

Baby Wants

by Scott David

“The baby wants s’mores.”

“Now? You want s’mores now? At eleven at night?”

“The baby,” Kelly repeats, touching her belly. “The baby wants s’mores.”

“The baby,” he says neutrally.

“The baby.”

Aidan meets her gaze.

I’m going to count to three, Kelly thinks. The baby’s childhood is going to be a long one if Aidan’s apparent prenatal reluctance to do his duty by the baby is any indicator of what’s to come. S’mores is not, after all, so much to ask. What about college tuition? What about unconditional love?

Aidan vaults out of bed. Kelly’s relieved. The baby doesn’t want a lot of eye rolling and sighing. The baby doesn’t want to hear that it’s pouring rain and Aidan has a big client breakfast meeting tomorrow. The baby wants prompt obedience and good cheer and a certain snap-to-it-tivity. If that’s a word. Many times, Kelly finds they haven’t even invented words for what the baby wants.

Aidan pulls on jeans and a t-shirt. He checks for his wallet, finds the boots he kicked off without putting them away properly. He has a dramatic jaw, a deep voice. He’s rumpled and handsome, but his features are slightly out of alignment, a little less than true, so the baby wants to inherit its mother’s features, especially if the baby is a girl.

“Anything else?” Aidan asks.

Kelly shakes her head.

“But take your phone,” she says. “You never know what else the baby might want.”

Aidan displays his phone like Vanna White to show her he has not forgotten. Kelly wonders whether Vanna-Aidan is being a smart ass. The baby does not want a smart ass for a father.

While Kelly waits for the baby’s s’mores, she concentrates on motherhood. She constructs a dozen lives in her mind, all of them good, all of them exemplary. She gives birth to Nobel Prize winners. She sires heads of state and brilliant writers and MacArthur grantees and even an OB-GYN

with a less chilly bedside manner than her own Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri. (It’s fine to dream of miracles.) Kelly will not for a second spoil the evening by allowing herself to indulge thoughts of the baby’s possible mediocrity. She will not let her baby prove to be a guy in a raincoat with no pants, or an insufferable boob like her former boss who insists on pronouncing foreign capitals as the locals would, or Ann Coulter. These lesser destinies are not her baby’s.

Aidan’s been gone less than ten minutes when Kelly suddenly realizes she can’t remember what on earth the baby wanted that caused Aidan to abandon her. Which is to say, Kelly remembers the object of the want (s’mores), but she no longer knows the want itself. She cannot conceive of ever having wanted s’mores. At any time in her life. Even as a little girl at the campfire. Indeed, s’mores hardly seem to be the type of thing a person could want. Saying, I want – the baby wants – s’mores would be like saying the baby wants cancer, the baby wants a terrorist attack, the baby wants World War III, the baby wants an advanced case of golfball-sized hemorrhoids and swollen feet (a subject with which Kelly has become infinitely familiar). The very thought of a single s’more makes Kelly gag.

What the baby really wants, she discovers, is fried wantons. Smothered in soy.

Kelly calls Aidan, but he doesn’t answer, which fills her with remorse. She has sent Aidan on this fruitless errand in bad weather for a repellant object that no one could possibly desire under any conceivable set of circumstances, and now she’s terrified that Aidan has been killed in a car crash, or during a stick-up at the convenience store. She’s terrified that she has set in motion events that she’s now powerless to change. She’s terrified she has deprived the baby of a father.

“Pick up the damn phone,” she yells into her phone. It goes to voice mail. She hears the voice of her baby’s father—now deceased, for all Kelly knows. It’s a calm, unpregnant voice, that has no sense of urgency or care, that is heedless of the baby’s needs, that is off on a frolic, celebrating his freedom and essential solitary primordial maleness, nothing more than a swinging dick in an uncomplicated world where the mortal wants and needs of his own child and the woman to whom he pledged “I do” are just vague and colorless distractions.

