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The American Hospital

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The second time everything was faster than the first—faster, more brutal, but maybe more merciful too, since the period of hoping and worrying only lasted two weeks.

Again, all went according to plan at first. With the consent of Hélène and her husband, Le Goff increased the dosage slightly so he could harvest five eggs. He fertilized four, implanted two of those, and froze the others. Again, the fertilized ova divided, becoming four, then eight, then sixteen-cell clusters. And the first blood test was positive.

Then, two weeks after the transfer, Hélène woke up in the night with sharp abdominal pains and knew immediately what she was in for. No need to wake her husband who slept deeply and couldn't have done anything anyway. She felt a pressure like colic or diarrhea and barely had time to pull her nightgown up under her breasts and sit down on the toilet before it came splashing, plopping out in a warm, sharp-smelling gush. She turned on the light and ventured a look into the spattered, blood-smeared bowl. The water was bright red with streaky clots of darker crimson. When the word "tissue" occurred to her, it made her throw up and she flushed the toilet immediately because she couldn't stand the smell with her nose so close to it. She closed her eyes.

Then she took a damp sponge and wiped off the spatters and scrubbed the bowl with the toilet brush. She could feel her blood pressure dropping from the loss of blood and her legs felt weak. She sat down on the toilet seat again. One of the cats was awake and sidled up to her, purring and arching its back and wrapping its tail around her bare leg with strong but gentle pressure. Although she had flushed several times, it hadn't woken her husband.

It was so hot they had left all the doors and windows open for ventilation, but there was no air. Rai music from some sleepless neighbor drifted in faintly through the open bedroom window that looked out on a small inner courtyard. At regular intervals, the sound of cars stopping at the light came through the living room window. She could shower without worrying about waking up her husband. She steadied herself with one hand while the water dribbled down her body. She shut her eyes and could see again the contents of the toilet bowl and the words "bloody mess" came back to her, a phrase the American had used in another context. Silently she repeated over and over like a mantra: it was a clump of cells not a baby, a clump of cells not a baby.

Then she sat at the open window in the living room, looking down at the street while she smoked. The other cat woke up and both of them lay down on the window sill to be near her. On the other side of the street, the green neon cross of Madame Allouche's pharmacy shone brightly. The smell of fresh croissants rose from the bakery downstairs.

What a bloody mess, she thought again. The American hadn't been able to talk about the war

that afternoon when she asked him to, nor was it much easier for him a few days later, after she'd rested following the second implantation and they met again in the now familiar cafeteria. He explained his difficulties as a dilemma: on the one hand he wanted to tell a coherent story—because when you tell a story you want it to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, or maybe because you can't communicate memories until you can see them from above, outside, from a distance, as a whole. But on the other hand, he said, all he had to offer were details, scraps, impressions, splintered memories from a mole's-eye view that didn't fit together in any logical way. Then there were the analyses he himself had only heard or read, things that turned the war into a document for the archives but had little or nothing to do with the individual soldier's experience. The problem, he explained, was that the real war was neither the one thing nor the other, but both together, so that a single person couldn't possibly tell the story of the war.

But I don't expect an official communiqué, she replied. I just want to hear what's eating you up inside—assuming you can talk about it at all.

He looked at her in surprise: is something eating me up? Maybe I've just been chewed up and spit out because I'm too weak or too tired—just battle fatigued?

I don't know, she said and smiled at him.

Involuntarily, he reached for a cigarette and said: the weirdest thing was that the war was being fought at the edge of Paradise—East of Eden—without anyone thinking it worth mentioning. There we were the whole time, in the desert, with the Garden of Eden barely twenty miles away.

Hélène gave him a puzzled look.

