

V I N T A G E

---

eBooks



NICE BIG AMERICAN BABY

**JUDY BUDNITZ**

---

**nice big american baby**

stories

**judy budnitz**

**vintage contemporaries**

vintage books

a division of random house, inc.

new york

---

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Praise](#)

[where we come from](#)

[I. before](#)

[2. during](#)

[3. after](#)

[flush](#)

[nadia](#)

[visitors](#)

[saving face](#)

[miracle](#)

[sales](#)

[elephant and boy](#)

[immersion](#)

[the kindest cut](#)

[preparedness](#)

[motherland](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

[also by judy budnitz](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

## Acclaim for Judy Budnitz's nice big american baby

"Powerful. . . . Graceful and singular. . . . Budnitz manages to be both funny and serious, whimsical and substantive: With a wry rap across the knuckles she draws our attention to vital things." —*The Washington Post Book World*

"The buzz is right: The short story is making a comeback. For proof, look no further than the spare, polished gems in Judy Budnitz's *Nice Big American Baby*." —*Mother Jones*

"It's Judy Budnitz's world, and we are all just visitors. Or so it seems when reading the fiction of this provocative writer. . . . Budnitz's new story collection serves up [a] potent stew of surrealism, comedy and horror." —*The Baltimore Sun*

"Excellent. . . . Budnitz invents outrageous plots that somehow carry the weight of truth. . . . Lovely, haunting."  
—*The New York Times Book Review*

"Thank God that Judy Budnitz is Judy Budnitz and no one else, and that no one else is Judy Budnitz. This collection is singular, unforgettable, and utterly affecting. . . . Budnitz has a way of investing so much soul in her stories that you buy it all, completely and utterly, and you can't turn the pages fast enough. She is one of the most consistently brave young writers we have." —Dave Eggers, author of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

"Provocative, disturbing, wry, and just plain fascinating, *Nice Big American Baby* is some of the best new American short fiction I've read in years." —Jill Owens, [Powells.com](http://Powells.com)

"Budnitz's voice is comfortable and perfectly pitched, and her characters live and think in ways that feel vaguely familiar. Yet the laws of the universe are different here. Tiny hints of strangeness slowly spread over every surface. . . . We are bystanders in Budnitz's world, and after a few hours here, it's hard to see arms, legs, babies, or anything else quite the same way again." —*The Village Voice*

"Budnitz's surreal tales leave us questioning the nature of familial love; with each curious twist the reader is left wanting to read more." —*People*

"These are truly astounding tales—dark, funny, and bruisingly delivered—that invite us to gaze into the fun-house mirror of our global moment. Judy Budnitz is a ferocious talent. Her stories linger and expand in the mind." —Robert Cohen, author of *Inspired Sleep*

"Sharp and even ingenious. . . . In 'Flush,' the absurd recalls Barthelmean tenderness. . . . Scream a little softer, the saying goes. 'Flush' screams very quietly indeed. It makes itself heard with clarity and grace."

—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Brilliant, heartbreaking, funny stories, by a writer who is political in the very best sense of the word, meaning: intensely aware of the value of even the least human heart, and that any one person suffering belongs to us all."

—George Saunders, author of *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*

"Budnitz has misgivings about America's place in the world. But she avoids even the names of countries, burning away anything that will distract from the primal questions of who we are and who we owe each other." —*Newsweek*

"Judy Budnitz can make the most fantastic landscapes credible, and the most ordinary even marvelous and strange. These amazing stories remind me a little of Flannery O'Connor, and mostly of no one; once you've read a Budnitz story, you can't mistake her for anybody else."

—Nell Freudenberger, author of *Lucky Girls*

"Judy Budnitz's stories glow. This collection—brilliant, unpretentious, and addictive—reconfirms that Budnitz is in a class by herself among today's young literary writers. . . . One day some

generation of people will have to think of a new name for Budnitz's special brand of storytelling; the meantime let's be grateful we get it first." —Matthew Pearl, author of *The Dante Club*

"Judy Budnitz is a fabulist, a realist, a dystopianist, a social satirist, a humanist, and a teller of morality tales—sometimes all at once. . . . These are astoundingly good stories; you will never forget them." —Julie Orringer, author of *How to Breathe Underwater*

"*Nice Big American Baby* will take you through the rabbit hole to the other side—Judy Budnitz's side—where something strange, exciting, and unforgettable is sure to happen. . . . Everyone should be reading this." —Hannah Tinti, author of *Animal Crackers*

"Judy Budnitz is easily one of the bravest and most exhilarating writers of my generation. Armed with these wickedly funny stories, she boldly transforms our culture into breathtaking myth. This book has serious compassion and big time originality: a harrowing testament to the miracle of modern life."

—Gabe Hudson, author of *Dear Mr. President*

# judy budnitz

---

## nice big american baby

Judy Budnitz's stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Story*, *The Paris Review*, *The Oxford American*, *Glimmer Train*, *Fence*, and *McSweeney's*, and she is the recipient of a Pulitzer Prize and the O. Henry Award. *Flying Leap* was a *New York Times* Notable Book in 1998. Budnitz is also the author of the novel *If I Told You Once*, which won the Edward Lewis Wallant Award in the United States and was short-listed for the Orange Prize in the United Kingdom. She lives in San Francisco.

also by judy budnitz

---

flying leap

if i told you once





where we come from

---

## I. before

---

There was a woman who had seven sons and was happy. Then she had a daughter.

She loved her sons with a furious devotion. But she did not want the daughter, even before she knew it was a daughter. She could feel the baby sitting low in her belly and did not want it.

Another burden on my back, the woman thought, another mouth to feed.

From the moment the girl was born she was frail and sickly; she greeted the world with a sneeze. The mother heard the sneeze and felt a heaviness descend upon her heart. Even with the best coddling and foreign medicine, the girl would probably die within the month. Three years at the most. A waste. It would be better, she thought, if the girl died now and got it over with. There were many ways a baby could die. Infant death was common in that part of the world; no one would notice one baby more or less.

