

whitewashed horizons

Mari Stromquist

Paradise Valley Community College

Second Place, Short Story

BEN WOKE WITH HIS eyes still closed, so it took movement to remind him where he was. Instinctively he tensed his body, but for the moment the ride was smooth. The insides of his eyelids were red, and when he strained to open them the red was replaced with a sheer blue-white that blinded him before softening into the squares of the bus windows, creating individual photos of the sky outside. He always felt lonely when he first awoke, and now, remembering that he was heading away from home, he felt lonelier than ever.

He thought of his mother. She was probably still at the terminal, an hour after his bus departed. She was probably still waiting, and worrying.

"It's just for the weekend," he'd reminded her while they waited. "And he is my dad. It's not like I'm going to some stranger's house." But to himself he added: *Though it might as well be.*

"And we can't fight partial custody. And, well, this is the first time he's asked me since..." Ben didn't want to say "divorce." All his feelings could not be expressed in that two-syllable word.

His mother had sat silent while he spoke, clutching his ticket for fear he might lose it before the bus arrived. He wished she would trust him more. He was fifteen, after all, and they had become a two-person family after his father left. Ben figured that was it—she probably felt she could never depend on anyone again. *But I'm still with you*, Ben thought resentfully. Yet in his heart he knew he had also showed her, in his own foolish way, that she could not depend on him either.

One midnight, a few weeks after the divorce, when he'd had trouble falling asleep again, Ben noticed a line of orange light fill the slit under his door. After what seemed like hours trying to ignore it Ben came out to find his mother in the fully lit kitchen sitting on the counter beside the brewing coffee, her thin white legs dangling, so deep in thought that for the first five minutes she did not notice his presence. Ben did not want to approach her but was afraid she would catch him standing there spying, so he coughed suddenly as though he had just entered. She startled back into herself and, realizing Ben, invited him to sit beside her on the counter—where he was never allowed to sit—and even offered him coffee—which he was never allowed to drink—so he could not refuse.

They said nothing this whole time. His mother watched her knees, and Ben watched her knuckles whiten around the mug. He wanted to hug her, to show her he understood, but his body was lead. Until now Ben wondered if there was telepathy between parents and children, because out of nowhere her fingers unclasped from their death grip on her mug and she let out a sob and swung around to wrap his rigid body as though he were a little child again. It was as though she herself were a child, hunched and shrunken against him. Until now he could not understand or forgive himself for pulling suddenly away, from fear of suffocation. He had retreated into the dark corner between the cabinets, and his eyes returned to his knees, afraid to look up and see if hers were hurt.

Ben knew then that the moment was lost, that she would never again come to him for compassion. She had seen that he was still only a baby, and that she had to save him from his own pain instead of transferring hers to him. He felt worse than a baby. Even babies, with their small fragile bodies, could handle being hugged.

If only she knew now how much he didn't want to go. Even though there was a part of him that longed to see his father, not for closure but for the possibility of being whole again, he knew it was foolish to place such hope and responsibility on a person who had abandoned him six months ago. He knew that in reality this visit was more likely to further crush him than complete him.

He fingered the stub of his orange ticket, with his fate spelled out in digital letters: *546 Phoenix to Tucson- arrival 3 pm-non-refundable*. The old man beside him had such long legs he had to angle them sideways, forcing his knee into Ben's. He was looking ahead and smiling, the kind of watery amused smile that made Ben wonder if he was either wise or senile. For some reason, the old man's knowing smile made Ben more uncomfortable than his sharp-boned knee. A sudden worry popped into his mind that he'd revealed something in his sleep. Maybe he'd had one of those divorce dreams again and droned his life story for the entire row to hear. Moving his head only slightly, Ben stole a glance across the aisle. Would the next row have heard him too? The girl sitting across wore the same self-content smile, her lips curling upward like a doll's bow mouth. She rested her hands over her stomach, which was large for such a young girl, not in proportion to the rest of her tiny body. It rounded under her overalls, and Ben realized that she was pregnant. This girl, who couldn't be older than himself, was about to have a baby and looked so serene in her world while he drowned in his own mix of selfish worries.

