

No, she tells me. She has made her choice.

Her eyes falter, but her voice is steady, her words firm.

We call the social worker, then Children's Aid.

Her time comes. I am called to the delivery room. The baby emerges rapidly, forcefully, tearing at his mother's tender flesh. I barely have one glove on before the head is crowning, and soon the tiny body is tumbling out, so eager to enter the world, so unaware of all that awaits. The familiar heartbeat that has surrounded and sustained him all these many months is growing distant. Unlike his brother, he will not be returned and held close to it.

A beautiful boy, I long to say, but I must not. She has begged me not to.

She cries softly, her head turned aside.

Don't tell me what it is — don't show it to me — I won't be able to give it up — I have to do this. I have to.

The baby cries — tentatively at first, then in great lusty gulps. His mournful wails — *Hush, child* — echo through the unresponsive room, through heavy air thick with shame and loss. Both mother and child unappeased, unappeasable.

The baby is swaddled hastily, tenderly, then spirited out of the room to unknown waiting arms.

I silently sew up the visible ragged wound. It closes neatly, firmly. I can do nothing to mend the greater one.

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My niece cries, is held to my sister's breast for long draughts of comfort before being brought out to meet her family. She curled herself tightly into a ball, unperturbed, her fists waving

vaguely. Her eyes close contentedly, security enveloping her as snugly as her pink flannel blanket.

I am haunted by the birth-pains that unfolded in that other time with such rending difference. I can still see a heartbroken woman with long ash-blond hair and hear a baby's cries receding down an endless corridor. And I continue to wonder, what has been the life of the one sacrificed? Of the other, whose future was bought at

such a cost? And what of the one who chose?

What would it take to make such a choice?

I hold my niece close.

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Better off in a bubble

A resident on our team has just paged me. I'm in emerg, she says. I'm already doing an admission, but there's another one here. Do you want to do it?

Sure, I say. I'll be right down.

Great, she says. I don't know much about it, but I think it's a boy with SCID.

SCID? I think. Oh God. Is he in a bubble or something? It's a long, slow walk down to the emergency department. I flip through my pocket reference, trying to learn something about immunodeficiency.

I exhale with relief when I arrive and look over the emerg sheet. SCAN, it says, not SCID. Except, what the heck is SCAN? I ask someone.

Oh, the emerg doc says, that's Suspected Child Abuse or Neglect.

That's much worse, I think. Can I have the kid in the bubble back?

A rag. That's what his mother's boyfriend has been stuffing in his mouth. To keep him quiet. Charming, I think. He's got a hematoma the size of a strawberry crowding his tiny mouth. He's miserable.

Things happen fast. He's admitted. He's fed through a tube in his nose. He gets better. He's apprehended. He gets a foster parent.

I go to see him just before he's discharged. Usually he's glad to see me, but I interrupt his eating and he's cranky.

Don't let anybody push you around, I tell him. Push back. I show him how to make a fist. I show him how to punch me in the jaw. He's six months old. He's going out there, where everything is so much bigger than he is.

Maybe he'd be better off in a bubble, I think.

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