Then she looked at the tiny wrinkled face and felt ashamed. She resolved to love her daughter as she had done her sons.

She named the girl Precious, to remind herself.

She made a promise to her daughter, but her seven sons were a delight and a distraction and if she did not break that promise she did bend it to its limits, like a young tree in a windstorm. Precious learned to make no demands on her mother. She took the food from the bottom of the bowl at meals and kept her feet clean so she would not leave footprints behind her.

The woman was happy. Her sons grew tall. People told her how lucky she was: eight children, all of them still living.

But I have seven children, she would say. And then: Oh. Yes.

One year the rains came doubly hard, the roads became rivers of mud, and the fruit rotted on the vine. The next year the rains did not come at all. Surely, people said, the third year will be a good year. But they were wrong.

It had never happened before—two years without rain. Even those people who considered themselves modern began to pray again and to hang charms at their doors.

The underground stream that fed the electric pump in the village dried up. The woman's sons were searching for water. They were tall and thin and knew how to travel in the heat of day. They ran and rested, ran and rested. Each time they paused they arranged themselves in a descending line so that a brother could rest in a brother's shadow.

They had taken buckets and jars to carry water back to their mother. And to Precious. Precious always remembered, but always as an afterthought.

They found a wire fence. The top of the fence was lined with prickly wire like a thornbush. They tore their hands on it, climbing over. Far in the distance they could see a dark smudge bleeding in the sky. They ran closer. It was the largest building they had ever seen, massive and gray and faceless with three tall chimneys like fingers pointing to the sky. The black smoke that poured from them was like nothing they had ever seen before. It hung in the sky without dissipating, it was dense and heavy like rain clouds about to burst.

The oldest said it was a rain factory. He said he remembered hearing people talk about it. He was sure.

Yes, said another, I heard that too. It's true.

Beyond the building they saw a pool, almost a lake. It was perfectly shaped and perfectly still, and the water was the strangest color they had ever seen—bright, bright blue and iridescent, with pearlescent rainbows on its surface. They agreed that the color must mean it was very pure.

The first one to taste the water became very sick. His brothers watched him twisting and retching.

his arms folded in on themselves like wings. A thick white gravy came out of his mouth and nose. They heard a roaring in the stillness and looked up to see two trucks speeding toward them trailing clouds of dust. They lifted their brother and ran.

They knew their brother could not climb the fence, so they hid among the rocks where they knew the trucks could not follow, and they waited for dark. They dug beneath the fence with their hands. They took them most of the night. They knotted their shirts into a sling and headed home, carrying their brother between them.

The woman was waiting on her doorstep for her sons to return. In the red light of dawn she saw the silhouettes approaching. She counted only six bobbing heads and began to keen in her throat.

Her son did not die. Eventually his hands uncoiled and he was able to walk again. But he was not the same as he was before. His face had hardened into a new expression that made him look like a suspicious stranger.

She knew that was not the end of it. The poisoned water was the beginning, a portent of what was to come. She was not surprised when, soon after, her sons began to disappear one by one.

The rains still did not fall. Everyone was hungry. The earth was cracked and barren. There was no work to be done, and anger and discontent began to ferment in the hearts of the people. Some complained against the government, though many had never seen the slightest evidence of a government and did not believe it existed. There was talk of electing leaders, building an army, a people's army for the people. The woman listened but did not understand how an army could bring the rains.

The woman's eldest son came to her and said he was going to become a soldier.

But you're just a child, she said.

The army has a whole division just for children, he said. I'm already too old for it. I will have to join the men.

She saw his thin chest surge with pride as he said this, and her heart ached.

So he left and she knew she would not see him again. Soon another son left to join his brother. This was the one who had drunk the tainted water; he waved as he walked up the dusty road and she could see he was trying to smile for her, but his facial muscles were frozen in a sneer.

One of the younger boys announced that he was going to join the children's army. She forbade it. He ran away in the night.

She heard rumors of fighting, the people's army fighting the government's, factions of the people's army fighting each other. There was an outbreak of fever in the village and many people died, including her youngest son.

So she had three sons left. Then two more went off to fight. They went together; that, at least, was some comfort.

Don't become a soldier, she told her last remaining son.

I don't want to, he said, but they will force me to if I stay.

She knew. She had seen boys being dragged down the street, people averting their eyes. But she did not want him to leave.

He told her he wanted to go to the capital. He asked for money to get there. She would not give it to him, but he stole it and left while she slept. He was a hundred miles from home when the bus skidded off the road and rolled over.

Now the daughter she didn't want was all she had. The woman was not so much bitter as resigned to her fate; she suspected she was being punished for her thoughts at the girl's birth. All the furious love the woman had lavished on her sons she now poured on her daughter, and for the first time Precious's name seemed justified.

The daughter cowered under the assault, after the years in her brothers' shadows. She had been accustomed to being invisible. Her mother's attention now seemed like a burden; she missed the air

feeling of being disposable, inconsequential.

~~The woman did not speak of her sons at home. To the others in the village she bemoaned her losses.~~ But you are lucky, people said. You still have a child. Still alive. Many of us have none left. You are one of the lucky ones.

Yes, she said, I suppose I am.

The woman who had never been afraid now began to fear that her one last child would be taken from her. She tried to hide her daughter, disguise her value, shield her from anyone who might take her away.

She stopped calling her daughter by her name and instead used "Sister."

Precious did not mind. Her mother seemed determined to name her exactly what she was not.

The woman closed her doors and kept her happiness close and hidden, a miser with her hoard.

The soldier appeared at the door, and before Precious could say a word he cried out how he missed her and hugged her to him. He smelled like a week's worth of sweat, and when he smiled his cheeks stretched into taut creases that looked like they might split at any moment. Don't you remember me? he said. Of course she didn't. She'd never seen him before.

