

Stillborn

Flash Fiction for Guests of the WordFeeder
(See www.WordFeeder.US for story embeds.)
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*Except for a few details, this is a true accounting of actual events
as told to the WordFeeder by one of the principals in the story you are about to read.
The attached birth certificate has been redacted to protect the identity of
one of the principals and his family, but is nonetheless real. -wf*

"So did ja read it yet?" It was Stallings habit to come into his colleague's office without knocking, and tonight was no exception. Knocking conveyed a certain respect that might suggest that he and you were equal, and that wasn't something he would ever concede.

"Read what?" Penelope responded, not bothering to look up. Looking up would let her intruder conclude that he could command her attention which he could, but only if she let him.

There's was a world in which everything counted.

They had slept together... Wait. No, that's too romantic a way to put it. More like they had sex together once over a year ago. Her team had been going nonstop, around the clock on a special project. No sleep. Lots of pizza. They both needed a break and took it on her couch. Twenty minutes later, they were back to work.

"This," he told her, throwing a classified file on her desk, causing the two short piles she had in front of her to mush together as it landed, covering up the form she was filling out when he'd walked in.

"Hey!! You think maybe you shouldn't piss off the superior who writes your evaluations?!" Her voice was calm enough, but she wasn't kidding... and he knew it. "What is this?" she asked, still not looking at him, turning in her chair to put her shoeless feet, crossed at her ankles, on the corner of her desk she kept clear for just that reason.

"An entry level NSA researcher picked it up off some guy's family blog when it tested positive for the query we sent them."

"Remind me..."

"The one that looks for references to suspect births, 1940 to 1950, that meet the profile our psycho-bananas consultant gave us.

"You know, I've never seen him without his lab coat." It was rhetorical observation not meant to solicit a response, her eyes skimming the disclaimer on the cover sheet, paying special attention to the signatures of those who had seen it recently. "Where was this one?"

“Oklahoma. 1946. It was part of a memoir written by his mother when she was gravely ill, about a time when she was a delivery nurse, just after the war. Take a look. I’ll get us some coffee.” And he left.

Opening the folder, it seemed for a moment that she couldn’t move her eyes off the title, but she did and read the copy of the handwritten text the blogger had published. His mother was from an age before computers, and had never learned to type. Her penmanship was steady, deliberate and easy to read despite the woman’s advanced age and condition.

Oklahoma City, November 20, 1946, just after 10 AM.

It had been a slow shift since I had come on at 8 when it was still cool enough that the air flowing from the open double doors at the end of the corridor near the maternity ward made the place bearable. Later on that day, not even the large floor fans we had would keep me and the other staff from perspiring through the starched white outfits which were required wearing at the time. I remember that day because it was unseasonably hot, but mostly because of the one military couple that came in from Tinker Field whose delivery made me question what I believed and, more importantly, what I didn’t. You know, son, I’ve never been a particularly religious person. Looking back now that I face the end of me, this is the one event in all the years that makes me question whether or not I might have missed something.

They were in their early thirties. He was a Captain in new Air Force they created after the war. With nothing more than a simple infirmary on the base, he had taken the chance to drive his wife to our hospital, fearing that, if it was a problem delivery, the corpsmen at Tinker wouldn’t be able to handle it. It was a risky decision given her condition and the distance, but these were determined people. The mother, in particular, was going to have her child, regardless of the cost. What irony that the Captain had survived three years in the war unscathed, only to come back to have his wife’s life threatened by something so routine as the birth of their second child.

She was a slight woman, barely 5 feet tall, weighing just 100 pounds before she had become pregnant. Labor had actually started more than a day earlier, slowly, with its intensity and the timing of contractions coming and going unevenly. When she arrived, we found her in agony, writhing in pain. The child, still inside her, was huge relative to her size, and was cavorting, turning and rolling, fighting to get out. Nowadays, they would have done a Cesarean, but not then. For whatever reasons, the doctor agreed to a vaginal birth.

As was the habit at that time, the Captain stayed in the waiting room while his wife fought alone, with the doctor, me and another nurse, to push out her son. After what wasn’t more than 20 minutes, the wife began to deteriorate, the medications we had given her having done little to resolve the difficult situation in which she and her baby found themselves. Even without the monitors and other technology we have now, it was clear they were both in serious trouble. Sending the other nurse for a second doctor to assist him if necessary, the attending went into the waiting room, just outside, to speak to the Captain.

So quickly had the doctor been moving that the swinging door to the delivery room had become stuck open, and I could see the Captain rising to his feet. Fearing the loss of the baby, or the mother, or both, the doctor asked the Captain, if it were necessary to make the choice, should he save his wife or child. It was a question he had to ask, given the religious beliefs of some of our patients, but these were Jewish people and I'm not sure it was a problem for them. I remember the Captain looking past the doctor, into the delivery room, the full weight of what he would say clear on his face. "You save my wife, doctor," he said without the least uncertainty in his voice, turning his head to face the physician to make sure his decision was clear. "Save my wife." (I remember wondering later if I would ever hear a more profound statement of love given what he stood to lose. Whatever his beliefs, they served him well.) His voice was resolute, its sound hanging in the warm air while his eyes followed the doctor who rushed back into the delivery room, the second doctor and the other nurse almost running down the hall right behind him.

Half an hour later, it was over. The lifeless body of their son lay unceremoniously on bloody towels in a tray on a table along the far wall while we continued to help the mother. The other nurse, so affected by the loss of the child, left to start the paperwork, so she said, but no one could blame her, and I did my job trying not to look up and across the room.

