

AN EEL FOR JACQUELINE

by

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"I need an eel," I tell the tiny woman in front of the fish stand.

She sucks air between her gapped front teeth as she twists a towel around her chapped fingers. "I got lotsa eels, hon," she says.

"It has to be a white eel," I say. "A live one."

She squints in apparent concentration, as if trying to remember where she might have put some. "There's no white eels in the Chesapeake," she says, finally. "I got plenty of these though. You want this one here?" She points into a bucket at her feet, where a black eel swims in a circle, bumping its face repeatedly against the plastic sides, probing for a way out. Its desperation magnifies my discomfort at even being here.

"No thanks," I say as I turn away.

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At eighty miles an hour the familiar stretch of interstate had become a carnival ride with none of the fun. "Are you okay?" I yelled over the road noise.

Sheila growled and pulled on the hand strap with such force that the ceiling liner bowed in. "Just get me there," she ordered as she writhed in her seat. The tires squealed as the car veered onto the exit ramp and a horn blared from behind us. At the hospital I stopped the car with two wheels on the sidewalk and helped Sheila inside the emergency room.

I scrubbed up and dressed in sanitary gear as instructed, and was ushered into a room where Sheila lay on her side on a stainless steel table, surrounded by a small army of people. The surgeon ducked her head in from an adjoining room. "It's showtime!" she bellowed.

In the operating room a nurse directed me to a stool near Sheila's head, the only part of her not hidden under the choppy sea of gowns, blankets, and other cloths draped across and around the operating table. I sat down and held her hand. "Do you think your parents will be able to come down to see the baby? They weren't expecting him so soon."

I didn't answer, lost in thought about how much extra the emergency procedures would cost,

and wondering how we would come up with the money to pay for the new-baby things we still needed and hadn't had time to save for. I desperately wanted to be happy, but couldn't chase away the anxiety.

"Is everybody ready?" the surgeon asked as she stood poised to begin.

"This won't take long at all," the nurse said. She glanced at my furrowed brow. "Don't worry," she said. "She'll be able to feel a kind of tugging sensation, but she won't feel any pain."

I tried to focus on Sheila's voice as she talked about the baby and anything else that sprang into her mind, while the clink of surgical tools and the stutter of a suction hose insinuated in the background. After a couple of minutes, one of the doctors signaled to the nurse who had her hand on my shoulder. "Do you want to see your baby?" she asked me.

I rose slowly, peered over the wall of cloth, and looked inside Sheila. The surgeon lifted what might or might not have been a baby out of her and set the blood-covered bundle on one of the linens that lay across Sheila's thighs. I sat down quickly.

"Did you see that huge thing on the side of its head?" one of the nurses whispered too loudly to a coworker.

The nurse sitting with me patted me on the shoulder. "It'll be okay," she said as she looked daggers at her colleague.

As someone took our baby over to a steel counter, I thought I could hear a faint cry. "It's a girl!" the surgeon shouted from the other side of the mound of cloth.

Sheila's hand found mine and gave it a surprisingly strong squeeze. "Pete? Is everything okay?"

"I'm not sure. How do you feel?" I asked, hoping to deflect her.

Sheila looked toward my face, but her eyes did not fix on mine. "I hardly felt anything," she said, sounding as if she had just awakened from a deep sleep. The surgeon and the obstetrician came to the head of the table and motioned to me. I pulled my hand out of Sheila's with a little difficulty, because our fingers were stuck together with sweat, and stepped over to them. "She's real small—under three pounds—but she gave us a good cry," the surgeon said as she looked at the obstetrician.

"We're going to need to brief you on a couple of things," he said. "I'll come find you when we're through here."

They closed Sheila up, and I followed as the nurses wheeled her to the recovery area. After nearly an hour her eyelids fluttered open. “Did you see the baby, Pete? Did you see him?”

“Just for a second. And she’s a girl.”

“Jacqueline, then. And Mae. Jacqueline Mae. How does she look? Is she beautiful?”

“Sweetie, I’m pretty sure there’s something wrong.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t really know. The doctor said he’d be here in a little while to explain things.”

A man carrying a clipboard walked over to us. “Are you the Gables?”

“Cables. Yes,” I said. “What’s going on with our daughter?”

“Do you have a history of any birth defects in your family?”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Where is our baby?”

“I don’t know. I’m just here to ask some questions.”

“What kind of questions?” I asked.

“Didn’t they tell you? There is a large growth present on the baby.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“I don’t know. I’m just here to get data for a study I’m conducting.”

“But I haven’t even seen my baby girl yet,” Sheila said.

“It will only take a minute.”

