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Babyman

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Babyman

At The Pocket Inn on Detroit's North Side, the crowd thins out after midnight. Carroll Spark carries a five month old baby girl, his unnamed daughter, across the icy parking lot. She's wrapped in a little pink parka he scored at the GoodWill. The girl sleeps, a bottled nestled in the parka next to her. But if she wakes up, so much the better. The game is better if the baby cries.

It's smoky inside The Pocket. Carroll edges up to the bar, stands next to a platinum blonde in black jeans and high-heel boots. He orders a Screwdriver. When Carroll sets the baby on the counter, the blonde turns around. Her breasts are too small.

He eyes two gals across the room. A brunette with a big nose and chest and a pretty redhead with hoop earrings. He walks around the bar as if he's looking intently for someone, holding the baby in front of him like a shield or a badge.

Ignoring the women, he stations himself close enough for them not to be able to ignore him. He reaches into the parka, pinches the baby's bottom. Several people look over when she cries.

Carroll fidgets as if trying to calm the baby. Inside the parka he pinches her again.

It's the brunette who bites first. Carroll plays the bars like a fisherman working a stream.

"What a little sweetheart," she says. "What's the matter with you, honey?"

As the brunette reaches out, Carroll hands her the baby, as if that's what they both had intended. He catches the woman's eye and shows her a bland, even smile. Not even a hint of a threat.

Carroll knows his features are even; his brown hair full and fine. Even the deep lines across his forehead are smooth and symmetrical. But he worries that his ears and his lips are too big and too red.

The baby stops crying. The woman smiles. Carroll grins back, as if this sudden three-way happiness is a little trophy he's earned. Something to take home and keep.

The redhead goes home alone. Carroll and Joleen leave The Pocket in Carroll's van. Tonight he calls the baby Dianne.

Carroll stops at the NiteOwl-Package-Drive-Thru for a pint of vodka, a quart of orange juice, and a quart of whole milk. He gets on the Morton Expressway even though it's just for a mile. He likes to get above the city and see the rooftops and lights spread out in the distance. In the van, on the road, the city can play tricks with your mind. Get close enough, down on the streets, it looks like a huge, silent wrestling match, all grimaces and tears.

Back way off, up on the freeway, it's like a cold stone tableau, like one of those friezes on the old buildings downtown, all finished up and dignified. He exits on Eisenbach and drives to the double garage he rents off the alley behind Gannal Street. He drives down the alley for the last six blocks, easing the van over rough spots, steering around open dumpsters and abandoned cars.

Joleen doesn't seem to notice the freeway or the alley. She stares at the baby on her lap and talks about her job--factory work at Campbells, the Banquet division. She runs a machine that plops peas and potatoes into tray from 3 to 11, five days a week. She plays with the baby, saying "peas and potatoes, peas and potatoes," as she touches the little face. Carroll can already tell she's never had a kid. But wanted to.

The way Carroll tells it to Joleen, the baby's mother is a real scumbag. He's trying to get her back, he says, but she's strung out, and he only sees her by luck in the bars. He's waiting for her to come to her senses, come back to him and baby Dianne. It's almost beautiful what a crock of shit most people are dying to believe. Almost beautiful.

In the garage, Carroll opens all the van's doors. He puts Eddie Money's first album in the van's cassette player, his only sound system. The room smells stale, like something dirty's been burning. Carroll twists open the round, orange air freshener stuck on the refrigerator door. Joleen sits on the couch against the far wall while Carroll mixes Screwdrivers for both of them.

"Healthiest drink there is. Plenty of C. And no beer breath. Even baby Dianne likes em." He laughs like he's teasing. A sip or two really does quiet the kid down at night though.

"You're terrible. And she's such a cutie pie." Joleen juggles her Screwdriver in an oversize plastic Dixie cup while she holds the baby's bottle. "You're raising her all by yourself? Here?"

She looks around the garage. A big oil-drum wood stove stands in one corner with concrete blocks stacked up all around it that can hold the heat a long time. Carroll burns garbage from up and down the alley. He could buy firewood--he's got a decent job--but he likes to scavenge. He's a security guard downtown, same place for years. Routine's good for a person. And Carroll lives cheap. Some of his money he sends to southern California where his first child lives with his first and last ex-wife. The kid's in high school now. Damn expensive--that age--that place. Cars, clothes, CD's, drugs. Not like when they're babies. Milk and diapers are all they really need, long as they're healthy. The garage is well-insulated, not too cold in winter, not too hot in summer.

