

“The Coming-Out of Baby”

(from *Symphony of Stories*)

by Norman Weeks

The new mother sat back against the head of the bed. Cradling her baby in her arms, she looked down upon its sweet face and delighted in the little heft of its body pressed against her breast. The baby looked up with unfocussed eyes and smiled back at her.

It had been a difficult pregnancy; but, then, aren't all pregnancies difficult? Nine long months, the mother forming the baby inside her body, cell by cell, from rudimentary germ to complex living creature. Such a long time, with pains along the way. Then, the late-night hours of labor and the stress of delivery. At long last, here it was, her own sweet baby! It looked a lot like her, the mother thought to herself.

The baby gurgled in a little contentment. Wasn't it glad to be alive, just as glad as the mother was?

The mother felt fatigue from the wear-and-tear of the pregnancy and birth. She felt a sadness too, the sadness of being emptied out. Yet, there had been something satisfying in the process of pregnancy itself, in the knowing that a new life was being developed for the world. The mother had felt a suspense, about what the baby would be, then about its unknown future in the world.

What love and pride the mother felt upon looking down at her new baby! Today she would share that love and bask in that pride, for she had invited several people over for their first look at the baby.

The mother was not yet well enough to be up-and-about. It wouldn't be unseemly to be found in bed with the baby, would it?

If she wanted to, she could wait a few days until she was able to leave the bed, and then invite people over. In that case, she would lead them to the crib, where they would stare down at the baby, as if it were a package delivered to the house, an object of curiosity, detached from relatedness.

No. Why shouldn't the visitors come and see mother and baby together, even if still in bed, the baby in the mother's arms, as it had once been in the mother's body? Mother-and-child,-- that's the way it should be. The two of them belonged to each other. Neither mother nor baby had any meaning without that relatedness.

The mother picked up the hand-mirror from the bedside stand and gazed at herself. She looked a little tired, but otherwise quite presentable. On an impulse, the mother showed the baby itself in the mirror, but, with its unfocussed eyes, the baby didn't recognize itself. The mother smiled down at the baby. Someday, the baby would recognize itself and be proud.

The mother arranged her gown and sat up straighter in the bed.

"Now, you be good," she said to the baby. "We're going to show you off today, yes, we are!"

And she caressed the baby's little face and smoothed back its few wisps of blond hair.

The first visitor was Mr. Kritikos. He knocked on the bedroom door.

"Come in!" the mother invited, in proud expectancy.

Mr. Kritikos approached the bed and looked down at mother and baby. Then he walked around to the side of the bed, where he could get a closer look at the baby.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a girl," the mother told him. "Her name is..."

"A girl?" Mr. Kritikos echoed, shaking his head in disapproval. "There are too many girls around these days, don't you know that? It's a supply-and-demand situation with babies, and at this time there are just too many girls. You should have had a boy."

"But..." the mother began to protest.

"Before you had the baby, you should have researched the supply-and-demand situation," Mr. Kritikos continued. "You shouldn't just go ahead and produce a baby without first determining what kind of baby the public wants. Even if your baby is a good one, if it's a girl and nobody wants any more girls, why, you've just wasted your pregnancy and labor."

“But it had to be a girl!” the mother protested. “I don’t think I could have had a boy, I mean, if the baby was *meant* to be a girl. Anyway, why should I have the kind of baby other people want? It’s my baby, isn’t it?”

“Sure, it’s yours,” Mr. Kritikos answered. “Please yourself. But you want the baby to be accepted in the world, don’t you? As I said, we’ve got an oversupply of girls right now. The public doesn’t want any more.”

“You mean that people won’t accept my baby, because she’s a girl?” the mother asked in apprehension.

“I’m afraid not,” Mr. Kritikos answered. “If only you had consulted me before the pregnancy. I could have given you guidance, saved you a lot of wasted effort. I’m telling you, nobody wants girls these days.”

The mother looked down at her baby girl with a frown. Was this baby a big mistake, after all? No! The mother loved her baby, loved her as she was, as she would love a boy as he was, if her baby was meant to be a boy. A baby is meant to be the way it is. How could you have a baby to suit other people’s supposed preference? That was crazy.

“I commend you on your effort, anyway,” Mr. Kritikos said. “I know it’s a difficult thing to have a baby. I’ve never had any myself, of course, but I know how it is.

“You made a mistake on your first try. That’s understandable. You didn’t have any experience. But now listen to me, so that you can save yourself from repeated mistakes. What I would suggest is this: Next time, why don’t you have twins? People love twins! Try to have twin boys, because, as I said, boys are in demand right now. If you had twin boys, people would be so pleased that they’d forget about your failure with this girl.”

Mr. Kritikos knitted his brow and thought a minute.

