

Cry Baby Cry

by Joey Delgado

The baby will not stop crying.

He's been crying for three hours straight.

I'm the worst mother ever.

What kind of mother can't soothe her own baby?

The bad kind.

"Charlie, honey, please stop. Please, please, please."

There's a knock on the door. Great, the first pissed off neighbor.

I open the door. It's Grace from two doors down. Grace with the kind face, look how bad she feels for coming over to complain.

Quick, say something to show it's okay.

"Grace, I know why you're here. *Believe* me, I'd be over here too. I am so sorry."

Grace cocks her head, does that smiling/not-smiling thing, a little friendly flinching to dispel awkwardness between neighbors.

"Whaddya mean, honey? I brought food."

Grace holds up a casserole dish.

"You're so sweet," I say, yelling over the baby's cries. "Come in. I'm so sorry."

"Why do you keep apologizing?"

"The crying. The non-stop crying that's been going on for, like, three hours."

Grace seems confused. Her eyes look away from me, towards the baby's room.

"Oh," she says. "Right."

She sets the dish down on the table and walks to me. She wraps her arms around me. I return the hug.

"It's so hard," she says. "I know."

"Oh, it's fine. Do you wanna give it a shot? You're always so good with him."

"Um, sure, hon. Sure."

We walk to the baby's room and she looks down in the crib. The crying is ear-piercing but Grace gives no indication that she hears it

at all. She reaches into the crib and touches the baby. She pulls her hand away.

"It's okay," I say. "Pick him up if you dare. He sounds like a hell spawn, but he won't bite."

"Okay, sweetie. Okay." Grace leans over and picks Charlie up. She holds him close to her chest. He stops crying almost instantly.

"That little shit," I say, laughing. "See, you just have a way with children."

"Yeah," says Grace. The way she's looking at me, I can tell she wants to say something. Something serious.

"What, Grace?"

"Um, Tracy, you know this baby...this baby isn't real, right? This baby isn't Charlie?"

I laugh again, but the way she's looking at me, the way she's standing ramrod straight shuts me up.

"Are you serious?," I ask.

"Tracy, love, Charlie p-passed away a month ago. He died of pneumonia. This is a plastic baby. Oh my God, I'm so sorry. I'll call someone. I shouldn't have said anything. I'll call someone."

"This isn't funny. Why would you say that?"

"He's plastic, Tracy. You can't keep going on like this."

"Okay, you need to leave. Give me my baby and get out."

"He's plastic, Tracy."

"Give me my baby, give me my baby! Now!"

Charlie starts to cry when I take him out of Grace's hands. I kiss his forehead and rock him, never taking my eyes off Grace. A tear slides down Grace's face.

"Leave. Please leave."

She shakes her head at me and looks at the baby in my arms.

"Look at it, Tracy. What do you see?"

I look down at Charlie and see his perfect skin, pink and soft. I see his wide blue eyes, so much like his dad's, the only thing of his dad's I wanted Charlie to have.

"I see my son, Grace."

"That is not Charlie, hon. That is a doll, a *plastic* doll."

"Enough! Get out of here or I'll call the police."

"Tracy—

"Get OUT!"

Grace walks out of the room. I'm nauseated and trembling. I put Charlie back in his crib as gently as I can. I want to free up my hands in case she tries anything.

She's standing at the door, her hand on the knob.

"You can't keep going on like this, Tracy." She doesn't turn around when she speaks. "You need help."

"I'm calling the police. I don't ever wanna see you again."

Grace opens the door and walks out. I slam it shut behind her and throw the locks, the deadbolt and the chain.

"He's plastic, Tracy."

Now she's saying those awful things in the hall for everyone to hear. I feel like I'm on fire, like my skin is going to burst into flame. I can barely stand, my legs are shaking so bad. I look for something to beat her with, something to throw. Her dish is still on the table. When I pick it up the lid slides off and falls to the carpet. I look in the casserole dish and don't understand what I see.

In the casserole dish are a plastic apple and a plastic banana.

"What the fuck?"

