

Where She Went

by Wendy Wimmer

*Originally published in **Per Contra** Issue 27*

Before that unnamed baby started showing up each night, she had been a happy woman. Or at least she thought so. Happy and lucky, in fact. Sometimes she'd drive up their street in their desired bedroom community and look at their own little bungalow squatting in its wide corner lot and it would frighten her, how perfect and happy her life was. The windows with awnings were two sleepy-hooded eyes. Although she would never admit it to anyone, some nights she would pause for a moment in the driveway, afraid to cross the walk and step into its yawning open jaws. Then she'd shake her head and think about the leg of lamb in her freezer and wonder when she was going to have enough courage to make it for dinner. She had never made lamb before and she worried that she would screw it up by cooking it too long or not long enough or putting too much rosemary on it and the whole thing would taste like pine needles.

Once she got through the door, she would sit inside the front room without turning on the lights and listen to the wind howl. The glass in the old windowpanes rattled. Her husband - Carl - hated that sound. It was just a reminder of money flying out the window, he'd say, and then make a quick slick motion with his hand, as though the money were very eager to flee on lubricated chutes. Carl bought weather stripping and spent their Saturdays haunting windowsills, a burning candle in his hand. She didn't say it out loud, but she liked the rattling. It reminded her of the house she lived in as a child, with high ceilings and glass doorknobs and squeaky floorboards and a bathroom door that didn't close completely.

She and Carl were happy, it had been decided. There was no doubt that Carl was happy. He would announce how happy they were, how lucky, how perfect and happy and lucky as they'd sit in their living

Available online at *«<http://fictionaut.com/stories/wendy-wimmer/where-she-went>»*

Copyright © 2015 Wendy Wimmer. All rights reserved.

room and watch television, each on opposite sides of the sofa with a pile of her furniture catalogs occupying the international waters between them. Certainly no one would argue with him about their happiness, their luck.

Normally, we keep our opinions to ourselves.

On a whim, one evening we sent her a dream of a baby girl, with long eyelashes and big dark eyes even though the woman's own eyes were blue. It was a strange dream for her, a very simple one. We normally doled her complex epic dramas, comedies and fantasies with casts of thousands and subplots that wove into other subplots.

In this dream, she was bathing a child, only a few days old because the baby still had on her stomach a blue umbilical cord, dark as a crayon. She cupped the warm water and brought it over the baby's skin, taking care to keep the baby's head out of the water. The plastic bathtub was light blue; the fluffy towel that she planned to wrap the baby in was pink and smelled of Dreft. She felt awkward holding this baby. She worried that the water was too cold or that the baby would get sick. And then she woke and remembered that she was not a mother and there was no baby. It was a good dream.

That evening, while Carl read the newspaper, she sipped a glass of claret and flipped through a Restoration Hardware catalog. She kept thinking about the baby, wondering if Dr. Freud were happy now that she was apparently dreaming directly out of textbooks.

When she got up to use the bathroom, Carl asked her where she was going. It was a ridiculous question, really. She snapped that she was going to the bathroom and perhaps he'd like to know how many squares of toilet paper she used too. He looked up at her, injured with eyebrows lifted, and then murmured that he was sorry to take an interest in her. She said nothing and left the room, but was even more irritated when she returned. He always asked her where she

was going. It was annoying. She wondered aloud why he always asked her that, even in the middle of the night, when the answer was always the same. He said nothing but his eyebrows were working, knitting a suitable answer that would not further upset her. She could tell. Finally Carl folded the paper and reached toward her and murmured that he was afraid she would leave. He said this in a way that seemed proof of how much he loved her. He watched her closely for a reaction.

She took his hands and kissed him softly, and then said nothing as his hands went to her hips and pulled her closer to him. She was accustomed to this. Sometimes they would lie on their oversized sofa together; his hands would wander while he talked about ordinary things, such as what they should make for dinner or their plans for the weekend. It was as though he were not aware his hand patrolled her hips, an explorer looking for the perfect spot to plant a flag.

Then his tongue slicked out to touch her lips slightly and she acquiesced. She always did. She had been with Carl for almost her entire life. She was thirty-four and they had started dating when she was nineteen, so it had been certainly all of her adult life and over half of the part of the life that mattered, the years between ages 12 and now. As she kissed Carl, she kept thinking back to his last comment, wondering if she should have just said "where would I go?"

Her hands never sought him out. This was not to say that she did not enjoy the things he could do with his body. She did, but she knew that he was always there, as ever present as a mountain range. She felt guilty that Carl enjoyed her body so much while she felt as though his body was utilitarian. Solid. Warm and covered in a downy fur that seemed to thicken and multiply, staking new territory as the years passed. A body made for taking out the garbage and wearing denim. Carl's body seemed as ridiculous as the bodies of the fathers

of her childhood friends, men who mowed lawns in cut-off business slacks. Carl was not a father because she was not a mother.