Kelly suddenly regrets ever having sex with Aidan. Regrets ever playing without a safety net. Regrets laughing when Aidan said, “I wants you wit’ ma baby, Kizzy,” which is apparently a quote from *Roots*, a TV series she has never seen since it aired when Kelly was two years old. Aidan, however, has seen it. Aidan hails from good Democratic liberal stock, civil rights



lawyers and safe schools advocates whose shelves of old videocassettes reflected a firm belief in the value of diversity, and Aidan enacts – she is told – a mean bar-table Kunta Kinte and intends (over Kelly’s dead body) to offer up baby to the heavens after its birth to bestow its name.

No, Kelly now wishes she had married Arnold Goldbaum, the dweeby runt with whom she experienced her first kiss, who offered to give her the contents of his Bar Mitzvah envelope full of cash from his relatives if she would just show him her “pussy.” Kelly now wishes she had shown Arnie her pussy. She wishes she had been a swinger. She wishes she had become a nun. Kelly imagines herself cloistered, serene, without the slightest clue as to what it was like to have a man enter her body, to have a baby occupy her belly like an invasive parasitological species causing these myriad untoward changes and thickenings and appetites and urges that were so entirely alien to her otherwise well-adjusted and rational self, the self that runs a \$15 million account in a public advertising agency and puts the fear of God into junior copywriters.

Then the baby kicks, and the cloister dissolves into the cramped bedroom where this very same baby was conceived thirty-four weeks ago during a drunken, tequila-fueled marathon session of unbridled lust following her cousin’s wedding reception from which it took Kelly’s chafed nipples three days to recover and of which neither she nor Aidan could specifically remember the details in the morning, though there had certainly been shrieking, spanking, heads knocking on headboard, nasty language, and repetition of the phrase “Drill, baby, drill” (it was during Palin’s run for office)—all things the baby doesn’t want, but Kelly wouldn’t mind experiencing again once her body returns to something approaching normal (if it ever does).

Aidan’s a good man in a lot of ways. He opens doors for women. He winces at harsh language in front

of girls. But he's also a brawler, a drinker, a talker. He has many friends. Too many. They drift into town and call him in the dead of night to go out for a beer, and Aidan always wants to go – feels compelled to go – but ever since the baby was conceived, he does not go, because – Kelly assumes – the baby doesn't want its father coming home at dawn hungover and piss-eyed.

It's been eons since she and Aidan had good sex. Centuries. Which makes Kelly suspect what's making it so difficult for Aidan to answer his goddamn phone is that Aidan is instead flirting with some trampy teenage checkout girl with a nose ring and pert tits and boyhips and not the slightest sign of constipation and back pain. She imagines the checkout girl seductively applying shiny chapstick while Aidan waits to pay, tilting back her head and opening her mouth, her shirt parting from the waist of her low-rise jeans and those glistening lips smacking together with a sound like wet leaves. She imagines the quick exchange of glances and a sloppy blowjob out of range of the security cameras in the walk-in refrigerator among the Schlitz cases and blocks of Cabot cheese.

Kelly hauls herself up from the bed. She paces back and forth. The baby is restless. The baby wants motion. The baby wants the teenage check-out girl dead.

Yes, it's true: the baby wants to hold a public execution. The baby wants to see pain and blood and jewelry liberated from pierced parts with extreme prejudice. This is a Biblical baby. This baby has no mercy for pert-titted teenage checkout girls. This baby has no time for Daddies who get off with a complete stranger. The baby's chief and overriding concern is that it be carried by a mother with two good legs for running, in case the wild wildebeest charges, so that Kelly is able to flee and take refuge in the nearest baobab tree and hurl spears she whittled from baobab tree branches.

Kelly crosses from the bedroom into the hall and into the tiny living room, which she roams like it's the ancient savanna. She feels fierce. She could leapfrog the sofa longways if it meant she could protect her baby. God help her husband and Pert-tits if they come home now. If they get within range, she'll skewer them with baobab spears. The baby would want it so.

Aidan calls her back.

"I was driving," he explains. "We don't talk and drive. It's dangerous. We wouldn't want our baby to talk and drive, when our baby is old enough."

