

THE BIRTH OF SAMUEL

The resident leaned across the counter toward the pretty nurse. “Why does the practice keep Dr. Levin around?”

Neither realized the subject of their conversation was just around the corner.

The pretty nurse leaned toward the resident. *Smart girl*, thought Dr. Levin. *Marry a doctor, and your time working night shift is over--once he pays off his loans*. She pulled at the end of her ponytail.

“He doesn’t have the best bedside manner...”

The resident barked a laugh. “Bedside manner? The man has a god complex!”

Around the corner, Dr. Levin’s eyebrows came together. God complex? Perhaps. If he wasn’t around to say, *let there be light*, those babies would never leave the darkness of the womb.

The nurse fidgeted with her clipboard. “His surgical outcomes are quite good.” It sounded more like a question than a statement.

Silly girl. His surgical outcomes were unparalleled. He was a genius in the OR--a magician with the knife--and his partners knew it. He could tyrannize the staff and patients all he liked as long as he saved babies and kept malpractice suits at bay.

Dr. Levin decided it was time to end this tête-à-tête. He rounded the corner.

“If you’re quite finished your courtship ritual, perhaps you could tell me who I’m seeing next?”

The resident jumped, and the nurse had the decency to blush. She held out the shaking clipboard.

“M-Ms. Jacobson’s in room three.”

Dr. Levin snatched the chart and called the resident to heel. (What was his name? Something foreign. They were all foreign these days.) Together they entered a room where a pixie of a girl drooped on the edge of the exam table. “Girl” wasn’t the right word, he mentally amended. When you are 71, every female under 50 seems like a girl. But girl or woman, this female seemed distraught. Distraught females made him uncomfortable--something he ought to have considered before pursuing obstetrics and gynecology. He glanced at the chart.

“Ms.--ah--Jacobson?”

The young woman gulped, scraped the tears from her face, and tried to smile. Dr. Levin froze. Barb. This girl was the spitting image of Barb at that age.

He cleared his throat. “Why are you here today?”

It was the wrong question. She went all blotchy and started crying again. The resident made a sympathetic noise. Ms. Jacobson, slurring like a drunk, managed to convey that her third round of fertility treatment had failed.

Dr. Levin tapped the clipboard, “Not a surprise. Only 50% of women conceive after the first six months on Clomid.”

Ms. Jacobson’s sob and his resident’s expression told him he’d said the wrong thing. He didn’t care. If she wanted someone to pat her hand, she should’ve seen the midwife.

The woman gripped the edge of the exam table. “But Penny gets pregnant without even trying!”

This was why he avoided clinical practice, Dr. Levin reflected. He preferred the predictable world of the operating room, where anesthetized patients couldn’t talk back. Or cry. There, he was the god of his little universe.

From behind him, the resident said, “Penny?”

Dr. Levin withered him with a look. “Ms. Jacobson--”

“Hannah.”

“Ms. Jacobson,” he said firmly, “whether Penny is your sister or your dog has no bearing on your fertility. Continue with the Clomid and come back in three months.”

“But--”

“Please see the receptionist on the way out.”

Despite his age, Dr. Levin could move quickly if necessary, and he was out of the room before the patient could start weeping again. Barrenness--how perfectly Biblical. But with synthetic hormones and statistics in his corner, he could sometimes beat God at His own game.

#

Three months later, a very different woman sat on the exam table. Ms. Jacobson was radiant. Barb had looked just like that when Finn was on the way, half a century ago. Before Dr. Levin could ask the unnecessary question, she caught his hand in hers.

“It’s a boy!”

He extracted his hand from her grasp. “My congratulations.”

Boy babies grew up to be young men who slammed doors and broke your wife’s heart, but even he knew this wasn’t the moment to bring that up. As he monitored the fetal heartbeat, she raised her head from the table.

“His name is Samuel.”

Something inside Dr. Levin always shrank from thinking of a fetus as someone with a name. Better to wait until it was safely outside. But he managed a smile for her sake.