“Then again, the fashion might change. It usually does so every few years. People might come around to liking girls again. Why don’t you have twins, as I said, but make it one boy and one girl? That way, you’d have a winning combination, no matter the changes in what people want. Some are obsessed with the overpopulation issue and disapprove of twins, true, but those few aren’t interested in babies, anyway. Most people are sentimental about babies. You’ve got to

appeal to their sentiments. Yes, *twins*,--that's what I would recommend for your next pregnancy."

Mr. Kritikos walked back to the door. "Well, good luck in the raising of your baby girl," he said.

With that empty blessing, Mr. Kritikos abruptly left the room.

The mother reddened with anger. Here she had invited Mr. Kritikos as the very first person to see her lovely baby, and all he could do was second-guess the baby's gender. How ridiculous! Of course the baby had to be a girl. If Mr. Kritikos didn't like girls, if, as he claimed, people don't want girls these days, to hell with them!

"Next time I'll have twin hermaphrodites!" the mother shouted after Mr. Kritikos through the closed door. But he was long gone and did not hear her.

As she waited for the next visitor, the mother looked down at her baby girl with a searching eye. This baby was a girl, no denying that. Had the mother made a fundamental mistake, as Mr. Kritikos claimed? She began having doubts about her baby.

The next visitor would not arrive for a while. The mother had thought that Mr. Kritikos would stay longer. She had allowed him plenty of time to admire the baby, but he had delivered his judgment and left abruptly. He hadn't even looked at the baby, really.

The mother bared her warm breast and drew the baby to the nipple. The baby took the nipple and sucked out nourishment. How it needed the mother for its very life! The mother felt pleasure in her baby girl, in first having given her life and now in nourishing her. Never mind Mr. Kritikos and his crazy ideas about what kind of baby people will supposedly accept.

Satisfied with the warm milk, the baby dozed off. The mother drew her gown back over her breast and waited for the next visitor.

Mrs. Picayune came into the room in a rush.

"Where's the baby? Let me see it!" she huffed.

"Sh! My baby girl is sleeping," the mother said to Mrs. Picayune. "Isn't she sweet?"

Mrs. Picayune stared hard at the baby.

“It’s got a birthmark on its face,” Mrs. Picayune observed.

The mother was irritated by that remark. She knew the baby had a birthmark; anybody could see it. Why did Mrs. Picayune point it out to her? Was it to embarrass her?

“Yes, but it’s a small one,” the mother said, in defense of both her baby and herself.

“It’s so dark, though,” Mrs. Picayune persisted, drawing her head close to the baby’s face and touching the birthmark with her fingertip. “They can do wonders in plastic surgery these days, but I don’t know whether they can remove such a dark birthmark. The poor thing!”

The mother squirmed under Mrs. Picayune’s scrutiny. She drew the baby closer and, under the guise of giving the baby a loving caress, tried to cover the birthmark with her hand.

Mrs. Picayune then took the corner of the baby blanket between her fingers and drew it back, exposing the naked body of the baby.

“Oh, look at all those spots and blemishes!” Mrs. Picayune cried out, backing away in a little horror. “It’s covered with warts or moles or pimples or whatever they are.”

“No baby is perfect,” the mother said with hurt in her voice. “What did you expect? Have you ever seen a baby that was perfectly perfect?”

“No,” conceded Mrs. Picayune. “But I’ve seen many babies with fewer blemishes than yours. Oh, the poor thing! The poor thing!”

The mother pulled the blanket back over her baby girl’s body and drew the baby tight against her, its head looking over her shoulder, so that Mrs. Picayune wouldn’t be able to look at the baby anymore.

Mrs. Picayune tsked and tsked and extended sympathy to the mother and baby. All those blemishes, what a shame! How awful the mother must feel about her poor blemished baby!

The mother became upset with Mrs. Picayune and, claiming that it was time to feed the baby--(although the baby had already been fed)--, she asked Mrs. Picayune to leave.

“The rudeness of the woman!” the mother thought to herself after Mrs. Picayune had gone. “Spoiling this special day with nit-picking, then with pity that neither my baby nor I want or need. I should never have invited her. I know how she is.”

Mrs. Picayune's loud voice, her probing, the tone of her comments, and the mother's upset all disturbed the baby, which now began to fuss and fidget. The mother tried to calm the baby, but she herself was too upset to be able to calm down. How can you calm a baby, when you yourself are upset?

If only she could cancel the remaining visits. But it was too late. She had invited everybody, had insisted they come, and they would all get their look at the baby.

The mother's own mother, the baby's grandmother, was coming next. Surely, she would appreciate and love the baby.

The new grandmother, just arrived in town, hurried over to see the baby. She came into the bedroom with great joy and enthusiasm.

