

# A Dull Roar

*by* billy robinson

Downstairs again, back in the kitchen, because ten minutes in bed and I got the shakes.

Earlier tonight, Joel scared me. He got home first, and I found him in the kitchen, sitting in the chair I'm sitting in now. He didn't want me to turn the light on. "I'm afraid of you," he said out of the darkness. Generally stuff like that doesn't come out of his mouth. Instead I get these teary-eyed looks of despair and pleading face: When Carol? When are you going to stop acting this way?

My baby was born stone-cold, thirty weeks to be exact. I don't know. Is seven months enough time to forget the frenzy of light, blood pouring out of you like a flood, the swollen purple kink?

It didn't seem possible two years ago. Two years ago, Joel and I were happy little campers. He'd taken over his dad's environmental consulting firm, one of only two of its kind in Philly. Then his rival went belly up, and Joel became the only game in town. It was his idea to have a baby. It was also the time that my artwork of hot, bright suns and colorful poppies was starting to get shown. I'd been teaching art at Moore College for ten years, and then suddenly I found myself hobnobbing with art critics and clanging champagne in tulip-shaped glasses. But Joel thought it was getting late in the day. We weren't spring chickens, anymore. We married in our early thirties.

And yet I thought, What could a couple of years hurt?

A month ago, Joel surprised me with plane tickets to France. He was trying to cheer me up. We were just sitting at the dinner table with leftover veal chops and micro-waved, boiled potatoes when he reached into his shirt pocket and unfolded a picture he'd ripped out

of a British magazine—a beautiful geranium-teeming condominium overlooking the hilltop fortress and town of Mougins. He imagined that Pouilly-Fousse and Camembert and lavender fields were just the things I needed. Not to mention the magical light and Picasso's spirit, to get me painting again.

I tried to paint too soon. Two weeks home from the hospital, and so sick was I of the Maury Poviches and The New Price is Right and the abundance of inane soap on the tube. I couldn't go back to teaching yet. I still had three more months of leave. Of course I missed my students, but I missed more the linen, raw and wheat-colored, rubbing against my knuckles. I dreamt of the *thunk-thunk* of the staple gun one night, and I swear the next morning my breathing turned fuller. The dream sent me straight out of the bed to my studio at the back of the house. There, I set up a blue vase and three pomegranates, laid them out on top of a white linen tablecloth.

Everything was going along swell. I applied Gesso to the linen canvass. Slapped it on thick, like whipped cream. Then I feathered out the brushstrokes. An hour later I took a burnt umber and made a big wash of it in a jar, started in on the underpainting.

But then something happened.

The paint began dripping off the bottom of the canvass. Splat, splat, splat. I took a rag to wipe them. But they kept falling. Onto my smock, onto my worn-out Keds. They looked like these big muddy tears. And that was it. Next thing I knew I was scraping the paint off the canvas with a palette knife.

Muddy tears. Can you believe it?

So instead of building up my own forest of bold and beautiful canvasses, I started seeing a therapist. It was Joel's idea. He got tired of watching me drag my ass around in slippers and pulling the

curtains tight against the light. Dr. Holland is fiftyish, pretty, with reddish blond hair. Joel came along that first session. Before he even sat down he went off on how he couldn't believe it possible to love something so much without ever knowing it. I thought she was going to cry. Then it was my turn. Words tumbled over each other like wooden blocks. I rubbed my hands, the knuckles chafing crimson. Joel didn't have to go back. Now we're six months later, and I've been sitting on her brown tufted-leather couch twice a week, dredging up every insult, slight and indignity ever perpetrated against me since I was a speck of DNA, but where am I? A month ago she wanted me to engage Joel in a discussion about the baby. "Ask him if he thinks the baby would be walking already. What about talking? Ask him what he thinks the baby would say to him?" So that night I brought it up while we were on the couch, *Lost* at commercial. He didn't say anything right away. Then he turned to me in the blue-glow of the TV screen and said, "Let's just watch, okay?"

Joel wasn't always so tepid. For the longest time I'd come home and he'd be standing in the doorway, wide-eyed and full of anticipation, as to what knowledge, if any, I had gleaned. I think he thinks I'm slipping backwards. He doesn't say it. He's not that kind of guy.

Little did I know he even wanted to take a shot at a baby again. I found this out while in France. He rolled his arm over me in the middle of the night, and I thought he wanted sex. We've had sex since the stillborn. I'm not impervious. But then moments before he came, he whispered in my ear, *Let's try again*. Suddenly I felt the full weight of his pelvis. I had to shove him off.