"I don't know what else to do. I'm so in debt from the drug clinic I sent her mama to." He points at the baby, still in Joleen's

arms. "They want a small fortune for Treatment. And she was in there all day every day for 30 days. It's like a goddamn taxi meter clicking, that Treatment is. I went to 12-step meetings with her till I saw those 12 steps in my dreams. I really felt we had it licked. Now look at me." Carroll waves an open palm slowly around the room.

There's a carpet on the floor on the half of the garage where the van doesn't park. It's rolled across the floor and then right up the wall behind them and nailed down near the ceiling. In one corner, there's a crib. Above it hangs a delicate mobile, little pastel balls so light they move when someone walks by the crib. Carroll conjures a tear. Joleen kisses it.

Carroll pulls away from Joleen and rolls over in the bed. He starts to move toward the crib. Joleen hugs him to her.

"Hope I didn't wake Dianne up with my hollering," she says with a new tone of intimacy to her voice. "Haven't you finished yet? Is there something wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong, baby, just something missing. You want to satisfy me, don't you?" He nuzzles his head between her breasts. The right one seems slightly smaller.

"Sure, Carroll, I'm just tired. You gotta give a gal some breathin' room. That's all. You need some special TLC from Joleen?"

"I need the baby." He moves to the crib in the half-dark room. "Feed us honey," he says as he gets back in bed, "Feed us both." The baby's mouth slides around her breast.

"I don't have what she needs," she starts to pull away from them, "really, Carroll, I don't."

"It don't matter," he mutters as he kisses at her other breast, "It don't matter. You both got what I need, you both got what the babyman needs."

Eddie Money begins Side 2 for the third time. Carroll watches the baby's lips work on Joleen like a fish mouth, feeding, trembling, at the bottom of a pool of clear water. He hopes Joleen doesn't say anything, doesn't wreck it with words, doesn't argue, or laugh. All of his own words slide out of his head until it's just him, him and the baby, alone together with this woman.

Then he hears Joleen. She does what most people would call crying, what Carroll would call crying at any other time and place. She does it quietly, holds two heads close to her, opens her legs again.

People do things. Things you'd never expect. That's what makes it interesting. Like a torture chamber. Like a symphony orchestra.

Carroll can get a woman pregnant, as long as certain conditions are met. Conditions like in the garage, the first night with Joleen, with the baby. And that's what he does. Gets her pregnant. Women are like jackpots, he figures. You play em. There's skill and there's luck.

Skill was getting her home, getting her bedded. Luck was getting her pregnant. More luck was that she's pro-life. One hundred per cent. Pregnant and pro-life. Bingo.

Skill will be getting the baby.

"Ever since I told you I'm PG you been actin' different to me," says Joleen. "I never shoulda gotten mixed up with you and Dianne. If I hadn't been dog-tired that night and seen that sweet kid--you're fucking cuckoo. They'll take that kid away from you, Carroll. They will. Less you marry me." She says it like she's trying to be mean and sweet at the same time, like she's trying to match the way she thinks Carroll is.

Carroll laughs. What she doesn't know. He's traded babies since '81. Leon, a friend on the city police, has connections. Bought and sold and traded. Out of downtown, into the suburbs. Out of the suburbs, over to the coast. Leon likes it, Carroll likes it, people uptown like it, people on the coast like it. Even the babies like it. Dianne, this little girl, wasn't a trade though. But she could be. She sure could be.

"The day Reagan was shot," Carroll says.

"What the hell you talking about. I'm serious, damn you."

"So am I. That was the first one I bought. My grubstake. Little boy. Blue-eyed."

"I don't want to hear this crap. Where's Dianne's mother?"

"It ain't no Dianne, and there ain't no mother. Except maybe you." In spite of himself, he smirks at her like a boy who's played a clever trick. "Maybe I just called her that cause you said you had a niece named Dianne that night down at The Pocket, remember?"

"Carroll, listen to me, damnit. Don't tease me. I'm pregnant, grade-A pregnant, no ifs, ands, or buts--I been to the Clinic. We could make out together--I just know we could. Between the both of us, we got two jobs and a van. And Dianne."

Carroll has started polishing the leather pistol holster he wears at work. He whistles low. Two Tickets to Paradise. Eddie Money.

"I said listen, you mother, I loved you and that little kid just how you wanted even if it is damn near sick the way you--the way you do things."

Carroll points the empty holster at her. His ears are bright red. He licks his lips.

"Please don't say sick, Joleen."

"Look, it's common sense. I can't raise no kid on my pay. Half my check'd go for day care. And you're gonna need help with Dianne before long."

Carroll puts his fat finger through the holster hole. Rubs it back and forth.

"Truth is," he says, pointing at her belly, "truth is, you're the one who's sick."

