

Still Born

On the day she was born, Rachel came out in several pieces with skin like a bruised cantaloupe. There was no pulse, but she was crying softly. The delivery room smelled like sulphur and beef stock.

The doctor had been ready to induce a typical stillbirth. His schooling and experience had not prepared him for such an extraordinary delivery, but he was a good physician with a deep regard for the value of life. He ordered his staff to sew the girl back together and take her pulse again.

There was still no heartbeat.

But there was no denying Rachel was an active baby. She pursed torn, grey baby lips and nibbled the doctor's latex-gloved finger with tiny, yellow teeth.

She's hungry, the doctor said. That's always a good sign.

Rachel's broken, undersized body was placed in the arms of her teenage mother, Bobbi. Bobbi also looked small and broken but alive with the tired, glowing eyes of a new mom. The nursing staff nervously watched Bobbi look into her child's face, deep blue and white like the ocean. A ball of gas rattled the infant's body, trying to escape, and her lips parted as if she were exhaling an actual breath. Bobbi was woozy from the drugs and the pain but felt full with life, protein. She saw a tiny star of light flash above her child's forehead.

My baby, Bobbi sobbed.

She's like an angel or something.

Rachel's body was still warm from being inside her when they placed it on Bobbi's chest. Her heart throbbed against the infant's weight. She looked into her child's flattened eyeballs and saw herself in the reflection. When Bobbi's eyelids grew too heavy to keep open, nurses took

Rachel away. She was delivered to a laboratory in a small clinic outside the city, where she was examined overnight by a group of expert pathologists who spoke mechanically into recording devices and used the word “Mystery” a lot.

Throughout the autopsy, Rachel wailed for her mother. She was placed on an evidence sheet and radiographic images were taken of her body. A sample was plucked from a patch of black and white hairs poking out around a deep wound that reached across her scalp from ear-to-ear. The doctors combed over her little body with their instruments, reporting imperfections and birthmarks, each pustule, wound, and abscess, into their voice recorders. Radiated gunk was pumped into Rachel’s intestine while the doctors crowded in front of the X-Ray screen and watched it pass through her system. Food – a milk formula and bits of mashed peas - came out only partially digested. Finally her back was arched over a body block and the stitches were temporarily removed from her chest so the doctors could poke around in her heart and lungs with metal sticks. It sounded like a plumber cleaning a drain. After an exhausting three nights of tests, they sewed her whole again.

In the end, a conclusion could not be reached in the argument about whether Rachel should receive a birth certificate, a death certificate, or both. She received no formal documentation at all.

Bobbi’s own mother died without leaving her daughter any memories other than a vague feeling of having once been loved and a small yellow diary. The diary had always been empty except for a holy card and a wrinkled photograph on printer paper of her mother’s hands cupping her own, as if teaching her how to pray.

It was the only photograph her mother left her. Bobbi treasured it. The holy card was lost during a move when she was a girl.

She always wanted the hands to be her mother's, but she was also wary. The picture wasn't printed on photo-paper. It was printed on plain white printer paper, wrinkled and torn at the edges. The hands in the picture had make-up on them and were manicured. The lighting looked professional. A part of herself she didn't like had always suspected the image was from an advertisement and not her mother at all. But why would she be left a photo copied from a magazine?

Her father hadn't left her anything. He'd just left.

When Bobbi was handed her child in the morning, the baby was stitched together like an old doll. Bobbi wanted more than anything to nurse her child but the doctors, concerned about Rachel's teeth, warned against it. They prescribed a high-vitamin formula, which Rachel refused. Bobbi fed her liverwurst instead. She massaged ointment into the infant's wounds, which never healed completely. She doted on the child. She spent her free time trying to craft baby clothes from yarn, which seemed to fall apart on Rachel's rotten flesh overnight. When Bobbi could not find a priest to baptize the baby, she performed the ceremony herself.

Conception in the Tombs

Eight and a half months before Rachel was born was the last time Bobbi visited the garden.

Every spring when the flowers came out, she started making up lies to visit the prayer garden after school. Her foster mom at the moment was a woman named Miss Grundlich, who disliked the place and didn't understand why Bobbi would want to spend so much time there alone.

Both prayers and gardens only distract fools from realizing how foolish they are, she said.

