

THE INFANT DEPARTMENT

Deborah Bauer, Phoenix College

Honorable Mention, Short Story

It is odd that Rachel is not thinking of babies today. She is not peeking into baby carriers and strollers, or peering through car windows making sure infants are buckled into car seats. She has taken a baby-break and today she envisions a home office where everything has its place. Bookcases are on sale at Wal-Mart, and they assemble for free. She is busy imagining stacks of books organized in subject and size, when she hears a soft voice, almost a whisper, directed her way.

"Ma'am do you have any change, anything you could spare?" A young woman with a shopping cart is tucked next to the row of eight soda machines, under the large white letters spelling out, "One-Hour Photo," and "Pharmacy." Rachel glances into the shopping cart expecting to see kittens or puppies, but there are two small twin boys on defuzzed baby blankets, curled like yin and yang in the afternoon heat. A pungent cloud rises from their bodies, a mix of stale cigarettes and yesterday's urine.

Rachel towers above the woman. They are barely the same species, let alone the same gender. If the woman is slight and nearly non-existent, Rachel is big-boned and present. She's wearing name-brand denim shorts and Birkenstock sandals. Her short hair is streaked blonde to hide the gray. She turned fifty in May, but looks younger, with still-smooth skin she protects from the direct sun.

"Ma'am, can you help us out?" The woman's voice is blatant now, not to be ignored. Her wisps of hair are gathered into a thin ponytail. Her clavicles rise above the stretched neckline of her tee shirt like the juxtaposed handles of two wooden spoons. Rachel's eyes travel down to a football-size abdomen, seemingly swelling on its own volition, disconnected from the fleshless body housing it. A baby.

"Yes. Yes, of course." Rachel fishes in her purse and comes up with a five-dollar bill.

"Thank you, and may God bless." The woman's eyes meet Rachel's as she takes the money. There is no uneasiness, no apology.

Rachel's no longer in a hurry to get through the automatic doors. "When's the baby due?" Has this woman received prenatal care? Does she know when it was conceived? Or by who?

"Next month, soon enough. They say you should time it so you're not pregnant in the summer here...I should have listened. But you can't always pick the time and place." The woman laughs then, not nervously, but with high clear musical tones, and Rachel realizes she is talking to a teen maybe even younger than her daughter Elena who is a sophomore at the university in Tucson.

"Babies bring blessings. They always bring the best of luck." Rachel says this with all the prophecy and hope her voice can muster.

She tells Franklin even before he has twisted the top off of his beer. She knows he hates having ideas thrown at him like a flash flood when he first gets home, but she never has the patience for good timing. She keeps her back to him while she stirs eggplant and garlic on the stove.

"I found a baby in front of Wal-Mart of all places. 'You can get it for less'." Rachel has been researching web sites with names like Cherished Children International, Los Ninos, and World Adoption. No age restrictions. Photos of smiling, well-fed, healthy, happy babies. None of the crib bangers, rockers with dull eyes, the attachment-afflicted orphans she once watched in psychology class videos. But there were charges for home study, pre and post-placement supervision, coordination, legal costs, hospitalization and exams, document translation, travel, lodging, passport, authentication of documents. More than they could afford with two kids in college.

"Give it up Rachel. Please. I'm through with this conversation. We have two children already. We're through having children." The catsup hits the mustard as he slams the fridge door. He is always slamming things and she's not sure if the havoc he creates is intended as punctuation, or a result of his unrestrained, tall-man strength.

"Some women breed babies like kittens. This woman won't even miss it. She'll churn out a new one in nine months, even two at a time if she tries hard enough. They need to put birth control in the water system in Mesa, Arizona, damn it. I'm tired of seeing women have babies when they don't have the means to take care of them, especially when I want a baby so bad. "Rachel is surprised by her own bitterness, but months of baby-lust has left her convinced that the women that don't need babies are precisely the ones that have them. She calls the young fertile women, "The Breeders", in her thoughts. Their grocery carts are full of boxes of Cocoa Krispies and Kraft Macaroni and Cheese. They blow smoke in the faces of children with chronic ear infections, and they never buy fresh fruit.

The next afternoon Rachel drives with the window down and takes a deep breath. It is the July monsoon season and it rained the night before. Instead of splattering the car with craters of wet dust, a full downpour woke her during the night and she can still smell the moisture steaming up from the hot ground. She stops by the ATM for money before she drives on to the Wal-Mart. Across from the store she notices a string of ancient motels for the first time. Their darkened neon signs announce, "Tri-City Inn," "Hiway Host," "Kiva Lodge," a reminder of the old days when Main Street carried travelers from the east to Phoenix. Now they house people without permanent addresses. Travelers of a different sort. The kidney-shaped swimming pools are drained and fenced, or filled in and covered with brown grass. She wonders which one they live in.

