

MIGRATIONS

Someone had laid the baby among pine boughs and red toadstools. Bits of leaves clung to the blanket, and next to it was a bottle wrapped in a bandanna like a hobo's kerchief. As Maureen stared, not sure what to do, yellow maple leaves fell around the bundle. If she had lingered anywhere on the trail, the baby would have been completely covered by the time she got there. She never would have discovered it.

What Maureen had come looking for were the monarch butterflies. At this time each September, the monarchs passed through Maryland, and she hiked the Orange Trail around the lake in Oregon Ridge Park, trying to spot them in the pines and dying milkweed. With their black veins and gold wings, they could blend in with maple leaves and be almost impossible to spot. But sometimes, they burst through the branches, like doves or kerchiefs pulled from a magician's hat. She probably would have overlooked the baby wrapped in a yellow blanket if she hadn't been trying so hard to spot orange wings winking in sunlight, or any new living thing.

Her first thought was, someone camouflaged this baby. It blends in, just like a toad on an oak. The eyes, the eyes give it away.

One foot poked out from the blanket, mottled pink and white, and kicked once. As Maureen held her breath, the yellow blanket slowly rose and fell. She thought of the babes-in-the-wood tale, the ballad of pale bodies covered with strawberry leaves by robins. She also thought of her boys, how she had held her breath in the dark, waiting for the smallest sound from a bassinet. She had read them those rhymes of burning bridges and child abandonments in a sing-song voice. Music to camouflage.

Who would leave a child a few yards from a hiking trail? There were animals in the woods. Squirrels, snakes. Hawks overhead. Would there be bite marks, blood on the baby? At

the corner of her eye, an old memory wormed its way out. Her boys were far ahead and higher on the trail, disappearing around the turn of the mountain switchback, and her husband disappeared after them. Then rocks and crumbling cliff had tumbled down, and she had been unable to breathe until she heard her husband call out, "Wait up," and finally the boys' laughter far ahead. Everyone had gone on ahead. No one had waited up.

She left the trail and walked the few steps through the pine needles to the baby, slipped her camera from her shoulder, and sank to the ground. There was dirt on the baby, on the back of its hand, in the skinfolds of the knuckles and in the nails, as if it had beat the earth with its fists, and one heel was smudged brown-green, but there was no blood. The baby's face was clean, white. Its eyes were wide, wild with questions. Dry. Cried out, Maureen imagined. She touched her own face, her own wondering eyes. "Where is your mama, little one?" She brushed the leaves off the blanket and pinched burs from the felt, the spines of the seed husks pricking her skin as she pulled them away. One drew blood, and she sucked her finger. Had the baby been pricked, too? She lifted each small arm and leg away from the yellow blanket, looking for scratches. Cry, she thought, you should cry. Out loud, she said, "I would."

She tuned her ear to the wood sounds, listening for the crunch of footsteps or muttering, something besides bird calls and leaves brushing overhead. Someone who had changed her mind or, to give the benefit of a doubt, was returning after putting the baby down for only a minute. Less than a minute. Hadn't every mother done that at least once? How horrible it would be to return and find your baby gone. What an awful empathy she had. She listened, letting several minutes tick by. Nothing. No one was returning.

Maureen cupped the small head in both hands and turned it toward her. This was not a newborn with that pinched and creased look of the elderly many of them had. The baby had

plump cheeks and lips, and eyes beginning to be distinct, to show resemblance. The eyes were no longer the newborn's dull gray-blue, but a truer blue. Maureen guessed two months, maybe three. Like a chrysalis breaking open, it was beginning to show its possibilities, what it could become. The baby moved against her hands, and its lips made small sucking sounds, so she held a knuckle to its mouth. It sucked, then screwed its face into the beginning of wail, twisted away from her, and put a fist to its mouth.

Maureen picked up the bottle tied in the bandanna, opened it and sniffed, poked a finger in the milk, and tasted. Not sweet. Probably formula, not breast milk. She didn't think it had gone bad, so she picked the baby up and put the nipple in its mouth.

She settled in the pine needles, leaning against the stump next to the red toadstools, and fed the baby on her lap, lulled by the burbling and slow, steady stream of bubbles in the bottle. She snuggled the small body close to her belly, and a wind came through the trees above her, full of monarchs. Hundreds. All those yellow wings beating west. With the sucking baby in her arms, she cried, wiping her nose and eyes on her jacket shoulder. The baby stared at her crying face and at the monarchs overhead. Maureen blinked her eyes clear and craned her neck back as far as she could. "Where is all this coming from, baby? Is this wonderful, or is this sad?"