He did the same to her mother, embracing her before she could resist. Precious saw her mother's face, propped on the man's shoulder, the eyes closed, and for just a moment her mother looked blissful. Then the eyes opened and her mother's face hardened again.

It's good to be home, he said.

He's lying, Precious said sullenly.

Her mother knew it too. And yet she cooked him a meal and allowed him to stay the night. She kept closing her eyes for a few seconds at a time; Precious knew she was imagining that it was true, that one of her sons really had come home.

In the dark of early morning Precious heard a creak and felt a breath on her shoulder. A finger found its way beneath her blanket, it pointed and beckoned. She turned over. And then everything happened fast, before she could say a word, like a gourd cracked open and the pulp scooped out, to be replaced by something else.

In the morning the woman arose to find her imposter son gone and her daughter too. One of the soldiers had taken all the money she had.

This is the story the daughter tells to her unseen audience, the listener swaying in a travel hammock made of her own flesh. She tells the story over and over, the rhythm of her voice matching the rocking rhythm of her legs, hoping he will understand.

## 2. during

---

“If you’re an illegal,” the man says, “the only absolutely surefire way to get into America is to stow away inside a woman’s belly.”

She asks him what he means. He tells her that anyone born on American soil is automatically a citizen. “Doesn’t matter who or what the parents are.”

“But what happens to the baby’s mother? She’s the mother of a citizen now.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he says. “Anyone without papers, if they catch you they’ll deport you. And they will catch you. Probably take your baby away.”

Her hands slide down the front of her dress.

He narrows his eyes. “You seem determined.” She nods. “Do you know how to swim? Ever been chased by dogs? Can you run fast on those pretty legs?” She nods; she has never done the first two, but surely they are instinctive. Surely, under duress, her body will know what to do.

“Will you still be able to run fast in a month? Two?” he says and with a sudden brisk movement cups his hand against her stomach.

“Yes,” she says, trying not to flinch.

“I might just be able to help you,” he says. “How much money do you have?”

She wants to go to America. She’s heard they give you a free dishwasher the minute you cross the border. In American stores there is always a hundred of everything, food as far as the eye can see, more food than you could eat in a lifetime. There is plenty of work for anyone who wants it, because the Americans are the laziest people on earth and will do nothing they can pay someone else to do for them.

Once you get there, everyone agrees, the rest is easy. Soon you’ll be a lazy American yourself, having fat children and buying furniture. Furniture? Yes, a woman tells her, in America if you want furniture, a refrigerator, even a car, you can pay a tenth of the price and take the things home; the Americans will trust you to pay the rest later. They are as trusting and gullible as children.

The visions of abundance keep her up at night. It’s not for herself that she wants these things. It’s for her baby. She knows he is a son, riding high inside her; with every breath she feels his heels crowding against her lungs.

Months earlier, when she told her cousin she was pregnant, her cousin hugged her and said, “Don’t worry. We’ll take care of it. I know two good ways. One hurts less but takes longer. The other hurts a lot but is over quick. Which do you want?”

“No!” she cried. “Neither,” she said, pushing her cousin away.

She cannot even contemplate getting rid of the baby. She loves him already, has begun crooning to him and addressing conversations to her belly long before she starts to show. But as her son pushes the front of her dress farther and farther, she begins to wonder. Does she want to raise her son in a country where half the babies die before they are a year old? A country where a woman could have eight children and consider herself lucky if one survives to adulthood?

She begins collecting stories of America. She builds a house in her mind, furnishes it, plants trees outside. She imagines her son, fat and white, playing on a vast expanse of immaculate carpet. She sees him as a boy, big and healthy and strong, wearing stiff brand-new clothes, pushing the other boys so they fall down. She pictures him when he’s her age— by American standards, still a child, he’ll be going to school, playing with his friends, whistling at girls, and trying to put his hand up their skirts. American skirts.

For some reason, whenever she pictures her son he is bald, his head white and oversized and glowing slightly, like an enormous lightbulb. She puts a baseball cap on him. Better.

“You’re crazy,” her cousin says. “They’ll take your baby away and give him to some American parents. They’ll snatch him away the minute you get there and send you back. Americans love foreign babies.”

“Love to *eat* them,” the cousin’s friend says. “At least that’s what I’ve heard.”

“Do you want your baby taken away and raised by foreigners?” her cousin says.

Of course not, she says, and suddenly realizes she does.

She sees the strange man again and asks if he can help her.

“You want to cross over,” he says. She gives him half a nod.

“You’re in luck. It’s a side business of mine, arranging these things.”

She looks around to see if anyone is listening.

“Just remember,” he says, “there are no guarantees. If they catch you and deport you, I don’t give you your money back. If they catch you, I don’t know you. I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

She nods. The first time she met him he was wearing a flowered shirt and a baseball cap like the one her son wears in her daydreams. Today he is wearing a cowboy hat and a nice-looking suit. When he turns to go she sees that it is all crumpled in the back, riding up into his armpits.

She tries, and fails, to remember his eyes. She thinks he has a mustache.

They meet again so she can give him the money, and he asks for her name.

“Precious,” she says, and looks away. She does not like to reveal her name; she senses it is dangerous for anyone to know her true worth. Precious is the name of someone treasured, adored. It means there are people somewhere who would gladly pay ransom for her, rescue her from a tower, lay down their lives for her. This is not true, but it is what people assume. She’s afraid he’ll raise her price.

But he grins a wide face-creasing grin. He thinks they’re playing a game, giving themselves nicknames. “Then call me Hopper,” he says. “First name Border. And what about”—he nods at the front of her dress—“what about Junior there?”

She stares back at him stonily refusing to acknowledge anything.

“You know,” he says softly, “they don’t like it. They don’t like this kind of thing.”

“What thing?”

“What you’re trying to do. They see it as an abuse of the system. They’ll try to stop you.”

“I don’t care.”