“Please,” I said. “Can’t you see this isn’t the time?”

The geneticist shrugged and walked away.

“Pete, what was he talking about?”

“There’s a growth on her head.”

“What do you think it is?”

Our doctor approached slowly, as if worried about interrupting an argument. “Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Cable. It looks like things didn’t go exactly as we planned.”

“Can I see my little girl?”

“I’m afraid not. The nurse tells me you have an elevated temperature, so we can’t allow you into the NICU.”

“I can’t see my own baby? That’s ridiculous!”

“We can’t risk infecting the infants in that ward.”

“Can my husband see her?”

“Mr. Cable can probably visit the neonatal unit later today.”

“Is she going to live?”

“It’s difficult to tell. I need to get back in there. Please rest assured she’s in the best possible hands.”

The nurses wheeled Sheila away to get her settled in her room. By the time they sent for me, she was deeply asleep. “Would you like to go see your baby while you wait for your wife to wake up?” one of the nurses asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “Is she okay?”

“They said you could go visit, so that’s good.” I followed the sign toward the neonatal intensive care unit—the NICU—past the babies on display in the maternity ward. Families clustered together against the glass, debating the origins of noses and ears. Their joy slugged me in the stomach, and I turned my head as I walked on.

The hallway became dim away from the glare of the maternity ward. A sign over the NICU door said to press the buzzer for entry. A metallic voice burped out of the intercom: “Yes?”

“I’m here to see my daughter.”

“Name?”

“Jacqueline.”

A pause. “No, sir. *Your* name.”

“Oh. Sorry. Pete Cable.” After a few seconds the lock buzzed and I pushed inside.

Steel sinks lined the wall. A sign instructed me to scrub my hands and arms up to the elbow for ten minutes. Steam billowed up as the spray rang on the bottom of the metal sink. I rinsed off the orange soap, dried my hands, and put on a disposable mask and gown from a shelf over the sink, following the directions on another sign.

I continued down the hallway. Empty incubators on rolling carts lined the wall like tiny cabs at a taxi stand. I turned toward the sound of voices and bleating machines, and approached a woman sitting at a desk and wearing a pink lab coat. She looked up from a clipboard. “Are you Mr. Cable?” I nodded. She called out to a man and a woman stationed next to an incubator twenty feet down the narrow room. “Sharon. Cliff. This is Mr. Cable.”

I stepped carefully through the crammed room, navigating around incubators, a disorienting mass of machines, wires, and people dressed as I was. The two nurses caring for Jacqueline nodded in greeting. A striped towel draped over the front of the incubator blocked my view inside. A light trained in the back projected shadows onto the towel from behind. I tried to make sense of the shapes but could not. "May I see her?" I asked.

"Sure," said Cliff as he lifted the towel.

I spun Jacqueline gently on the merry-go-round in the park while she clung to it and cackled. Each time she whirled past me, I held out my hand in case she lost her grip. The closer she came to the edge, the louder she squealed and the wider her crooked smile became. Her face flashed past, and her crazy blond hair trailed. "Faster!" she commanded. "Make it go faster, Daddy." Of course, I did. But just a little.

We played alone in the park for an hour before a gray-haired Asian man and three small girls arrived. The girls swarmed over the merry-go-round and looked up expectantly, so I started the contraption spinning. The three dark heads and Jacqueline's spun past in a Morse code dot-dot-dot-dash as they shrieked. Finally, long after I myself was dizzy, the youngest one started to get off while it was still moving, so I stopped it quickly. They spilled off and toppled into the grass, panting.

The three girls stepped in age from three to four to five, a judgment I could not have made before Jacqueline was born. They wore matching dresses, and each had a red ribbon in her hair. Their faces were flawless. The oldest one looked at Jacqueline carefully and then pointed. "What's wrong with her face?" she asked.

"She's okay," I answered.

The old man hooked his finger in the corner of his mouth and pulled down hard, pantomiming a snared fish. "What the matter with mouth?"

I was surprised and a little put off at his bluntness, but I answered. "She had an operation. Many operations, actually. There was nerve damage. She can't move the left side of her mouth or close her left eye all the way."

"Ah-h," he said, and stared at her until she ran off to the slide with the middle girl, the one about her age.

I retreated to a bench to sit and watch the girls. The man again strolled over, relentlessly friendly. "You try ee-ya brood," he said.

"Pardon me?"

"Ee-ya brood."

I tried combinations in my head, trying to make the words fit into English. "I don't understand," I said.

The man was not frustrated, and tried again. "Ee-ya. Like snake."

"Oh," I said. "An *eel*?"