When the baby had stopped sucking and closed its eyes, she laid it back down in the needles. "Who are you, baby?" She loosened the blanket around the swaddled baby and unsnapped its pale green sleeper to peek under its diaper. A girl. She snapped her sleeper back up. In the sunlight coming through the trees, the baby girl's fine hair lit up like red anthers in a cup of mountain laurel. No wonder the monarchs had come, even if her eyes were blue as stone. "You'll be Laurel." She bent over and kissed her forehead.

Maureen stood, popped the lens cap off her camera, focused on Laurel, and clicked pictures from several angles. “Your first pictures, Laurel.” On the viewfinder, the baby looked like a fairy child, more magical than the baby on the ground. “Your first pictures as my baby, anyway.” Maureen powered the camera off and slung the camera strap over her shoulder. Then she stooped and picked her up, brushing away the leaves and bits of sticks. What kind of person leaves a babe in the woods? Not a mother who would take pictures of her baby and frame them, that’s for sure. Who could love you as much as I would? She cupped her head in one hand and her body in the other, snuggled her into her hoodie, pulled the zipper as far as it would go, and returned to the orange-blazed trail. “Which way, Laurel?” Maureen looked at the woods ahead and the woods behind. “Back to where we came from, or all the way to the end?” Monarchs roosted in a tree farther along the trail, then scattered south. Laurel shifted in her arms, toward them, then back into Maureen’s ribs. “All right, then. All the way to the end.”

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Maureen doesn’t have a baby seat in her car. Her children are grown and gone, to Mexico and California. So she improvises a baby bed with the blanket from her trunk, wedges the baby against the passenger seat with her purse, and scans the stations until she finds a classical music station with something slow. There. Piano to soothe Lauren as well as slow her own heart.

She stays in the slow lane on I-83, with one hand on the steering wheel and one hand lightly on Laurel’s belly. She drives this way for miles, staring straight ahead, afraid to take her eyes away from road, so slowly that other drivers tailgate and veer around her. They give her dirty looks and the finger. She catches this out of the corner of her eye. But she doesn’t care. She’s just happy that they pass by too quickly to see inside her car.

After she exits onto Charles Street, the uninterrupted motion ends. Now there are red lights, and Laurel fusses each time Maureen has to stop. This fussing has a different sound than the wailing she remembers from years ago. Almost doll-like, as if she had been wound up with a metal key hidden inside her sleeper, or like the doll with a pull-string Maureen had when she was little that said “I love you” from a screen on her tummy. The painted mouth never moved, but in Maureen’s head, she could make her say anything. She could leave the doll anywhere and find her again later.

Her young mother years return to her. Driving without destinations. Pushing a stroller in the dark. Sitting on her front steps, afraid to wake a sleeping baby. Now, she doesn’t know what she was so afraid of. What she was incapable of, or capable of doing, in her exhaustion? But they had all survived. The nocturne ends.

“I don’t like the sound of that British NPR announcer either, Laurel.” Miss Hoity Toity.” She takes her hand off Laurel only long enough to hit the power button, then rests her hand on the baby’s belly again, humming a few bars of the Chopin melody over and over.

Even off the highway, she takes it slow and easy, afraid that if she has to stop suddenly, both her purse and Laurel will spill onto the floor. Pedestrians. Not only do they walk out into traffic talking on cellphones, but they push strollers out ahead of them, too. “We have to keep an out for the crazy people, Laurel.” She pats the baby’s belly and makes shushing sounds. “Just because they have a death wish doesn’t mean they should endanger others. Isn’t that right?”

As she approaches the intersection at Coldspring, the light turns yellow. She tenses. “Should we chance it, Laurel?” As much as she would like to lull the baby to sleep with the car’s motion, as reluctant as she is to jostle her purse and baby, she can’t take the risk. She taps the brake, slowing down instead of driving on through. Normally, she’d speed up.

There is a car right behind her, almost on her bumper. That car was certainly not three or four car lengths behind when Maureen began tapping her brake. In the rearview mirror, Maureen can see a woman in sunglasses gesturing. She's shouting something. The woman lifts both hands and slams them down on her steering wheel. She waves one arm out her window, then changes lanes and pulls alongside Maureen, to her left. So they are side by side at the red light. Stuck. The other car's passenger window rolls down, and the woman makes roll-down-your-window gestures at Maureen, but Maureen pretends not to see.