“Good!” he says, breaking into a smile again. Today he is wearing grease-stained coveralls such as a car mechanic would wear and, beneath it, incongruously, a spotless white dress shirt. In a brisk, businesslike voice, he says, “We here at Hopper and Associates have many options to offer the busy traveler. Would you prefer plane, train, boat, or automobile? Business class or coach? Smoking or nonsmoking?”

She turns the choices over in her mind. “I’ve never been on a boat.”

“I’m joking, sweetie.”

“Yes,” she says. “I knew that.”

She sees the border in her dreams: an orange stripe, wide as a road, dividing a desert from horizon to horizon. The border is hot; people run across it screaming in pain, their shoes smoking. The border guards are lined up in pairs on the other side, each pair with a swatch of black rubbery webbing stretched between them. The moment someone reaches their side of the border, two guards snag him and slingshot him back to the other side. The guards are neat and precise; nobody gets through. The people pick themselves up and try again, running across the scalding line. Again and again they are repulsed. Some are flung through the air; some are sent skidding across the border on their faces. The people tire, they are staggering, crawling, propping each other up. The guards continue their work mechanically, occasionally pausing to take a man’s wallet or fondle a woman’s breast before sending

them back over. There is something about the guards' alert, smooth movements that seems familiar as if she's seen all this before.

She must work out the timing of the crossing as precisely as possible. If she goes too soon, it will mean spending more time, pregnant and waiting, on the other side. The longer she's there, the greater the chances the deportation people will catch her and send her back before her son is even born.

But if she waits too long he'll be born outside the border, on un-American soil, and will never get his baseball cap, his citizenship.

She has told her son about America, told him about her plans. Told him the story of a woman and her seven stolen sons. That's what you can look forward to, she told him, if we stay. She hopes she can count on his cooperation.

The man, Hopper, doesn't care about her plans. "You'll go when I tell you to go," he says. "You can't control these things. You have to seize opportunities as they arise."

She waits and waits. Apparently the opportunities are slow to bubble up. She's in her ninth month when the time comes. She rides a bus to a border town, arrives at the meeting place.

She and six others cram into a secret space behind a false panel in the back of a delivery truck. There are a few nail holes for air. They are afraid to talk; when one makes the slightest noise the others pinch him, roll their eyes. They are all strangers to one another. Their initial excessive courtesy dissipates with the rising heat. The metal walls are like an oven. One man insists on smoking. The two people on either side of Precious accuse her of taking up too much room.

There are delays; the truck stops and starts, the back door opens and closes. At first they all freeze expectantly every time this happens. But the stops continue. Precious begins to wonder if the driver has forgotten about them and is going about his usual deliveries.

Night falls, they know this when dots of light in the nail holes go out and they are in total blackness. No one lets them out.

The second day is more of the same. One man wants to bang on the walls; they've forgotten us, he says. The others restrain him. The heat rises and they squabble silently over the last plastic jug of water.

On the third day they all fall into a stupor, frozen in positions of cramped despair. The only stirring is Precious's son, kicking impatiently. On the evening of the third day they cross the border without knowing it.

It is dark again when the truck stops, footsteps approach, the metal door is wrenched back. They blink in the glare of a flashlight as the driver helps them out. He tries to make them hurry but they cannot unfold themselves. He carries them out one by one, like statues in tortured poses, and places them on the ground, where they lie unmoving for a long time and then begin to uncurl as slowly as new leaves unfurling.

They lie on hard earth surrounded by trees. The truck disappears down a dirt track leading back to the highway. They begin to groan and creak and stretch themselves—small things first, fingers and toes. Precious stands up and leans against a tree. She tries walking a few steps. The movement makes something shift within her, then shift again, sinking lower, like the tumblers of a lock falling into place. Good, she thinks. Right on time.

She heads down the track toward the highway. The others call after her, warnings, halfhearted offers of help. She knows they're glad to be rid of her. She's a burden, a liability.

She walks along the highway. So far America is a disappointment, bare and empty. It'll get better, she tells herself. Americans, she knows, are optimistic. She thinks of big white gleaming American hospitals.

She waves at the occasional cars zooming past. She can't see the drivers' faces. If she were in the place she wouldn't stop either, she thinks. Who wants a strange woman having a baby all over you?

nice clean American car?

But within minutes a car pulls over to the shoulder ahead of her. She clutches her son, tries to wait more quickly. Americans really are friendly after all.

The car is a dull gray, dirty, unremarkable, and she's close before she notices the heavy wire mesh separating the backseat from the front. The driver has already stepped out of the car and has his hand on her arm before she can think of running.

He helps her into the backseat and drives on. He doesn't seem surprised to see her, seems to know exactly who she is and what she's doing. He's driving in the same direction she'd been heading. At first she thinks he's going to help her after all; then she realizes that they are heading back to the border, that she'd been pointed in the wrong direction.

She's still hopeful. Everyone says even when you get caught, they make you stay in a detention center for weeks while they ask you questions and write words on pieces of paper. She'll have her baby and then go home.

But that's not allowed to happen. She's rushed through a series of gates and hallways and waiting rooms, and people ask her questions and eye her belly and hustle her along. Before she knows it she's sitting in a van with other defeated-looking people who don't meet her eyes. She recognizes two of the people who shared her secret place in the delivery truck but pretends not to.

This time she can see the border as they cross it. It's not how she pictured it. Just a fence, a checkpoint on the road. She holds her belly. Her son is shifting around. Not yet, she thinks fiercely. Not yet.

She looks for the Hopper man. She assumes he would have disappeared by now, but no, there he is. "Don't be mad, little mama," he says. "I told you there were no guarantees."

She stamps her foot. The pressure inside her is unbelievable. But she wills her body to hold itself together.

"Tell you what," he says. "How about I set up another trip for you? Free of charge? Because I'm such a nice guy?"

"Not the truck. The driver was bad. I think he told the border police where to find us."

