

CURTIS SMITH

THE BABY CRIES

- I. The baby cries. The baby cries. The baby cries. The physiology of his colicky sobs would stymie a busload of Einsteins; such a tiny body, such a staggering noise. You roll down the car window, hoping to vent his bawling, but you wonder—can sound be vented? Where is that genius bus when you need to flag it down? Even on winter's iciest days, your father used to crack the window and hold up his cigarette, the pose of a blasé, motorcade-riding monarch waving to his adoring subjects, the smoke a fleeing white ribbon. But Einstein's dead, and as of last Wednesday, so is your father, and now neither of them are up for answering your questions.
- II. Signal your last turn well in advance of your block. You are the lead ship in this sorrowful armada, the guide from the funeral parlor to the post-service gathering at your house (your mother is in no condition . . . and again, the heaviest responsibility falls upon you, the eldest child). The chilly current from the window nips at your cheek and dries the dampness from your eye. A rearview glimpse, your husband in the charcoal suit that doesn't quite fit the way it did when he wore it to his first post-college interview, and beside him, your son, hidden in the protective shell of his rear-facing car seat. "Hey, little man. Hey there," says your husband, but his tantalizing offers of a nook are drowned beneath the boy's tearful gale. Your husband slumps back into his seat and sighs dejectedly. "We've got to find that damn blanket."
 - A. And the baby cries. And cries. And cries. Einstein scratches his tangled garden of snowy hair and accepts your father's offer of a cigarette.

- B. Adjust your rearview to witness the orange echoing of your turn signal. Guide the car down your development's winding streets. The procession twists behind you, and here and there, like speckled dapples on sunlit waves, you pinpoint the cars of the relatives you haven't seen all in one place since your sister's wedding.
- III. Last night you held the baby, drying his wet cheeks and whispering that everything was going to be fine, and could he please, please let you sleep—just for an hour— tonight of all nights? You rocked him until you both drifted off, your prayers answered by God or exhaustion, but with his first renewed squawk, you woke startled, momentarily confused by your surroundings, by the swaddled bundle in your arms, your son's slumbering expression replaced by grimaced strawberry cheeks, slit-squeezed eyes, a quivering, dimpled chin and a gaping, toothless mouth, a face so distorted that it came to you as a dreamy image, your baby's sweet features kidnapped by a stretched-to-bursting balloon filled with the breath of all that was pained and inconsolable in the world.
- IV. Park well beyond your house and bail out with a parachutist's hell-bent determination, the door quickly closed to seal yourself from the incessant cries. While your husband struggles with the car seat, clutch your coat closer to your throat and witness the armada's docking maneuvers. The front wheel of your great uncle's Cadillac bucks onto the curb, and even the cocoon of metal and tinted glass can't mute his wife's scolding exasperation. An unintended choreography settles over the scene, the spirit of Busby Berkly resurrected in the one-by-one extinguishing of headlights and engines, in the opening and closing of car doors, in the last gray puffs of exhaust plumes rising into an equally gray sky. Your husband hands you the baby and jogs ahead to open the house. Navigate the gentle slope of your lawn, your heels unsteady over the dead grass and the last of the brittle leaves, and the baby, perhaps fatigued, perhaps shocked by an inhaled lungful of December cold, stops its sobbing. "That's a good boy," you whisper into the pink, seashell curve of his ear. Stand in the opened doorway, the baby's cheek nuzzled next to yours, the house's warmth touching your neck, and await the invasion of the sober figures who descend your lawn's slope. How will all these people fit inside?
- A. Your alarmingly thin sister, already separated after less than a year of marriage, her dreams of a family vanished along with the husband who wiped out her bank account. Her speech at the funeral home service crumbled into a rambling account of family vacations and long-deceased pets, her voice cracking as she read the lyrics to some Dylan song she'd penned on a rumpled piece of hotel stationary. Her mascaraed tears ran in

dirty streams until you stepped forward in an act equal parts compassion and embarrassment and helped her back to her seat. Despite the afternoon's deep blanket of clouds, she wears sunglasses, and the dark, oversized lenses twinkle with the cherry-burning reflection of the cigarette perched at her plum lips. You pray she'll survive the afternoon without popping too many pills or making a scene behind the barricade of a locked powder room door.

