

A Hole Through The Earth

The windowpanes rattled and the front door thumped as if an intruder were trying to get in, but it was only the wind. No one could be bothered to come to Darwin Vanderkote's house, a fact he knew only too well. After so many years alone he sometimes thought he might even enjoy the company of an escaped convict from the prison next door, but in the three decades since it opened, no escapees had been daring or stupid enough to stop running right there, in the shadow of the guard tower that looked down on his property. Chinks in his chimney bricks and holes in his shed were evidence that idle or possibly drunken correctional officers had taken potshots in his direction. He didn't dare keep a dog or a cat, worried that a moving target in the yard would present an irresistible challenge.

From five o'clock in the morning until seven in the evening on weekdays, garbage trucks rumbled by on their way to the dump, which abutted the other side of his land. He'd been awakened more times than he could count by the thunder of the lurching trucks that shook his house as their giant tires dropped into the bathtub-size pothole in the road that ran past his front porch. He kept his own supply of gravel to refill the hole, which the county never seemed to find time to address. But no matter how much rock he piled in, the ground beneath absorbed it and more. He felt sure that by now the trucks had punched a hole straight through to Australia or whatever godforsaken country was on the exact opposite side of the Earth from Shaw Township, Pennsylvania. Maybe somebody down there could make use of the free gravel.

Peace was elusive, even after the garbage grinders and earthmovers at the dump had shut down for the day. At night the buzzer at the prison startled him awake as it signaled every shift change and every time the inmates were about to be herded to wherever they weren't standing at the moment.

Materville had written off the Vanderkote family many years before. Darwin's father, a teacher, had been accused of taking advantage of some of his students at the middle school. Darwin's mother had run off, confirming for most people that Darwin's father was guilty—although nothing had ever been proved. In such a small town the stain extended to Darwin and persisted even now, years after his father's death. Materville's residents barely nodded at Darwin when he stopped at the grocery or the drugstore for his supplies. He lived in his decomposing house, stubbornly healthy, and after thousands of desperately uneventful days that pounded home the certainty of his situation, he assumed he would pass from this life unnoticed. But he was about to learn that years of solitude do not earn a man immunity from more heartache.

* * *

The first six months of Margie Sussman's pregnancy passed without a hitch. She tried to simply enjoy the experience, but she couldn't stop dwelling on the stories in the pregnancy books about the many things that could go wrong. Barry smiled infuriatingly whenever she tried to read one of the alarming passages to him, a clear sign that he cared less about their baby than she did. Every time she learned something new about preeclampsia, sudden fetal distress, or the endless list of possible birth defects, she rubbed her belly gently and promised her baby that knowledge not only lit the darkness, it kept evil and disaster at bay.

In her seventh month something began to feel different, something she couldn't quite describe. When Barry pressed her to put it into words, she did so grudgingly, knowing he would laugh at her. "I don't feel as cheerful as I did before," she said. His soft chuckle proved how little he cared about her happiness, and she marveled at how much he had changed in just the first year of their marriage.

As the days ticked by, it seemed that her baby moved less and less until sometimes hours would pass with no kicking, squirming, or even an occasional hiccup. Every time she tried to talk to Barry about this, he humored her by placing his hand on her belly and telling her not to worry. One day, after the third time she approached him in a near panic, he snapped at her. "You're a young, healthy woman in the industrialized world who eats well, doesn't smoke or drink, and goes to the doctor regularly. Most of the planet's mothers would love to be in your position." So without saying anything about it to Barry, she made a doctor's appointment for the next day.

She waited in the exam room, cold and uncomfortable in her disposable gown, chewing her fingernails and staring at the diagrams on the wall depicting the stages of pregnancy and the way a baby should lie curled in its mother's womb. She had often wondered how they drew these so accurately. No X-ray or sonogram was this detailed. Had the first-ever cutaway drawing come from the autopsy of an unfortunate young mother and the unborn baby inside her? The mother in this particular drawing was smiling, with no apparent care in the world. Margie shook her head and forced herself to look away, at the crisp white paper pulled across the examination table where she'd be lying in a few minutes while Dr. Parham looked at parts of her no one else—including her—had ever seen.

The doctor knocked once and let himself in slowly. Margie stopped chewing her nails and sat on her hands, partly to warm them and partly to hide them from his judgment. Yes, she was a nervous person, but who wouldn't be, considering all that was going on? It didn't mean she was going to be one of those overly fussy moms who never let their kids do fun things or eat unusual foods. "Hello, Mrs. Sussman," he said as he smiled unconvincingly and looked at his clipboard. "You told the nurse you think the baby's been moving less than usual?"

"Does that mean anything?"