It was then, son, a full five, maybe 10 minutes after the delivery, that I heard... no felt is more like it, the sound of a hand reaching into my head, as if to pull my mind toward it. I felt panic and fear, not that I had felt before, but what I realize now was the dread and sadness of pending death. I felt life slipping away uncontrollably – I cannot, even today, explain the power of this calling, the memory of which time has done nothing but enhance. – and found myself drawn away from the wife, semi-conscious on the delivery table, to the baby, still motionless where the doctor had laid him to rest.

What I did next was by compulsion, by the instructions of an unseen intelligence, something so primal and yet so compelling, I had no choice. Picking up the child, still wet from the delivery, I shook it violently, back and forth in front of me, and then I stopped. The doctors were no doubt alarmed, but I wasn't paying attention, not to them, still holding the body of the baby a foot in front of me. And then, as if nothing had happened, his head shook back and forth on its own, his eyes, never cleaned after birth, opened, and his color began to normalize, his legs and arms beginning to move normally. And the fist in my head went away as suddenly as it had arrived.

I was surprised, pleasantly so, to find out years later that the child had not only survived, but appeared to be normal in all respects and, in fact, quite intelligent. You had to have been there, son. Far from thinking these to be the ravings of a sick old woman, it was, as you're fond of saying, an experience you can take to the bank. I've seen an old photostat of his birth certificate, the word "stillborn" typed in, then crossed out. (I've enclosed that copy for you to see. Take good care of it.) Make what you want of what I have told you, but it was real and says something, although I don't know what, about the human condition and about a certain power we may all have within us.

"Well," Stallings asked on his way back into her office, the frosted glass door to her office still closing behind him. "What do you think?"

“I think it’s a curious story, that we should get a copy of the birth certificate and see where it takes us, but that Beaker,” her pet name for their scientist consultant, “has his pocket protector up his ass.”

“Here,” he said, reaching across her desk to hand her the coffee he promised, the sound of his voice muffled by the oversized bite of the cinnamon bun he was holding. “Want some?”

“What, after you’ve had your mouth on it?”

“That didn’t used to bother you.”

“Jeeze, you’re so repulsive sometimes,” she spoke honestly and quickly which was always her style. “What about the birth certificate?” She didn’t have time for his nonsense.

“Gone. Missing. The son never got it, and the original’s long gone.”

“Okay, trace the kid through his father’s military record. There couldn’t have been that many Jewish Captains at Tinker Field on that day in November. And do it yourself,” meaning, as Stallings knew she did, that he should keep it to himself, entirely on computer if possible, without hinting at the importance of any inquiries he’d have to make.

“I’ll take care of it. ...You don’t buy this theory about near death birth experiences, do you?” Stallings asked a serious question, trying to get back into her good graces by focusing on the task at hand.

“Beaker says that there’s a kernel of intelligence, a core life force in our brains that is the last thing of us to die, that cries out at the end in one last desperate attempt to get help. That I’m willing to buy, but can a near death event ignite something, some special capability in an infant? Can that child grow up, perfecting its ability to reach out to other minds, to become our mission’s target?”

“The one that comes and goes, and can never be killed?” Stallings recited the popular legend. “The one with telepathic powers and who can move things with his mind?”

“Yeh, that one. Telepathy, maybe, using very low power bio-chemically produced electromagnetic waves, having perfected his ability to control and interpret their frequencies. Maybe. Telekinesis, on the other hand would require substantial forces way beyond what any human can produce outside the SyFy channel.” Clearly annoyed by it all, she was busy reorganizing the papers on her desk. “I think it’s an agency myth and that we’re wasting my team’s time and money. Now get the fuck out of here and do your job.”

Standing up from the chair in the front of her desk, taking one last look at the front of the sleeveless t-shirt was wearing – because he was a creep and couldn’t help himself – he turned toward the door only to be surprised by the man, in his early 60s, standing inside Penelope’s office just a few feet in front of him. “Who.. When did you...,” and his mind went blank, his body, limp but still standing.

“Wait over there,” the man said pointing to the open space on the wall next to the bookcases. And that’s exactly what Stallings did, hugging the wall, his shoulders down as if he had been shamed by his third grade teacher, Mrs. Cronmiller, and told to stand in the corner.

“Hi, honey.”

“Hey, Dad.” By the smile on her face and way her eyes opened, it was clear she was glad to see him, although they talked frequently, even if there was no phone or e-mail involved. Even now, just in case someone was listening, everything he said and she asked or answered was in their heads, mind to mind. A sort of dampening field he radiated allowed him to move unnoticed by those who would see him. Her agency records said she had been adopted by a wonderful couple, now deceased, but made no mention of the man being her biological father.

“Is Bozo going to be a problem?” he needed to know, for his own safety and hers as well.

“No. He won’t remember any of this, just what I want him to recall, and he won’t follow up. Besides, I’ve already fixed Grand Daddy’s military records.”

“Thanks, honey. Anything you need me to look into for you?”

“A couple of things. Why don’t you buy me dinner at that roadhouse you love, where the band is too loud for anyone to hear us, and we’ll talk about it?”

And he smiled back, knowing it would, as always, be the highlight of his day. Looking at Stallings, still standing there in the corner, he turned and opened the door, sending Agent Bozo through it and back to his office without his suspecting or remembering a thing.

-wf

Writing, Flash Fiction, Life