

The New Main Stream

by Nicole Haroutunian

An hour later, we're no closer to the tunnel. In our rental car, we're just two in a school of a thousand fish skimming the edge of the island. Go with the flow, we keep saying to each other. We're just going with the flow.

Leaving the house, we were dressed in our baby-shower-best: Bellie in white, sweet and wholesome, me in blue, calm as the ocean. But now, lurching stop-start-stop, Bellie's emitting high-pitched groans, hands cupping her big, round stomach—"I'm a beached whale," she moans—and I'm thrashing around, fanning at my armpits, flapping my elbows like fins, sweat carving rivers through the city-silt settling on my skin.

We eek forward a half-block then come to a halt. Bellie cracks a can of lemon-lime soda, takes a sip and passes it to me. I dribble it down the length of my arm; it's warm enough not to feel good at all. I blot the spots with an old tissue and bits of fluff stick to my flesh. "You really want to introduce me as the mother of your child?" I ask.

"Everyone at the shower knows you plenty well," she says. "You need no introduction."

Bellie and I have been roommates going on fifteen years. We get along better with each other than with anyone else; people have always made the mistake that we're a couple and this whole baby thing won't help matters. The truth, though, is that we both like men—we like to sleep with them, I mean. In fact, that's where the whole baby thing came from—no funny business, just an old-fashioned slip-up with Bellie and this guy she used to bring by.

What made this time different from the one or two others, when it was either Bellie or me in a bit of a snafu, was the fact that we're getting older—old enough that the thought of keeping the baby actually stuck and started growing like the little embryo itself, getting more complicated by the day.

Besides the baby, Bellie kept the guy—his dry skin, his sun-white hair—in her bed at first, then on the couch, finally he was practically on a mat by the door. “Come on, Bel,” I told her. “I’d make a better father than that piece of debris.” And that started us drifting: how we met as students riding high on the Third Wave, our discussions back then, how we believed a family could be anything we wanted it to be. And so, she floated the idea and I was swept away.

What I hadn't considered, as a little guppy theorist, was that choosing a family—a yuppie family with two moms and a baby—might mean choosing all the families I wouldn't have, too, rolling up those childhood givens—a smiling husband and a baby who looks at least halfway like me—and stuffing them into a castaway bottle for the next dreamy little girl to find. But skin sweat-sticky, tissue barnacled up and down my arm, never the youngest anymore, not even in a very big room, it's easy to get caught up in the net of: this is it, right in this car. Why would I wait for someone to come my way, knowing he never may, when I've already got Bellie and the guarantee of a baby? But sometimes it's hard to ignore those then agains: what about all those other fish in what is still such a very big sea?

The stream of cars is stagnant for what seems like forever. We make noises about how we're going to be late, stopping just short of blaming each other. But neither of us cracks first—suddenly it's the jerk behind us who can't wait any longer. He pulls up until his bumper is touching ours and we vibrate with the revving of his engine. “That's going to get me all excited,” Bellie says.

She wiggles around in her seat; Bellie can still giggle at a time like this. I, on the other hand, I don't find it amusing; I say: “I'm going to kill him.”

Bellie goes to child-lock the doors, but I'm quicker—I burst out of the car like a flood through a gate. “You want to back the fuck up?” I shriek, banging my fist on the hot hood of his sedan. He does back up an inch off the rear and I feel awesome about it until I catch

a good glimpse through his windshield and see that he's a freaked-out looking teenage girl.

"It's a little girl," I say, jumping back into the car before Bellie can lock me out. Her jaw hangs, horrified, mirroring the dark mouth of the tunnel, which yawns open to swallow us whole. It's not too late to tell her that I was talking about the driver behind us, not the baby inside her. But the baby is a girl—I asked, even though we promised not to, on the day of the last ultrasound—and I can't help pausing for a second too long, wanting to see what Bellie's going to say.

At first she says nothing—how could she with a smile on that big? I squeeze her hand, happy to have done the right thing. I wanted a girl, too. But then she hisses, "I knew it," and I realize her smile is more like clenched-tight teeth.

"Keep cool, Bel," I say.

"I wasn't talking about the baby," I try.

But she adjusts the rear view mirror so she can give me the evil eye. As always, she can see right through my back-pedaling ways. "I knew it," she repeats, the tip of her nose turning a bright shade of red, "and now, what I want to know is if you're going to break all those other promises we made."

I run down the list in my head. Veto power on all potential life-mates, bed-mates, moves out of state. Joint checking for baby expenses, a savings plan for college tuition, alternate shifts at the cooperative nursery. Nothing non-organic in the pantry, no television, early classes in Spanish, piano and maybe Chinese. We're not so far into the tunnel that I can't still see the city behind us. I decide maybe it's time to back the fuck up myself.

A trickle of stinging sweat slips into my eye; I might be panicking here. The salty drip makes me think of the river, of the water threatening to crash down on us; it makes me think of the new main stream.

Over the years, the city's been growing up and out: whole neighborhoods have been dumped into the Hudson, cobbled together from the foundations of skyscrapers. Bellie and I spend a

lot of time at a riverside park on one of those landfill protrusions; we always marvel at how firm the ground feels beneath our feet. But recently I've been reading about how those brand new bits of city, edging their way out into the water, have caused the river's current to change its course. They've forced it to break the pattern it's followed for who knows how long.

So now, the main stream of the Hudson wends its way around the island in a whole new path and it's been wearing at the floor of the river, carving out its altered destiny and carrying clean away the buffer of dirt above the Lincoln Tunnel. With so much water rushing right above us, just out of sight, how could I not worry about what we're getting into?

"Part this river down the middle so we can get out of here," Bellie says, like she can read my mind. "You wanted to play God," she says, "so do it."

"That was Moses who parted the river," I say, the snap in my voice snapping me back in time, back to when I could be just as furious, but my hair was in pigtails and my feet didn't touch the ground. It occurs to me that there's nothing original about fighting on road trips, that freaking out in a four door is just about as common as can be—in fact, most of my childhood backseat memories look a lot like this. I take a deep breath and hold it. Maybe we're onto something, Bellie and me. Maybe we've gotten stuck worrying too much about promises here. Maybe we belong up there, going with the flow, in the new main stream.

Making this journey when I was little, I pictured the tunnel like a straw in a drink: water all around. It was years before I realized that that's not how it is, that tunnels are dug into the ground. I used to dream of climbing through a trap door in the ceiling, my parents and me released from the close confines of our car into a beautiful, cool stream, somersaulting with the current, a happy fish family. And now, finally, the world is just how I used to imagine it to be: the water really is right over our heads.

"Bellie," I say, wiping my eye, "wouldn't you kill for a swim?"