- B. Your mother in window's black, her face obscured by the sheer veil hanging from her pillbox hat. How collected she is, her grief distilled into a series of graceful interactions. As a rebellious teen, you thought her rigid social codes archaic, even soulless, but now you've grown to appreciate her as the Einstein of suburban decorum, a woman who can pick up the phone and, sight-unseen, select the perfect corsage for any gown, who pens next-day thank-you notes with a calligrapher's precision. How perfectly she understands her role today, the linchpin between seldom-gathering clans, the afternoon's emotional barometer, the one others will look to for strength or comfort, and you have no doubt she will conduct herself accordingly, her behaviors setting a precedent she hopes her children will follow. Only later, alone in a bed suddenly too large, will she allow herself the luxury of tears.
- C. Your father's parents, their wrinkled, Florida-brown hands linked, your grandmother leaning heavily on her silver cane, your grandfather's pained, arthritic stride further hampered by his oxygen tank tethering of clear plastic tubes. They haven't said a word all morning, a silence that only adds to their fragile veneer, and there's a poignancy in their labored procession that makes you clutch your baby closer.
- D. And the rest—your father's half-deaf business partner; a young cousin on chrome crutches, his scholarship hopes mummified beneath an ankle-to-thigh cast, the white plaster graffitied by his football teammates; your brother, whose three-year-old son, once released from his car seat restraints, sprints ahead in a wobbly-legged, momentum-building rush that ends with a headfirst tumble into flowerbed mulch.
- V. The afternoon's overriding emotion? Relief first springs to mind, your father's suffering finally over, thank God and Amen, a period put to the cruel wasting of his dignity and awareness. Of course there is still sorrow, and throughout the morning tears have flared like wildfire sparks, some catching and spreading, most tempered with soft condolences and back-patting embraces. But mainly there is relief, for now you are free to forget his gray and sour-smelling skin, his hollowed cheeks and drug-slurred speech; now you and

everyone else are finally free to remember him as you wish – as a child, a college roommate, a brother, a Christmas visitor, a bridge partner, a lover, a father. Stand aside and welcome each of these memories into your home. (But other, more private emotions simmer beneath your hostess's smile. Nuzzle your baby's sweet-scented head, the downy hair smelling of your breast milk, and coo the same powerless assurances you've been whispering these past few sleepless nights. The unsettling tension accumulates in his bones, his momentary peace replaced in troubling degrees by the faint, seismic twitching of tics and scowls. "There, there, honey," you say. "Be a good boy for mommy." And herein lies the conflict: today your maternal duties do not mesh with memories of your father, memories in which you are the child being held, the one hearing whispers that all is well with the world.)

- VI. "Let me," your sister says, taking the baby before you can warn her of his impending eruption. Your still-outstretched arms are swiftly filled with the arrivals' shed coats, a bulky mass of wool and leather and unwound scarves, and from the static mound rises a garden of distinctive scents, your sister's Winston Lights, the spicy patchouli oil you can't smell without thinking of Aunt Mary's Christmas cards. When you place the coats on your upstairs bed, you pause, your palm smoothing over the rippled landscape of your grandmother's patchwork quilt, the familiar scraps of old dresses and faded jeans you helped her sew as a young girl on a summer visit. True, you've never shared your family's addictions, their smoking and drinking and pills, their need to stand in the spotlight or upon a moral high ground, but at this instant, you understand the nature of selfish temptation for it takes all your strength not to stretch your weary frame across the quilt and tumble into its deep sea of hibernation dreams.
- VII. Downstairs, you discover your mother arranging the serving trays and dishes across the dining room table, the plastic wrap skins pulled from refrigerator-cooled spinach dip and cheese cubes, vegetable trays and cold pastas. A quick glance into the living room finds your husband groping under the Christmas tree's lowest branches to plug in the string of white lights. Your sister bounces your fitfully whimpering son on her hip, her pursed lips leaving faint, plum impressions on his forehead. Her dark glasses have been pushed atop her head, her mascara-circled eyes exposed. How different is she than your baby? The two of them so fragile, both clinging to their teetering emotional perches, hers complex and intricately haunted, his unable to stray beyond the black-and-white of brainstem and reflex. You worry about her pain and disappointment, fear her history of impulsive love affairs and dramatic sabotage. Would she still let you hug her the way you did when you