"That's terrible," the man says. "You just can't trust anyone, can you? I won't use him again."

The second time is on a boat, a huge boat, a cargo ship. She doesn't know what it's carrying; the cargo could be anything; it's packed into truck-sized metal rectangles, stacked up in anonymous piles.

She and twelve others hide in the hold. It's dank, dark, cramped, but the gentle motion of the boat soothes her; this is what it must feel like for her son, she thinks.

Her son is very still. She worries that he is dead, but she tells herself that it's only because he's grown too big, has no room to move. Just a little longer, she thinks, and then you can come out and begin your new life. Some people told her America's territory extends from its coastline, fifty miles into the ocean. Others have said five miles. She wants to wait for solid land to be absolutely sure.

But they're stopped almost immediately. She and the others are sought out with flashlights, led up to the deck, and lowered into a smaller boat that speeds them back to the harbor. She would have tried to run, to hide, if not for her son. Any violent motion, she fears, will bring him tumbling out. If she jumped in the water, he might swim right out of her to play in the familiar element.

"My goodness," the Hopper man says when he sees her. "Are you having twins?"

"Your boat people are bad," she says furiously. "They told the border people we were there."

"You don't say! I certainly won't be using their services anymore."

"I think the border people pay them money to turn us in. A price for each person."

"What makes you think that?"

She has heard people arguing, pointing at her and arguing over whether she should bring the price one or two.



“We’ll get you over there,” the man says. “I give you my promise. Three’s the charm.”

The next time, she rides in a hiding place built between the backseat and trunk of a small car. They have trouble shutting her in; her belly gets in the way. It seems luxurious, after the first two trips. She has the space to herself. A man and woman sit in the front. On the backseat, inches from her, a baby coos in a car seat. She doesn’t know if it’s their baby or someone else’s, a borrowed prop. Her son shifts irritably, probably sensing the other baby, probably thinking, Now *that’s* the way to travel.

At the border they’re stopped, the trunk is opened. The panel is ripped away, and for the third time she’s blinking in bright light. She imagines her son beating his fists against the sides of her womb.

Not yet, she thinks, not yet, my son. Just a little longer.

She’s now nearing the end of her tenth month. Her belly is strained to the breaking point, her back aches, her knees buckle. But she’s more determined than ever. And her son seems to be as stubborn as she is.

“Now it looks like quadruplets,” Hopper says.

“He’s going to be an American baby,” she says, through gritted teeth. “Babies are bigger there. Nice big healthy American baby.”

“Is that what he told you?”

“He’s not going to come out until we get there,” she says.

“I’ll do what I can,” he says. “No guarantees.”

She’s been told there are places where you can climb over the fence. There are places where there’s no fence, only guards in towers who sometimes look the other way. She’s going to take her chances on her own. Enough of his gambles.

“I wish you the best,” he says, tipping his fishing hat.

She can barely walk; she stumbles, lurching and weaving. Other people look at her and say, “There’s no way. It’s impossible.” She ignores them.

She walks, through scrub brush and rocks and burning sand and stagnant, stinking water. She walks and walks, thinking: American baby. Nice big American baby.

She hears a sound echoing from far away: dogs yelping, frenzied. She can almost hear them calling to one another: *There she is, there she is, get her.*

They burst over a rise and she can see them, a mob of dark insects growing rapidly bigger, a man with a gun trailing far behind. Has she crossed the border already? It’s impossible to tell.

The first dog runs straight at her. She stands still and waits. It seems nearly as big as she is, a small horse. At the last minute it veers away and circles. All the dogs swarm around her. But they do not touch her. They keep their heads lowered abjectly to the ground. They seem in awe of her big belly.

The fat sweating guard who comes puffing up behind them is not impressed. Soon she’s sitting in her familiar van, heading back.

She’s been carrying her son for over a year now, with no intention of letting him go.

“Now, that can’t possibly be good for him, little mama,” Hopper says. “You should let the little feller out.”

“He’s going to be an *American* baby,” she says, slowly, as if talking to a child.

“Let me help you,” he says. “I know a man—”

“No,” she says.

“We’ll try another way. I can get you a fake passport.”

“No,” she says. She hobbles back to the border, is stopped by a fence, and begins tunneling under it, clawing the dirt with her fingernails. She’s crawling through, nearly breaking the surface on the other side, when her son shifts, or perhaps instantaneously grows a fraction of an inch, and suddenly she’s stuck. Border guards come and drag her out by her heels. They don’t seem surprised, they seem as if they’ve been expecting her. They look bored, almost disappointed, as if they’d expected her to have

little more originality.

“Why won’t you let me help you?” Hopper says.

She doesn’t answer.

“Free of charge.”

“Why are you being so generous?”

“I don’t know. Out of the goodness of my heart?”

Today he’s wearing a bolo tie, a snakeskin vest. He is wearing rings on every finger, like a king, like a pirate. Like a pirate king.

“Please,” he says. “I *want* to. I insist.”

She realizes something she should have seen months ago. He’s been tipping off the border guard. He takes money from people for helping them cross; then he takes money from the guards for telling them when and where to expect visitors. She’s been making money for him with each of her trips.

“You are a bad man,” she says.

“Oh, come now,” he says. “You can’t blame me. It’s a game of chance.”

“An evil man. When my son gets big he’ll come back and kill you.”

“Your son’s already big,” he says. “And I don’t see him doing anything.”

She is determined. She flings herself at the border again and again. She travels in cars, trucks, buses. She walks on blistered feet. She travels in a fishing boat, an inflatable raft. She wears disguises, buys false papers. Each time the border repulses her, spits her back.

Big American baby, she tells herself. She sees his size as proof of his American-ness. Only American babies could be so big, so healthy. She has convinced herself that he has always been American, that she is merely a vehicle, a shell, a seed casing meant to protect him until he can be planted in his rightful home.