Bobbi lived with Miss Grundlich in a small single home in northeast Baltimore with a front porch and brown vinyl siding that reminded her of an earthworm's skin. The house was a few blocks away from a large Catholic cemetery next to a small church with a prayer garden that stunk of roses each spring. On breezy days, the odor overtook the graveyard and filled the rows of white crosses like syrup in a waffle. It made Bobbi's guts go soft, thinking: Nobody is alive to smell this.

She wondered if ghosts could smell flowers. Bobbi had never seen a dead body, although the only love she could ever imagine came from a woman who had been a corpse her whole life.

She had come to the prayer garden each spring since she moved from her last group home to Miss Grundlich's three years earlier. Bobbi had not been raised on religion, but she wanted it. She was drawn to the little plot of red roses and white lilies in the shadow of the cemetery.

The small hexagonal nook was empty day after day. The emptiness made her feel safe, like all the monsters in the world had been chained up and fed with slabs of bacon. It was just Bobbi and the flowers, waiting for God to join them.

Bobbi's pale blonde hair was cut into a bulb. It was lopsided and resembled an oversized military helmet sitting atop the fine skeletal features of her face. Miss Grundlich cut it herself and fancied it made Bobbi look like a flapper. Bobbie never had a haircut she was proud of. She never felt like she owned anything. Even her body and hair was on loan.

The garden became her place to rest, a place where she could own herself. The first spring after she discovered the place, she found a book called *The Canon of Saints* at the library. The book contained biographies, as well as beautiful images from holy cards. She began to learn the lives of the saints, study their faces in the cards. Their lives were marked by ordeals and miracles. She related to and admired the ordeals. She saw beauty and hope in the miracles. Saints

were men and women set aside from the world, people who had heard God's calling. The stories spoke to her, even though God had not. She wished to be called by someone. She prayed for her life to be part of a plan. She began to write prayers in the yellow diary, which she kept wrapped in plastic bags beneath a paving stone in the garden, next to a miniature statue of the Virgin, her tiny foot on the neck of a snake with an apple in its mouth.

Bobbi lived in single-sex group homes most of her life, so she had known very few boys. The ones in her class terrified her and she avoided them, even though several were secret admirers. They sometimes approached her in the corner of the asphalt playground during free periods. She would sit with her back against the chain-link fence and read about the saints from her book. The boys would approach her in packs and make noises, blow her kisses or reach out to touch her hair. It made her feel like she was trapped in the gorilla enclosure at the zoo.

She chewed her fingernails until they bled. They often swelled with green pus that smelled like her fingers were dying. She bit her cuticles with her front teeth and yanked them from their sockets. Skin peeled off around the edge of the nail and scabbed. When she touched anything at all, her fingers burned.

She almost only wore a purple sweatsuit in those days, which everyone made fun of.

Bobbi was afraid of boys, but she was more afraid of her foster mom. She was afraid because her foster mom was proof of the dissatisfaction she suspected in all living things.

Miss Grundlich was a sad woman who lived to spend her afternoons reenacting the villainous roles in musicals with the donkey-faced nephew she occasionally babysat. Otherwise she lived a plain, frugal existence that seemed like a penance to Bobbi. Bobbi admired her for it. Sometimes she encouraged Bobbi to apply for college scholarships, but for the most part she had given up on everything.

One night Miss Grundlich got half-drunk on rum punch near a moon-bounce that was set up for her nephew's birthday party and said, Life is over for you, Bobbi. It will always be like that. Life barely even exists for me.

Miss Grundlich's home was near Bobbi's high school, a mile or so past the far end of her campus. Bobbi hated both places, but that mile in between felt good. The prayer garden existed within that mile.

The lies she told Miss Grundlich usually involved boys.

Miss Grundlich went out of her way to meet boys for Bobbi when she was running errands. Some of them sounded too old for her. Maybe even illegal, although Bobbi wasn't exactly sure how the law worked. Bobbi believed she was being pawned off because she would be a legal adult soon. Miss Grundlich would no longer receive a monthly stipend for taking care of her. She needs somebody to take me off her hands, Bobbi thought, and she thinks only a man would be interested. So Bobbi made up lies about after school dates, in order to be alone in the garden.