His voice is laced with solemn, unconscionable righteousness. She wants to throttle him. The baby needs Kelly to be able to talk to him at a moment's notice. The baby needs its father. Doesn't he understand that? Is it such a complicated concept to grasp?

"The baby doesn't want s'mores any more," she says.

"No?"

"No, the baby wants fried wontons."

"Fried wontons. Check."

"And soy. Not the low sodium stuff. The baby also wants beer nuts. And blueberry kefir. And breathmints. And maybe some Mandarin fizzy water."

Kelly could go on and on. The baby wants smart outfits to set it apart from its peers. The baby wants window sills without lead paint. The baby wants the rain to stop. The baby wants to be a skilled musician. The baby's need is endless.

Above all, of course, the baby wants to get born now. Not three weeks from now when due, but now, when baby's Mommy doesn't think she can stand another single day of being pregnant. When Mommy is terminally done with exhaustion and heartburn and dizziness and the complete demolition of anything resembling healthy skin tone. And that doesn't even address Mommy's bladder control issues. Which reminds Kelly. She closes herself in the bathroom and carefully lowers herself to the seat.

"What did you say?" Aidan asks, when he knows damn well that Kelly didn't say anything, that what she did was emit an unladylike grunt – or was it a moan? – that a true gentleman would have gracefully ignored or, better yet, taken full responsibility for.

"Did you get all that?" she asks.

"Got it," he says cheerfully.

"Repeat it back to me."

He does so. Flawlessly.

Kelly's pleased she has married a man with a knack for memorization. The baby wants good genes. The baby wants a big brain. The baby wants to go to MIT. Kelly hangs up and prides herself that she has graciously omitted mention of the pert-titted check out girl. She'll forgive Aidan this time. The baby wants her to forgive.

Rising from the toilet, trying to wrestle her elastic pants back into place, Kelly is suddenly entranced by the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. Over the past nine months, in direct proportion to the baby's growth, the apartment has gotten smaller, and the number of mirrors has proliferated. There seem to be thousands of mirrors now, specializing in catching her at odd and obscene and completely unflattering poses. Normally she avoids them like the plague.

Today, however, Kelly turns left and right, stands taller, angles her

chin (“chins,” she has begun saying to Aidan). She pulls back her oddly thin and perennially greasy hair (the baby does not like the chemicals in shampoo), and flashes a movie star smile.

Improbably, she looks good. Really good. Even her butt looks good. She knows this because she removes her drawstring pants and draws off her shirt and stands in her socks and is wearing no bra. This moment doesn’t happen very often. This moment is a miracle. She feels titanic, oceanic, swollen, fluid. That’s just what the baby would want. No skin-and-bones, rags-and-goth-eyeshadow checkout bitch can hold a candle to her.

“Carrying it like a beachball,” her mother had said just last week. “Sign of a boy. Women carry girls on the hips.”

“We’ve agreed not to find out the sex. We’ve agreed to wait,” Kelly had replied.

“You’ve told me a dozen times already, Kelly. It makes it very difficult to shop, you know. It’s very thoughtless of you.”

Think blue, Kelly had wanted to say. She still wants to say it. She wants her mother to intuit the child’s sex, to understand the mystery. She wants her mother, thirty years after the fact, to turn out to be a good mother. She wants this 180-degree, wholesale transformation from Wicked Witch of the West to Glenda the Good Witch, not because it would help Kelly achieve some belated psychic wholeness or get her mother past the pearly gates when her mother’s time came due, but rather because the baby wants a grandmother—a real one, with gray hair and candies and patchwork quilts and a country house on Thanksgiving to which the baby will travel on a sleigh.

Of course, Kelly also wants to say think blue because – though she and Aidan had indeed agreed not to learn the sex of the baby – Kelly has cheated. She has gone back on her own to the OB-GYN, and sworn Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri to secrecy, and explained her need to know. Kelly desperately wanted to revert to her standard explanation for everything that had happened in the past nine months; she wanted to say, the baby wants to know its own sex.

