

Here Comes the Sun

by Jaime Karnes

I pretend we're a happy family. My brother is the doting husband, I am his bouncing wife; and our mother, in the back seat of the car with her body folding deeper and deeper into itself, is our beautiful child, curled up like a sleeping bird. We are proud pretend-parents. Taking pictures for the world to see, striking the poses of happiness in this way for nearly ten years.

Look at our bird now, on her way to the hospital. Such a brave little bird, isn't she?

My brother is in love with me, his wife. Though he wasn't comfortable with it at first, he's grown to accept our roles over the years. I can sense his resolve when the traffic suddenly stops — and he reaches his arm across the console, creating a barrier around my midsection.

You may not understand, so think of it this way: if the radio were on, it would play the Beatles during our trips every day to and from doctor's appointments, specialists' offices, emergency rooms. We would buckle in our bird, then ourselves as always. We'd turn the key. The engine would hiccup as always, and 'Here Comes the Sun' would play and repeat. Because isn't that, after all, the happiest song any of us knows?

I pretend our baby is singing along, humming gaily, her auburn curls blowing in the crisp January air, of which I've let in less than an inch. But our baby coughs a sad sick-bird cough and we both look back at her, lovingly. I close the window. Almost there, little one. Stay strong.

We make a hard left into the Fletcher Allen parking lot, last night's snow piled high on its curbs. I give my brother a look that says be careful, my love. If he doesn't slow down, and brake at the perfect speed, we could fishtail. We could lose control and spin about, spilling our family, losing our love. What then of our happiness? Certainly we'd no longer be the happy family people envy. We're the kind of family you think other people have, and they

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think you have. Actually, if we all took our clothes off and stood still and listened, we'd realize not one of us has that family; not really anyway.

My brother carefully slides the car into the closest spot available. Baby has fallen asleep again.

I tell him I will wake her if he fetches a wheelchair. He tells me that the snow is slush now and a wheelchair is worthless. He will, he says, carry his baby inside. I think this is the grandest of all grand gestures. And then I think: *When will someone carry me?*

Wake up, little bird.

I watch my brother carry her into the hospital, and I love him with parts of myself I didn't know were capable of love. I love my brother with the space behind my eyes, the skin between my fingers, the ends of my hair, the crease in my neck. I love him with the centre of my belly button, that place that feels electric to touch. It's more love than anyone has ever felt, I'm sure. I have an urge to donate it to children in Africa, or give it to the girl that works the kiosk in the mall. I'll give it to a lonely continent.

I'll sift it from myself like specks of sand and sprinkle it over Palestine, over Israel. I'll feed it to the world.

My love is so deep it could colour the Black Sea.

The doctors don't seem to believe in our love, that pretending to be this happy family can save us. That caring for our bird will protect her. They say it's time. They say they've done everything they can for her. They touch our shoulders when they tell us.

Love is not the happy ending we expect.

My brother waits with our mother in the small room, her shrivelled body snaked in tubes, covered in plastic, and I go outside into the parking lot, into the storm. The wind slaps my face and cracks my empty expression. My eyes are the corners of an empty gorge with my mouth at the centre. I breathe deep, trying to freeze my organs.

Across the street, on the other side of the four-lane highway, I see a man wearing a gorilla suit. He waves. I wave back. Unsure he is even waving to me, I wave harder, with both hands. Soon my arms

are above my body as if separate from me, uncontrollable, inconsolable. I must look crazy, like a drowning child. I'm waving, *Hello!* but it looks like, *Help!* I don't stop.

I move through the parking lot to the edge of the highway to get a better look at him. He's holding a sign that reads: Kids Under 5ft Tall Get a Free Soda, Today Only. I wonder how much the gas station pays him to stand there in the cold. He motions for me to come across the road. He wants me.

He's not as immense as I first thought. He's more like a boy inside a hand-me-down suit. He lays his palm across the top of my head, air-measuring my five-foot-nothing height. I decide this means he thinks I qualify for a free soda.

There are so many choices. Diet this and diet that. Explosive caffeine in this, cherry-flavoured that. I wonder what flavour my brother would like. I think Pepsi sounds fine, but it's free and I want to get something different, something I'd never choose if I were paying for it. I settle on Raspberry Riot and its promise of five-hour energy. I fill a twenty-ounce cup to the top with ice, watch as the pinkish water beats into it, listen as the carbonated liquid pops and sings.