The thing is, I'm supposed to be ready. My cycle is back on track. Even my uterus, according to the doctor, is in tip-top shape. But our life is not so perfect anymore. Joel's business is struggling. What money he made in the last couple of years is half gone. God knows

we spent enough to get me pregnant the first time. The specialist was a three-hour drive to Washington. And for what? First I miscarried, then gave birth to a stillborn. Do we need to spend another forty thousand—forty thousand we don't even have—to end up with nothing? Obviously, my uterus is on the fritz. The doctors still don't know what happened. I'm thirty-eight now. The next baby could have Down's, or get stuck in my fallopian tubes—a bulbous clot that will have to get flushed out of me with liquid Drano.

They say there is no limit to how much pain you'll endure if you want something bad enough. Maybe I don't want it bad enough, is what I've concluded. Or maybe someone is trying to tell me something. Maybe I'm supposed to stick to what I'm good at. Like teaching students about shadow and light, about fat brushstrokes over thin. I'm not sure I want to be a pincushion again, anyway. All those paragon needles Joel stuck me with made my arm throb like a motherfucker. I couldn't sleep. Besides, I don't think I was ever cut out to be a mother. I never went gaga over other people's children. Even my own, I couldn't touch. Joel was the one who held him, rocked him as he lay swaddled in a blanket. The doctors insisted I do the same. Something about the first step on a long path to moving on. But I cursed at Joel to get the baby out of my sight. What kind of mother won't touch her own flesh and blood?

The thing is, If I push out another dead baby, I may just break.

Already, I can't paint. I told this to Dr. Holland when I got back from France. In the middle of our trip, Joel surprised me with an easel, some paint tubes, and brushes. He convinced me to go to Vallauris with him. Together we'd find the most beautiful blue ceramic vase in the world. Once I started walking the main narrow street with all the art, I was actually excited. When we got back to the condominium, I set up a small wooden table in the bedroom. I presumed I was going to spend the afternoons painting the vase in beautiful, warm light. But after a while I found myself painting the

bedroom, instead. It was not an exact representation. I did not include the bureau or any of the little knick-knacks we picked up along the street fairs in Cannes. Nor did I paint the room in its actual colors. Everything was slightly distorted, the tone in darker shades of cadmium red, the brush strokes neither smooth nor swirling in what was usually my style but short and abrupt, like tiny, petrified knots. When Joel came in and saw the bedroom a violent agitation of crimson, he didn't know what to say. From then on his energy was at a premium. He was like a snail on Valium. All he wanted to do was go to the local market to buy our roasted chicken and our daily baguette and bottle of Orangina. We never got to La Promenade des Anglais in Nice or to the flea market in Ventimiglia. I never set foot in Picasso's home in Antibes, either. Joel's plan was to get me away from myself. But France wasn't the best idea maybe. The Cote D'Azur was more like California than like France. We kept running into Americans everywhere. Even the couple vacationing below us was from Chicago. Joel swam in their turquoise mosaic-lined pool every afternoon while I stayed in the bedroom, trying to sleep. From the open window I could hear them laughing, and their perfect English. It made me feel like we hadn't gone far enough away.

I watched Dr. Holland's expression turn sourer the more of the story I relayed. And the whole time she just sat there, repositioning her arms. She wasn't saying anything, so I thought, We're done here. I thought, She is out of answers. Then she took off her glasses and said, "Why don't you try painting a portrait of Eric?"

No one but her calls him by name. I left her office and went into the parking lot, blinking from the harsh daylight. I haven't told Joel about her creepy request. What would he have said? "Hey, why stop there? Why not get out all his stuffed animals and baby rattles and display them throughout the house!" Joel doesn't understand what Dr. Holland is getting at. Why she keeps reminding us, in his words, of something that's impossible to see. It's no doubt he's lost faith in

her ability to cure me. A couple of weeks before we left for France, he asked me if I wanted to seek out other counsel. I was in bed when he came out of the bathroom, floss caught between his teeth.

“You want me to quit?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “You can start over again. With someone new.”

The next morning I found him in the kitchen stuffing files into his briefcase. “I can't,” I said, as I stood in the doorway, my hand bunching the collar of my terry-cloth robe. “I just can't go down this road again with someone else.”

He didn't say anything. Just a small puff of air escaped between his lips before he went out the back.

