

Steeping

I peeked out the corner of my beveled, stained-glass window. Laynie was resting her head on Georgia's shoulder as they waited on my porch. They stood a few steps below me, and if their eyes hadn't been averted, they'd have stared directly into mine. Georgia had braided her gray hair into a loose chignon, so she was not being encumbered by Laynie. Although Alaska's summer sun shone brightly behind them, Laynie was wearing a baggy gray hoodie. I noticed its front pouch had become partially detached, hanging like a flag in surrender without a breeze. I inhaled. She was too young to be defeated.

My husband, Anthony, joined me, and I saw his thick eyebrows lift and his chest expand before he opened our front door. The mother and daughter entered my home, and we all exchanged hugs. I detected a hint of alcohol mixed with the stench of cigarettes on Laynie and could tell from Anthony's pursed lips that he had smelled it too. Laynie crouched where eight-week-old Paul lay sleeping in his carrier and kissed him. Her bleached strawberry blonde hair fell in his face, causing Paul to wake up and start crying.

"He must be hungry," Georgia said.

Laynie scooped him up and settled into my wingback chair. She tugged her arm from her sleeve so she could nurse him. The sweatshirt angled across her now exposed torso, not even a bra covering sections of her translucent skin. I debated whether to mention that Paul had just finished a bottle of formula, but Laynie was stroking his cheek with the tips of her manicured fingers. He had not taken her nipple, which dangled there like an overripe raspberry. I eyed them, wishing I could stop staring, wanting to interrupt this moment.

A month earlier, in a grocery store, I had met Georgia when I stopped to admire the tiny baby in her arms. She told me that her daughter was being forced by the State to give Paul up for

adoption. I listened in silence as a complete stranger revealed such personal information to a casual passer-by. Then, looking directly at me, Georgia asked if I wanted Paul. I couldn't take a breath, but I did cry. Tears condensed on my face like a cold glass in a hot room. Maybe Georgia intuited that I couldn't conceive, sensing that without the trust of another woman I'd be forever childless. Paul let out a groan, and I found his air, sucking in a shaky breath. Georgia took my phone number. I left my basket in the produce section, tripping over myself as I hurried to my car, fumbling to find my phone to call Anthony, to beg him for the baby.

"I just found our son," I blurted out when he answered.

Anthony listened to me, not saying much. Still, he agreed to leave work early to meet the baby. I called Georgia and arranged when Laynie and she would come to our home with Paul to interview us. After that visit, Anthony said he wanted to adopt Paul, if Laynie chose us.

The next morning, my iPhone had vibrated. I paced as Georgia spoke. Laynie would let Anthony and me have her son if we agreed to an open adoption. We did, not foreseeing all that would entail.

I still wonder if Anthony regrets it.

Three days later, a judge had granted us temporary custody of Paul. The next few weeks evaporated behind me as we all established new routines, such as the five of us gathering regularly, acting like family.

"Would you like some tea?" Anthony asked as Paul finally latched on to Laynie.

She peered over her black cat-eye glasses with tape covering a hinge. "Sure."

Georgia nodded her head too, her braid bobbing along as well.

"I'll get it," I volunteered, already wanting a moment alone.

I put on a kettle and exhaled, trying to steady my breathing. I felt like a hostage who knows that every decision she makes determines her outcome. I was not interested in entertaining or impressing these people. But I wanted to survive, with Paul in my arms, cuddling and cooing. I knew that adoption requires salesmanship, so I was playing the game. I stood in my kitchen as my heart raced and my thoughts stalled. I began pulling teabags from the cabinet.

Even though Paul was living with us, we were still negotiating the adoption, which meant Laynie could take Paul back and pick different parents. I needed to placate Georgia, which included tolerating Laynie's breast-feeding Paul and welcoming his biological family into my home. Georgia had instigated the visits, almost daily, sometimes with relatives but always with Laynie. I think that Georgia dragged her daughter along so she could nurse Paul, but reports of Laynie's behavior made me doubt that Georgia's insistence had to do with Paul's wellbeing. So I figured that Georgia was just trying to remind me who Paul really belonged to. Laynie seemed indifferent nursing, joking it meant big boobs and no chance of a fourth pregnancy. But every time she did, in those first moments when Paul wouldn't accept her offering, she studied him, spellbound.

The kettle whistled, jolting me from my trance, and the acid in my stomach boiled. I hoped agreeing to Georgia's demands was not making anyone's situation more difficult.

As I came back to the living room with the tea supplies, Paul looked at me. At least that's what I remember, but every time I tell this part of the story, Anthony interrupts me.

"Babies that young don't make eye contact," he says.

I still think I'm right, though. Since the moment Paul and I met, we have operated as if we are two machines being directed by the same controller. But even if Anthony is right, here's

what I know for sure: Laynie stopped feeding Paul, passed him to Anthony, and reached for a teacup.

“We brought something for you,” she said. “Go get it, Mom.”

Georgia excused herself, and Laynie carelessly scooted the teabags around. My shoulders slumped when I realized she may have picked me using similar discretion. She plunked a bag into her steaming hot water. In that instant, I was the teabag: burning, waiting, infusing. Georgia returned, giving me a milk jug that had been cut off above the handle. Inside it was a Ziploc bag with frozen red liquid.

Laynie jerked the teabag’s string. “That’s my placenta.”

My jaw locked.

“Oh?” Anthony said, squeezing my knee. “Maybe we’ll plant a tree with it.”

I nodded twice.

“We actually thought it’d be useful if Paul gets sick,” Georgia said.

I closed my eyes and recalled hearing about harvesting stem cells from the cord blood, but I knew a placenta in an old carton wasn’t the same thing.

Laynie looked straight at me. “Or you can eat it.” She didn’t blink. “It’s supposed to be really healthy.”

I had to say something. Having a son depended on my performance. Anthony handed me Paul, and I understood his implication. The baby would be my son. I cradled him and stared into his face, searching his eyes to find the words to offer Laynie.

“Paul is lucky you think about his future,” I said.

I watched as Laynie took a sip of her tea, sighing with contentment.