"It can. Why don't you lie down and I'll get ready to take a look?" While he scrubbed his hands, she struggled up onto the table and lay still, waiting for further instructions and hoping his hands were warmer than hers. "Let's see what we have here," he said as he smiled and touched her belly. His was a no-nonsense grip, unlike Barry's playful patting and rubbing, and it put her a tiny bit more at ease. He stood stock-still for at least two minutes as she listened to him breathing through his nose. He shifted his hands to another position and repeated the process. He placed a stethoscope on her belly and moved it around periodically but his face registered nothing. "Is your baby usually pretty active?" Dr. Parham asked.

"He has been—until recently. That's why I called and talked to the nurse."

"You did the right thing." His stern expression seemed to be saying the opposite, that she had failed her baby in some way.

"Is everything okay?"

"At this stage in a pregnancy a baby would typically move several times an hour. And I wasn't able to pick him up on my stethoscope, so I'm sending you to the imaging center next door for a special sonogram," he said, not exactly answering her question. Her heart seemed to skip a beat, and she thought at first that her baby had finally decided to stop fooling around and make his presence known. She held her breath for a second and waited, but felt only her own thudding heartbeat. Tears welled up and spilled out onto the examination table. "Try to stay calm," the doctor advised. Men always had useless advice about things they could never really understand. "Go ahead and get dressed. I'll call and let them know you'll be right there." She could kick herself for not making an appointment sooner. She should have trusted her instinct that something didn't seem quite right. But, as Barry always reminded her, none of her worrying ever came to anything. Until now, at least.

Darwin backed his pickup slowly out of his driveway, mindful of the lumbering trash trucks. He maneuvered around the giant pothole and drove slowly toward town. Although today was visiting day at the prison, only one car sat in the guest parking area. Even so, that was one more visitor than Darwin would receive today. Closer to town the pavement improved and he could take his eyes off the roadway, though there wasn't much to see. Shaw had been a proud town, with a lumber mill and a textile factory that kept people working. But when both businesses closed, nothing replaced them and the population dropped. The opening of the prison and the dump had been temporary economic boons, but people had begun to drift away again and he couldn't see how the town would ever again be the place to raise happy families and stick around.

He parked in front of the drugstore and medical arts building and wondered, not for the first time, what was artful about medicine. As he stepped onto the sidewalk, Margie, with tears streaming down her face, barreled into him and the two of them fell together onto the pavement. She sat awkwardly next to him on the rough concrete, with her shirt riding up on her rounded belly. "Oh my goodness," she said as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said. Margie had seen him in town many times and had heard rumors about how he was crazy and lived off food scavenged from the dump. This was the first time she'd been this close to him, and he looked pretty normal to her.

Evelyn, Dr. Parham's receptionist, pushed through the door. She strode out onto the sidewalk, stopped and stared at them lying on the pavement. Darwin rose slowly and helped Margie to her feet. She stood but began to wobble as soon as he released her. He thrust out his hands to catch her, inadvertently grasped her belly, and held on until they both steadied. Before he had a chance to let go, the baby kicked hard and Margie cried out. Darwin jerked his hands away as if he'd been burned. She smiled broadly as she clutched her midsection and held on tight, wishing that she could cradle her baby in her arms and start loving him right away. Relief and then happiness swept over her and she began to weep again, this time with a smile so broad her face actually hurt a little. "Is everything all right?" Darwin asked.

She couldn't help but laugh at his confused expression. "I was worried there was something wrong with my baby, but now he's kicking up a storm," she said. "I guess you have the magic touch."

Evelyn stared at Darwin, who flushed crimson and stepped back. "Margie, is everything all right?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm feeling much better, actually."

"You want me to walk with you to the imaging center?"

"I don't think I need it now, but I guess it's better to be safe than sorry. I'll head over there in a minute." Margie and Darwin stood silently until Evelyn walked away. "I hope to bump into you again soon," she said, and laughed at her own joke. When she smiled at him, he smiled back and she knew in her heart that he was a kind man and not the monster or kook that everyone said he was.

* * *

Two days later Darwin returned from town and pulled into his driveway. A middle-aged couple stood up from his front stoop and waited with their hands in their pockets while he got out of his truck. They didn't look like they were selling anything, except maybe God, so he braced for the speech. "Can I help you?" he asked.

A rail-thin woman wearing coveralls approached him and stared at his face as if something important were written on his cheeks. "We heard what you done for Margie," she said. Darwin had heard that name recently but couldn't recall where. "You saved her baby."

He smiled at the memory of the young woman, but didn't understand. "Saved? How?"

"Laying on of hands," the woman said.

Darwin laughed, but the woman continued to stare at him, expressionless. He knew these two were going to be religion nuts. "We ran into each other on the sidewalk and fell down," he said. "I helped her up. That's all."

"Doctor Parham's receptionist, Evelyn, says the baby was dead inside her until you touched her."