But Kelly suspected Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri wouldn’t much appreciate this terminology. Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri would have thought Kelly was nuts. Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri would have called social services and taken the baby away from her and put it up for adoption, and the baby would live out the rest of its years in Peoria with an abusive family who couldn’t possibly give baby as much love as Kelly would.

So Kelly instead said, “Aidan and I have changed our mind.”

Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri looked smug. For a moment she hadn’t answered Kelly’s question. Worrying over some papers on Kelly’s chart, the good doctor had obviously begun to think—what with her Harvard degree, and her fashionable skinniness and her expensive eyeglasses and her stethoscope that she wore as proudly as a string of goddamn pearls, and her extravagantly long hyphenated name—that Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri would herself likely produce a better baby than the baby, and Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri would never deceive her husband or lie or cheat or steal or take the magazines from the waiting room, which Kelly has been doing for months now, despite the fact that she has a truckload of parenting magazines at home. (She has a sneaking suspicion that the ones at home aren’t the right magazines, that their advice is dated, all Skinner box and Doctor Spock, and the baby is a modern baby and needs the latest technological advances in babydom.)

And then, abruptly, Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri elected not to hold Kelly or her baby to the higher – nay, celestial – ethical standard by which Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri herself no doubt lived, and revealed the baby’s sex, which Kelly now carried around like a guilty secret.

The baby does not want this awkward, deceptive arrangement. Kelly has experienced regular urges to spill the beans to Aidan or her mom, but she senses it would make her look fickle and a little crazy and she is therefore gearing up to express ersatz wonder and surprise and awe when the baby is finally born and spanked and its sex proudly declared and it is held up to the night sky like *Roots* and given a boy’s name.

Kelly sits on the edge of the bed and flips through one of those magazines that has Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri’s address label on the front cover. Each page fills the baby with want. The baby wants new-mom notecards in five cheery colors and a Tummy Time play mat and a Halo sleepsack and a Boppy breastfeeding aide. The baby wants a stylish studio diaper bag and an ultrasound sonogram frame and matching set of sonogram photo magnets and a silver Mommy-to-be necklace with a dangling baby-shoe pendant.

The baby wants a mother as pretty as the model in the photograph: the flawless mother who doesn’t look as if she has earned her pregnancy, who has perfect skin, and no swelling, no cramping, and hardly any incontinence, bleeding gums, joint pain, or high blood pressure. A mother who will give birth to little flawless model children who will stroll out the delivery room like they were on the goddamn catwalk.

The baby also wants a father like the father in the photo: the loving look, the non-receding hair, the father who does not burp or fart or stay

late at work, the father with a higher paying job (or, better yet, independent wealth) who nevertheless never opens his mouth to express inane child-rearing philosophies he has developed with his buddies down at the bar.

The baby also wants – no, the baby must have – a bedroom the size of an airplane hanger like the one on the open page, a bedroom decorated by a professional celebrity nursery designer and furnished with a Posh-Tots armoire and a pewter crib and a genuine zebra-skin stain-resistant rug harvested from naturally deceased zebras that were humanely raised on PETA-endorsed zebra farms.

There's nothing wrong with the baby's many wants, Kelly reasons. There's nothing wrong with wanting a world fit for its occupation, a world without toxins or flat tires or immensely superior OB-GYNs. Not that the baby wants to be completely catered to, because the baby doesn't want to grow up to be a spoiled brat. But fertile soil for growth is ok. A shield from some of the worst hardships – hunger, cold, abuse, mullets, Sarah Palin, cleft pallets, childhood diabetes, urban blight, bad art, conniving coworkers, Arnie Goldbaum's bribery – isn't too much to ask.

And the baby doesn't always get what the baby wants. For example, the baby might want the six thousand dollar stroller advertised on page fifty-seven, or the twelve hundred infant foreign language learning software on page sixty-eight, but there's no way in hell the baby's going to get either, Kelly decides. The baby's no materialist. The baby will damn well use its imagination. The baby will make do with a block of rough wood and a teddy bear made of rags. Kelly thinks: Babies can't be choosers.