Ben had wanted so badly to forget that a baby was the main reason he dreaded visiting his father. His father's new wife had just given birth to a boy, and already a child he had never even seen had such power over him. God, what a sinner he was—hating a baby, and worse, half his flesh and blood. But in his mind his father's second son was not a baby but a full-grown teenage boy: Ben's replacement. The sourness rose inside him, but the old man smelled like medicine, a bitter eucalyptus scent, and as Ben breathed deep, the smell alone soothed him.

Still, he needed fresh air. As if he'd willed it, the bus turned off the road, slowing to a stop over the crunch of gravel. Ben hoisted himself higher in his seat to strain a view from the window across. *Thank God!* A Texaco Station. The old man could not have moved slower, but with sudden patience Ben at last reached the door and nearly threw himself down the stairs like Jonah from the whale.

"Break time! If you're not back in twenty, we depart without." The driver's booming voice was diluted by the roar of the motor and the rush of the outdoor wind. Even in October, the sky was still clear and the sun strong in Arizona, but despite the few spurts of wind it was a still day, and there was a rawness in the air that took the edge off the heat.

The passengers scattered. Some leaned against the bus for a smoke, while a few groups headed across the street to another store. Ben went straight to the food-mart. Once inside he headed for the back of the store to avoid the dark eyes of the cashier

looking suspiciously at his book bag. He opened one of the cooler doors, and the icy air surrounded his body until he thought he would never close it again. But he took a bottle of water and his place in the winding line. By the time he reached the magazine rack by the counter, nearly fifteen minutes had passed. Absentmindedly he twirled the rack and lightly fanned the glossy pages.

"Don't touch unless you plan to buy the whole rack."

Ben jerked his head to meet the cashier staring at him again, this time threateningly. He jammed his left hand into his pocket, and when it was finally his turn he didn't look up when he asked for the restrooms.

"You mean *restroom*. Outside, 'round back."

Ben stuffed the water into his book bag and resisted the urge to slam the food-mart door behind him. He went around the building and was still looking down when he nearly bumped into somebody. It was the young pregnant girl from the bus. She seemed to be blushing, but maybe it was just from the heat, and Ben felt warmth enter his own cheeks. For some reason he felt embarrassed using a restroom after a woman.

The restroom was tiny and florescent-lit bright. The smell of ammonia nearly burnt the hair in his nostrils. Mingled in was a lighter, unfamiliar scent-less distinct. The white linoleum floor shined as if newly wiped. The toilet shined too, but he noticed with disappointment—no more toilet paper. Not even the cardboard roll. There was a paper towel dispenser by the sink, though. He cranked it. Empty too. Strange. Someone had cleaned the room but forgotten to refill the paper. He noticed then that the sink was full of paper towels, not crumpled, but dry and layered in whirls like brown ribbon. Slowly he pulled the pieces aside, and they floated to the ground. Below the top layer of paper was a loosely wrapped bundle, and when Ben split the opening a wrinkled pink face greeted him, its tiny eyes screwed shut. His heart stopped.

A baby! *Oh God. Dear God in Heaven.* He was afraid to keep looking, but suddenly the paper around its stomach rustled and rose; it was breathing! *Thank you.* His heart punched the wall of his chest. The baby's eyelids strained open and Ben found himself staring into the two indigo irises. They stared back. Then the little puckered mouth cracked and a clear, white cry burst from the puffed lungs and almost shattered him. In a strangely automatic movement, he lifted the baby from its porcelain cradle, still half-wrapped in paper towels, and drew it to his chest. Its body was warm. The sharp cry still echoed in his ears, but now the baby quieted to a soft gurgling.

He didn't even know what to think, but questions swam in his mind like fish in and out of sand tunnels. What was happening? Was he really here, holding this baby? Yes, its tiny heart was beating against his bursting chest. Why was it here? He'd read about things like this in the newspaper—babies abandoned in restroom stalls and even dumpsters. But it had never seemed real enough to happen to him. *Why me, for goodness sakes?*

Only one question was answered. This baby had a mother. She had just left. In his whirlpool mind an image of the young pregnant girl suddenly came into focus. *Her.* He would have to find her. Where? The bus. *Oh, God. The bus!* He was late. As fast and carefully

as he could, he lowered the baby into his book bag. Then he strapped the bag around him and held it close to his body. He walked in running motion, making long strides with his legs, so as not to bounce the baby. By the time he reached the front of the food-mart, the bus was already gone. And the girl was gone with it, miles and miles away from her baby, heading into the heart of Tucson. *How can you leave me like this?* he almost cried aloud. *What am I going to do?*

He had to find someone to help. *How about the man in food-mart? No. Remember the way he looked at me when I touched his magazines, like he wanted to kill me.* He would probably call the cops and accuse Ben of kidnapping. *The cops.* Now, why didn't he think of that before? They were there to help. Though the idea made him uneasy. Police cars with their sirens were big and nosy, and he wasn't ready. He couldn't even believe his own situation, much less have to explain it to a dozen uniformed officers. He needed to clear his mind.

