

Expecting

The calendar on the wall says I've been gestating for twenty-eight days, although I don't recognise any of the months on the calendar. Gestation, no, pregnancy, lasts longer than that, surely. Twenty-eight days doesn't feel right, or at least it shouldn't. I can't keep track of time here, but my stomach is swollen, bruised black and throbbing, my breasts are in agony, and more swollen and bruised than my stomach. I can feel 'it' kick. We weren't allowed to learn the sex of the baby. Learning the sex is my favourite part of pregnancy. The mystery, the tension of not knowing but wanting to, and guessing all the same. Every time a thought would occur about the baby's future, when picking a toy or clothes, or hearing a name you like, you would play a film reel of random static moments of your baby's future life; called that name, with that yellow duck, with that green onesie – and he would giggle, she would babble, they were real. And when the Staff, no, not Staff – we called them doctors – when the doctor would finally tell you that it's a boy or girl, all of those images became true, my baby boy, my little girl, they were coming, and they were real. We weren't told its sex because we shouldn't get too excited, there was work to be done, rough work. It will be birthed soon, and there is work that needs doing, that will hurt too much if we are excited. We know what is expected of us, so we need to be prepared.

Today is our last drill or training session. Our preparation has been getting more intense. Over the last week, we have progressed through a catalogue of different distressed animal sounds with increasing intensity. We Wives discussed it in the breakroom during supper and agreed it sounded like a pig, perhaps foetal. The first day we listened to it squeal – it was a looped track – and we were asked to listen for as long as we can. We could remove ourselves

from the task whenever we had had enough, and we would be done for the day. The Staff called it inoculation. Some Wives took their headphones off almost instantly. I don't know any of the Wives' names, I don't feel the need to ask, and neither do any of them, it never seems to occur to us. The scarred one, whose ribs show too tightly under yellowing skin, ran away crying. She didn't come to supper that afternoon. I don't know if she has had too many children, or if simply this is her first, either way, she is not going to perform well at the procedure. I don't know what will happen to her, or her child. All I can do is focus on my own training, my own baby, and do the best job I can.

The next day the Staff told us we would have three sessions: morning, after supper, and before bed, for 20 minutes each. It was the same looped track. The scarred wife cried almost the whole way through the sessions. The piglet, if a foetal pig should even be called a piglet, would grunt uncomfortably, a guttural cooing, like it was being pushed aside from its mother's teat before it was done drinking. I began to make different timestamps internally over the numerous sessions. It took around a minute before the piglet started to scream. I would like to describe it more so like an animal noise, squealing or yelping, but it screamed. It screamed for whatever was happening to stop, it screamed to go back to its mother, to crawl up into her womb, and never face the outside world, or these cruel tools again. It continued until its vocal cords snapped and rubbed raw, its voice dying in its throat, croaking out protests with a broken instrument. It screamed like a helpless child, which I suppose, was the point.

We had to listen to the piglet for longer and longer each session, every day, until eventually we spent hours a day listening to it; the scarred wife would cry the whole time, still sobbing well after the sessions were over.

For the last day of listening to the piglet we were given tools. The same tools we would have to use to operate on our babies. We studied each with artificial interest, getting our hands used to their weight and cold. The scalpel weighed the heaviest. Twenty Wives standing at a long silver table, with a tray of tools to their left; headphones on; white frocks fastened tightly around their waists; bellies engorged with torn seams beneath the skin. What a sight we would have been to our Husbands, watching through the one-way glass. Always there in spirit for support, but never able to help us when it counted. This was our job. They can't help with the birth; they can't help with the procedure. *A mother must know her baby, inside and out.* The Motto of Maternity. *A mother*, not father; there are no fathers here in Maternity, only Husbands. If anything happens to us or our baby during or after birth; the husbands are escorted off the premises, or volunteered for further experiments in a different ward. So, they tend to us while we prepare, and do what they can as husbands to Wives. They cry when we do; reassure us of our unwavering beauty; praise us for a strength that they lack; the gift that is our presence here; a role that only we can fulfil.

Yesterday was the first non-animal sound loop. It was by far the hardest. With the tools now familiar to our hands, we were given deceased foetal deer to practice the procedure on. Foetal deer, I guess they are fawns, were screaming over headsets for the last week, not piglets. We were wrong.

Laminated charts were given to each of us, showing the different incisions we are to make on our babies. One down the sternum, next to the heart. One across the small of its back on the left. One in the stomach, just below the belly button. A pictured list of different foreign materials and growths, that we are to remove from our babies with our hands, were shown in a column on the sheet; grey and black tumours, misshapen but smoothed stones, thick vein-like sections that looked like hollow leeches, only too pallid. The fawn on my tray had scorch

marks on its chest and throat, pinpricks of abraded skin at the centre of the burns. A cut from its anus through to lower stomach was tightly stitched shut with rough cord. Its chest and stomach were overstuffed with debris. It lay crooked and still. We were told to practice making the correct incisions on the specimens at our own pace, and see what growths and objects we could remove from it. We had one hour and would do this again before bed with a new set of specimens. They instructed us to put the headphones on like the previous days, and begin.