The rain becomes heavier. The wind blows. The baby kicks. A car passes. An hour passes. Kelly hugs herself. She shivers. She checks her watch. She's lucky. She knows that. Other people lose babies (or husbands). Other people's babies are born with defects. Kelly has a strong baby. Her baby wants barbecued ribs. Her baby wants access to orthodontics. Her baby wants and wants, and these wants are a good sign: this is a baby with ambition. This is a baby that will go far. This is the best specimen of babyhood conceived in this part of the country in a decade or more. That's what Dr. Putnam-Ramabathri will say when the baby is born.

In fact, the more she considers the baby's greatness, the more Kelly suspects she is not good enough for this world-class baby. She will damage it. She will stunt its growth and limit its potential. One day she won't know what the baby wants. The baby will kick and cry and toss and turn, and Kelly

will not be able to figure it out. This is her recurring nightmare. She has a desperate fear of not knowing what to do. A fear that she will be a bad mother. A fear that motherhood won't come naturally to her the way it comes to other women. She feels guilty for feeling guilty, afraid that she feels afraid. The baby will be made nervous by her nervousness and it will grow to be an irritable, selfish, frail child, full of tics and allergies and crankiness. The baby will be entirely unlovable.

Instantly, the baby wants an apology from Kelly. The baby wants an apology for these uncharitable, miserable, unnatural, unmotherly thoughts.

"Mommy didn't mean to," Kelly coos at her belly. She senses she is going to be saying this more than once over the next eighteen years. The prospect fills her with dread. Kelly doesn't want to be the mother her mother was. She wants – the baby wants – her to be a better mother than that, the first best greatest mother there ever was, besting the Virgin Mary, surpassing the queen mother, exceeding Marion Cunningham and Clair Huxtable, lauded above Mother Nature, and Gaia, and even Dumbo's mom, who never gave a hoot about his big ears.

The baby wants what Kelly's mother was never able to give her: affection. Also, humor. And security. And a dad who did not abandon them. A prom dress that was not secondhand. A private school education. A sense of decorum. (The baby also wants the brothers and sisters Kelly never had, but Kelly cannot bring herself to contemplate that prospect just now.)

The baby wants pickles with its fried wontons. The baby wants dark chocolate. The baby wants genius. The baby wants to live in Boca Raton. The baby wants to care more about truth than it does about itself. The baby wants to be a noble savage. The baby wants to be a real man.

Somehow the litany of what the baby wants calms Kelly. It's an incantation. A preparation. Make the universe ready. Prep the mold. Brighten the skies. The baby wants a keen sense of right and wrong, a solid moral compass, a bit of luck, and a handful of good friends. The baby wants an intact family. The baby wants love that is intentional, not haphazard, love that is an act of will. (And yet Kelly's love for this baby is unspeakable, and not willed, perhaps not even wanted. She is terrified of it.)

The baby wants most of all a shot of tequila. Unpasteurized cheese.

She feels guilty for feeling guilty, afraid that she feels afraid. The baby will be made nervous by her nervousness and it will grow to be an irritable, selfish, frail child, full of tics and allergies and crankiness. The baby will be entirely unlovable.

Sushi. Everything that is forbidden. Sometimes baby wants two opposite things at once.

Aidan does not die. This is the good news. He has also not been seduced. Or if seduced, it's been done quickly, which is much the same thing. Pert-tits put no effort into it.

The bad news is, he's full of good cheer. Even bonhomie. He is telling Kelly about the wild winds and the full moon and the Chinese food place open past midnight on Congress Street and the fourth-and-goal on Thursday Night Football that was so damn exciting he had to pull over at the side of the road until it was over.

Aidan stops short when he sees her clothes in a pile on the bedroom floor. He sees the robe she has wrapped around herself. He puts two and two together. Kelly sees the math take place in his brain. She can smell it, for God's sake. On account of the baby, she has developed a keen sense of smell. Better than a dog. And the smell of math is acrid, irritating. Especially when it adds up to an accusation.

"What have you been doing?" he asks. "Did you check the windows, lower the blinds?"

Kelly ignores him. She finds a warm box of wontons, a Costco-sized bottle of soy sauce in the bags Aidan has brought home.