He didn’t expect to see Ms. Jacobson after that. One appointment with him was all most mothers-to-be could take. They latched on to the female doctors and midwives, who could listen dewy-eyed to their detailed birth plans. He knew they secretly hoped he wouldn’t be on call on their Big Day. They’d better pray he was the one wielding the knife if things went amiss, though.

But Ms. Jacobson was back again the next month, still garrulous and glowing. She seemed immune to his utter lack of bedside manner--probably due to her elevated estrogen levels. As her pregnancy progressed, Dr. Levin found himself looking forward to seeing her chart appear on his desk--to see her face, so like another face he hadn’t seen in... He cut that thread of thought off before it caused him pain.

“I’d like to have a water birth,” Ms. Jacobson confided at her 30-week appointment. “I’ll be working with the midwife from now on.”

He felt a fleeting, ridiculous sense of disappointment. *Of course*. Women these days thought of a natural birth as some sort of badge to achieve. (Nonsense, of course. Look at infant mortality rates before modern operating protocols.)

His face must've given him away, because Ms. Jacobson put a hand on his arm.

"I so appreciate the care you've taken of me and Samuel."

He harumphed, stared at his meticulously polished Oxfords, and wished her the best. He meant it.

#

Two months later, Dr. Levin and the resident (Dr. Juliani? No, something else...) were scrubbing out of a uterine biopsy when the midwife came rushing in, all clattering clogs and flyaways.

"The Jacobson baby's heart rate dropped again. We need you in the OR."

Dr. Levin frowned and began scrubbing in. "Is an epidural block in place?"

"She didn't want one."

He refrained from massaging his temples, because he'd already scoured his hands twice in five minutes. Of course she didn't want one. Nobody listened to doctors any more. No, they got their advice from essential oil peddlers and the backwaters of the internet.

He was getting too old for this. Barb had always begged him to retire, and he should have listened. He should have listened to her about a lot of things. He should have listened to her about Finn.

The resident trotted along behind him like a sycophantic spaniel as he strode toward the steel double doors. Ms. Jacobson sat hunched over on the operating table as the anesthesiologist

prepped her for an epidural, her belly taking up most of her tiny frame. She smiled a thin, sad smile when Dr. Levin came in. She looked exhausted. Defeated.

He guessed what she was thinking: that a c-section meant she'd failed as a woman and a mother. There'd be no water birth, no doula, no essential oils. No badge.

Medical staff moved with seamless choreography around her, calling out the familiar script, looking to Dr. Levin for their cue. He was the conductor, the scalpel his baton. The fetal heart rate line on the monitor zig-zagged reassuringly, the time signature for this strange symphony.

Only one gowned form stood awkwardly by the wall, unsure of his role on the stage: the husband, poor, lost soul. Dr. Levin gave him a reassuring nod and squared his shoulders. He was the god in this heaven, and all was right with the world.

Until it wasn't. The fetal heart rate line flattened. The anesthesiologist, his epidural needle poised at Ms. Jacobson's lumbar, glanced up at Dr. Levin.

Dr. Levin raised a finger. "Roll her."

Nurses lowered Ms. Jacobson to the table and turned her onto her left side, their eyes on the monitor. Her eyes searched their masked faces for answers, for reassurance. The husband shifted his weight from one foot to another, arms crossed because he had nothing better to do with them.

The fetus's heart rate hadn't come back up, and Dr. Levin's voice boomed from on high.

"Time to go. Ms. Jacobson, we have to put you to sleep for this."

The pace of the dancers doubled, movements frenetic now. They positioned the little woman for a C-section, arms out as if she were about to be crucified. She raised her head from the table.

“You’ll get Samuel out safely?” Her voice was thready.

Dr. Levin inclined his head, Jove-like.

The anesthesiologist pumped NMBAs into the IV, Ms. Jacobson’s eyes half-closed, and the anesthesiologist taped them shut. At the same time, the nurses were cleaning and draping the surgical field, and the tang of Betadine filled the room. Dr. Levin couldn’t see her face now--probably for the best. Best not to think of her as a person with a face and a name and eyes that looked to him for reassurance.