The day it happened Bobbi woke up sleepy, almost still in a dream. The night before a bat had entered the house through her bedroom somehow while she was sleeping – or had she dreamt that too? – and Miss Grundlich had thrown a fit. She screeched at the terrified animal, who banged itself into the ceiling fan and sent dust falling like snow onto Bobbi's head. Miss Grundlich hid under a white macramé tablecloth, which made her look like a panicked ghost. She shouted directions at Bobbi from the floor of the dining room. Eventually the bat was trapped in the kitchen, where Bobbi let it out the back door. She could hear the bat cursing as it flew away. It took her an hour to get back to sleep and by that time, the sun was nearly up.

Bobbi slipped through the school day in tired silence. She never spoke a word and no one

ever asked her to. Her knees buckled twice on the way to the prayer garden. When she got there, she had to lie down, even before she checked on her diary. She curled up in a spot near the roses and fell asleep listening to the breeze squeak the gates of the cemetery.

She heard her name as if it were being called out through the walls of a tomb.

Bobbi rolled over on her belly and put her face in the grass. The blades felt sharp on her cheeks. The voice gurgled through the muck of her dream.

Wake up for me. I want to show you something.

His voice – it was a male voice – was low and phlegm-soaked, urgent like someone struggling to breathe. It pulled on her.

I want to teach you about life and death.

When she woke up, the garden was empty and the sun was tipping over the edge of the steeple, threatening to set.

Bobbi, the voice said. Hi.

A large boy or a small man was standing at the edge of the garden in a dark, hooded sweatshirt. She could barely make out his face, even though it wouldn't be dark for more than an hour. All she could see were yellow teeth in the shadow of his hood. A little moustache like a silver caterpillar.

Bobbi's heart wriggled when she heard her name. It was as if it had stepped from the Stranger's mouth, declaring itself to her. She thought of the diary and panicked. She went to reach for it but stopped. She had never written her name inside the book. The only mark her mother had made for her had been the outline of a small red heart with a dot inside. Even if he had found it, there was no way of knowing it belonged to her.

Are you looking for your prayer book?

It's not a prayer book, Bobbi was quick to answer, then caught herself. She had never been quick to answer anything in her life.

I don't have a book, she said. And it isn't prayers anyway. Or it wouldn't be.

She was embarrassed of her prayers.

The smell of roses in the garden was deeper than usual. It made her dizzy, nauseous. A wind blew over the fine blonde hairs on her cheek. Bobbi edged herself closer to the paver stone where she hid her diary. She could see a yellow corner peeking out, blurred by the plastic bag.

You don't need that, the Stranger said. I don't want to read it anyway. I don't need to read your thoughts on paper.

He sounded bored all of the sudden. She wasn't sure why, but for some reason that bothered her. He cracked his knuckles one-by-one and yawned. He is making a big show of it, she thought.

Books are dead trees, he said. I like things that are alive.

He sat down next to her and removed his hood, but even then she had trouble telling how old he was. He had silver hair and a face that was flat as a tombstone. His eyes twinkled like aluminum foil in a microwave. His skin was smooth and white. When he smiled at her, it cracked like old plaster. Bobbi thought of a clown trapped inside make-up.

Do you want to hear a joke? he said.

No. Do we know each other? She was trying to be defensive without being impolite. She realized her hands were shaking. She held them together, as if in prayer. Do you know me? she asked.

He appeared to be considering the idea.

I think so, he said.

Bobbi thought that was a weird answer. She squinted at him. For a second she thought she saw a face much like her own, a sort of male version of her face, but then it passed. He was blank and unfamiliar again. He lit a cigarette and offered her one.

I don't smoke, she said and it felt good. It was a line she had used before. Being offered a cigarette was something she knew she could handle.

There's a first and a last time for everything, he said. Last time I checked, teenagers did things like smoke.

Yeah. Well I'm not that good at being a teenager, I guess.

No. I don't guess you are.

His cigarette smelled funny. It was a thick chemical odor like the one released in Biology when her lab partner opened the small pink stomach of their fetal pig. It smelled like it had been dipped in the fluid the dead pigs were packaged in.

No worries, the Stranger told her.

That was how she thought of him: the Stranger.

You're a special girl and that's better than being a typical teenager any day or night. It's what I liked about you.