"Perverts everywhere," he says. "Did you know there's a whole section of the internet devoted to pregnant pornography?"

He blushes.

"Not that I was looking," he says. "Not that I'm into it."

Kelly stops rooting around in the bags. She squares off and faces him and lets her robe fall open.

"Why? Don't you think I'm sexy?"

"Of course I do."

"You think I'm hideous," she says. "You think I'm never going to get thin again. I disgust you."

"No," he insists.

"I'll put a bag over my head. I'll get a burka. I don't want you to have to set eyes on me. I'm only the mother of your child."

"No," he says. "I mean yes. You are. You are the mother of my child. You're the most beautiful girl in the world."

"The baby wants a mother who's pretty."

"You're pretty," he says. He slips behind her and put his huge warm



hands up under her robe, on her hips, on her belly. He is actively willing himself to be the man he wants to be. Manhandling his own boyish desires. Trying so hard that Kelly smells sweat, a mixture of hot and cold, effort and fear. It's maybe a little disturbing that he has to try so hard.

"Because the baby's no fool," she says belligerently. "The baby understands evolution. The baby wants a mother who is pretty. Pretty is how you retain a mate. Pretty is how you get a new husband when the old one runs off with teenage checkout girls."

"Checkout girls?"

She twists away from him. "Don't think I don't know."

Aidan is confused. Aidan is hesitant. Aidan's mouth hangs open. Kelly's not sure the baby likes this. His fear is somewhat gratifying, she supposes. The baby wants a fierce mother with her baobab spears. But the baby also wants, well, more backbone than baobab when it comes down to it. The baby doesn't want a spineless father who's incapable of delivering discipline. Nor does the baby want a domineering mother so tired of getting her way that she aches for someone to tell her what to do, and runs off and joins a harem, and subjects herself to a strong-willed man who regularly sentences

her to lashes for talking back to him. The baby does not want this to transpire; the baby would not thrive.

Kelly retreats to the bed. Aidan trails after her and offers her a fried wanton. She rolls away from him, and shows him her back

“The baby doesn’t want a fried wanton,” she says.

“But I just went out ...” he starts to say, but he knows enough not to argue with the baby, so he adds in a softer voice, “I brought you Ben & Jerry’s.”

Her nose twitches. The baby kicks.

“Remember,” he says, “you’re eating for two.”

She rolls over and studies him. He holds up a spoon. He sees he has done something right, and this pleases him. Like he’s a genius. Like it was rocket science, she thinks. But Kelly doesn’t feel the least bit bitter. She, too, is pleased. And surprised. And, well, kind of grateful.

“Baby wants a napkin,” she says.

Kelly eats and they watch HGTV – the nursery edition – and every once in a while Kelly feeds Aidan, and his lips become a mess of chocolate and look very kissable. Kelly sets aside the Ben & Jerry’s and strokes her belly, and discovers she is horny.

“Baby wants sex,” she says.

“Don’t say that.”

“Baby wants Mommy to have sex,” she corrects. She fumbles at Aidan’s belt buckle. Aidan is abashed. He pulls away her hands. He doesn’t like the words baby and sex in the same sentence.

“How do you think baby was made?” she says, exasperated, laughing. What a prude, she thinks. But she’s pleased Aidan wouldn’t ever let his baby (if it were a girl) grow up to be a slut. If the baby were a girl, Aidan would intimidate all the horny high school boys – not yet born – who try to take the imaginary baby Kelly is not actually having out on dates. Aidan would drive off all the Arnie Goldbaums. Aidan is nothing if not responsible. His mother raised him right. He’s not capable of irresponsibility. This is what it means to be Aidan. If he were not responsible, he would cease to exist.

She feels waves – no, oceans – of gratitude toward him. She feels for the first time since they saw the sonogram that they are carrying this baby together, that Aidan is helping share the burden as best as he is able, that he would gladly have carried the whole thing for her, if he could, if she would let him.

The baby wants a man like this, she thinks. A provider.

“Baby loves her Daddy,” she says.