Before he could make the transverse cut, though, the maternal heart rate picked up tempo. Ms. Jacobson wheezed behind the drape.

Dr. Levin glanced at the monitor. “What the hell--?”

Her blood pressure had plummeted. The anesthesiologist announced the dose of epinephrine, and the hapless Mr. Jacobson demanded that someone tell him what was going on. Dr. Levin was uncharacteristically quiet, his thoughts scattered. He’d have liked someone to tell him what was going on too. *Think. Why couldn’t he think?*

At his elbow, the resident murmured, “Anaphylaxis. She’s allergic to the anesthesia.”

Of course. Dr. Levin snapped, “I knew that.”

Ms. Jacobson retched, and his thoughts settled into an uncomfortable order. Low blood pressure meant low oxygen levels, and low oxygen levels meant the baby wouldn’t last long inside. It was time for Dr. Levin to perform his miracle. If God wasn’t going to save this baby, he would. His scalpel hovered over the taut skin. *Let there be light.*

His hand shook.

A tremor doesn’t matter to most people. A statistically significant portion of the population has a normal hand tremor. But here, now, he could lacerate Barb’s bowel or nick Finn.

No, no, that wasn't right. Hannah and Samuel, not Barb and Finn. He felt sweat gather on his forehead, trickle down his back.

The resident rubbed his hands together. "We have ten minutes--maybe fifteen."

Dr. Levin knew what the young man had left unsaid: before the fetus--Samuel--suffered lasting neurological damage. He tightened his hand around the scalpel, but that only caused it to shake more.

Samuel, Samuel, Samuel. He was helpless as the day Barb almost died delivering Finn; helpless as the day eighteen years later when Finn slammed the door and never opened it again; helpless to save this woman with a name and a face.

Dr. Levin turned to the resident. "You do it."

Nurses' eyes widened over the tops of their masks, and the resident gaped at him. "I'm sorry, what?"

Dr. Levin held out the shaking scalpel. "You do it." And then, with an effort, "Please."

#

Dr. Levin stood at the window of the private NICU room, watching Hannah lift Samuel from the little plastic bucket they put babies in these days. Samuel didn't seem to think too highly of his accommodations and was voicing his complaints. Dr. Levin grunted. Nothing wrong with that APGAR score now.

Hannah carried the red, writhing bundle to the window and held Samuel up for inspection. Dr. Levin managed a tight smile. Finn had been this ugly too. But Hannah was obviously blind to any faults this baby might have.

"How are you feeling?" He spoke loudly, so his voice could carry through the glass. The nurse at the charge desk popped her head over the counter. *Busybody.*

Hannah grimaced and put her hand on her stomach. “Like everything inside wants to be outside.” Her voice was muffled, and Samuel was doing his best to shout her down.

“Ah, I’m sorry.” He gestured vaguely at the two of them. “Sorry your delivery didn’t go as planned.” He’d wanted her to have her badge.

“Don’t be sorry.” Hannah smiled down at the baby, who had turned an angry puce. “I hate to think what would have happened if you hadn’t been there.”

Dr. Levin spoke to his meticulously polished Oxfords. “Yes, well. It was... it was my resident Dr. Jhurani who performed the surgery.” Hannah’s eyebrows rose, and Dr. Levin began to babble. “He’s an excellent doctor--a very promising young man. Getting married soon to one of my nurses, in fact. Wonderful girl. Going to the wedding next month.” He laughed self-consciously. “My son is my plus one.”

Hannah opened her mouth and (Dr. Levin guessed) made a polite sound that didn’t carry over her son’s caterwauling. She retreated to an armchair to nurse, and Samuel set to work doing what babies do best. From her seat, she called,

“Still, I’m grateful! It was a miracle.”

Dr. Levin frowned. “Modern medical science.”

Hannah was gazing down at Samuel as he fed, Madonna in a pastel hospital gown. “I suppose nothing is a miracle or everything is a miracle.”

He gave a noncommittal grunt, and she glanced up.

“Thank you, Dr. Levin.”

Dr. Levin glared at the charge nurse, who was still rubbernecking, and cleared his throat. “Eli, please.”