She wondered what her alternate universe self was doing right then, if she were sitting in a sleepy-eyed bungalow like this one. She wondered about Carl's alternate universe self. Did he have a mustache? Did he wear different cologne? Did he like onions?

In the next dream, we played a little trick. This time, we kept the baby out of it, but she was at the ob/gyn. Her doctor was happy and smiling and asked how the baby was, asked if she was able to get enough sleep, all the while combining the dull ache of having given birth while he poked around under and inside her. The doctor was her real doctor, a dog enthusiast, and in the examining room there were pictures of his Weimaraners receiving ribbons and standing at attention on little pedestals. On the ceiling above the examination table, there was a poster of dog breeds, and to keep her mind from the pinching, she read them to herself in the same voice she imagined she used when she read to the nameless baby. Miniature Schnauzer. Whippet. Briard. Poodle.

Carl sensed that something was troubling her, so he suggested a trip, something to get away from the darkness of winter. He thought for a minute and then suggested the vineyards on the coast. Yes, walking through old buildings made of stone permeated with fermentation. He knew it was something that made her happy and that she would lose herself in the planning. She nodded and offered a weak smile. It was a lovely idea. They could come home with a few cases for summer entertaining in the gazebo and it would give them an excuse to talk about the trip while they poured wine -- without sounding like they were bragging, which was absolutely the most crucial thing. Yes, it was a good plan. Carl patted her on the shoulder and asked if they were out of coffee. She told him to add it to the shopping list.

In her dream that night, she took the baby grocery shopping. It was her favorite store, although she had never been inside it before, one with the crooked floorboards and the decadent cheese board and vivid fruit that seemed obscene in the middle of blustery January. Exactly the kind of store she would shop in -- if she had any idea where it was. She strummed up and down the aisles, the cart humming like a zither on the wooden slats. The baby cooed at the colors and stared up at her as she shopped. While she was searching the shelves for Desitin, she recognized a boyfriend she'd dated in college before Carl. He was in the same aisle, debating various sticks of deodorant. She hadn't seen the man in years, but there he was, minus the dreadlocks and with new wrinkles under his eyes. His eyes slumped downward for a cursory glance at her body and then continued onward, pushing his cart full of pomegranates, tapenade, brioche, shrimp, and a bottle of pinot noir. The year on the bottle was 1997. In her own cart, a loaf of bread, diapers, formula, cans of soup, cheese, ground chuck and a recycled utility bill envelope full of coupons. She laughed to herself for hoping he would recognize her and then moved along, touching her receding baby tummy.

During the day, she found it difficult to concentrate. Sometimes she would feel a sense of panic. Who was watching the baby? But then she would remember -- it was all just a dream.

Just a dream. As though dreams weren't important. We get that all the time.

She tried to fill her waking hours with projects. She dedicated herself to her collection of catalogs. Carl called it furniture porn, and in some ways, he was right. She flipped past the ones where the homeowner sits on the edge of a sofa cushion wearing a loud sweater and gardening clogs, as though they would much rather be pulling weeds. She liked the rooms with only furniture in them the best. She could easily imagine herself in those rooms, straightening

the paintings on the wall, or taking a book from the shelf. She did not mind being alone in her catalog world. There was not a question of talking about what she and Carl would do or not do. There was not the subtle play for more and more touching.

The next night, she found herself sitting on a sofa. Not the overstuffed sofa that sat in their bungalow but a different one, one covered with a blanket to protect it, or maybe to hide it. She rested the nameless baby on her legs and they just looked at each other. The baby gripped her finger and she softly stroked the loose skin of the baby's hand. There was a pink hand-knitted layette on the table, a personalized label inside that read Hand stitched with love by AUNT DENISE. She didn't have a sister.

It was the same baby every night. Her subconscious had provided us with name although upon waking she could never quite recall it. It was an old name, beginning with a vowel. It was a name you might have seen on crumbling gravestones in churchyards. In the mornings, she knew it upon waking and would think herself stupid for having forgotten it, but then after ten minutes, it would be gone, as ephemeral as a sigh.