There they are. She sees them even before she parks. The little boys are in diapers and flip-flops, squatting on the gray pebble cement on either side of their mother. One of the twins is grinding a cigarette butt into the pavement, a circular spot where scores of smokes have been snuffed out leaving a glossy black moon of tar and nicotine. The other twin is shredding a styrofoam cup.

"Hi." Rachel feels her muscles force a smile. "Here. This is for you." She gives the woman the bill she has folded into her palm.

"Well, thanks. I appreciate it."

The woman must certainly wonder what Rachel wants with her. Rachel knows she is not used to return customers, and a twenty is hard to come by. Rachel's eyes head downward to the mound under the shirt.

"Do you want to feel? It's going to town right now." The woman takes Rachel's hand and puts it on her belly, "It just kicked." Rachel feels a slight tremor under the skin. She moves her hand across the smooth surface, and probes a sharp point, perhaps a little elbow or knee. It's such an intimate thing to do to a stranger, to touch a hill of baby flesh. It has always baffled her to think that just because a woman is pregnant, it's suddenly okay to run a hand along a stomach, or to listen with a pressed ear to the sound of the intestines rumbling just under the surface. Rachel wants to stretch out these moments, to place her mouth close to the mound and whisper, "I'm here for you." She imagines they are all three in collusion now. The woman, herself, and the baby. They will not exchange the words. They are safe as long as they don't. Rachel will wait for a sign.

"Another baby is the only solution for us to fix our lives." She was sure of this truth as soon as the words spilled out with no context to precede them. Rachel entered the kitchen as she spoke and Franklin looked up from his beer and newspaper.

"What are you talking about? You can't take someone's baby. It doesn't work that way. And there is a reason why Maricopa County will not give babies to couples that are fifty. There is nothing wrong with our lives. Our children grew up and went to college. That's it." His forehead is creased and his eyebrows run together in a frown. Rachel feels a little sorry for him. But she presses on.

"We'll have one more child, and this time we'll be more conscious of how we do things, the things we say, the environmental influences on the individual temperament. I don't think we were conscious enough with Elena and Max. Now we know what to do. Think of it as something we owe society." She is proud of her reasoning. She has managed to almost rationalize her emotions. Her desire for a baby is really more innate, almost biological. Something she feels deep in her vital organs, but maybe Franklin can understand this.

"Rachel." He doesn't understand. His paper is down on his lap. "You're bored with life right now being in-between kids and grandkids. Believe me, once you got a baby, the feedings, the shitty diapers, the babysitters every time you left the house. You wouldn't want it. And you couldn't give a baby back once you got one. You can't decide you want to return it like a jacket. "

Rachel walks out of the kitchen. He hardly noticed Elena and Max through most of their childhood anyway. He was one of those dads who continued to do his own thing, like when he built a sailboat, or got a real estate license. He didn't especially want kids to begin with. She had begged for each one. First asking to get married when he wanted to live together forever with her paying her own way. Why buy the

cow when you can get the milk for free? And then she begged for just one child, "Pretty please." Then when Elana was fifteen months during a camping trip on the coast she begged again, "Pretty, pretty please, just one more," and Franklin relented just to have the crazy tent-sex she promised that night. And he acted the same way with pets. Never agreeing outright to take on new responsibility, but adjusting just the same. She decides she'll just bring the baby home like a new puppy when the time comes.

Rachel now plans daily trips to Wal-Mart to pick up dishwasher soap, light-bulbs, microwave popcorn, items she used to pick up at Safeway during her weekly grocery shopping. She doesn't always make contact. But when she does, she always gives the woman money from the ATM. Sometimes she just sits in the car watching them, waiting for something. And sometimes she notices the woman watching her, too.

One day they are gone. The expanse of cement gray wall is deserted. Rachel doesn't need to park the car to see it. And after several days she walks into the store and asks the gray-haired "Greeter" in the blue vest, "Have you seen the pregnant lady with the two little kids napping in a shopping cart? The ones who were out in front everyday?"

"Were they panhandling?" The corners of the Greeter's crimson mouth are turned down in disapproval.

"I don't think so. Just waiting for a ride." Rachel feels protective. She realizes that the soda machines kept them from being spotted by employees.

She tells Franklin at dinner, "They're gone."