She carries him for two years. She constructs a sort of sling for herself, with shoulder straps and a strip of webbing, to balance the weight. She uses a cane. She looks like a spider, round fat body, limbs like sticks.

Her son is alive; she can feel the pulse of his heartbeat, feel the pressure as he strains to stretch a finger, an eyelid.

She thinks she can see a dark shadow through the taut translucent skin of her belly. She can see his hair growing long and black.

Her body is adaptable. Her skin stretches, her bones shift, her blood feeds him. When people see her they are amazed, but she is not; she has seen it before, the lengths the body will go to to preserve itself, to cling to life.

Big American baby, she thinks. Nice big American baby. It is her mantra.

She carries him for three years. Three and a half. She becomes a legend, then a joke, with the border guards. They wave to her as she creeps past, cheer her on, drag her back at the last minute.

Don’t you think he wants to come out by now? people at home say to her.

He’s safer living in my belly than in this wretched country, she says, though she has been so single-mindedly set on her mission that she has taken no notice of external events. War, famine, peace, prosperity: it is all the same to her. America is the only option, the only ray of hope.

She carries him for four years.

Big American baby. Nice big American baby.

She has in her mind pictures of hot-air balloons attached to bicycles, fanciful flying machines. Some days she imagines she will simply lift off the ground and float over, suspended by the power of her will alone. Hers and her son’s. Or she imagines that she is invisible, intangible; she breezes across the border. The air, it seems, is the only thing that crosses freely.

Her son is so big, she imagines he fills her completely, his arms fill her arms, his legs fill her legs.

She is a mere skin covering him, like an insect's carapace, soon to be flaked off and shucked away.

~~She's too tired to speak now, just pants and whistles through her teeth. The words rattle in her head.~~

Nice big American baby, someone chants. Not her. Him. The voice of her son gurgling up from her belly. Muffled and airless but undeniable.

My son's first words, she thinks, smiling proudly at a shriveled bush. You hear that? No baby-talk preliminaries, no babbling or lisping. My son: so precocious, so American.

One day, as she is panting out her mantra and picking her way across the sand, a border guard appears: suddenly, as if he sprang up out of the ground. He carries the usual gun, wears the usual impenetrable sunglasses, has the regulation sweat stains blooming from his armpits. He takes her arm. She obediently turns around and begins walking back. She does not want him to start pushing her, getting rough; the baby might come out.

But to her surprise she finds him pulling her forward, forward across the magic invisible line. Forward, toward the magnificent city that hovers like a mirage in the distance.

"Come on, little mama," he says. "You've had enough."

When she closes her eyes she sees the hospital of her dreams, a white sparkling grand hotel. When she opens them she sees speckled ceiling tiles, masked alien faces. She can't feel a thing; she's a floating head. It's finally happened, then: her stubborn impatient head has taken off and left the slow body behind somewhere to gestate, egg and nest all in one.

"My son," she says.

"He's coming," they tell her. They have to operate. "There's no way he's fitting through the usual door," they tell her.

She sees a foot kicking. It's as long as her hand. She hears a stupendous, deafening roar. The foot catches one of the masked doctors on the chin and sends him flying backward into the spattered arm of another masked figure.

Her balloon head is bobbing near the ceiling now, borne on the baby's howls, but she'd swear she can hear, interspersed with the empty cries, bellowed words. I want, the baby demands. Give me, want, I need, I deserve, I have *earned*. . . .

She sees rising up out of her tired body a sodden mop of long black hair. She sees grasping fists.

She hears—and surely she must be dreaming now—she hears the scrape of a rubber-gloved hand rubbing a sore chin and a doctor's voice saying, "Now *that's* what I call a nice big American baby."

Empty, deflated, she sits alone in the back of the van. She hears weeping somewhere, mingled with the sounds of tires on asphalt. It must be the driver. It can't be her. Can it? Impossible. There's nothing inside her to come out, not a drop. She's hollow, she's still floating, they forgot to reattach her head to those rags and remnants that were her body.

"But it's what you wanted, isn't it? Wasn't that the whole plan, give birth and leave him here with a new set of folks?"

"I never even got a chance to hold him."

"He's too big for holding already. He could hold you."

"I had things to say. Stories to tell him."

"He heard them. He was listening, all those years when you talked to him. He'll remember."

It's the voice of the Hopper man; she's not sure if he's the man driving the van or if the voice is inside her head. It doesn't matter.

"I want to stay," she whispers. "He's mine."

"You can always have another."

### 3. after

---

The prospective parents had applied for a newborn baby, so they did not know what to make of the walking, talking child they visited at the temporary foster home. The adoption agent assured them he had been born only a few days earlier. "I have his birth certificate right here," she said.

Maybe children these days grow up faster than they used to, the hopeful parents told themselves. We should have studied the child development book more carefully, they thought.

They did not voice their doubts, fearing they'd reveal their inexperience, their ignorance. One slip of the tongue and their application would be rejected.

They felt intimidated by the adoption agent, who handled babies as carelessly as basketballs, and also by the foster mother, who had eight children in her charge.

The prospective mother had been looking forward to the cuddling, burping, nurturing years; she had been gearing herself up for sleepless nights of colic and lullabies and martyrdom. The child before them, calmly regarding them with large brown eyes, was already far beyond that stage. Yet there was something so appealing, so desirable, so eminently *wantable* about him that both prospective parents found themselves smitten. They *had* to have him. He sat on the carpet knocking one block against another, seemingly bored, covertly watchful. They both felt a quickening in their hearts: the anxiety of bargain hunting—the sensation that if they did not get him immediately, someone else would come along, perceive his value, and snatch him up.

When they brought him home he ran through the house pointing at things, wanting to learn their names. "Microwave," they said. "Piano." "Baby monitor." "Treadmill." "Shoe tree." "Television."

They were charmed by his curiosity. Privately they fretted over the way he stiffened whenever they touched him. He was remote, as patiently tolerant as a teenager suffering the whims of unhip parents.

