

The Prettiest Lie

by Curtis Smith

Your life is going to change—how many times was that prediction offered in one form or another during my wife's pregnancy- Mothers often said it with a bliss-touched smile; fathers with a smirk that was both sardonic and conspiratorial, and a distinct, cross-gendered handful uttered the words with an unblinking intensity that rattled me more than any of the bloody videos we watched in our childbirth classes.

In the months before my son's arrival, my focus turned inward to the lightless, floating world where he spent his days. I say 'inward' in the truest sense, for I felt as if my wife's watermelon belly had become an extension of my own body. Amazing, our doctor's visits, the underwater *slurp-slurp* of our child's buried heart, the ultrasound's cloudy visions, the brief glimpses of his face, fingers and toes, then deeper, into his bones, his air-awaiting lungs, more. . . . My wife and I adjusted our diet, took long, twilight walks, our pace slowing as summer eased into fall. We developed rituals—the Sunday Polaroids we shot to document her budding growth, joking about our plan to make them into a flipbook, and each evening after we'd turned off the bedroom light, I rolled over and placed my lips to the curved, taut dome of her belly and spoke to my son, words of encouragement and love, hope and strength. *Everything's OK, baby. Everything's OK.*

He was placed in my arms in the delivery room, cleansed and swaddled, his skin the pink of well-chewed bubble gum. *He looks wonderful*, the doctor said, grinning from behind her mask. I gazed upon him, this solid, warm mass, his birthing cries short-lived and a single, curious finger worming its way out of the blanket, and when I began to speak, his unseeing eyes fluttered open, and I wanted to believe he recognized my voice, the words

incomprehensible but the sound a welcoming bridge to this bustling, confusing world. *Don't be scared, little man.*

The next forty hours passed in a blur of interrupted sleep, doctors' consultations, orderlies bringing cafeteria trays, nurses jotting their notes. I took walks to stretch my legs, aimless wanderings that usually ended with me standing outside the nursery's long window. Fourteen had been delivered on the same day, a near-record that had the nurses counting back nine months and dubbing the batch "Super Bowl Babies." There were always a handful of infants in that room of blazing white lights and pinging machines, each wearing a beige knit cap topped with a Halloween-colored pom-pom, and when the door swung open, out poured the chorus of their collective breathing, a hum moist and tenacious and unlike any I'd ever heard before.

Back in our room, the muted TV heralded the arrest of the beltway snipers—a man and a boy, their smiling pictures leaving the rest of us to consider again the always incongruous face of evil. In between pokings and tests, our boy was wheeled into our room, his sleeping form nestled in a glass-sided shoebox, his high-pitched rasping already unique to my ear, a singular, unmistakable note I swore I'd be able to discern from the others.

Late October, and the rain fell long and steady, the chilled gray crouched outside the concourse's floor-to-ceiling windows. The weight of my son's carrier threw an unexpected hitch in my stride, and my wife rolled alongside us in a hospital-mandated wheelchair. The nurse who pushed her told us the latest on the beltway snipers, the hard news of their capture giving way to speculating psychologists and retired attorneys, the case's undertones of seduction and brainwashing and cold malevolence oozing to the surface. I looked down at my sleeping son. How sad, the ease with which some of us lose our way; how sad, the fate of the oblivious victim, the lightning-strike violence of this world. Past us filed the sick and those who loved them, the workaday faces of the nurses and cafeteria workers and the maintenance men, and I smiled at them all, suddenly seeing them not as strangers, but as bundles

once placed in their parents' arms, innocent and blank and incredibly fragile, and for a brief moment, I wanted to embrace them all and whisper in each ear the prettiest lie that everything was going to be OK.