The woman behind the counter has hair on her upper lip — it's sparse but I can see the fine fuzz above her mouth. She says that'll be one dollar and twenty-nine cents.

But it's free today, isn't it? I ask.

She says it's only free for kids.

I want to shout: but I *am* a kid! I am, I swear. Maybe she sees me as a mother, too old to be a child. But I am someone's child, at least for another few days, the doctors say. At least until then.

I ask her to repeat the amount.

One dollar and twenty-nine cents. She holds out her hand, her eyes all over the store. I can tell she doesn't understand. Doesn't care that I qualify based on something as trivial as inches. I think the best things are immeasurable, and besides I didn't ask for the soda. The gorilla man offered it. He wants me to have it. *Please.*

My mother is across the street, I say. I don't have any money with me.

The woman twists her lips to the side of her face, chewing the inside of her cheek. She has to think about this one, I can tell.

Before our bird was a bird, she was our mother. And before she was our mother, she was a stenographer. Before she was a stenographer, she was a student at Syracuse. Before Syracuse, she was a farm girl from Hoosick with red hair and blue eyes. She had her own bird then, her own mother.

I can't give you the free drink, the woman says. It's too risky on my end, you understand?

I do. I set the bright blue cup with its extra-long, super-wide straw down in front of me, between us. A circle of sweat builds at its base. I think the promise of Raspberry Riot has ruined me, raked me over and left my love someplace between home and the hospital.

Did you have a sip? the woman asks.

No, I say. I didn't even try it.

Outside the hospital, my brother is waiting. He's angry. Where have I been? What's taking so long? We have to go back to the room now and wait with our bird, hold her hand as she readies herself for flight.

Dr Whitney said it'll be a few hours, he says.

Time closes in on us. She needs things from the house and we must hurry. Air is thick with snow. Fat flakes land on my brother's face, cling to his eyelashes. Past him, the gorilla man looks at my empty hands, shrugs his shoulders. I shrug back. I want to run to him and tell him it's not his fault, explain that I don't qualify because I am no longer anybody's child, or I won't be soon.

She wants her afghan, my brother says, and the photo of us from Christmas three years ago.

That was before her hair fell out, I think. Before they took her uterus. Before they took her teeth. That's a very good idea, I say, the afghan. It's yellow like the sun. She'll like that.

My brother's car starts hard; the engine doesn't want to turn over. I look into the empty back seat. My brother asks if I'm hungry —

he's worried that I haven't eaten. Suddenly I'm thirsty, thirstier than anybody has ever been.

The yellow afghan is buried beneath a stack of papers: month-old unpaid bills, receipts from our mother's prescriptions; and sticky notes, hundreds of them. She started using sticky notes after the doctors said that seventy-five per cent of her brain had been covered with lesions. She wanted to remember our birthdays.

The photo is covered in dust. I snatch it from the bookcase and rub my palm across our smiling faces.

The tree was beautiful that year, my brother says.

I roll the car window all the way down on the drive back to the hospital. I pinch my outer thighs until I'm sure they are bruised.

Dr Whitney is waiting for us outside our mother's room. She explains that a coma was to be expected. She says she is sorry. I see that the foundation is thick around her frown lines. Our mother wasn't the kind of woman to wear foundation.

I watch my brother lay the afghan across her body. He's meticulous. He pulls at each edge, smoothes the wrinkles. He walks around the bed, repeating this four times. He tucks her in, sliding the yellow wool behind her knees, around her feet. I think today will be the day that I did not help him. Today will be the day that I watched instead.

He takes the frame from my hands and places it beside the bed. I can tell he's checking to see if it's at an angle precise enough for our mother to see when she opens her eyes. We both know she's not going to open her eyes.

I notice they've removed her dentures. Her hollow cheeks make her look dead, not dying. I scan the room for her teeth. I would put them back in when no one was looking.

My brother holds her hand. We're standing on each side of the bed now.

Say something, he says. I look at him blankly.

Damn it, Paige. Say something.

I scan the room. The television in the corner is off, the shades in the window are drawn and the door is closed. I can't find an idea. I can't find a borrowed word. I can only stare at my husband.

I lean in to our bird's face. Her breathing is shallow, and she smells like unwashed scalp. The way a pillow smells after someone you love has left.

Well? my brother asks.

I whisper, here comes the sun, little darling, and kiss her empty mouth. ■