It's 11:37 p.m. now, and the cup of tea I brewed has made my shaking stop. After Joel said he was afraid of me, he went upstairs to bed. I didn't follow him. Instead I went into the living room until I heard the bathroom faucet stop running, then let some time pass for him to fall asleep. After I snuck upstairs, I pulled down the sheets as delicately as possible. I didn't want to wake him. I didn't want any more words between us tonight. I didn't want to go through another fight like the one we had the night we arrived from France. On the plane I drank water and four of those tiny Schnapps' bottles. Then I kept trying to make jokes in the car ride home. Not until he turned off the ignition in front of our house did he actually acknowledge my presence. “You're drunk. Go to bed.” I watched him get out of the car and head straight to the garage. I then went inside the house to make myself a cup of coffee. An hour passed before he came in to wash his hands at the kitchen sink. I was already there, waiting in a chair. “You hate me because I'm no good at audibilizing,” I started. “Nor am I the little firecracker you fell in love with. You don't like that I'm sent over the edge by the smallest, most ludicrous things.

Bobbie pins, ginger jars? Did you know that a student painted a still life of a bowl of fruit, three peaches caving in towards decay, and my mind turned to fleeting life-spans, then turned again to the stillness of life moments before death, then again to the moment of death of our son? Everything reminds me of him. You, on the other hand, are a steady ship on a turbulent sea. Little bothers you, really. You're the iceman. I've been sitting here wondering if it's just that you've turned into a cold son of a bitch."

The words just poured out of me. Joel stopped rubbing his hands and let the water run as he looked at me. Both of us stood there, saying nothing. As if waiting for the other to flinch.

Two days later I was advising Dr. Holland that Joel and I are no longer the same people we were when we married. The fissure that was the death of our baby has exposed our marriage's soft underbelly. Ask him anything and his eyebrows shape into a straight line. It reminds me of a tightrope, someone poised, balanced, between fury and dismissal. Seven months is enough time, he thinks. Not to forget, necessarily, but to move on. Sometimes I agree. Sometimes I think I'm ready. Only sometimes something happens that can throw you for a loop. After just one month back teaching and a student's sixty-two-year-old father can fall and smack his head on the corner of a coffee table and die. As she rushes out of the room to her small Kentucky town, you can already smell the disinfectant. I waited a few days before I called her home. When the mother answered, there was a distinct exasperation in her voice, something I recognized. I said yes, I understand, to everything she said. Otherwise, I was quiet. At the end she said, "Things can fall apart. It only takes a second." There was nothing else to say to that. There really wasn't. The whole time she spoke I watched a blue jay perched on my office windowsill. Blue jays are squawking and territorial. I tapped the window. The bird stayed put.

Here is what happened tonight: I got home around seven. I knew Joel was already there, because his Volvo was parked in the driveway. The house was dark downstairs, so I assumed he was upstairs, maybe taking a shower. But then I flicked on the kitchen light, and I jumped. "Turn it off," he said. Because I froze, he had to repeat it. "Turn the light off. Please."

And so I did. His tie was loosened. There was a bottle of scotch on the table, three-quarters full, and a glass, fully empty. All this I saw by the moonlight pouring in the window. He told me he'd been thinking about a lot of things. Then he listed them: I'm no longer the person he married; I seem to want to be in this marriage alone. He said it wasn't all my fault. He wasn't the same person, either.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't move. I watched him tilt his glass and peek inside, then turn it upside down, gently, almost too carefully, on the table. I waited for him to say something else. But suddenly, not too careful at all, he pushed back his chair to stand and started to pass me towards the stairs. Though not before he stopped at the edge of the kitchen to utter, "To tell you the truth, Carol, I'm afraid of you."

I think of those words now and they give me a wrenching feeling in my stomach. I wonder if it's true, Is he through trying? The other night while we stood in the kitchen locked in each other's stone silence, he finally said, "You're waiting for something to get you to the other side of grief. But there's no such thing." At the time I didn't know what he meant. But now I see that there aren't going to be any bottom lines in my future, no last days of sorrow. Only the sound of grief, perhaps, rendered a low, dull roar in time.

I put my cup in the sink, head off towards the stairs to bed. Only halfway up I retreat down the stairs again, head down the hallway to my studio. Inside, I flick the small table light on, sit at my drawing table, put pencil in hand. Suddenly I'm drawing a large sphere for a

head, a high forehead, and a nose, small and unformed. I give the face plump, puppy-fat flesh, rough child eyes, then a few strands of straw-colored hair on his cradle.

As I draw I feel a particular jittery apprehension.

Also easiness, as light coming in my window is from a fat round moon.