Then he saw it. Across the street, just a little up the road, was a neon yellow sign atop a cabin-style building. *Ma's Diner.* That moment, it looked more inviting than his own home. He would find someone to help him there. The place was probably full of friendly, small-town folk who shared secrets and drank coffee all day. Ben realized how thirsty he was. Remembering his water, he took it from the side of his bag and chugged down half the bottle. Then he took one of the paper towels wrapping the baby, drenched it with water, wrung it, and molded it over the baby's forehead.

When he reached the diner, the baby was asleep again. *Good.* He could go in and observe his surroundings without drawing immediate attention. It was dark inside, but in a cozy way. Before taking a seat at the counter, Ben hid the bag under his stool, where it would be out of sight and danger. Even though it was lunchtime, the restaurant was almost empty. He tried to get a better view of the waitress's face to see if she looked friendly, but while his eyes followed he they stopped upon someone else. There, sitting at the table by the window, was the mother of the baby. She was staring, transfixed, at her water glass. Torn packets of Sweet n' Low littered her table like day-old confetti.

Ben's heart quickened again. *So she didn't leave on the bus. She couldn't bring herself to.* Neither could he bring himself to approach her. *You have to,* he told himself firmly. But what would he say to her?

Hi, you don't know me, but I've got something of yours? As if the baby were a coat or a purse. *Stupid.*

The waitress came to fill the girl's water, and when she looked up to say thanks her eyes froze, locked with Ben's. She pried away from his gaze, and before Ben could finish his thought, she clambered from the table and hurried to the door, letting it swing behind her. *Wait!* Ben scrambled down from the high stool, grabbed his book bag with the baby, and followed after her. He clutched the bag to him again, ready to run in whatever direction, but she had disappeared. Only the endless sky faced him, the sun so white and high it made the flat desert vaster and Ben feel more stranded in the middle of nowhere.

Not again. Please. He then noticed a shadow moving on the ground to his left. The girl was sitting there, at a loss for hiding places, her bowed back leaned against the building. She was looking into the distance, out at the whitewashed horizon, and in the sunlight her thin amber hair fell like feathers over her forehead.

He turned and, after a moment of eternal silence, cleared his throat. Still she did not acknowledge him. Her eyes stared straight onward, as though she were deaf and sightless.

"I think maybe you didn't mean to leave this behind. Not really." His own voice cut through the air surprisingly clear and steady. His legs, though, were too paralyzed to kneel, so he lowered his book bag to the ground, not a foot away from her. But she didn't shift her eyes toward the bag or look up at him. Her eyes cast down to her lap, revealing the blue cobweb veins of her almost transparent eyelids. His legs finally softened and he was able to bend them. Slowly he knelt beside her and to his relief she did not move away. Ben saw the baby begin to squirm and waken, without opening its eyes. Its pink arms spread, and it made a tiny sound, at last breaking the girl's trance. She turned toward Ben, then toward the bag, and he saw that her eyes were the same round and deep blue as her baby's.

"Don't you want to hold her?" Ben shuffled the bag closer and with a gentleness he did not know he contained, gathered the baby into his arms. Despite him, it watched its mother. Ben moved the baby toward her until its side brushed her shoulder, and after hesitating she took it and made a cradle over her stomach. For a long time she looked into its face, as its eyes stared fully back at her, until her body began to shake. Ben had an urge to hold her to stop the shaking, which grew more violent before her face erupted in a cry. The tears came streaming down her pale cheeks, over her nose and the cliff of her chin. He couldn't just sit there. Her arms were full, but his were free. With a sudden movement he tried to hug them both, though his arms were not wide enough, and together the three of them formed into a tight and shielded bundle. In a moment he would hardly believe, Ben felt tears drip on his arm and shut his eyes until all he could see was white.