You know what civilians don't think about very often? said the American. That war isn't fought on a playing field but right in the middle of a world that wasn't meant for it. There are people living there, animals, nature, and all of a sudden tanks are rolling over them, houses exploding, the earth being ploughed up and fertilized with dead humans and animals . . . We were heading for the Euphrates valley on the left flank of the attack, in the north. Between the Euphrates and the Tigris, north of Basra and Lake Hammar, is the marshland that all the scholars and dreamers conjecture was the Garden of Eden. A bit north of that, along Highway 8, is Ur, where our forefather Abraham began his wanderings, and Uruk, where Gilgamesh reigned, where he fought and befriended Enkidu, where Ishtar fell in love with him and the Bull of Heaven raged and was laid low by the comrades-in-arms. In the middle of those marshes, however, was Paradise, and we were making war at its gates, but no Archangel Michael came to chase us—or the others—away . . .

Cote had fallen silent and Hélène waited quietly for him to begin speaking again. Finally he said: on the morning of the third day we were on a rise above the Euphrates valley. It was our first sunny day, sunny and hot. The sun hadn't been up for long, but it was already as blazing hot as noon. Below us, a gigantic lake glittered black in the light, a lake that wasn't on any of our maps. I was sitting on top of my Bradley when I saw them: seven ibises coming from the south. Majestic. Probably the dense smoke from burning oil wells we could see on the horizon had confused them or forced them to change course. The Sacred ibis winters in the marshes. They were flying way up high in a V. I had a good view of their long, black beaks curved like scythes. Their wide, powerful wings glinted white in the sun, the tips of the primaries black as if dipped in ink. They too could see the lake from up there. They banked, circled, and landed, braking with their wings and stretching out their slim red legs in front of them like planes lowering their landing gear, almost all of them simultaneously. There couldn't have been more than three seconds between the first one touching down and the last. The moment the first reached the surface of the lake you could see something was wrong, but it was already too late. There should have been a shower of spray, a thousand droplets sparkling in the sun, but as they landed they only stirred up a tarry wave that brought them to an abrupt halt, as if they had landed in stringy glue. It wasn't a lake: it was a pool of oil—several square miles of it. We should have known. The fleeing Iraqis had uncapped all the wells, but this was the first one we'd seen and from a distance, against the light, it looked like a lake. Maybe it was wishful thinking—us wanting to see a lake after so many days in the desert. The ibises had been fooled as well . . .

Cote broke off and stared straight ahead. Hélène lit a cigarette and looked at him in profile. A muscle was twitching beneath his right cheek. He wiped his palms on his pants.

It was terrible to watch. We sat there transfixed and couldn't stop staring down at the birds. Of course they tried to take off again immediately, but they couldn't. Their primaries were already sticky with oil. Their breasts were sticky. They couldn't move forward in that goddamn filthy soup. And they were much too far from shore. Then they began to twist their necks around, trying to clean off their feathers, and just got oil on their beaks as well, on their heads. They started to panic and beat their huge wings against the oil—we could hear it—but they only splashed themselves with more. It wasn't oily water, it was pure crude oil. They swam in circles on the carpet of oil. We could hear them. Usually, ibises don't call or sing. But now they stretched their necks up as far as they could, pointed their curved beaks at the sky like drowning things, and screeched. It was horrible how quickly their feathers got so covered in oil their skin couldn't transpire, and slowly they started to suffocate. I sat there on

my Bradley with the sun in my eyes and watched the seven ibises stretch out their necks and point their beaks straight up, as if beseeching the sun for help. Nothing all around us but desert and away on the horizon high-tension lines and billows of smoke and below us the dying birds in a pool of oil. The weaker they got, the more they stretched out their necks and opened their beaks. Then the order to move out came over our radios. We were to drive south toward the airfield in Jalibah. I ordered two of my men to shoot them. We walked the hundred yards down to the shore of the pool and my men stood there at the edge and shot the poor beasts.

Hélène sat at the open window of her living room recalling Cote's story about the birds and his long silence afterwards and how at last he stood up and said he had an appointment with his analyst, Dr. Mehran, and then she thought about how he said the words bloody mess.

Gradually, day dawned. Most of the cars stopping at the intersection had already turned off their headlights. The gutters were being sluiced clean and a grizzled black man in the green uniform of the Department of Sanitation positioned his dam of rags behind the manhole from which the water was flowing, then followed the stream along the gutter with slow strokes of his broom, past her window and down the street toward the rue de Charonne. She felt as hollow and empty as the morning and decided to make herself a cup of coffee.