The Stranger's use of the past tense - Liked - gave her the creeps. Bobbi couldn't look at his face. She watched his hands instead. He began to pick lilies and take them apart with fingers that looked as if they were carved from bone. He was meticulous in his dismantling of the flowers. First he plucked the petals from the stem. Then he yanked each stamen with his thumb and forefinger and flicked the tiny, pollen-dusted anthers from their tops with his thumbnail. All that was left was the stem and the stigma, the female part of the flower, which he then ground into the dirt near his knee.

Bobbi watched the procedure with rapt attention, horrified but unable to look away. The Stranger noticed and gave her a flower that he had been about to dissect. She accepted, still too captivated to think, but was pulled from her trance by the way the flower looked in her hands. He had just picked it. It was still fresh. It wasn't dried out or wrinkled the way she thought of a dead flower. But still, there it was: Lifeless.

Bobbi let the flower fall. She stared at it in the patch of grass between them. She hoped that when she looked back up, the Stranger would be gone. When he wasn't, a tiny part of her was glad. He was sort of interesting, she thought, and he is interested in me. He had been nothing but friendly so far. Still, she hated herself for that tiny part.

You don't like your family, do you? the Stranger asked.

I don't have a family.

She stared down at her chest and waited for him to respond. The silence was making her even more uncomfortable.

Of course you have a family. He said it just when she needed it.

She felt comforted by his remark, but also irritated. Who was he to tell her about the family she did or didn't have?

I do not. I've never had one.

Right away she felt guilty again. In some ways, Miss Grundlich, as sad as she was, had tried to be her family. And her mother - even though she was dead, had always been dead - she was Bobbi's family too. Bobbi felt like she had betrayed them both. She was alone.

Would you like a family?

He moved closer. She wanted to slide away, but couldn't. It was like the grass was tugging on her skirt. It gripped the bottom of her thighs as though her tights were rubber. His

eyes were flickers in a well. She looked down at her chest.

Do you want a family? he asked her again.

She started to say maybe she did want a family but she corrected herself.

What I really want is sainthood, she said.

The Stranger laughed.

What do you want something like that for?

Bobbi had trouble answering. Her thoughts raced. Why did she want to be a saint? There were a million reasons - she was sure of it - but she couldn't think of any on the spot like that, which also made her feel guilty. Maybe she wasn't cut out to be a saint after all.

It's better than whatever I am now, she said. She was surprised to hear so much confidence in her own voice.

Good answer, he coughed. But what's that? What are you now?

Bobbi was exhausted by this line of questioning. She couldn't remember why she had ever started coming to the prayer garden in the first place. None of her prayers had been answered. She was as lonely as she had ever been. It's only a hiding place, she thought. For a loser girl with no God or family. She felt ridiculous. It killed her to feel that way in front of the Stranger.

He repeated himself. What are you? he asked.

I would do anything to blink my eyes and find myself somewhere else right now, Bobbi thought. I want to turn into clay and be stomped into the dirt.

Relax, the Stranger said. He stood up and held out his hands. They looked almost translucent. She felt like she had been staring at those hands her whole life. Her own palms were pink and slimed over with sweat and dirt from the garden. She tried to pray, but forgot how.

Let's go for a walk, the Stranger said. He was already leading her into the cemetery. She never went back for her diary.

Rachel's First Home

Miss Grundlich allowed Bobbi to bring Rachel home to live in a space above the garage.

Despite her condition, Miss Grundlich said.

Bobbi was grateful but nervous about the situation. She didn't want to be the burden she was certain she was. Moment to moment it was as if she were stepping across a glass coffee table, waiting for it to shatter beneath her.

She was also grateful, in a confused way, to the Experts who had examined Rachel after she was delivered. Upon their request, Bobbi went back for a visit. A deal was struck between them, in which Bobbi would be paid in return for participating in a long-term research study. The study would last an indefinite amount of time. The only requirement was that Rachel be available for semi-regular examinations. Bobbi tried not to imagine what went on during the examinations.

She had trouble telling the Experts apart. Only a week after leaving the hospital, she found herself outside a medical clinic in an otherwise vacant strip mall, ringing a buzzer. There was a camera over the entrance. An old woman in a black cardigan answered the door. She smiled and for a second Bobbi thought her jaw had become unhinged, like a snake. The woman explained that she had just put false teeth in to answer the door and they were still off-center. Bobbi apologized for being startled.

They were led through swinging doors in back of a tiny waiting room with a white foam-paneled ceiling, where the old woman had been watching television. They walked down a

white hallway. A clump of people waited for her at the end of the hall.