Watching a woman get desperate is its very own brand of fun. Like the old flicks with the villain who always has a railroad track handy and knows all the train schedules by heart. As long as you know you'll be there to untie the ropes before the train chugs through. To Carroll the trick is to be both the villain and the hero. Be your own damn movie. Hire you own actors.

Like Joleen.

She's over six months into it when baby Dianne disappears.

When she finds out, she throws a fit.

Dianne was getting too big to keep anyway, and Leon called in an IOU from a trade last year. That's what friends are for--especially downtown. Carroll knows in advance Joleen will freak. But without the baby, it means no real sex anyway. Carroll can go a long time between drinks of water. There'll always be another woman, as long as there's another baby. And vice versa. The game goes on and on.

At midnight he slips Dianne through the window of Leon's cruiser along with a little bag he's packed with some diapers and milk. Leon sets her carefully down on the passenger seat next to an upright double-barreled shotgun. He gives Carroll a thumbs-up and disappears down the alley.

Carroll waits till he's done missing baby Dianne himself before he sees Joleen again. Almost a month. Don't ever think Carroll don't care about the babies, too. He cares in the way they all just have to come and go, in the way there's so many of em and they're all so much alike. Almost a month. That's what makes him the babyman, deep down.

"Her mama took her back," Carroll says when Joleen asks about Dianne. "She moved to New York, they got better clinics there, she's gonna be a drug counselor while she keeps up with her own treatment. The drowning saving the drowning. That's the way things are, Joleen. The blind find the blind. Like you and me, honey, like you and me." He reaches toward her swollen belly. "Let me feel it kick again."

"Don't touch me or it. You told me so many stories I can't tell what to believe anymore. All I know is I can't stand up all

day in that line much longer."

Carroll plays advocate for the devil.

"Is it too late for an operation, Joleen? I know you said you don't approve and all."

"It was too late one minute after you gave me this thing. I don't want it and you don't want it, but I sure as hell ain't gonna kill it. God moves in mysterious ways, Carroll."

"Damn if He don't. I gotta say I admire you there, Joleen, truly I do. Jesus, your breasts are gorgeous."

It takes him almost an hour to calm her down enough to touch one.

They lie in bed. He rubs her feet where they're sore.

"Honey Joleen, my baby. I didn't know this would happen. You working so hard every day. Damn that factory--no maternity leave until after three years. What a bitch."

He watches her. He waits until her face relaxes.

"We just gotta make a plan, baby. I'm gonna say it slow one time so you know I ain't kidding. I'm not gonna marry you sweetheart."

Joleen listens to the truth and the lies, all mixed up. Her eyes blur. Carroll sees she's learning. There's no good way to sort it out. You believe everything and get your heart broke time and again, or you believe nothing and your heart gets numb and sandy like a foot that's gone asleep. Carroll's proud of all he's figured for himself.

"I'm not marrying nobody, not ever again after the first time. I got a boy in high school I ain't seen for five years. Carroll Jr."

Carroll traces a finger around the hollows of his ear lobe. He can't remember if he's ever told Joleen about Carroll Jr.

"So that's that. But I respect that you got to be true to your feelings and have this baby, that's all there is to it. But then you get to start over." He pauses to let those words sink in.

"I'm past startin' over. I'm here in my niche. You know about niches?"

He waits for her to look in his eyes. "This city's got a million niches, and I'm in mine for the long haul. You just gotta find a niche for yourself. You got plenty of chances left. Look, here's what we'll do. You take leave without pay, and I pay the bills for the next month, including the hospital. And then we go our own separate ways, simple as that, two people, two ways. OK?"

Joleen is doing it again, what she's learned so well at Carroll's place, that unnamed kind of crying. She'd have learned it somewhere anyway, Carroll figures. Just a way of being voiceless in the dark, a way of praying and cursing all at once, a way of making do with it.

"And the kid? What about the kid, Carroll."

"Baby'll be OK. I promise. I'll take the baby."

Carroll stays in the slow lane on the Expressway. The van's out of alignment--it pulls off to the right. He thinks about Joleen. She's in labor. He dropped her off at St. Luke's this afternoon. This is the worst part of the game even though it's the best part, the time when all the women become one woman. One pregnant woman whose face he can't quite see.

Joleen was on the verge of screaming in the van, sweat on her forehead as thick as honey. A baby's on the way for sure. Carroll wonders where it will end up. Maybe in a plush living room in a house by the lakes, learning to walk on carpet as deep and thick as pelt. Two parents hovering around, loving it even more than usual because they had to buy it. That's real love.