Aidan’s eyes fill with tears. He strokes her face. Now, gradually, he’s in the mood.

Kelly thinks, Baby would never have believed Daddy needed so much foreplay.

They kiss, and Aidan is gentle and hard at the same time, and just a little hesitant when his hands stray beneath her collarbones.

Kelly says, “You can touch my tits, you know. They won’t break.”

“But aren’t they for the baby?” he croaks.

Kelly feels a perverse sort of ... curiosity. Yes, that’s what it is. Scientific, dispassionate curiosity. She looks at him and then at her tits. He is staring at them. He is maybe embarrassed by what he wants, and Kelly feels roomy and expansive and generous, infinitely capable, like a Jewish grandmother. She says quietly, “The baby doesn’t want these. Not right now. For now, these are for you.”

Aidan looks grateful that she hasn’t embarrassed or ridiculed him. Obviously his greatest fear – and something in his Irish Catholic upbringing – tells him he should be embarrassed and ridiculed, that he deserves it, that such treatment would be good for a dirtybird like him. Aidan’s not often held back by religion. At worst, he’ll pay the piper later, maybe sneak off to church without telling Kelly and spill the sins to the very priest that will end up baptizing their baby because Aidan’s mother insists that the baby be churched. But for now, Aidan gets after Kelly’s breasts, and she enjoys the attention and his gratitude, his worship. Aidan is delighted. What Aidan wants is not complicated at all.

In the morning, Kelly rises early. She hardly sleeps now. She is beyond exhaustion, and the baby wants a ghost of a sip of caffeine, not enough to do damage.

Aidan pours a quarter cup.

“Maybe a little more,” Kelly says. She fills the cup to the brim. He starts to protest, but Kelly shoos him out the door.

“Bring home the bacon,” she says. “Impress the clients. The baby wants a college fund.”

This is only Kelly’s second day not working at the agency. She went back and forth on the question: take maternity leave now or only after the baby is born? She hates to have to go back to work even a day earlier than necessary and risk missing the baby’s first step and or it calling the day care workers “Momma.” She fears leaving the baby with unqualified sitters and

unmet needs, so that the baby develops a Gibraltar-size chip on its shoulder that will reveal itself when the baby is fifteen and has a serious heroin habit and a bunch of good friends dressed in black who sacrifice cats.

What does the baby want? She had asked over and over. To work until labor or not to work? She'd asked herself and she'd asked the baby and she'd asked her mother and she'd even asked Aidan, who was smart enough not to provide an answer. Aidan had nodded and listened and hadn't dared to venture an opinion on what the baby might want, because Aidan was not the one, after all, who was lugging around this soul-sucking mass of humanity and thirty pounds of excess blubber for nine months, so what possible right could he have to offer the slightest surmise on what the baby wants? Once he has gotten pregnant and barfed and leaked and bulged and swollen, then, maybe, Aidan will have the right to do something other than zip his lip.

The caffeine, Kelly notices, makes her irritable.

She turns to the morning paper, which features an article about a mother dying of cancer. She is creating videos for her four- and six-year-old children to remember her by. Kelly wants to shut the page, to blot out the image, but she can't help reading to the end. She can't help finding a link to the videos on the paper's website. She can't help hoping the mother magically survived.

The mother tells the camera she loves it when her little boy runs into the room and makes his mommy laugh and she sings *Que Sera Sera* and she calls the camera her children's names. Someone has made-up the mother's wan and cratered face. Someone has fitted a wig over her skull. The last line of the article notes the mother's passing.

Kelly tears the entire newspaper to shreds and cancels her subscription. She vows never to be this mother. Never to abandon her child. She

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vows to be long-lived, to watch her diet and exercise, and under no circumstance whatsoever to predecease the baby.