The Experts had sweat on their foreheads. Some of them were in lab coats. Others wore dark grey suits. They smelled of latex and disinfectant. Bobbi thought they looked educated. Like men guarding ancient secrets.

One of the Experts in the front seemed to have been nominated spokesman for the group.

We would like to continue our studies as long as...He was having trouble coming up with Rachel's name. Apparently, they had been calling her something else.

Rachel, Bobbi said.

As long as Rachel, he continued. Remains...How should I phrase this?

He glanced at his colleagues, searched for the perfect delicate word to explain the situation.

Animated, someone chimed in from the back, proud to help.

Fair enough, he said. As long as she remains animated.

Bobbi regretted the contract as she was signing it. She was desperate and terrified and for the first time in her life, it was not for herself. She had never taken care of anything, much less a daughter. She remembered the time she was given the responsibility of looking after the gerbil, Doug, who lived in her group home. She had been eleven-years-old. The hairs on her forearm tingled when she got to hold him. She could feel his tiny heartbeat and it almost made her cry. She was proud to hold him, to be given a chance. She could tell he liked her. She was sure of it. She could feel his tiny heart beating in her hands.

Doug was a nervous wad of fur that shook and burrowed his face in her skin. She tried to calm him down by petting him. It was working except he was so soft and nervous, she couldn't stop. After about an hour of furious petting, Bobbi accidentally pushed Doug's little body from

her hand. She watched the animal fall like a lump of Play-Doh onto the tile floor and break his neck. The other girls in the home said she did it on purpose. They called her a witch. Not long afterward, the social workers moved her again.

The blood pumping through her chest curdled when she imagined the prospect of being responsible for another human being. Bobbi had never held a real job before. It never occurred to her that she might one day have a kid. None of the saints she could think of had given birth. The only one she came up with was Mary, Mother of God. And Mary was a virgin.

The initial income from the study allowed her to rent the space above the garage, though Miss Grundlich specified that the undocumented lease would require renewal on a bi-weekly basis. Inside there was an industrial sink, a toilet, and a small mirror, but no shower. There was a hot plate but no stove. Bobbi still had an old single bed from the house, but Miss Grundlich insisted she take her double. Bobbi refused, but the old woman demanded it. She suspected Miss Grundlich still held onto fantasies of the child's father reappearing in her life. She cloaked Rachel's crib in mosquito netting to protect her from flies. She kept all their clothes in the same trunk she had been carrying around since she was a little girl. The trunk was covered in stickers, most of them peeled off fruit.

There was no other furniture in the garage apartment. Bobbi was afraid to buy any. Movement felt impending. She purchased items for the baby but everything else was baggage. I will never own anything again, she told herself. She began to keep a new diary, on paper napkins that she carefully folded into the leaves of a Bible, which she stored at the bottom of the purple book bag she used to carry to school. She could only fit a few lines on each napkin. On one napkin, she wrote: *Only live for her, because she can't live for herself.*

Although Rachel was an infant and would not remember, Bobbi could tell she already felt

something wrong with herself. Her little body grew and decayed simultaneously, like a plant that struggles on despite dead limbs. Her body digested itself. The muck that leaked from her cells loosened the skin until her tiny hands looked as if she wore over-sized gloves. Her fingers were black.

Bobbi had to adjust her daughter's position frequently. She held her upside down, stretched her out, anything to combat gravity. She lined the crib with trash bags to catch the yellow fluids of her daughter's decay. She massaged gas and partially digested lunchmeat from Rachel's distended tummy. Rachel groaned in appreciation. Rachel's tongue and genitals collected bacteria that caused bloat. Bobbi scrubbed them with a wet cloth. She injected saline to prevent the infant from drying.

She must see the world around her and be terrified, Bobbi thought, just like any other baby. She cried like any baby too. She cried because she was hungry. She cried for love. She cried because she wanted her mother's attention. She cried because something inside was already telling her that she belonged hidden beneath the earth.

Rachel lied in her crib beneath a mosquito net pulled tight and held in place with clothespins. Three flies crawled on its surface, trying to work a way inside. She reached up toward the flies as if to eat them. Bobbi brushed the creatures away and inhaled the thick, sickly-sweet odor that came from inside the crib.

Shoo, she whispered.