Darwin sighed. "I got no magical powers. If I did, would I live like this?" he said as he pointed at his house.

The woman beckoned to her husband, who trudged slowly over to them. "My husband has lung cancer, and the doctor says there ain't nothin' he can do. We walked all the way out here. Can't you at least take a look at him?" The woman grabbed her husband by the shoulders and placed him directly in front of Darwin until the two men were virtually nose-to-nose. The man looked dreadfully tired, with black rings under his eyes and skin that seemed almost yellow. Sweat rolled off his bald head, and he rocked slightly on his feet.

"You want to sit down, maybe have a glass of water?" Darwin asked.

The man nodded, but the woman screeched, "Touch him!"

Darwin stared at her. "Ma'am," he began, but she rushed up and grabbed his hands.

"Touch my husband's chest," she demanded. Her body shook—whether with anger, desperation, or both, he didn't know—and she frightened him. He believed she would do anything to get him to place his hands on her husband, so he reluctantly allowed her to press his palms against the man's chest. Darwin wondered whether she wanted him to say something, but her face quickly melted and she began to sob as she released him. She threw her arms around her husband. "Everything's going to be all right now, honey," she wailed as she hugged him tightly.

People began showing up at all hours of the day and night. Sometimes they waited patiently in the driveway and sometimes they pounded on the door, as if he were a criminal or withholding something that was rightfully theirs. At first he tried to turn them away, but they wouldn't listen. Parents with sick children were the most painful and the most insistent. After he touched his visitors, they usually calmed down and smiled and talked with him, which he liked very much. In fact, sometimes the atmosphere inside his house resembled a party, with families laughing and smiling together, freed from anxiety. All of it was more than he could have hoped for, after so many years of being alone.

* * *

Margie had gone to the baby store the day before to comfort herself by browsing again through the wondrous assortment of safety equipment, which included outlet covers, cabinet door locks, electronic monitors, and a bewildering assortment of car seats that seemed built to survive even if the car itself were vaporized. The clerk kept asking whether she needed help, so she bought some Onesies, a receiving blanket, and some special laundry detergent that Barry claimed was nothing but the regular soap, watered down. So to avoid any argument that might spoil her good mood, she waited until after he went to work. Then she did a special load with just the new baby stuff and sniffed each item happily before folding it and placing everything carefully into the new dresser in the nursery.

Barry's job as a prosecutor made him more than a little self-righteous, in her opinion, which she kept to herself most of the time. He always believed he was right, and he questioned her like a lawyer whenever they disagreed. He never conceded a point and seemed incapable of seeing things from her point of view. It wasn't that he saw everything in black or white, which offered the possibility of two opposing viewpoints on every question. No, to Barry every question had just one correct answer and everything was a solid, upstanding gray, like all his suits. A slate gray that made the walls close in on her like giant slabs of stone.

* * *

At the grocery store two customers smiled at Darwin. The first time it happened, he thought he'd imagined it, but by the time he got to the cash register, he could tell something had changed. The cashier looked him in the eye and counted his change into his hand rather than dropping it on the counter for him to pick up the way she usually did. "Do you need help getting your stuff to your car?" she asked.

He'd bought more food than usual so he'd have something to offer his guests. "No thanks. I can manage," he said.

"I'd like to thank you for helping my uncle," she said.

"Your uncle?"

"Yes, he's been in a bad way with the rheumatoid arthritis. He says his hands have hurt a lot less since you touched him."

Darwin tried to remember the man, but there had been so many already. "You're welcome," he said. "I'm glad I was able to help." As he arrived home, he scanned the yard for visitors and almost drove right past the fresh asphalt patch on the giant pothole in front of his house. He certainly appreciated the effort by the county road crew, but he'd only been gone two hours, not nearly enough time for them to excavate, compact the subsoil, and fill and patch the hole properly—and even that might not do the job. In his experience, some problems couldn't be solved no matter what you threw at them.

A week later the trash trucks succeeded in pounding the asphalt down into the hole, exposing the gravel that lay beneath. Darwin shook his head and shrugged. There was no satisfaction in being right about something like this. Better to be wrong and reap the benefit of good fortune. Instead, he went back to giving the hole a wide berth, and his visitors managed to maneuver around it to get to him.

One night he went to bed and turned out the light but was unable to fall asleep. Insomnia had plagued him most of his adult life, but when his efforts as a healer began, it had stopped, almost as if he'd cured himself of sleeplessness as a side effect of his work. Outside he heard what sounded like a fox, baying just like the voice of a woman in distress. A noise like hail hitting the front porch got him out of bed. He walked into the front room just as a fist-size piece of asphalt crashed through the window. Even though he wanted to see who had done this, he forced himself to stand still, to avoid walking on the broken glass in his bare feet. He had been through this before with drunken idiots or kids from the high school, but thought all that had faded into the past, now that the town had warmed up to him even a little.