The ringing door-buzzer interrupts her vows, and she is immediately annoyed that Aidan has gone to work and abandoned her. The baby does not want to walk down four flights of stairs to let in the UPS man. In fact, the baby

would prefer not to have climbed the four flights in the first place. The baby wants instead an elevator building at a better address, but what the baby

gets is this godforsaken top-floor unit in the once-uber-hip, up-and-coming "Seaport District," which was supposed to have been the next new target for bohemian gentrification that didn't quite make it before the stock market crash and now sits in developmental limbo. "We barely have mail service and telephones," Kelly jokes to her friends, but it's true: you have to get in a car to get so much as a pack of Marlboro Lights, which she has of course quit smoking, at least as far as anyone else that matters is concerned. Maybe a puff on the roof when Aidan's working late. Which Kelly will no longer do, since she has made a vow not to predecease the baby.

The buzzer rings again.

"Christsakes, I'm coming!" she yells. She waddles to the speaker for the intercom and yells again. "Don't leave, whatever you do, don't leave."

The UPS man is waiting at door. He is a real Marlboro man: gruff and silver-haired, with crows' feet and kind eyes that widen when he sees her.

"I would have come up," he says. "You should have just let me in, I would have come up to you. Are you alright?"

"Where do I sign?" she asks.

"Want me to carry the package up?"

"I'm pregnant, not disabled," she snaps.

"Sorry."

They stare at one another. The UPS man seems a little affronted by her brusqueness. Kelly thinks maybe she should not have been so gruff. She has been getting gruffer as she feels more vulnerable. She has been getting gruffer since she drank the whole cup of coffee. She says quietly, "I'd be grateful if you'd carry it up."

He does.

She follows.

He is kind enough not to outpace her.

She offers him a tip.

He pretends he does not see.

"Your husband," he says, "is a lucky man."

And then the UPS man is gone. She hears his heavy steps down the apartment stairs, the front door slam, the sound of his truck moving into gear; a rough, masculine sound. She stands in the doorway and wonders what it would be like to kiss him. She wonders whether the baby would want her to flirt with the UPS man. And yet the next time the buzzer rings, near lunchtime, she has false hope it's him again.

It's not. It's the polar opposite of the UPS man.



It's Kelly's mother. Who says she has stopped by to "check in," knowing it is Kelly's first day off work, making sure Kelly isn't going out of her mind with boredom.

"Not yet," Kelly says. "Not yet. But I've only just started talking to you, so there's still plenty

of time. And by the way, it's my second day of no-work."

Her mother ignores her tone. She mentions that she has a date tonight.

"Can I crash in your spare bedroom so I don't have to drive back out to the suburbs?" her mother asks.

"You're a grandmother," Kelly scolds. "The baby doesn't want a grandmother who 'crashes'."

"I'm not a grandmother yet," her mother says brightly.

"You'd dare deny my child?"

Her mother looks at her from a great distance, a distance at which the baby prefers not to be looked at.

"Was I as neurotic as you when I was pregnant?" she asks.

It's not a question that is meant to be answered. It is not a question worthy of answer. Kelly has a thousand answers. You never cared as much as I do, she wants to say.

But these are hard words, and Kelly bites her tongue. For all her mother's faults, it's still clear the baby wants a grandmother. Even this one, who has no gray hair, or sleigh, or country house.

"You can crash here," Kelly says.

Her mother kisses her and hauls in a large suitcase from her car.

"You bring your steamer trunk and hat boxes too?" Kelly asks.

"Thank you," her mother says, dashing out. "And don't wait up."

The baby wants a world where things aren't upside-down, but the baby's evidently not going to get it.

Later that night, Aidan sleeps, and Kelly waits up. She's thinking

she wants to do something extraordinary for this child. Something dramatic. The baby wants to be saved from a burning building. The baby wants to have a Volkswagen lifted off its left leg. The baby wants a parent who will love the baby enough to say no. The baby wants a hero, a mother who invented fire, a father who will always be there.

Kelly's in a sudden hurry to have this baby, in a hurry for it to get born, to be held, to be walked to the first day of school, to be accompanied down the aisle. She knows she should not feel so urgent. She knows she should have patience. She knows she should slow her breathing, count to ten, temper her own desire. Kelly sits forward, legs spread wide, head slumped over her own tummy, a hand on each side of her belly, just holding and listening, and for a moment there's no sense of time passing, no sense of the slightest want or need.