were kids? Your mother brushes by, jostling you from your drifting. "Silverware and napkins first, dear," she says, a correcting tone that resurrects the dormant pulse of the rebellious teen who thought her so foolish. (Calm down, you tell yourself. Her penchant for orchestrating life's most inconsequential and maddening details is just her way of coping, of exercising a bit of control over the world's engulfing chaos, and in recent years, you've become a bit more sympathetic for you've discovered these habits creeping into your own actions, a genetic hardwiring that provides a mild, cringing shock each time you find yourself obsessing over color schemes or anniversary gifts.) Relatives crowd around the table, plates are filled. Someone turns on the kitchen radio, the tuner twirled in a garbled march that ultimately settles on a station playing Christmas carols. Your son's gurgling spurts accumulate into a sobbing torrent, and you turn instinctively, nearly tripping over an eight-year-old second cousin who's lowered herself onto all fours in an attempt to coax your spooked tabby from beneath the table. Your grip tightens on the extra forks you've retrieved from the kitchen ("Dessert forks, honey," your mother said, handing you back the dinner forks you'd laid out), your knuckles bony white, the tines gripped in your trembling hand like a bouquet of silver thorns. And the baby cries. And cries. And cries. The distressed wails rise into a tidal wave that washes over the voices around you. You feel choked by the table's shuffling press of bodies, by your mother's Miss Manners scrutiny and your sister's tinderbox instability. "Stop your crying!" you want to scream. "Stop your goddamn crying!"—a public crumbling that would expose your most shameful, nagging apprehension, your fear that if you can't handle a crying infant, how can you possibly manage the years to come, the emergency room visits, the slammed-door arguments, the calls from disappointed teachers, the broken-curfew nights. . .

VIII. Your husband appears in the dining room entrance. "The blanket, honey?" Snapshot bursts tumble through your thoughts, and you see the blanket (a hand towel-sized swatch of nubby, colorful yarn with the inexplicable ability to soothe the boy) in a dozen different locations. Stuffed between the couch cushions. Speckled with clinging dust beneath the crib. Balled up and forgotten in the depths of your diaper bag. Concentrate, you tell yourself, and you close your eyes in an attempt to shut out the voices, to stifle the shrill sobbing that twists through your mind like a rusty corkscrew. As a child, your mother claimed a prayer to Saint Anthony would lead you to what you'd lost, but this afternoon, your heavenly connection has been interrupted, the frequency pirated by images of your father doing the hokey-pokey's two-step with Busby Berkly while Einstein furiously diagrams chalkboard equations relating the inverse rela-

tionship between the duration of your son's tears and your sanity. Set out on your blanket-seeking journey, and as you travel from room to room, meticulously scanning the knee-high niches of a child's world, you notice the distinct strata that have settled over your house:

- A. The TV room, where the men have unbuttoned their collars and suit coats of black and gray, their ties loosened, their hands filled with beer bottles and snack tray chips. The paneled walls vibrate with the collective groans and cheers triggered by the football game playing on TV.
 - B. Despite its chill, the sunroom has been claimed by the teens, girls with braces and blossoming curves, boys who rub their peach fuzz chins and grumble in alarmingly deep baritones about the inanity of their parents.
 - C. The kitchen, the wives' domain, with their talk of carpools and household finances, the young ones in mid-thigh black dresses and high heels, the mothers in more sensible shoes whose rubber soles squeak each time they peer into other rooms to see what mischief might need their attention. (Yet these distinct divisions are unified by the conversational snippets you overhear about your father, his business partner who imitates the improbable, choppy swing that netted your father, a golfer who rarely broke a hundred, a hole-in-one; your uncle recounting the weekend they hitchhiked to Atlantic City and danced the Mashed Potato with Miss Alabama and Miss Tennessee, two pageant losers whose lacquer-sprayed hair stayed unruffled while their debutante-ish demeanors melted away on a sloppy river of sloe-gin fizzes.)
 - D. The children are the afternoon's nomads, their routes repeatedly crossing yours as they chase each other in a giggling, duckling parade. Untucked shirts and rumpled blouses bear the spills as yet unnoticed by their mothers. Clip-on ties dangle from suit pockets, and a few unwittingly carry static-attached tinsel strands, thin ribbons that flutter like starshine banners in their hurried wake.
 - E. You discover the blanket in the laundry room off the garage, the prize nestled like an oyster's pearl in the dryer's metal drum. The garage's scents of oil and gasoline stir faint recollections of the sleepwalker's steps that led you here last night after your son had rechristened the blanket with spit-up. Set the dryer for a quick, warming spin and thank Saint Anthony for coming through.
- IX. "Snow!" shout the children. The smokers have gathered by the garage's opened doors, their inky silhouettes stark and flat against