The car is a large SUV, like a Navigator, taller than Maureen's Toyota, so the woman in sunglasses is able to look down into her interior. At the edge of her sight, Maureen sees her scooch over, straining against her seatbelt, and then peer down over her sunglasses. Maureen pulls the yellow blanket over Laurel's face and says shh, but Laurel thrashes and lets out a wail.

The woman in sunglasses has her mouth open, and Maureen expects her to cuss and say something about her driving, how if she can't drive she has no business on the road. Instead, the woman bends down closer, again gesturing for Maureen to open her window. But Maureen only leans hard against her window, smooshing her hair against the glass, as if her head could block the car's interior. Laurel thrashes against the blanket, beats the edge of it away from her face with a fist. Now she is crying.

"Oh my God, where is your car seat?" The woman is shouting at Maureen's closed window, shouting over the baby cries. "Do you have a baby on your passenger seat? Is that what I'm seeing? Oh my God, lady."

Maureen hits the radio's power button again. A full orchestra is playing now. Brass, woodwinds, percussion, all the strings. She turns it up, drowning out everything else. While she waits for the light to turn green, she pats Laurel's belly and takes deep breaths. Her vision is

black at the edges. When the light finally changes, she exhales. Monarchs fly out of the black edges, though this can't be true. Maureen knows she sees things, at least that her vision isn't one hundred percent. She presses down on the gas and goes through the intersection. But the woman who was in such a hurry two minutes ago stays behind, even though the cars behind her are hitting their horns.

Maureen taps the radio off. "That busybody is looking at our license plate, sweetie. What do they say in the movies? The jig's up?" Now that they are moving again, Laurel is quiet. When Maureen glances at her, she is staring back with her stone blue eyes. "Let's see if she can read our license plate now." What would the poor baby have to go back to? What kind of world leaves you without looking back?

Without signaling, she makes a hard right turn onto a narrow side street. "Read that, lady."

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When Maureen arrives at Giant, she buys a can of Similac, a bottle of spring water, and two more plastic bottles, as well as a package of Pampers and wipes. Cereal. Pears and peas in little jars. She goes to the checkout line with a basket in one hand and Laurel still tucked into her hoodie. The same checkout lady she usually gets is there. She's an obese woman, short and probably over three hundred pounds, who has to prop herself up on the metal frame of the conveyor belt. "Find everything you were looking for? Do you have your rewards card?" This may as well be a recording. Because she can't stand up straight, she never looks Maureen in the eye.

Maureen says "yes" and "yes" like she always does. Everything is the same as always, except this time, the checkout lady leans forward and pulls the zippered edge of Maureen's

hoodie aside. “Aw.” She looks at Laurel and then at Maureen. “We have carts with baby seats, you know. Next time, you should use one of those.” The checkout lady pulls the hoodie even farther ahead from the baby’s face, so that customers in other lines and a woman at the Coinstar machine, done with dumping in a plastic bag of change, could see, if they cared to look. “A cutie pie. Just look at that red hair.”

Maureen remembers the red baby seats in the line of carts next to the carts she usually pulls hers from. Years ago, there weren’t carts like that, or carts with plastic two-seater toy cars attached to them, blocking the aisles. You held your babies in your arms, or sat them up in the cart’s metal seat facing you when the babies were old enough to sit up without toppling over.

“Grandbaby, right?” The clerk pokes a fat finger at Laurel’s cheek, and Maureen snuggles her closer. She doesn’t answer the question.

“But I shouldn’t guess. I got a big mouth.” The clerk scans a box of Gerber oatmeal, then pauses before dropping it in the blue plastic bag with the Similac. “You know this is for older babies, right?”

Maureen reaches down into her purse for her rewards card. She thinks about the fat little paperback by Dr. Spock she had depended on. Rice cereal, barley, oatmeal, cow’s milk, honey. She can’t remember all those things anymore. “It won’t go bad.”

The woman at the Coinstar machine turns and looks at Laurel, then at her. “Why you got that baby in your jacket like that?” Her voice is too loud, loud enough to be heard over the clinking of all the coins being counted in the machine.