It was a child's voice coming through my headphones. A soft whimper, the formation of a word balancing back and forth on its tongue. "Pah, puh", then it screamed. One frequency, no wavering or building to it, just a sustained scream as loud as it could manage. The scarred wife started sobbing, beginning on the fawn through tears. The inoculation must be working. After the initial whimper, I couldn't even tell the voice was a child's, the scream was the piglet's, was the fawn's, the child's, my baby's; a crumbling wall of abrasive noise to be pushed through, I can push through it, for my baby's sake. The Staff can't help, my Husband can't help. *A mother must know her baby, inside and out.* The inoculation must be working. It's up to me, and I will be prepared. I cut into the fawn. It felt too easy.

That night, after the second session of the day. I asked my Husband what he saw when he looked at me. He told me he saw a radiant angel, the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen; as strong as marble, as gentle and soft as a lullaby. Things I've heard the other Husbands say to their splintering Wives. What he doesn't say is that he sees a woman he barely knows, with sagging, defiled tits, whose hair is so stiff and lifeless it can't be distinguished from bleached straw. A woman with bags under her eyes as purple as the stretch marks across her stomach, carrying a baby he would help raise, that he couldn't care less about. I asked my Husband if he thinks the baby will be a boy or a girl. He replied it doesn't matter, it will be our baby, and

after the procedure goes well, it will be perfect, just like you. I don't expect anything more than that, and I don't respond. He kissed my clammy forehead. His lips were stiff and chapped. I felt nothing, no warmth or comfort in his kiss. We went to bed.

Today is the last day before the birth, and the procedure. Our last day of preparation. The final training session. The charts wait for us on the table, along with the tray of tools. Our Husbands watch from behind the glass window, their inoculation parallels our own but is so much more forgiving. The scarred wife isn't here. Maybe she finally did it, killed herself and the baby. Maybe she stole the scalpel in her frock and slit her wrists in the bedroom after supper – something I've considered a few times. But I want to be here for my baby, no matter how much it hurts me to hurt it. I can't tell who's braver, me or the scarred wife, but I have a feeling it's her.

The Staff bring out a tray and place it on the steel table before each of us. There is a fawn pinned through its limbs to the tray, a leather strap around its neck fastened tightly. Live specimens today, to prepare us for the resistance and restlessness of a real living subject. Something strange happens; I put on the headphones, and a shriek starts playing, I can't tell if it's a child, or a baby, or a pig. Whatever it is, I don't care, it falls over me as white noise. I'm preoccupied with the smell of the deerling. It is all I can perceive, all that I can focus on. The bitter taste of urine, mixed with a musk of fur and straw. There's been no smell to notice; yesterday's specimens smelt chemical, and sanitary, like the rest of Maternity. The white noise is drowned out by a cavernous thumping, my heart is trying to escape my sternum, exiting through my throat. *A mother must know her baby, inside and out.* The first incision spills copper into the air and up into my nose, cutting through the musk and bitter scent. It's too much. I remember the smell of my first baby. How wonderful that smell was. The best smell in the world; sweetened cream and earthly antiseptic that only exists in the womb; the

smell of the unspoiled. So rich it chemically overrides your brain, replacing all other thoughts with only your love of the baby, of my baby. Mine. I'm not prepared to smell my baby. I'm not inoculated yet. I'll smell my baby tomorrow, I'll want to hold it close and cradle it, and the metal-tinged arterial spray of the first slice will cut through me like a scalpel, and I'll be reduced to nothing but a wounded animal. I want her smell unspoiled— my baby is a girl, he, she, doesn't matter, I'll call her what she is, whether boy or girl, but she isn't an it. She's my baby girl, and I won't spoil her heavenly smell with pain. When I smell her I'll want to hold her to my bosom and turn the scalpel on anyone who wants to hurt her. She's my baby, and I won't hurt her. I'll leave Maternity and jump off a cliff into the ravenous ocean. I won't need to breathe underwater – as long as my little girl is in my arms – I'll be breathing in her scent. My baby will be with me where she belongs, and she won't have to hurt; just float along in the dark brine, as she had been. But it's a mother's job to know her baby, inside and out. The Staff won't do the procedure, and the procedure needs to be done – otherwise, my baby will hurt for the rest of her short life. My Husband can't help, or won't, it doesn't matter. It is my responsibility. I have to do the procedure. It's a mother's job, *a mother's job*. It's up to me to know my baby, inside and out. *Inside. And out.*