One night, we made it morning. She walked into the little nursery, gathered the baby up into her arms, and smelled the crown of the baby's head. She could never get enough of the baby's smell, sweet and somehow also sour and a touch of her own smell as well. She brought the baby back into the master bedroom, which was not the bedroom she shared with Carl in the sleepy-eyed bungalow but rather an entirely different bedroom with high ceilings and Victorian moldings and cheery white wainscoting that had a shelf at eye level. On the shelf were little treasures-teacups and colored bottles and tiny rocks. She knew that it was her bedroom because it was exactly the bedroom she would have chosen for herself. She placed the baby on the bed between her and the sleeping form of a dark-haired lanky male form. She did not look up from the baby but she felt him turn

over and whisper good morning. This was Carl? No. It could not be Carl. She could hear a smile in his voice. The warm sun was shining down on the three of them. She knew that it would wake her up and they would be gone, leaving only her utilitarian husband in their place.

The next afternoon, she broached the subject of children with Carl. He responded that he was too selfish with his time and her attention and very simply did not want to complicate his life. She was surprised by his frankness but also, completely not surprised. They had discussed this early on. Somewhere in her certainty that nothing good could come from her choices, she hadn't dwelled on the issue, thinking that they would have broken up by the time it mattered.

She decided instead to think about what she would make for dinner. Perhaps she would attempt the lamb. No rosemary, though, she decided. She was too skeptical about the rosemary and even though every recipe on the Internet declared it crucial to a successful lamb meal, it seemed as you really weren't supposed to be eating it. It was an accidental spice. Or herb? Maybe it was an herb. She wasn't sure. She'd have to look that up somewhere. No. She could make the lamb however she wanted. Yes, with roasted root vegetables tossed with some imported olive oil that had cost \$25 at an Italian market. While slicing the fennel, she decided that she needed to stop dreaming of the baby and the baby's father. She would just stop. Push them from her mind. Concentrate on what really mattered.

How quaint.

That evening, seated in their dining room with the Wright-inspired furniture, Carl declared the leg of lamb a success. She smiled and replied that she had had an epiphany. Carl made a joke about a Lamb of God and she laughed, even though it wasn't funny.

That night, we put her back into bed with the baby's father. Her greedy hands explored his tall frame and he whispered assurances that he would be gentle and that she should tell him immediately if anything hurt, but his mouth brushed up against her ear in such a way that she quivered, feeling heat rush through her body. She thought about making herself wake up, right then, but she did not want him to stop, wanted instead to weave herself around him, keep herself there in that place. After they were finished, she wanted to tell him that she was going away, that she would not see him or the baby again, but instead she rested her head against his smooth chest and listened to his heartbeat and the soft sounds of the baby girl in the baby monitor.

Before bedtime the next evening, she swallowed a plastic cup full of green Nyquil and then took another half dose, just to be sure.

We do not care for challenges.

We sent her strange terrifying dreams of penguins with teeth and women with white powdered faces chasing her through a maze of thorns. The night after, she doggedly insisted on taking the sleeping aids, then even still through months of vicious nightmares, until they became so bad that she couldn't even remember why she started taking Nyquil in the first place.

Sometimes even we are surprised. We are also patient.

One evening in early summer, she used the last of the ropey liquid, and did not open another bottle. That night, she stood with the baby's father in a waiting room. A door buzzed and a nurse in a mask came out and waved them in. A sign said "Infant Ward - ICU". Her baby was lying there in a small plastic bed that reminded her of an under-bed storage bin. Her once vivid eyes had gone dull and her skin was grey. They both donned gowns decorated with ducks wearing sailing caps, muted green masks and powdered latex gloves

that smelled of talc. She wanted to hold the baby but the wires and monitors made it impossible. There was a single pink teddy bear. She could only put one latex gloved hand onto her baby's little chest and feel the chilled flesh, despite the heat lamps that tried to keep her warm. The noises coming from the baby sounded like those of an old person, with raspy air and congested wheezes. She knew that if something happened to the baby, she would not be able to go on, she would not be able to do anything. Already, it felt like something was pushing her down, from the top of her head down to the floor, compacting her spine. She could simply fall into a heap on the floor and never move until she died.

Somehow this might have been the father's fault, although she didn't know how that could be. He was idiotically chatting with the nurses about visiting hours and she wanted to hit him. She wondered if maybe it was really her fault. She grabbed a Sharpie marker from the nurse's chart and inked the baby's name on the inside of her hand.

She heard the doctor telling the baby's father that the next twelve hours would be critical. She traced around the baby's belly button where just six months before there had been a withered blue cord toggle. She looked to the baby's face, waiting for a giggle but the baby either could not or didn't want to.

In her head, she decided to make a deal with someone, anyone. If we would just make the baby better, she would never wake up and continue to live here with her baby whose name she couldn't remember and the baby's father, whose name she never learned. Or if that weren't a good enough deal, then she would offer that she would just never wake up. She would be neither in her world nor this one. If we would just make the baby better. Just let the baby be ok. Just let the baby live.

As though we are in the business of striking bargains.