“The store is chilly.” If her husband were still alive, he’d tell that woman to mind her own business. Maureen wouldn’t have to say a word. Marty had gumption for both of them.

The Coinstar woman nodded at the oatmeal. “About four five months. Then you give your baby rice cereal first. Least that’s what my baby doctor said.”

A broken bit of leaf falls from inside Maureen’s jacket onto the conveyor belt. She picks it up and shoves it into her pocket. She shouts back, “I’ll remember that.” The coin clinking comes to a halt. Her “that” is much too loud.

The fat clerk hunkers over the conveyor belt and turns the box this way and that, looking for the expiration date, Maureen guesses. She pauses, then squints at the left side of the box. Murmurings and restless movements come from the line behind them. “You’re right.” She jams the cereal into the bag with the wipes.

Maureen is glad to know that the expiration date is no time soon.

Cars are parked close together in the shopping center parking lot, and people are everywhere, streaming from their cars into the stores, pushing their loaded carts back to their cars, slamming them into the return racks, dumping bags in trunks, snapping children into their booster seats and babies into car seats. Maureen pulls her passenger door open and unzips her hoodie to take Laurel out, put her on the seat, and bunch up the blanket around her. Then she notices the woman staring at her from the next car. She is holding her car door open an inch or two, waiting for Maureen to close hers so that she can get out.

“Trying to change a diaper.” Maureen pulls the wipes container from the bag and holds it in the air, remembering the earlier response to her lack of a car seat. The woman scowls and nudges her door open a little more. Maureen scoops Laurel from the seat and flattens herself against her door, so that there’s room for the other woman to pass.

“That can’t wait until you get home?” The woman twists pearls around her neck.

Maureen stands straight. “As a matter of fact, no, this cannot wait. People—” She trembles. The world goes black, then back to day. “Babies have needs. They need comfort. Some of us need to give them that.” She wants to twist those pearls herself. She needs to be what she was, but better. One more time.

The woman passes by on stiletto heels, at least four inches high. Impractical, useless shoes. She keeps looking back, like Maureen might bend back over to change her baby and put a ding in her precious door. Like a ding in a door matters.

Someone else is committing the tag number on Maureen’s Toyota to memory.

“Yes, let’s change you while we’re at it.” She unsnaps Laurel and kisses her fat belly. “Oh, you are soaked. Everything.” She strips off the sleeper and drops it on her car floor. “Stinky stinky.” She gently wipes Laurel, who smiles at this. “Your big brothers, now, they would have been squirming and kicking.” She kisses both naked feet. “Your big brothers. What on earth will we tell them?” She will have to tell them something. She could say she decided to become a foster mother, couldn’t she? But maybe the boys or their wives would want to know which agency or a social worker name, what kind of training she had to get or how the tax credit worked, things like that.

She could tell lies, real whoppers sometimes, but only up to a point. Then they would fall apart.

“We won’t tell anyone for a very long time. They live too far away now, don’t they? And do they come home to visit?” She pattycakes Laurel’s hands with each drawn-out word. “Why. No. They. Don’t.” She rips open the Pampers bag, holds a diaper up to see which side has the tab and which the Velcro, then slides it under Laurel’s bottom and tapes it closed. When she straightens her back, it cracks. “Little bit, you’ll break your mama’s back, you will. Ouch. Now

what will we do for clothes?" Maureen takes off her jacket and wraps it around Laurel, crisscrossing the sleeves around her and knotting them in the front. "There. All snug as a bug in a rug." Warm, but pretty silly looking. Maureen can't help laughing at the tiny baby with big flappy arms. She closes the car door and runs to the dumpster, because it's only for a minute and it feels so good to run, and she pitches the filthy sleeper, soaked diaper, and used wipes over the top of it. She thinks, there goes the evidence, and wipes her hands on her pants.

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Never on TV does Maureen hear a word about a missing baby. Even after two weeks there are no Amber alerts. No tearful parents in front of reporters' cameras and microphones. No photos. No flyers. No park rangers combing the woods or dredging the lake. If anyone remembered her tag number, no one cared enough to report it. She thinks, no harm done, was there?

She feeds Laurel, and Laurel smiles. She changes Laurel, and she laughs. She is happiest when she is moving, in a car or stroller, or spinning through the air on Maureen's chest. She is not complicated. For two weeks, Maureen lets herself think that this can go on.