He checks the gas gauge when he realizes he's on his third loop around the city. The pavement ahead of him is a gray movie where Carroll watches the past surface and dissolve, and as it unfolds ahead of the van he feels the endless circle of his game closing in on him. People are starting to switch their headlights on.

On his way home Carroll drives by St. Luke's again. He remembers how mad his wife had been in West Covina when Carroll Jr. was coming and he'd taken off for two weeks.

He double-parks in the hospital lot. He counts by heart the floors--one, two, three, four, five--fifth floor maternity. Room after room filled with women and babies, women with babies inside them, babies on top of them, girl babies who will have babies inside of them someday--Carroll thinks of those nesting egg toys that you just keep taking apart, one inside the other, each tinier than the one before.

And boy babies too--boys like Carroll Jr. and Carroll's little brother--the first baby he'd ever seen. When Carroll's father had brought him home from the hospital, the tiny red head poking out from the blanket, all wrinkled and indistinct, Carroll had thought it was a joke, as if somebody'd squeezed out the simplest features of a face in one of his dad's huge fists.

Somebody honks at Carroll, and he looks away from the fifth floor windows. He puts the van in gear and says a private so long to Joleen, although he knows he'll see her at least one more time. One more time to get the baby.

On his police-band CB, he hears his friend Leon turn in a robbery call at a pharmacy a few blocks away. Carroll stops in his alley and collects some cardboard boxes out of a dumpster. Cardboard burns really hot.

Carroll goes to the passenger side of the van and lifts the baby boy he calls Joey out. It's a muggy summer night on the South Side. He gets a bottle of formula from the glove compartment and heads into Marcie's, a small tavern near the Mid-town Glover Plant. His son cries all the time. It gets on Carroll's nerves.

He sets his face to look like a brand-new father--worried, distraught. What he doesn't know is that the expressions he tries for, ones he's gotten mostly off TV shows, aren't ever quite the ones he gets. What shows now is a boyish kind of fear, a desperate look, mostly around his pale eyes.

The bar's pretty empty. He sits in a corner and sips a Screwdriver beneath a neon electric guitar that says BUD. He gives Joey a bottle and waits for the swing-shift traffic.

A woman with no purse walks in and Carroll hears her ask the bartender if that little prick, Mickey, has been in. The bartender says no and gives her a can of seven-up before she asks. She's tall with thin, long legs and arms and neck, fine-boned, but with a bust like in the old days. She's got a light mustache or some sweat on her upper lip, but she looks like she doesn't care which or who wonders.

She looks over at Carroll and his kid in the corner. Joey starts to fuss. As Carroll dabs at his face and picks him up, the woman comes over to them. It's sweat.

Her breasts are full and large beneath her cotton dress. Carroll shakes the hand she pokes in his face as she takes the baby. Her name is Dora Mattsen. Everybody just calls her Matty. Carroll tells her his name.

"Poor little kid, so hungry." Matty sniffs the bottle Carroll's been using and wrinkles her nose.

"You trying to kill the kid? Forget this sour stuff." She sets the plastic bottle on the table. "We know what this little fella needs, don't we." She's baring a swollen, golden nipple and pulling Joey down to it. "Same as all of em need, young or old, eh?" She winks at Carroll.

When they leave, Matty carries Joey, still attached to her, and Carroll follows.

Matty directs Carroll to her place, a run-down fourplex on McNain that she manages in return for half her rent. They park in the driveway between two bikes and an oversize skateboard as big as a small sled. As they go in, Carroll sees a hand-lettered sign in the window. Block Home.

"What's the block home business, Matty?" Carroll makes small talk. He can't get an angle on how to sweet-talk her.

"What? Oh, kids can come in here. I'm always at home in

the daytime--I run a little day care--the Johnson twins upstairs in #4 and a couple of others. I got a sign up over at the Grimebuster Laundry. You'd be surprised--I have to turn people away."

"Yeah, I know, before Joey's mother ran out on us, she was having trouble even finding babysitters." He tries to look as if he's not really wanting sympathy.

"See if you can get a good picture." Matty says as she hands Carroll the remote control for the TV. You may have to fiddle with it. Are you any good with your hands?" She disappears down the hallway with Joey.

Carroll looks at the TV. The VHF is broken off, and a piece of curtain hanger is wired onto the rabbit ears. He goes to look for Matty. He didn't come here to play fix-it man.

He sneaks up behind her in the dark bedroom. He plans to show her just how good he is with his hands--that line was a come-on if he ever heard one. Just as he gets to her, she turns around, naked to the waist. Joey's on the bed behind her. She puts her arms around Carroll and kisses him and then pulls away and returns to Joey all in one continuous motion, all without a word. He watches her half-naked silhouette as she changes the baby's diaper and begins to nurse. But when Carroll shows her his hard-on, Matty tell him what he can do with it--for all she cares, she says--head for the bathroom.