"Who is gone?"

She knows he knows. He won't give her the satisfaction.

"The pregnant lady with the toddlers in the shopping cart. They've been gone for twelve straight days. I hope they're okay. It's so hot now."

"Don't tell me you've been going to Wal-Mart everyday."

She lies. "Well, not everyday. Just when I need something. They have good prices."

"It seems to me you've always boycotted Wal-Mart in favor of the little guy, before you met this woman. Didn't Wal-Mart wipe small business off the face of the planet?"

"Stop changing the subject. She's gone."

At the sink Rachel waits for the white noise of the running water to calm the thunder in her head. She wishes now she had offered support, or at least exchanged names and addresses with the little family. Or had followed them home to see where they lived. She wishes she had not been so focused on the baby, but on the woman's needs. But she'd been afraid. The woman was too needy. And Rachel doesn't question her own jealousy. She feels it under her skin.

Then one day when Rachel cruises the parking lot she feels a flutter between her heart and her stomach almost before she sees them. They are back, claiming their spot next to the soda machines, and from her car Rachel observes that the belly is now flat, almost concave. Even so, the young woman looks more beat than ever. In the afternoon heat the skin is mottled on her cheeks as though she applied rouge in the dark. In the child seat part of the shopping cart, lay a blanketed bundle. The twins are in the basket.

"Where have you been? Is everything okay?" Rachel has a ready bill in between her palm and curled fingers.

"I guess it's as good as its going to get. She's healthy." The woman unwraps the blanket and Rachel gazes upon the smallest baby she's ever seen. She weighs three or four pounds. Her legs are bowed and her fingers are as thin as a bird's legs.

"She's so tiny."

"Yeah. I make them small, but sturdy. The boys were only two and a half pounds a piece when they came. Look, I was hoping you'd come today. I feel like I know you. Could you watch the baby for a minute while I make a phone call? I don't want to wake her now." Her eyes meet Rachel's they way they did that first day, boldly asking and expecting with no excuses.

The woman shakes the shoulders of the sleeping twins and hauls them out under their armpits, one by one. They rub their pink-rimmed eyes with their fists. Their thighs are imprinted with squares from the shopping cart. For a moment Rachel watches the group set off across the parking lot, but quickly turns away before she can see the direction they are headed.

She picks up the baby and cradles the soft head against her face. The baby is a warm caramel-brown, with a crown of gold, springy hair. She is beautiful. Rachel wonders if a transaction has been made. She no longer worries about what Franklin will say. She needs this baby and this baby needs her. She'll tell everyone it was a Mexican adoption. Now she thanks God that they never exchanged names, addresses. They can't find each other. They can't change their minds.

Rachel wheels the cart into the store. A vinyl covered path, bordered in red, leads to clothing for men, women, children, and ends at the far right-hand corner of the store, in the Infant Department.

Rachel fills her cart with tiny socks and shirts, baby blankets, a bathtub, a travel crib, bottles, formula, small bottles of juice, a carrier, a car seat. She settles the baby in the padded carrier right away, and places it into the child seat of the shopping cart. She pays for the items.

Outside she straps the car seat into the car. But she doesn't put the baby into the seat. Not quite yet, she says to herself. The baby should be changed. She probably needs liquids by now. The woman has been gone for over ninety minutes to make the phone call. The baby's eyes are wide open now. They are as round and black as the buttons on a Raggedy Ann doll, and her mouth makes little smacking sounds. She's a good baby, not fussy even when she's hungry. Rachel finds a bottle of apple juice in a bag and screws on a nipple. She picks up the baby and holds her close against her chest, while she drinks.

Rachel looks up and down the street studying the Hi-way Host, the Kiva Lodge, the Tri-City Inn, searching the landscape for the mother flanked by her two little ones, but hoping for an empty vista. Finally she makes them out in the distance, shimmering behind the heat waves rising off of the pavement. They are beetles scurrying along the line of toothpick palms, growing larger by the split-second. Rachel watches the mother pick up the twins, one under each arm. Her legs are flailing out to the side as she runs towards her. Rachel knows there is still time to strap the infant in the car seat and take off. She wants to do this with all of her being. She'll name her Angelica. Her tiny angel. But she can't lift her feet, and her arms hang heavy and stiff as if they were broken and set in heavy plaster casts.

So instead of taking off, all she can do is locate the diapers and wipes in her Wal-Mart bags and start to change the baby on the passenger seat, so she'll be clean and dry when her mother comes back to get her. And she bends down to whisper in her tiny ear; "I'll be here for you."