the hushed curtain of white. *I'm coming, honey*, you think when you hear the baby's distant cry, the wail that reaches you with the prickly distinction of the princess's mattress-buried pea. *Hold on, little one, hold on*. Detours hamper your progress—your eight-year-old second cousin, having lost interest in your cat, now darts in front of you on her mad dash to smudge her nose and fingers against the kitchen window and watch the snow; your little nephew, who tugs on your skirt with one hand and grabs his crotch with the other as he breathlessly asks for bathroom directions; your aunt, who reminds you for the fifth time that she wants to exchange e-mail addresses before she leaves. You enter the dining room, and as your cousin Beth's fiancé steps back to let you through, his shoulder strikes the ornate mirror you bought on your Bermuda honeymoon. The glass shatters when the mirror hits the floor, the frame's perimeter of seashells and ocean-worn stones spit out like teeth knocked from a boxer's mouth. Others join you as you squat and carefully pick up the shards, Beth and her profusely apologizing fiancé, your broken-legged cousin who uses the rubbery tip of his crutch to push the far-flung shells and stones your way. "Don't worry, please," you say, trying to calm both yourself and Beth's mortified fiancé. Partial reflections swim across the mirrored fragments, eyebrows and ears, groping fingers, the fleshy bits of the room's improbable nexus forged by blood and marriage and shared rituals. The still-warm blanket draped over your shoulder, you sweep the broken bits into a dustpan, but as you carry the debris to the kitchen trash can, you become concerned. The baby isn't crying . . . isn't crying. Even Einstein halts his chalk-grinding calculations and directs a worried glance your way.

- X. In the living room, the Christmas tree lights soften the crow's-feet wrinkles around Aunt Mary's eyes. She sits in a straight-backed chair, a pie plate balanced on her touching knees. She grabs your hand as you pass, anchoring you in her patchouli oil current. "He's so beautiful, honey," she says. The baby lies on a quilt stretched over the living room rug. He gurgles and spits, his dark, wet eyes glinting with sparks of Christmas tree lights. His pudgy legs kick with a spastic, happy force that rocks him like an overturned turtle. Your sister sits on one side of the blanket and plays peek-a-boo with an unfolded napkin, the game paused every so often to wipe the drool from his laughing chin. Your mother sits on the other side of the quilt, her widow's black gloves placed neatly atop the coffee table, her fingers tenderly brushing the baby's mat of fine hair. Others gather nearby, their chairs drawn closer, their trance-like attention fixed on your son. Your grandfather grins behind the clear plastic of his oxygen mask, while beside him your, broken-legged cousin perches awkwardly at the sofa's edge, his crutches

propped beside him, and in his oversized hands, he holds a child's stuffed football, which he waves in a bell-jingling attempt to snare the baby's attention.

- XI. Kneel beside your mother, and when you rub her back, she leans into you, her head resting against your shoulder. Hand the tiny blanket to your sister, your meeting fingers exchanging a quick, comforting squeeze. Using the blanket, the game of peek-a-boo continues, the baby responding with a finger-flexing, wide-eyed excitement that triggers a mask-muffled laugh from your grandfather. A friendly debate ensues, your mother insisting the child has her eyes, your grandfather pulling aside his mask to contend that the boy's square chin is a carbon copy of his own, your sister's ringless finger tracing the curl of his ear and asking if anyone else has noticed that she and him are among the family minority with unattached lobes. It goes on like this, the associations growing more detailed, more ridiculous and amusing, the way his upper lips curls when he smiles, the musical toots of his burps and farts. Einstein sighs in defeat, tosses aside his chalk and plunks down at the foot of the blanket. Busby jumps atop the coffee table, and with his hands held in a director's crop, yells, "Yes! Yes!" as he pictures the scene shot from his swooping crane. Your father settles down next to you and holds his ghostly fingers above the baby's mouth. He only wants what all of you want, to claim an exhaled bit of the child for himself, to be reminded once more of those brief, irretrievable moments that can only be appreciated by those who have lost them.