While the kettle came to a boil, she slid her bare feet into the embroidered Moroccan mules with turned-up toes she wore in the house and went downstairs, out the front door, and into the fragrant cave of the bakery next door to buy croissants. Back upstairs, she made coffee while her husband still slept.

Some changes were made after this second failure. Hélène's husband booked them a trip to Prague for the end of October. He rented a vacation apartment in the vineyards near the television tower, a part of the city the tourist wave hadn't reached yet. There was an American bookstore with a tea room and several paths led down into the Old City. The polyglot Czech who rented them the place had advised against taking the shortest one that led through Žižkov. He said that under the Communists, gypsies from Slovakia had been relocated there and had turned the whole neighborhood into a sewer, and a dangerous one at that.

But in their walks through Žižkov they never saw anything out of the ordinary, were never subjected to any kind of aggression, and never had to worry about the pickpockets much more likely to be found among the swarms of people on the Charles Bridge or the Royal Way. In order to see the bridge at least once without being hassled, they set their alarm for early and got there before sunrise. From the river bank it looked like a silhouette cut from

paper or a magic lantern scene. The first souvenir dealers and sidewalk painters were already setting up their stands.

And in Žižkov they found a restaurant that was reasonably priced and good. Ordering a meal was like a lottery, since the menu was only in Czech and the waitress spoke nothing else. The place was obviously well-known to jazz aficionados and every night around ten, the dining room began to fill up with people who hadn't come to eat, but just ordered beer and waited for the musicians to arrive after midnight and start jamming.

Hélène and her husband were both feeling unsure of themselves. It showed in the solicitous way he treated her, almost as if she was an invalid or a convalescent still too weak to take long walks or open doors for herself. Hélène's confidence, her absolute certainty that the treatment in the American Hospital would succeed sooner or later hadn't been destroyed, but it was shaken. Both were suddenly aware that the results of their efforts were a completely open question. There was no law that said their exertions, their painstaking adherence to all the instructions they had been given, would automatically be rewarded with the birth of a child.

But although her husband treated her with exaggerated care, like a delicate treasure of great beauty whose owner no longer lifts it from its velvet-lined case for fear of breaking it, they also got into quarrels more often than before. They usually began over some trivial event that made him reproach her for not thinking positively enough, not wishing confidently enough, for being too fatalistic, defeatist, submissive. For his part, despite their latest setback, he returned to his conviction from before they began the IVF, his belief in the power of the will to overcome all obstacles.

Two unsuccessful attempts were still completely normal and no reason to abandon hope and confidence, but a silent tension began to develop and Hélène, who for nearly two years had been having the strange experience of feeling changes in her body caused by external agents—dilations and cramps, swelling ovaries, secretions and hormones working inside her, on her skin, on her psyche— Hélène began to see herself as a mere vessel for the performing of all sorts of chemical reactions, a vessel that needed to be rinsed out from time to time and prepared for a new experiment.

Discussion was called for, of course. Anne-Laure greeted them cordially and even Le Goff's office—with the sailing photos lending it a cozy Breton atmosphere—seemed like the home of an old friend. As soon as the formalities were over, Hélène's husband asked for a candid assessment of their chances in light of the unexpected termination of two pregnancies that had both begun so positively. Le Goff, wearing his usual open white lab coat with several

throw-away ball points and a Montblanc fountain pen in the breast pocket over a gray pin-striped shirt and dark red silk tie, listened with the melancholy smile they had come to know. Then he folded his hands and declared that it was normal to have two failures. With some couples it worked the first time, with others not until the third, fourth, or fifth time. With some it never worked.

There is no rule, only individual cases, and the best thing—the only thing you can do is stay as relaxed and optimistic as you can. A failed attempt doesn't make the next try any less likely to succeed. Each time you're starting from zero again and your chances are just as good.