A woman's shriek cut through the night air. He scurried back to his bedroom, stepped into his slippers, and trotted to the front window. He pulled the torn curtain to one side. In the front yard a woman in coveralls paced back and forth, pulling at her hair. She stopped and seemed to look straight at him, though he must have been impossible to see in the darkened room. "He's dead," she screamed. "He's dead and you're a fraud." She ran to

the pothole and gathered a fistful of gravel, which she flung at his house. "Stop playing God," she yelled. "He's dead and you were supposed to save him." She sat down hard on the grass and sobbed, her body convulsing as she held her hands over her face. He recognized her as the wife of the man with cancer, the first people who had come to him looking for help. He wanted to go outside and console her, but he was afraid of her anger and her strength. Instead, he stood and watched her for half an hour until she finally stood and walked away, down the road toward town.

* * *

Margie felt wonderful for a couple of weeks until the sense of foreboding crept up on her again. Immediately after the scare Barry had been sympathetic but soon adopted his normal paternal tone, the one that infuriated her. When she fainted in the grocery store, he went with her to the doctor, which seemed to her to be the least he could do. Dr. Parham ran a battery of tests and sent her for a scan again. This time, the baby did not spring back into action, and the doctor said there was nothing more to be done except to schedule the stillbirth. Margie didn't remember the car ride home and let Barry lead her to their bed to lie down. Dr. Parham had suggested a pill to help her sleep, but she didn't want to be numb or foggy. Barry puttered around in the basement and came by to look in on her about once an hour. He sat on the bed and touched her hair but said nothing and seemed to be avoiding touching her belly. At bedtime he lay next to her and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry," was all he said. After he fell asleep, she got up and sat in the nursery they had been preparing, painted yellow because they'd asked not to be told the baby's gender so they could be surprised.

As she sat there, she realized she was angry. Angry that something like this could happen to them, people who had never caused anyone any harm. And angry that everything was on track to end with no fanfare, no fight. Well, this wasn't right. There was at least one more thing they could do. She returned to their bedroom and switched on the light. "Barry, wake up," she said.

* * *

Darwin cowered at the back of his front room, afraid of the thumping on the door. A succession of people he had failed to heal and probably some of the usual troublemakers had made his life hell for more than a week. They churned up his front yard with their cars, knocked over his mailbox, flattened his truck tires, and spray-painted obscenities on his house. He had called the police several times, hoping they would station someone out front to discourage attacks. Instead, they sent an uninterested young officer to take a statement. But Darwin couldn't bring himself to identify anyone because most of these people deserved to be angry. He didn't expect people to forgive him, but his heart ached at the prospect of becoming a pariah again and living the rest of his days back at the margin of human interaction.

The thumping on the front door stopped, and a man looked in at him through one of the windows on the porch. A vandal wouldn't knock, Darwin thought. Maybe the police had finally sent someone to help him. He opened the door a few inches.

The man stared through the opening at Darwin. "I'm Barry Sussman, Margie's husband."

Darwin opened the door wider. "How's she doing?" Barry dropped his head and did not reply. "Come on in," Darwin said. He directed Barry to the one chair in the living room that didn't have a broken spring or a major divot where the foam padding had crumbled.

"Margie's not very well, I'm afraid." Barry swallowed hard several times and pinched the bridge of his nose as if trying to stop the flow of tears by force. "It looks like we're going to lose the baby."

The news felt to Darwin like a kick to the stomach. "I'm so sorry to hear that," he said. He wondered why Barry was there but didn't want to rush him. Barry ran his fingers through his hair and seemed to be trying to make up his mind about something. "Can I get you something?" Darwin asked. "Maybe a glass of water?"

"No, thanks. I have something to say, but it's hard. I feel like an asshole, but I don't know what else to do."

"It's okay," Darwin said. "I feel like an asshole pretty much every day."

"Margie wants you to come see her, to touch the baby again and see if that will help."

Darwin couldn't do that, especially with somebody as kind as Margie. "It's not real, you know. I touch people and it makes them happy for a while. But it doesn't do them any good in the end."

"I know you're not a healer," Barry said. "I don't believe in any of that crap. But Margie says I think she's silly and that I never listen to her. It's as if she's blaming all this trouble with the baby on me. If you come to see her, it'll show I do listen. We may not get to keep our baby, but maybe we can start again."

"I'll follow you in my truck," Darwin said. He pulled out onto the road behind Barry's car and steered around the pothole, which had already sunk nearly a foot in the middle. Maybe a patch is better than a gaping hole, he thought. Especially a hole so deep it goes straight through to Australia or whatever godforsaken place is on the opposite side of the Earth.