He just needs time, they thought, to get used to us.

What does bonding mean, *exactly*? the new mother wondered. She thought of the unknown woman, the biological mother who'd carried the boy inside her body for nine whole months, and realized she was jealous.

The boy was too well-behaved, too precocious, too perfect. It made them nervous. His perfection made him seem vulnerable, ripe for spoiling. Doesn't it seem like the perfect, angelic little boys are always the ones to get cancer, get hit by cars? the mother thought.

He never made any mistakes. If there were mistakes to be made, they'd be made by the parents. So they washed everything twice, planned educational vacations. The pressure was excruciating.

He'd been their son for over a year when he told them about the face.

He appeared at their bedside in the middle of the night, white and glowing in his astronaut pajamas. "Can I come in?" he said.

They relished the moment, kissing him, tickling him, tucking him in between them.

"Did you have a bad dream?" the mother said.

"There was a face in the window," the boy said, and described glittering eyes and shining teeth and a wiry net of hair, long fingers scrabbling at the sill and warm breath that seeped into the room. A sad face. It watched him for a long time, he said, not moving.

"It isn't real," the father said. "It's only a dream."

The mother thought of goblins, gypsies, pirates, a hundred fairy tales of stolen children. She tightened her grip. "We'll protect you," she whispered fervently. "We'll never let anyone take you away."

"Take me away?" the boy said. The father groaned softly.

She realized she'd made a blunder, planting a new fear in his head that had not been there before.

The next day the father made a great show of testing the locks on the boy's bedroom window. He pointed out the tree branches that moved in the wind like hair. He talked about the damp smells rising up from the basement, the stink and scrabbling of skunks digging through the garbage cans. The boy listened impassively.

For the next few nights the boy slept peacefully. The parents did not.

And then he was back, glowing in the dark, his feet padding across the floor. "It's back," he said calmly. They lifted their covers for him, pleased that he was finally having the normal problems of a normal child.

The face came back periodically. Not often, but every few weeks. The parents tried to dispel the son's fears, but with less and less enthusiasm as time went on. They worried that if the nightmares stopped, the tenuous intimacy with their son would be gone forever. The mother, in her heart of hearts, secretly made contingency plans—if his nightmares stopped, she'd simulate them (a Halloween mask dangling from the roof, say).

If she left the imprint of a finger in his sandwich, her son would eat around it and leave the little island on his plate. He continued to flinch at the touch of her hand. Still, she sometimes wondered if he was secretly starved for affection, if he'd fabricated the face story as an excuse.

Or maybe, she thought, he'd invented the face as a way of comforting *them*. She wouldn't put it past him, her wise little son.

In the night she stroked her son's shoulders and kissed the top of his head. She wrapped her arms around him and pretended he was inside her.

The next morning she went into his room to make the bed and found the window open and the curtains frothing in the wind. She felt a momentary panic—danger! falling baby!—but the window guard was still in place. She closed the window and locked it. As she was turning away she noticed fingerprints spotting the glass. She must have done that herself, just now. How careless. I'll clean it later, she thought, and bent to the bed, brushing away a few of her son's long black hairs.

To her surprise, she found the bottom sheet damp. Never before had her son wet the bed. She dipped her fingers in the wet spot, feeling fascinated, amazed, intensely maternal. My son, she thought proudly, wets the bed. She imagined telling a friend about it. *Oh, yes, like any normal child, he wets the bed occasionally. When he has a nightmare. What can you do? No, of course we're not worried about it. He'll outgrow it eventually.*

But still there was something strange about it. . . . The stain was perfectly clear; it looked like water. And rather than one spot it was composed of many, a string of drops.

She glanced around furtively to make sure she was alone, then raised her wet fingers to her nose. She smelled nothing. She put her fingers to her tongue. The wetness tasted like tears.

## flush

---

I called my sister and said, What does a miscarriage look like?

What? she said. Oh. It looks like when you're having your period, I guess. You have cramps, and then there's blood.

What do people do with it? I asked.

With what?

The blood and stuff.

I don't know, she said impatiently. I don't know these things, I'm not a doctor. All I can tell you about anything is who you should sue.

Sorry, I said.

Why are you asking me this? she said.

I'm just having an argument with someone, that's all. Just thought you could help settle it.

Well, I hope you win, she said.

I went home because my sister told me to.

She called me and said, It's your turn.

No, it can't be, I feel like I was just there, I said.

No, I went the last time. I've been keeping track, I have incontestable proof, she said. She was a law school.

But Mitch, I said. Her name was Michelle but everyone called her Mitch except our mother, who thought it sounded obscene.

Lisa, said Mitch, don't whine.

I could hear her chewing on something, a ballpoint pen, probably. I pictured her with blue marks on her lips, another pen stuck in her hair.

It's close to Thanksgiving, I said. Why don't we wait and both go home then?

You forget—they're going down to Florida to be with Nana.

I don't have time to go right now. I have a job, you know. I do have a life.

I don't have time to argue about it, I'm studying, Mitch said. I knew she was sitting on the floor with her papers scattered around her, the stacks of casebooks sprouting yellow Post-its from all sides like lichen, Mitch in the middle with her legs spread, doing ballet stretches.

I heard a background cough.

You're not studying, I said. Neil's there.

Neil isn't doing anything, she said. He's sitting quietly in the corner waiting for me to finish. Aren't you, sweetheart?

Meek noises from Neil.

You call him sweetheart? I said.

Are you going home or not?

Do I have to?

I can't come over there and *make* you go, Mitch said.

The thing was, we had both decided, some time ago, to take turns going home every now and then to check up on them. Our parents did not need checking up, but Mitch thought we should get in the habit of doing it anyway. To get in practice for the future.

After a minute Mitch said, They'll think we don't care.

Sometimes I think they'd rather we left them alone.

Fine. Fine. Do what you want.

Oh, all right. I'll go.

