will be no American children, that the bloodline ends here, that she gave up her country and assimilated for nothing.



Summer in Boston comes late but tries to make up for lost time with one hundred-degree temperatures. They had issued a boil water order for the entire Boston area because some pipe broke and was gushing our clean water into the Charles. And goddamn, it was hot. While we waited for the AC to crank up, the little fibers of the couch stuck to my legs. But on the floor, it felt like the plush white carpet was sweating. So I stood by the huge flat screen TV. The TV was the kind of thing I had once said I would never have.

Henry had laughed and bought beer when he saw there was no bottled water left in the stores. Now he sat with a bottle of light and creamy, expensive, Edelweisse hefe, going round and round the rim with his index finger. I wanted beer; I wanted to get drunk like him. But I was doing this pregnancy right, and so now I drank lukewarm boiled water that hadn't had the chance to cool. Henry asked, "What are you going to do, Eva?"

"Maybe it will work out," I said. I was thinking this "defect" would make her better than normal, like the boy in my neighborhood who had a club foot his father refused to fix,



claiming that it “built character.” Maybe spina bifida would make our daughter special.

I said, “Birth defects, like a cleft palate, used to make people in Native American tribes so special, they were treated like kings.” I had no idea what I was talking about, just vaguely remembering an informational paragraph beside some Native American art I’d seen years ago.

Okay, he said. But he’s not living five hundred years ago in a tribal society. And what causes spina bifida anyway, he asked. He looked at me like it was me, like I caused it.

“The doctor said it’s not enough folic acid before conception. Heat sometimes, hot tubs, electric blankets in the first month. And age. Of the mother and the father.”

He said we could try again, we could get pregnant again, we should terminate it soon. The leather couch he was sitting on was brown and glistening with his sweat when he shifted his weight. He looked like a sweating slug on the brown couch. Why did he say, we can try again, we can get pregnant, we should terminate it? I was the pregnant one, not him.

I told him we could wait a few more days and he grimaced like he smelled something disgusting and told me it was like a Band-Aid—you just had to rip it off. Was he drunk already? What was he talking about? This was nothing like a Band-Aid.

“The scarring would make it harder to get pregnant next time,” I told him.

“Maybe we should take that risk. And we can always adopt.”

I told him it was late and I had to get up early for work. He said we shouldn’t avoid talking about this, it was important, we only had so much time. Instead of responding, I went upstairs and looked at macabre Google images of spina bifida—the purple hardened plate on the lower back, the spinal cord protruding through the skin and muscle, the brain sometimes displaced to the upper neck. I read about the intense pain from the lower back to the knees and wondered if she hurt, right now, if she was screaming inside of me where no one could hear her.

What scares me is that this baby in my womb has to come out. It can’t grow forever, I can’t undo this. Either it will come out the normal way, or it will be sucked and pulled out.

When the doctor showed me the telltale signs on the sonogram monitor, I thought about how the sonogram sounds like a freight train to the fetus. I imagined what she was feeling inside, the loud rushing roar, the unbearable heat, how there was no way to explain to her why it was so hot and so loud, so suddenly. And if I did what Henry wanted me to do, there would be no way to explain that to her either.



I dreamed that I gave birth to our daughter, and she was terrible. She had two heads, melded together, one looking forward, one looking backwards, like the god of time. She had two sets of eyes, two mouths, two noses.

Henry was there in the dream and he said, this doesn't run in my family, does it run in yours? I said no, which was a mistake, and he assumed I had cheated on him. He said he would send our child into the wilderness to die. He took the baby with him and walked away until I couldn't see him anymore.

I told him over and over, "She is your daughter, she is."



When I woke up the next morning, everything in my body hurt. There were aches and pains in my neck, my shoulder, my back, my head.

Henry said he had something to show me after work, he wanted to take me someplace. He said to come straight home after work, and he'd see me later. He said, "love you," and left.

After work, Henry was waiting for me on the porch. "Come on," he said, "let's go!" In the car, he held my hand over the console, and I adjusted the seatbelt around my stomach to fit it better. I wasn't yet used to the extra weight.

He drove out to the suburbs and parked at the bottom of a hill. He said, "Now, we walk up the hill." We wound our way through the trees on footpaths, occasionally emerging from the woods into the nearby college's dorm parking lots. Fifteen minutes in, it started raining. The trees were so green, and the rain was coming down between the patches where the trees were less thick. Henry gave me his red raincoat and I put it over my head. Below us, you could see the rolling hills of suburban Boston, and then the city ending at the sea. He said, "It's not that much further now."

Ahead of us was an old and elegant brick building. Vines climbed up its sides, and the roof was made entirely of windows. He said this observatory was built in 1872. He'd come here a few weeks ago for the public stargazing night, and he said it still uses the same lens to look at the stars as it used to when it was built.

"Why did you bring me up here?"

"I just thought you would like it. I hadn't shared anything like this with you in such a long time."

I didn't even know he was interested in astronomy; I didn't even notice that he was gone that night. Our relationship had become platitudes: love you, miss you, see you soon.

He said, "Have you ever thought about how each star is coming at you from various times? That what you see in the sky isn't at all what is there right now? That each star takes



a different amount of time to reach you?”

I told him it's scary that you can't even trust your eyes.

Walking back to the car with Henry's red raincoat over my head, the rain slowed and the stars started to come out. I thought about how our models are only approximate, and there's no way to understand everything, or to have everything explained to you.

In the car, Henry told me he married me, not my womb, and it wasn't my fault, or his fault. But he wanted us to have a good life together and to give a good life to our child. He didn't think it was fair to continue with the pregnancy.

When he put his hand on my stomach, I couldn't help it, I started to cry. I wanted to tell her why she was in pain. I wanted to tell her the procedure would only last fifteen minutes and that it would hurt, but that after that, there would be stillness again. When I had found out I was pregnant, I had wanted to tell her about physics and Shakespeare, about romance and music. Now, all I wanted to tell her was, please forgive me.



I stopped by the grocery store on the way back from my first visit to the clinic to see if there was any more bottled water. They told me the dilators take twenty-four hours to open my cervix. They told me to come back the next day for the rest of the procedure.

At the grocery store, there was a throng of people gathering around two exhausted-looking men in sweaty Stop and Shop T-shirts and a pallet of five-gallon Poland Springs water. I waited in line for two containers. As I walked to the checkout, my gallon of water, swinging from its carry handle, hit a little boy in the head. He grabbed his head and looked up at me with big brown eyes. The look he gave me was questioning and curious, not accusing. He didn't know why he had been hit, and he wanted to know why. I said I was sorry. He looked around him at all of the people clamoring for water. I repeated, "I'm sorry," but he didn't hear me because he'd already started to cry.

The old man behind me in the checkout line asked, "What will you do with your water?"

I will do with mine the same that you will do with yours. I will drink it; I will use it for cleaning, for cooking, for brushing my teeth. I will bathe in it, I will wash my skin in it. As my cervix opened against my body's will, I thought, I will use this water to survive. 