But then he explained that because of the similar course of both failed protocols, he wanted to perform an additional examination. The morphology of the fertilized ova had had no visible indications that would lead one to expect problems in their development. The next time they tried (he looked up and smiled at them over the tops of his gold wire-rim glasses: there would be a next time, wouldn't there?) he was thinking of not making the transfer until the blastocyst stage, that is, on the fifth or sixth day after the egg aspiration, so he could observe the development of the embryo longer and because at that point, the endometrium would be optimally ready to receive it. But he was still keeping this in reserve.

Now, I don't want to alarm you. What I'm saying here is pure speculation and not very likely. I'm only mentioning it so we won't have to blame ourselves for not exploring every path, however unlikely. So I'd like to do a genetic screening, a chromosomal blood study. For example, there are mutations in the clotting factors V Leiden and II (prothrombin), that can lead to a higher risk of thromboses and embolisms and could be the reason for the failures.

If that were the case, was there anything that could be done to prevent it?

If it is the case, anticoagulant drugs can prevent a miscarriage. Then there's another factor that predisposes to frequent miscarriages: mutations in the methylene-tetrahydrofolate reductase gene, an enzyme that regulates folate metabolism. A folate deficiency can also contribute to an increased rate of miscarriage. And (he anticipated their question) can be treated with dosages of folic acid. And then we'll do an immunologic test to make sure you're not forming any autologous antibodies against phospholipids, and also a hysteroscopy—but that can wait until the beginning of the new year so you get a little relief from us. Why don't you go on a nice trip together!

Hélène and her husband left the American Hospital numbed by all the medical jargon and uncertain if the consult was more encouraging or discouraging.

In early March, as if in response to Le Goff's suggestion, they drove to Montigny-sur-

Loing for an extended weekend in the Auberge de la Vanne Rouge, where they hadn't been for a long time. At night, the water rushed over the weir outside their open window as it always had, but it rained a lot, the parrot had died, and the restaurant had a new chef who either wasn't as good as the old one or was having a bad day. In the evening they sat in the salon with the fireplace and watched the film awards. The prize for the best movie of the year went to Savage Nights, the extremely disturbing work of an HIV-positive director—and lead actor—whose days were numbered. The film celebrates life as burning the candle at both ends in a frenetic send-up of all bourgeois conventions and yearnings. Hélène remembered seeing the film six months ago. They had both left the theater feeling subdued and the whole way home and for the rest of the evening, their lives had felt vapid and hypocritical, though they didn't admit this to each other.

At the end of April they celebrated the eightieth birthday of Hélène's grandmother in her little railway employees' flat in the rue des Batignolles. The lunch lasted several hours and segued directly into afternoon coffee. Lucette, the overweight and powerful-smelling concierge of the building, was also invited. For her, the stairway to the fourth floor was a via dolorosa undertaken only with the prospect of a leg of lamb with the white beans she called péteuses and several pieces of cake. After the heavy meal, they all rose from the oak table laden with Gien porcelain that took up most of the small living room. One after another, they squeezed between it and the windows or the sideboard and out the door. The lilacs were blooming and to work off their meal, they had promised Hélène's grandmother an excursion to the Bois de Boulogne. They would take a walk through the Jardin de Bagatelle beyond the Auteuil racetrack.

Hélène walked slowly along the gravel paths, arm in arm with her grandmother, while the other two set different tempos a little behind or ahead of them. When they reached the massive stand of lilac bushes—an impenetrable hedge fifteen feet high that encloses the rose garden on two sides—and smelled their perfume, tears welled up in the old woman's eyes and she thanked Hélène.

I haven't been here for more than thirty years! The last time was with my poor Gus and we were pushing you in a baby carriage. It's so beautiful! She blew her nose into a cotton handkerchief and as they resumed their walk, Hélène's grandmother limping along both heavy and light on her granddaughter's arm, she kept repeating: it's beautiful, so beautiful!

The light of the spring sun was flat, the heavy flower heads nodded in all the colors from white to pale violet to dark purple, and a mild breeze carried their perfume into every corner of the rose garden.