During the conversation, the grandmother happened to ask, "How much did it weigh when it was born?"

"Eight pounds, fifteen ounces," the mother announced proudly.

"Oh dear, too big," the grandmother commented. "You know, my dear, it's not a good idea to let the baby get too big."

"But big babies are healthy babies," the mother said.

"We used to think that, yes, dear. I myself believed that once. Now we know it's not true. And didn't you have a difficult labor and delivery with such a big baby?"

Yes, the labor and delivery had been difficult, but the mother wasn't going to admit it. "Oh, I suppose it was the usual," she said. "How do I know? This is my first baby."

"The low-seven-pound range would have been better," the grandmother said. "A smaller baby makes delivery easier for you."

"But I didn't care about making it easy for myself," the mother answered. "I wanted a big, healthy baby."

"As I said, big and healthy are not the same," the grandmother re-affirmed. "The child might suffer obesity. Doctors say that babies with large birth weight tend to become obese. I hope your daughter doesn't become obese. I was so glad that you weren't. Obese people have such a difficult time in life."

The mother had been happy that her baby was born healthy. Now she worried that, if she had let her baby become too big, the baby might become obese as a girl or woman, might suffer heart problems or diabetes, or might have difficulty finding a boyfriend or husband or a job where people judge you by your appearance.

“You can still do something to get rid of the excess fat,” the grandmother urged. “Don’t feed the baby every time she cries. Cut back on her food.”

The grandmother then kissed the mother and baby and went out.

The little heft in the mother’s arms now felt heavier. “Little fatty!” the mother whispered to her baby in jest. “Little fatty, little fatty!”--a disquieting thought about the future of her baby. Should a mother deny and starve her baby, just a bit, so that it would grow up slim? Did the grandmother know what she was talking about? Well, now that she thought about it, the mother herself had had a low birth weight and, yes, she had grown up slim.

Linda Bella, the mother’s sister, was the next visitor.

“Doesn’t she look like me?” the mother asked her sister, holding out the baby toward her.

“I suppose so,” Linda Bella answered. Then, after a pause, “She’s not a very good-looking baby, is she? I mean, for a girl.”

That remark disturbed the mother, because it criticized the baby’s looks and, by relationship, the mother’s looks too. And didn’t the sister herself bear a family resemblance to the two of them?

Linda Bella saw the mother’s reaction, so she said reassuringly, “Of course, you can never tell how a person will wind up looking from the way they look as a baby. You and I are beautiful, aren’t we? But remember our baby pictures! A pair of ugly ducklings, weren’t we? So, don’t worry, your baby will probably grow up to be beautiful like us.”

The mother had not given a thought to her daughter’s future looks, until Linda Bella brought up the subject. Now she worried about it.

“It’s important for girls to be attractive, to have a nice face,” Linda Bella continued in a serious tone. “Much more important than for boys.”

The mother hoped that Linda Bella wouldn't mention the birthmark. She didn't, but the mother could tell by the way Linda Bella avoided being caught in any expression while looking at the baby that it was the birthmark that most disfigured the baby. Linda Bella and Mrs. Picayune would agree on that.

Could the birthmark be removed? If it were, would the girl have a scar on her face, a blemish as bad as the birthmark? Would this baby grow up into a fat girl with a face disfigured by the birthmark or the blotchy scar of an attempted repair? Would the other children make fun of her? Would she be the brunt of ridicule and boys' revulsion?

"Anyway, not all girls can be as beautiful as you and I are," Linda Bella joked. "I'm sure she'll have her redeeming qualities."

"*Redeeming qualities!*" the mother echoed Linda Bella's words to herself, after Linda Bella had left. Why did her daughter need *redeeming qualities*? What would she have to be redeemed from? From being a girl instead of a boy, from being blemished, from being obese, from being ugly?

The mother laid her baby daughter beside her on the bed. The mother then began to cry. She had been so proud of her baby. Now, all these criticisms from people. How could the mother have been so wrong, how could she have done so wrong? She had given birth to...to? A bundle of mistakes?

The baby again sensed its mother's upset and began to cry. The mother resented the baby's need for comforting, when she herself needed comforting. Yet, out of her motherly duty, she picked up the baby and rocked it in her arms, mother and baby crying, both upsetting the other, neither a comfort to the other.

Why had these visits turned out like this, the mother asked herself? If only she had kept the baby to herself. A mother is the only person in the whole world who knows how to appreciate the baby for what she is and who really loves the baby. Other people are thoughtless in their criticisms, cruel, and stupid. How would they like it, if they had a baby and a parade of people criticized it? Why couldn't they just accept the baby as she was and say a few kind words?