I flew home on a Thursday night, and though I'd told them not to meet me at the airport, there they

were, both of them, when I stepped off the ramp. They were the only still figures in the terminal around them people dashed with garment bags, stewardesses hustled in pairs wheeling tiny suitcases.

My mother wore a brown coat the color of her hair. She looked anxious. My father stood tall swaying slightly. The lights bounced off the lenses of his glasses; he wore jeans that were probably twenty years old. I would have liked to be the one to see them first, to compose my face and walk up to them unsuspected, like a stranger. But that never happened. They always spotted me before I saw them and had their faces ready and their hands out.

Is that all you brought? Just the one bag?

Here, I'll take it.

Lisa, honey, you don't look so good. How are you?

Yes, how are you? You look terrible.

Thanks, Dad.

How are you? they said, over and over, as they wrestled the suitcase from my hand.

Back at the house, my mother stirred something on the stove and my father leaned in the doorway to the dining room and looked out the window at the backyard. He's always leaned in that doorway to talk to my mother.

I made that soup for you, my mother said. The one where I have to peel the tomatoes and pick out the seeds out by hand.

Mother. I wish you wouldn't do that.

You mean you don't like it? I thought you liked it.

I like it, I like it. But I wish you wouldn't bother.

It's no bother. I wanted to.

She was up until two in the morning pulling skin off tomatoes, my father said. I could hear the screaming in agony.

How would you know? You were asleep, my mother said.

I get up at five-thirty every morning to do work in the yard before I go in to the office, he said.

I looked out at the brown yard.

I've been pruning the rosebushes. They're going to be beautiful next summer.

Yes, they will.

Lisa, he said, I want you to do something for me tomorrow, since you're here.

Sure. Anything.

I want you to go with your mother to her doctor's appointment. Make sure she goes.

OK.

She doesn't have to come, my mother said. That's silly, she'll just be bored.

She's supposed to get a mammogram every six months, my father said, but she's been putting it off and putting it off.

I've been busy. You know that's all it is.

She's afraid to go. She's been avoiding it for a year now.

Oh, stop it, that's not it at all.

She always finds a way to get out of it. Your mother, the escape artist.

My mother crossed her arms over her chest. There was a history. Both her mother and an aunt had had to have things removed.

It's the same with all her doctors, my father said. Remember the contact lenses?

That was different. I didn't need new contacts.

She stopped going to her eye doctor for fifteen years. For fifteen years she was wearing the same contacts. When she finally went in, the doctor was amazed, he said he'd never seen anything like that. They don't even make contact lenses like that anymore. He thought she was wearing dessert dishes

her eyes.

You're exaggerating, my mother said.

Mitch—I mean Lise, my father said.

He'd always gotten our names confused; sometimes, to be safe, he just said all three.

She's afraid to go because of the last time, he said.

What happened last time? I said.

I had the mammogram pictures done, she said, and then a few days later they called and said the pictures were inconclusive and they needed to take a second set. So they did that and then they kept me waiting for the results, for weeks, without telling me anything, weeks where I couldn't sleep all night, and I kept your father up too, trying to imagine what it looked like, the growth. Like the streak in bleu cheese, I thought. I kept feeling these little pains and kept checking my pulse all night. And then finally they called and said everything was fine after all, there was just some kind of blur on the first X-rays, like I must have moved right when they took them or something.

You were probably talking the whole time, my father said. Telling them how to do their job.

I was probably shivering. They keep that office at about forty degrees and leave you sitting around in the cold in a paper robe. The people there don't talk to you or smile; and when they do the picture they mash your breast between these two cold glass plates like a pancake.

My father looked away. He had a kind of modesty about some things.

My mother said to me, All those nights I kept thinking about my mother having her surgery. I kept feeling for lumps, waking up your father and asking him to feel for lumps.

Leah, my father said.

He didn't mind that. I think he might have enjoyed it a little.

Please.

Didn't you?

Promise me you'll go, he said.

She's not coming, she said.

The next day we drove to the clinic an hour early. My mother had the seat drawn as close to the steering wheel as she could get it; she gripped the wheel with her hands close together at twelve o'clock. She looked over at me as often as she looked out at the road.

There were squirrels and possums sprawled on the pavement, their heads red smears.

It's something about the weather, my mother said, makes them come out at night.

Oh.

We're so early, my mother said, and we're right near Randy's salon. Why don't we stop in and see if he can give you a haircut and a blowout?

Not now.

He wouldn't mind, I don't think. I talk about you whenever I have my hair done. He'd like to meet you.

No.

If you just got it angled on the sides, here, and got a few bangs in the front—

Just like yours, you mean.

You know, I feel so bad for Randy, he looks terrible, circles under his eyes all the time; he says his boyfriend is back in the hospital. Now whenever I go to get my hair cut, I bake something to give him banana bread or something. But I think the shampoo girls usually eat it all before he can get it home.

That's nice of you.

I worry about him. He doesn't take care of himself.

Yes.

Why are you still getting pimples? You're twenty-seven years old; why are you still getting pimples?



- [\*download online Guitar Techniques \[UK\] \(September 2015\) pdf\*](#)
- [read Artemis Fowl and the Eternity Code \(Artemis Fowl, Book 3\)](#)
- [read In Defense of Dolphins: The New Moral Frontier \(CourseSmart\)](#)
- [Fundamental Pharmacology for Pharmacy Technicians book](#)
  
- <http://ramazotti.ru/library/Guitar-Techniques--UK---September-2015-.pdf>
- <http://betsy.wesleychapelcomputerrepair.com/library/Artemis-Fowl-and-the-Eternity-Code--Artemis-Fowl--Book-3-.pdf>
- <http://www.netc-bd.com/ebooks/Carmina--Reclams-Rote-Reihe---Fremdsprachentexte-.pdf>
- <http://bestarthritiscare.com/library/Ebola-Myths---Facts-For-Dummies.pdf>