

The Tin Walls

I was never told why, not even if there was a true medical cause. I had been there, witnessed it, and everything. But I had been young and I was told never to bring it up. When I did, Mama would say not to ask anymore.

But I would say, "Don't you want another baby?" She would stare at me blankly with the kind of look that recognizes too much to know what to say. To remember what the question even was.

The baby brother was pulled from mama dead. He never sucked in the hospital air, clean with the smells of bleach that wipe away death. But you can always smell death, especially when it's clean and gone. Cleaning only makes death bigger. It reminds you of what will hold the baby brother longer than my parents ever will.

They couldn't have controlled how he'd come out, uncrying and still. Mother knew it was all an accident, a misunderstanding between his baby body and her older one. She would never forgive herself for it, the wanting of what she had been told not have. Mama was the first to move. She formed a ball, steady and solid. She crumpled and covered herself in sheets and blankets. She didn't cry, just pushed her weight hard against the labor bed.

My father had rushed from work to be there and he hadn't had time to change. I wondered what he would tell them when he got back, how he would phrase it, or if he would just keep walking past the questions. I wondered if he would allow them to pass like oncoming cars. Headlights of warning, just in case.

I pulled at the pant leg of his suit. "Can I hold the baby?"

He blinked. "No."

“Why not?”

“You just can’t.”

“I want to know what he feels like.”

“Savannah, I don’t know.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Still.”

They put me in the waiting room and I sat against the plastic chairs for hours. It was a time for paperwork, sitting, and staring. But I didn’t see any of that. What I saw was a man with a fork in his middle.

His wife had put it there during a fight. But he wasn’t angry at her, only at the receptionist for making him wait so long. Too long. They kept walking over and telling him to quiet down. They said it wasn’t a big deal. The fork would keep him from bleeding out anyways.

I gestured to the fork. “Why’d she put it there?”

“She got angry and I wasn’t listening to why she was angry,” he points to the fork. “Now I’m listening.” .

“Is she coming?”

“No, the police have to question her. As if I’m going to press charges. She’s my wife.”

“She put a fork in your belly.”

“More than I ever put in hers.” He looks to the wall. He looks back again. “Why are you here alone anyways?”

“My baby brother was born dead.”

“I’m sorry, ” he looks to me. “My wife and I could never have a baby.”

I tell him how they told mother not to. They told her to just be happy with me. With the one she was given. But wasn’t enough, she needed two. Everyone had two.

He looks down at his Krispy treat filled belly and the silver that sticks out like a door handle. He doesn’t say anything more, but sinks back into the chair until someone comes to remove the fork. To remove what his wife did, what her resentment made her do. I wonder if they had had a baby would the fork still be there. I’m not sure.

There’s been a tuna tin in the back of my kitchen cabinet for many years now. In it is the only picture of my dead baby brother. It’s of him on the changing table. He’s unchanged though. It wasn’t necessary.

But Daddy took the picture because he said everyone deserved a photograph. It shouldn’t matter whether they were living or dead. And so I took out the tuna and left my baby brother’s picture in the tin walls where he’s safe. Safer than he was in his old walls.

Sometimes I wonder what else was on the roll of film with the picture of my baby brother. If it was pictures from the vacation we took when Mama was pregnant. If it’s her laying on a beach, a belly round with promise. Or if it’s a picture of a child in green flippers hugging that promise tight. I wonder what the photo developer thought when he saw the one of my dead baby brother, small and bruised. I wonder if he even knew what it was.