A few kind words. A few insincere words? Well, the visitors were all being honest, telling the mother what they thought. But were they right? A mother is blind to her own baby, doesn't

see its defects, doesn't want to see its defects, because, for those defects the mother herself is to blame. Every negative remark about the baby is an attack upon the mother. But what was more important,--the self-esteem of the mother or the future of the baby? We have to recognize a baby as it is; admit the defects, so that they can be remedied, if possible. But her baby was a girl; there was no changing the very nature of what she was. What did people expect the mother to do about all the things wrong with her baby? She herself had caused the defects, was herself defective in child-bearing. How could she now be any good, then, as a mother?

And so, the mother, thinking those thoughts, cried. And the baby, perceiving the mother's upset, but not, of course, understanding that it itself was the cause of the upset, cried too.

There was to be just one more visitor. Maybe that one, at least and at last, would have a good word or two to say about the baby. The mother dried her tears and tried to rouse herself to cheerfulness.

She picked up the hand-mirror once again to look at herself. Despite her effort at self-cheering, her expression was miserable. She had another impulse to let the baby look at herself in the mirror, moved the mirror over the baby's face, but then recoiled from the gesture and placed the hand-mirror face down on the bedside stand.

She had composed herself, and the baby too had quieted down, when the last visitor, Mrs. Phreno, came into the bedroom.

The mother showed Mrs. Phreno the baby and said good things about it, but they sounded insincere to the mother herself:--The baby was healthy, and she slept well, and she had a good appetite, and she was really not that much trouble at all, and so on. The baby had to be justified, if not redeemed, the mother felt.

Mrs. Phreno listened to the mother's praise of her baby, not venturing any observations of her own. Her silence proved as disturbing to the mother as the opinions of the previous visitors had been. Why was Mrs. Phreno being so silent?

At last, the mother had to ask, "Well, what do you think of her?"

Mrs. Phreno hesitated, then said, in a somber voice, "I didn't want to say anything, but don't you notice the shape of the baby's head?"

“Her head! What’s wrong with her head?” the mother asked, drawing the baby to her protectively.

“I might be wrong,” Mrs. Phreno said. “I hope I am. But something seems wrong with the shape of your baby’s head; it looks lopsided. Maybe you should have the doctor do some measurements.”

“No! No! No!”

“I’m probably wrong,” Mrs. Phreno backed down. “Yes, I’m probably wrong. I didn’t want to alarm you unnecessarily; that’s why I didn’t say anything. Still, there is reason for concern.”

“What are you saying? There’s nothing wrong with my baby, nothing wrong at all!” the mother cried out, clutching the baby ever tighter to her.

“Of course not,” Mrs. Phreno pretended to concede. “There’s probably nothing wrong at all. Why don’t you press the doctor on it, do some tests?”

“My baby doesn’t need tests! My baby is perfect the way she is!” the mother cried out more vehemently than before.

Mrs. Phreno went over and put her hand on the mother’s shoulder, but the mother shrank back away from her.

“My baby is fine the way she is,” the mother insisted.

“Bless you,” Mrs. Phreno said. “I meant no harm in what I said. I hope you know that. I’m sorry if I have got you all upset, maybe unnecessarily. Yes, unnecessarily. I’m sorry.”

Mrs. Phreno reached out her hand in a soothing gesture, drew it back, then left the room with a sighed “Goodbye”.

The mother looked down at her baby’s head. With her hand she turned the baby’s head now left, now right. Then she put her two hands up to her own head and felt its shape. She picked up the hand-mirror and looked at her own head, now left, now right. She flung the hand-mirror across the room.

The visitors had been as much of an ordeal for the baby as for the mother. The baby now screamed and flailed and shook its little body in agitation against the breast of the mother. What a trouble it was, what a trouble it had turned out to be!

The mother tried to calm the baby, but, again, she herself was so upset that she felt incapable, incapable as a mother.

She made a half-hearted attempt, then laid the baby on its back on the bed.

The baby lay helpless on its back, screaming a pitiful weak scream, gasping for air, flailing its fat but feeble arms and legs.

The mother looked down at her wretched baby. She began to weep in misery, feeling contempt for herself, for the same pitifulness that she saw in the baby. She had made a botch of motherhood, had produced a botch of a baby.

Suddenly, the baby became a mere object to the mother, detached from her. There was no connection between them, there had never been. The mother hated the baby. It was not hers. She had not given birth to it, to this defective monster of a miscarriage with its misshapen head, its ugly birthmarked face, its blemished obese female trunk, the whole writhing hideous mass of it. It had nothing to do with her. It was a hideous baby, but it had nothing to do with her. . .

The next morning the telephone rang.

“Hello.”

“Oh, hello, hello! This is Mrs. Morovit. I’d like to see the baby. Could I come over today to see the baby?”

“Baby? Baby? What baby?”

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