"Ya," the man said. His smile broadened and he nodded vigorously. "Ee-ya. Da brood." I began to feel uncomfortable, as if it were my fault the two of us could not communicate. He remained unperturbed. "Brood," he repeated. With his right hand, he made a hacking motion across his left index finger. "Like when cut finger."

At last. "Blood?" I asked.

"Ya. Brood. Ee-ya brood." The man looked as if he would like to hug me, to congratulate me.

I thought about this for a moment, but the words themselves were not enough. "Eel blood for what?" I asked.

"Fix daughter face."

I sighed in exasperation. "I mean, how would it work?"

"Get white ee-ya." The man's smile disappeared for a moment. "Not get black one." He shook his finger, admonishing me for something I never would have considered doing. "Get white one. Live one." He smiled again and seemed a bit maniacal as he cheerfully delivered the rest of the prescription. "Cut off tail," he said. He chopped his right hand on his left palm to demonstrate. "Catch brood in cup. Rub on face."

"Rub it on her face?" I asked, sweeping my hand across my left cheek.

"No," the man said, shaking his head. "Not bad side. Other side. Use every day. In ten day, all good as new."

"Have you seen this work?" I asked.

The man hesitated. "No," he said finally. His face brightened again. "I read in newspaper." I nodded agreeably and hoped I didn't look as disappointed as I felt.

I wave to the man and move over to the swing set, where Jacqueline is calling me. I recall the first time the doctors explained about Jacqueline. Cysts, they said—lymph ducts that don't drain. They're usually about the size of capillaries, but they fill with lymphatic fluid and some grow as big as bean sprouts or bigger. Thousands of them, twisting among muscle fibers and nerves. Slipping into her ear canal and wrapping themselves around her windpipe and her esophagus. Sometimes breaking through the skin, bubbling on the surface of her face. To get them out is nearly impossible. But they have tried.

They have cut her open three times, battling these flawed lymph ducts. They warned Sheila and me before the last operation, and they were right. The left side of Jacqueline's face became paralyzed, though the doctors said some of the function might come back. Sheila and I cried when Jacqueline sat up in her hospital bed, overjoyed to see us, with her smile upside down. Milk flowed from the corner of her mouth at mealtimes. Our first night back at home, when we went to check on her, she slept with her left eye open. Sheila kissed her thumb and eased Jacqueline's eyelid shut.

For almost a year the doctors have been talking about another operation. Sheila and I play with Jacqueline, trying not to think about another trip to the hospital. I tell friends and coworkers about the Asian man from the park, laughing because he seemed like such an odd fellow. None of them laugh along with me; instead, most ask whether we have tried the man's advice. I am unable to shake the idea. It's disgusting. It sounds like voodoo or something wicked and superstitious. It borders on animal sacrifice. But then I wonder: *What would it hurt?* I can't sleep, and every day I look at Jacqueline's beautiful but broken face. So I have come to the fish market to find a white eel, but they have none.

I hurry away from the tiny woman's fish stand and start back past the other stalls toward

my car. Seagulls wheel overhead, their cries sounding like derisive laughter. Fish and crabs recline on tubs of shaved ice. Workers spray them with water so the scales and shells sparkle, but their eyes remain dull. The stench of dead fish from the river overpowers the scent of something frying, maybe crab cakes or french fries. Vendors call out to me as I pass, but I have had enough of this place and pick up my pace toward the parking lot. A man fishing off the side of the pier threads something that looks like a large worm onto a hook. It is black and twists around his fingers, writhing as he lowers it into the water. A white plastic bucket next to him is stamped "R&R Bait" in black. Someone has written on the bucket in a red marker: "Baby Eels—24 Count." I stop to look at them. They seethe in the container, fighting their way to the top and then slipping back into the mass.

On the drive home I vow not to tell Sheila where I went, even though I've never been able to keep anything from her. When I arrive at the apartment, Sheila and Jacqueline are sitting on the floor, pasting family pictures onto a poster board. The lineage is traced with a marker, the black lines connecting the photos. "Daddy, look what we're doing," Jacqueline says. "Our family tree!" Sheila beams as Jacqueline jumps to her feet and hugs me around the neck when I bend down.

Later, while Jacqueline is taking a nap, Sheila tells me the doctor has called to set the date for the next surgery. She doesn't look me in the eye. We spend an hour trying to read and puttering around. Without discussing it, we are standing together outside Jacqueline's room. We go in to check on her, to make sure she hasn't kicked off her covers. She's sleeping on her back and snoring slightly. Her tiny face seems perfect in the dim light of late afternoon. "I think she's closing her eye a little better," Sheila whispers.

"I think so too," I lie.