

Baby Love and Clean Light Burns

by Merrindahl Andrew

Maybe it would have been better never to have had him. She looked down at her hands, which were illuminated by a block of sunlight from the window. It cut them off strangely at the wrists.

Tony walked past her and placed a hand on her shoulder, briefly, on his way to the fridge.

‘What time’s the appointment, Suey?’

‘Four-thirty. I’m going to walk there.’

She had an image of the light beating off the lake, hurting her eyes, but she stood up to say goodbye. She put her hands on his shoulders to acknowledge the concern on his face. She smiled a weak, tense smile and silently apologised for it. By unspoken agreement, they wouldn’t talk about it this morning.

‘OK, love. I’ll see you later on.’

The light beat off the lake, so she kept her eyes to the right of the path, on the trees and the shadows. In solitude, her mind went instantly to the child, as a hungry person

abandons restraint when left alone to eat. She pictured his limbs in turn: leg, leg, arm, arm. They were honey gold, round but slim, the first lengths of capable bones emerging from baby fat.

She thought around his face, indirectly. His hair was fine and straight, the kind of hair that clings to warm breath when you bend over to kiss it. His face she left as a blurred sweetness. No merely visual image could be true.

Wind came off the lake, mixing with the light and stirring the trees. She stopped and turned into the wind to get the hair off her face, and drank some water, then moved off again, a bit faster. She saw herself passing him to Tony, his legs dangling beneath the four adult hands that gripped his ribs. He was laughing. Shards of laughter flew up to lodge in the ceiling, bright as light through a crystal.

In a tunnel of trees where the track veered away from the bright lake, she passed a fast-moving couple. They walked in single file to let her pass. The man (first) nodded tersely, in control. The woman flashed her a loose, exhausted smile, as she cheerfully shrugged along her heavy hips and arms. Sue thought the woman must have had kids, probably grown up now.

After the couple there was silence. A little while later she noticed that birds were venturing back onto the path, calling and clicking. She had read that some birds helped with the parenting of offspring that weren't their own. A lurid bright parrot looked up,

tipping its head to focus one of its flat, inscrutable eyes on her, grasping part of a pinecone in its claw and cracking at it with its strong, short beak.

When a couple loses a child, she thought, it can pull them apart. They can't bear to see their own pain reflected in the face of the other. She and Tony had held on to each other hard, fighting the urge to withdraw. But now she turned on herself. The path blurred behind her tears but she kept walking, fast, hoping she'd bang into something and hurt her shins.

How could she have thought it might have been better not to have him? Maybe she was not worthy, if she could think something like that. Maybe that's why they'd lost him.

Head down, she almost crashed into a woman pushing a huge pram with twin babies, pink and blue. Sue made a bitter sound halfway between a laugh and a sob. The woman was startled and sharply steered her precious load away.

Sue looked at her phone. She was nearly there but she only had fifteen minutes to calm down. She slowed her walk. She was among buildings now, and there were more people. Their presence rubbed some of the wild sadness off her. She smoothed her face. She realised she was fiddling with the hem of her top; she dropped her hands to her sides.

Trees were in blossom in the square, covering everything with white petals. Petals piled up in the gutters, mixing with litter and dirt. She looked at the petals crushed by people's

feet, how they went brown but weren't torn. Their strange smell was strong, at once sappy and musty, green and brown, spreading its sweet restlessness to the wind.

It was time now. She pushed open the door, noticing the handprints on the glass at the same time as the clean, dry, slightly chemical smell inside.

This was the first time she'd seen the counsellor, Ray. She had asked to see a man, not a woman, not someone who could have borne children. But when she met Ray she saw that he was a tall man in his forties who bent kindly around the middle, as if he was accustomed to lifting babies out of cots. Counsellors do not keep family pictures in their consulting rooms, but Sue could see, daughters she thought, looking at Ray.

'Depression is very common among childless women diagnosed as infertile,' he said.

Sue made a movement of pain.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'How long were you trying for?'

She looked out the window, which was filled with blossom and light, a little yellower now that it was later in the afternoon.

'You should honour it, what it is you're giving up, your hope of having a baby,' Ray said.

‘I’m not giving anything up. It was taken from me.’

Ray was quiet. She turned back to the blossom.

‘You might still have to give it up,’ he said softly.

She couldn’t tell Ray about the child, but she felt him prising him out of her hands, gently and knowingly. As if it was better never to have had him. She held on, secretly. She passed the child to Tony again. She saw Tony’s happy eyes crinkled all around. She saw the gestures of love they had known in their bones from the beginning, flowing out through their limbs, speaking to each other: ‘Yes, I know.’ ‘I knew.’ ‘You were right.’ ‘You were right.’

Ray was talking; she hadn’t heard.

‘...honour. Like that.’ His eyes held her carefully. She looked away angrily, but felt something warm in her throat, in her chest.

She stepped out into the square. The light was low now. Cold came up from the concrete, and only the tops of the blossom trees were sunlit. The sky was like a silver blue lid over the square. Orangey street lights were stuttering into life.

She called home.

‘Tony, I’m going to stay at Deb’s tonight.’

‘But Deb’s away; you’ll be by yourself...are you okay?’

‘I’m okay. I’ll be okay.’

‘Sue, when we got together I said if we could never have children I’d be happy to be with you. You know? I still feel that way.’

‘I know, Tony. But it’s hard to let go of...’

‘...of the dream,’ he said.

Deb’s flat was on the edge of the CBD, in a new building full of students. From outside she could smell noodle soup and hear laughter, but inside the flat it was quiet and clean. Deb had asked her to check in there and collect mail. Sue was sure she wouldn’t mind.

She opened the window and sat on the high bed, looking down into the street. Opposite the flat was an indoor swimming pool; after-work swimmers were arriving in suits. She could hear echoing voices splashing off the pool inside, under the dirty, glowing dome.

She felt tired, so tired. She had intended to eat, read Deb's trashy magazines, rest her mind in television. But now she just wanted to sleep. She unlaced her shoes and pushed them off, listening to them fall one after the other to the floor. Then she lay on her side, looking up at the sky, the first stars, until her eyes closed.

She woke cold and sat up. The window was still open. It was dark and a thick fog obscured almost everything except the bright white entrance of the pool. She pulled the blanket around her shoulders but didn't close the window.

She sat watching the pool entrance, lit and waiting like a stage or the opening of a spaceship. A figure was approaching from within. It was a tall adolescent boy wearing a shiny blue tracksuit. He was carrying something, probably a bundled-up towel. His face was serene and clear as ancient paintings of the virgin mother, and he moved with humble straightness, with a gesture of pausing before each step fell.

He moved into full view and seemed to look up at Sue, but she realised he was looking towards the sunrise. He looked down again into the bundle, with great care, and adjusted a fold of the blanket. He pressed it to his chest. Sue followed the line of his eyelashes down past his cheek, past the soft hairs above his lip, and saw his mouth move as he cradled his burden. Squinting, Sue tried to see into the bundle, but just at that moment the sun rose over the building and filled the foggy hollow with opaque light, and she could see nothing of the boy but a trace of blue among the gold.

She closed the window and put on her sneakers. It was better to have had him, their dream, but now he would have to become something else. She rearranged the bed, called Tony. He answered before the end of the first ring. Sue could hear how careful he was not to sound panicked.

‘Would you like me to pick you up, Suey?’