Matty makes it sound simple. She says she loves babies, loves kids, but doesn't have much use anymore for men--and even less for sex. She's got four kids already. Her youngest, Dean, is 14 months. She lets Carroll watch her nurse Joey and Dean as much as he wants, but whenever he asks for more, she just says "tough" to him. She says it a lot, that word. "Tough."

"You got a thing about tough, don't you, Matty." Carroll tries to bait her. "How'd you get these kids in the first place? Musta not been so tough somewhere along the line. Somebody opened the oven door sometime, didn't they?"

"How I got 'em is my business, Carroll. I don't ask you about Joey. What's the use of us telling each other a pack of lies. Just tell me that. It ain't questions that make this world go round."

The van is perfect for what Matty calls "outings." Matty drives it like a bus while Carroll reads city maps and the little brochures about local attractions that Matty's collected from the Detroit Tourist Bureau. She likes to take her family all over town, from the downtown to the suburbs. And back. Every weekend.

She tells Carroll you don't have to go a long way to have a good time--she says they could go someplace different every weekend of their lives and never get outside the Greater Detroit

Area. When he tells her where he's from, California, she says she's never gone west of Iowa City, Iowa. And doesn't really care to.

Carroll keeps the garage and his job and his van, but his party money, his game money and baby money, all goes to Matty and the kids. He rolls up the carpet and tacks it down in Matty's TV room so the kids will be warmer. Mostly Carroll uses the garage to work on the van. He puts new brake shoes on and turns the drums. He puts a new clutch in. Matty rides the clutch real bad.

But she's a great cook and smart as a whip. That's what it really boils down to, smart. The way she don't even wait for Carroll to tell her a lie, the way she marches right on around the parts of life Carroll struggles to explain away--she's smarter than Carroll. And he's just smart enough to figure that out. They say grace before every meal.

"You're always telling me about your friends on the force," Matty says. "So go for it. God knows the City pays better than your rinky-dink company."

"Yeah, I've got just enough friends on the force to know better. Money's not everything. I like my job. I'm used to it."

"So you can get used to being a policeman. You can get used to anything, give it enough time. Here, I'll call for you." She dials the number in the City's newspaper ad for recruits and makes Carroll an appointment for next week.

Carroll slams down his pop and it fizzes over on the end table. "I'm too old anyway. I'll just be wasting my time."

Matty wipes up his spill and slides a cardboard coaster under it as she talks. "Too old," she repeats his words, "what's with you and too old? You're as old as you think you are." She flashes him a wide smile.

"Look here," she says, "there's ways and there's ways. You're not the only one with friends. You think there's nobody in this town don't owe me a favor or two?"

"Maybe everybody owes you a favor, Matty, but maybe not me, maybe it's time for me to go my own separate way here. You're getting too far into my shit, way too far." He rises from the vinyl recliner. It squeaks as it folds up behind him.

Matty pushes Carroll back into his chair with the tips of her long, fine, fingers, as if her movement were the shadow of a real gesture, as if he weighed nothing, as if she could not imagine resistance from him. "Stay put, you're not gonna go anywhere, Carroll. I've got your number. I got it the first night I met you."

She heads down the hall to the bedroom. "They'll be proud," she says, "a policeman right in the house. It'll be safer for everybody."

She comes out with the babies, Joey and Dean. She calls the other kids out of the TV room.

Carroll sits still as they assemble around him like silent little animals, their unflinching eyes on him, gazes as warm as sunlight, small hands all over his knees. Matty watches him like he's already safe behind bars. She gives him Joey to hold as she nurses Dean.

"Hold Joey while I feed baby Dean."

"Goddamn, his name ain't even Joey. That's just what I call him because his mother's name was Joleen. None of this is me, this ain't my niche. It's not my niche here at all."

"So we'll make it your niche. Hell, how does anybody get a name? How'd you get yours--was your mother's name Carol? Was it?"

Carroll winces. His ears go red.

"See, it goes right on, it might as well be here. I'll take care of you and your baby and you take care of us. We'll keep calling him Joey--we'll keep calling you Carroll. There's nothing wrong with those names, nothing at all."

Carroll wonders what the night patrol shift will be like. He wonders if he could get Leon as a partner somehow. It'd be just like one of those old TV shows. He closes his eyes as he hears the baby sucking on Matty. It's like the wet, thick ticking of a moist, living clock across the room. He squeezes little Joey so tight up into his face he can't tell at all where he begins and the baby leaves off. One of them is crying.

Phil Condon