Make-Believe Mother

Marian Alert*
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Abstract

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Duchess lay on an old blanket loosely folded over a pile of straw in front of the water heater. Crouched on the wooden step, his denim patches close to his ears, Paul watched between the narrow boards of the railing.

"Is she going to have her puppies now?" he asked in a half whisper.

"We will see!" I sat carefully on the narrow step below his. Our conversation dwindled. My young pioneer studied every movement of his pet. Duchess was his everyday companion, the kind of friend a boy could talk to about anything, and she would understand.

"I hope she has a lot—fifteen maybe!" he said, standing beside the railing. The German Shepherd growled at the sudden movement, as she did when he rode too high above her shoulders. "Oooh, sorry, Duch!" he apologized. He sat down.

"Did the puppies just grow inside Duchess?" he asked without turning. I was sure he knew. "Hey, mom," he seemed to address Duchess, "Does it hurt to get born?"

"Yes," I said.

"How much? A lot?"
"Yes. But after a little while you don't even remember it."

"Did the puppies just grow—in her body?" he asked again, because when a fellow is four, what is real and what is make-believe are important.

"From just tiny little eggs," I tried to explain. The first small creature appeared at the opening and was smoothly expelled.

"Oh!" he whispered. He leaned over the railing. "Oh!" Duch licked the tiny animal vigorously with snapping jerks of her mouth. "Could we go down there?" he asked softly.

"Not yet. Why don't you turn around a little, then you can sit."

"Is she going to have another one?" he whispered.

I nodded. I leaned on the unconformable cement wall nearly an hour. I wanted to feel excited as he did. A second puppy was born. My back felt tired from sitting. "I'm going up and fix lunch now. I won't need any help today," I said. "Call you in a few minutes?"

"Okay."

The soup was just beginning to simmer when I heard the padded sound of moccasins on the stairs. The footsteps stopped in the kitchen door. "Hey, mom, she's got three now!" he said in a hushed tone. "I wish I could touch one."

"Let's wait till Dad comes home. You can go down with him. Are you hungry? Shall we have some soup?" I suggested.

"Mom, is that the way I got born? Did I used to be inside..."

"That's how a baby is born," I said cautiously. "You grew inside your mother's body—and when you were big enough, you were born! In a hospital though." Instantly I felt sorry.

"Inside—you?" Sensitively he formed the thought.

"No." He had not asked the question so meaningfully before.

"Was Shelley?" he posed, although he knew his sister was not adopted. I nodded. His face became flushed. Tears filled his eyes. "Well, gol, I want to!" he cried out.

I stood on my knees before him. Why did I feel guilty? I reached out to put my arms around him. Hesitantly he took a step toward me. The soup boiled over in sizzling draughts. I waited. He did not touch me. "Paul, I am your mother," I
said helplessly. "I mean I want to be." The small soft hands hung down at his sides. His light brown hair tipped forward, the cowlick sticking upward. The soup boiled over onto the heating element a second time. There was a pungent smell.

We ate without tasting. "You know Daddy's adopted. He thinks it's good," I said.

"Well how come Shelley . . . ?" His words burned. I tried to finish my sandwich. It was dry and hard to swallow.

"Shall we go down and see if Duch has any more puppies?"

"I'm goin' outside." He got out his boots and hunted for his mittens.

"I think your mittens are on the register," I offered without being asked. "I laid them there to dry. Shall I tie your cap?" He did not turn. The front door closed, not all the way. It pulled hard over the carpet.

I followed his steps to the open door. He was wading in snow as high as his waist. There were four hours until Dad would be home, and his other friend was becoming a mother.

The Branch

by Deborah Pui Young

Child Development, Soph.

glistening in clear shine
encircled by a solo sparrow's feet
dormant all the winter nights