She learns by phone that she will be a grandmother, a real one, but the long-distance kind. Maybe, her oldest son tells her, they can Skype. From her bedroom, the fussing sound she first heard in her car begins, that mechanical sound, like someone has wound a key in her back.

She thinks, all I know about that is, it's not real, you can't touch, they are jerky images not babies, the sound is never right. This new, real grandchild only makes her sad. She sinks into her armchair and presses the phone to her ear. The pitch of Laurel's fussing is higher now, with less breath between cries.

“And you can fly out here,” he tells her. “It’s not as expensive as you think. You can stay for a couple of weeks if you want. We can get a futon.”

Laurel’s cries are louder now, and Maureen feels them in her chest, pulling. The ticking of something about to blow. She presses the phone even more tightly to her ear and squeezes the armrest, breaking upholstery threads with a broken fingernail and pulling the padding loose.

She doesn’t want to fly anymore. She doesn’t want to sleep on a futon and skip from state to state, visiting, leaving pieces of herself along the way.

“We can come see you, too, when the baby is old enough to travel.”

She has Laurel right now, without conditions, without someone else telling her if the time is right for flight, or to belong to one person or to someone else. Now, Laurel wails, just as loud and real as her boys had. She is no doll. Maureen stands. “Sorry, but I have to hang up now.” Her voice rises to cover the wailing. “But I’ll call you back. I promise.” How many promises she makes.

There will be flight, one way or the other.

“Ma, is that a baby crying? Sure sounds like a baby, right there in the house.”

“Oh, that’s just a TV show.”

Lies. Fairytales.

“Well, turn it off.”

Like Skype. Now you see her. Now you don’t. An old babe buried under the strawberry leaves.

“I’ll have to call you later.”

“You can’t turn it off?”

“I can’t.” She drops the phone gently into its cradle. After a minute, it begins to ring, but she ignores it, lets it ring and ring on her way toward her bedroom.

Maureen picks up Laurel and jiggles her, saying shh. She doesn’t hum the horrible rhymes. Movement, winging her way around the little rooms of Maureen’s house, is enough to make her happy.

But Laurel has begun to see Maureen clearly now. She will grow to know things, to figure things out for herself, to understand the span of time between them and wonder. Already, she knows the sound of her voice, and she touches the parts of her face, memorizing her. Maureen thinks, it’s too late for anyone to memorize me now. No more beginnings and being left behind. No more cycles.

In the kitchen, she shakes powdered formula and water. Laurel bats at the bottle, swings her arms and kicks, not knowing how to get what she needs. Even more now than that time in the pine needles, when Maureen saw that the baby was losing her look of newness, of blank possibility, she sees a girl emerging. A girl with long red hair running on ahead and disappearing on a switchback. Laurel grows heavy in her arms. “Bye bye, baby.”

She can never return to the Orange Trail, and she will never see another migration, never see monarchs winging their way to where it’s warm enough. They can’t fly in the cold. They are paralyzed if they stay. They die. But some don’t make it there, anyway. There is always some harm done.

This is what will have to happen.

Maureen will bundle Laurel up in the new clothes she bought at the Pied Piper store and drive to the county park one last time. The Annual Honey Harvest Festival is scheduled for Saturday, and there will be lots of children and their parents there for beehive demonstrations,

candle dipping, apple cider pressing, and other fun things Laurel should enjoy when she's older. A naturalist will tell them about the monarch butterflies and how they live only for a short time, how the monarch they see is not same monarch that began the migration, but a great-great grandchild born from an egg left on the path. She will carry Laurel into the park's nature center in the car seat she bought, and she will put her down next to a colorful display, with things that children can touch. Next to the car seat will be a diaper bag with two full bottles of formula and an ice pack and other things that babies need. A photo in a frame will also be in the diaper bag. In the photo, there will be a baby almost camouflaged by her dirty yellow blanket in the early fall woods, but she will look magical.

Maureen will stay in the nature center for a while, watching, looking at the displays, making sure that Laurel is distracted, happy with the attention of children all around her, attracted to her butterfly blanket, the butterfly clips on her slippers, and the butterfly barrettes in her red hair. There will be parents there, kind ones, and someone to lock up later, someone to check that nothing was left behind and nothing is amiss. Almost imperceptibly, a woman in a hoodie, with pine needles in her pockets and bits of leaf still clinging to her, will move farther and farther away, from one display to another, until she's entirely gone.