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Cracking Open

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CRACKING OPEN

Four decades ago, when I was young and stupid and didn't know a baby from a wormy *kapusta*, according to my Polish mother, I gave birth to a tiny damaged boy on my kitchen table. Just out of high school, I was working in a fertilizer factory, going to night school, and writing frantically in my spare time to reshape myself in the image and likeness of George Eliot. But she never had children. Nevertheless, I figured since an infant is small and portable, it wouldn't interfere with my plan for the contemplative literary life. The day I decided to go off the pill, John Lennon and Yoko Ono staged a bed-in for peace in Amsterdam. One thing I knew with missionary clarity: this baby was my olive branch to the universe. Unlike my mother, who produced misfits who could only hobble and crawl, my child would be so loved he would soar. Our bond would heal every rift, every schism, every abuse. My husband, Matthew, an Irish boy who had been dismissed from his religious order at age 20 for chugging brandy in the Christian Brothers winery, was another hobbler and crawler. He wrote me poems, I gave him sex—an elegant but sparse compromise.

I registered at the local maternity center for prenatal care: two rooms over a store facing the Maxwell Street Market. Toward the end of the pregnancy, I made weekly bus trips to the center, where a volunteer palpated my belly to the crooning of Muddy Waters. I prepared my supplies for the time of delivery: a two-foot-high stack of newspapers, a large plastic sheet, a dime for calling the maternity center, a strong electric light, and a kettle for boiling water.

Giving birth was like my first accordion lesson. When they put the bellows instrument in my lap, I didn't know where to put my hands, how to hold it. I had no idea how to have a baby, so I sat on the beat-up couch in our third-floor flat on Ainslie Avenue, crossed my legs and asked Bernie, a pink-faced intern, "Okay, what do I do?"

"Maybe we should have read a book," Matthew said, gathering up empty beer cans from the coffee table.

Bernie took one of Matthew's poems that I had framed from the wall. I read a few lines before he hung a makeshift IV from the nail. *A small bright delighting thing / A dark deep beckoning / Embodied twilight turning day to night.* My baby, a small bright delighting thing, felt huge inside me: a nuclear fission ready to break upon the world. I pressed my thighs together to hold back the dribble of green water that had been leaking for a couple of days. The baby was still head up and had no intention of turning and preparing for descent.

Oxytocin dripped into my veins. Bernie's partner, a small Filipino woman, boiled water, spread my stack of *Chicago Tribunes* over the kitchen table and floor, and swung a 100-watt bulb from an extension cord above the table. Matthew tamped his pipe, composing a poem in his head. "Change into something comfortable and crawl up on the table," Bernie said, as he unpacked his doctor's bag on the kitchen sink, clanging shiny tools on paper towels. I grabbed an oversized Beatles t-shirt. The Filipino woman helped me maneuver the IV tubing as I hoisted myself up on the table. Earlier, I had been paying bills there, flipping a penny to decide who would get paid—Con Ed or Ma Bell. Envelopes scattered on the floor. Would Bernie and the Filipino woman ask for money?

Perfect control. Nobody will see me flinch. I lay on newsprint, naked from the waist down. Not a telltale sound or revealing grunt. My belly heaved. Muscles closed around the baby like a slow glacier. I controlled the pain by imagining an advertisement for a Burberry raincoat permanently affixed to my back thigh. Finally, I began to crack open: one centimeter, two centimeters . . . six, seven. After several hours and a few choruses of "don't push, don't push, don't push, okay push," two little legs dangled out of me. "Where's his head?" The kitchen was eerily quiet. I heard the baby cry inside me. He didn't want to be born.

"You must move bowels in 24 hours," the Filipino woman said, lecturing me about hemorrhoids and sitz baths. Bernie called for backup to figure out how to get the rest of the baby out.

My son wasn't exactly what I had expected. A blob of protoplasm, shiny and translucent. But he was my first wonder of the world, my Grand Canyon. When Bernie cleaned him off, his skinny legs twisted around themselves like Gumby. He looked more poultry than baby, but the most exquisite chicken I had ever seen. For a moment, I thought there must be something wrong with him. But what did I know? The only baby I remembered clearly was my youngest brother, and I never really looked at him, just plotted how to dispose of him. My baby was perfect, if a bit crooked.

In the days that followed, I became sweet with curiosity about this new little being, in the larger scheme of things nothing but a speck of dust on the earth, but for me, a reason for living. I nuzzled his swollen belly against mine, cooed over his soft crown and doll fingers, drank in the perfume of yellow diapers. *Little caterpillar*. It was now my life's work to protect, honor, and celebrate this delicate creature. *Snail without a shell*. After two weeks, I was in love. We were a team: I gave him life, he gave me breasts.

The name on his birth certificate was Beckett. Matthew rejected my choice, which was Oliver. Reminded him of olives or liver. But it didn't matter what anybody else called him. Ollie and I formed a secret bond. At night in bed when he whimpered, I whispered his name. His fish mouth, heat-seeking and hungry, clamped on to me. My mother called in her blessing: "Now you'll know heartache. May your child do to you what you did to me." *You had only weak tea in your breasts; mine are filled with crème fraîche*. I would do motherhood right, and love my Ollie better than all the Polish mothers of the old neighborhood, stuffed into their Goldblatt housedresses.

During our two-week checkup at the maternity center, I ran into Debbie, whose prenatal visits had coincided with mine. "He's beautiful," she said.

"You don't think he looks like a chicken?" Ollie and I were so tightly swaddled in my Madonna and Baby Jesus fantasy that I half wanted a reality check.

"All babies look like chickens."

When the doctor held him up, his legs didn't uncurl. "Dislocated hips." *There's nothing wrong with my baby. Maybe he*

looks a little funny, but Matthew and I aren't exactly centerfolds. A common mixed-breed girl: Irish milk skin dinged with acne, Germanic chin, and Polish thighs, too lavish for their petite frame. A dreamy Irish boy, bone skinny and delicate. *Ollie's one of us.* "Take him over to the pediatric hospital," the doctor said. "They'll snap his hips into place, and he'll be good as new."

I zipped Ollie inside my jacket, snuggling his tiny ear to my heart, as the bus dodged potholes down Lincoln Avenue. My mother cautioned me: "When I was eight, Pa took me for my first streetcar ride. I woke up in Cook County Hospital without my tonsils. My sister Josie was supposed to get the operation, but she run away." A few years out of Poland, they believed they'd be kicked off relief if someone didn't show up. *Does Ollie's doctor need to fill a spot on his docket? Get a grip, you're not an immigrant.* I was clumsy at nurture. He was my practice case, and I might as well have been in a foreign land.

Ollie became a file number: 127164. Snapping his baby hips back into place took more than a flick of the orthopedist's wrist. "Leave him here, come back in a week, maybe two, he'll be fine," the doctor said. Like taking a car in for service. His femurs were deformed, and they put him in traction, hanging a five-pound weight from eight-pound Ollie. *Do it to me, hang me upside down, pack me in concrete, but don't touch my baby.* Only two weeks old, he was so new to the world, my little pot roast, fresh from my kitchen table.

I left the hospital without Ollie, escorted by a burly security guard who smelled like fried carp and who offered me a Lucky Strike. "Don't go gettin' all hot and bothered, honey, visiting hours is over, and you can't stay here no more." But where was I to go? Ollie couldn't live without me. They'd ignore him, starve him, experiment on him. I was his milk, my arms were his skin. It was as if they had taken one of my organs and left it, disconnected and bleeding, to die. "Go get yourself some broasted chicken," the guard said.

I sat with Matthew in the coffee shop across the street from the hospital until it closed at midnight. Do something! Kill the guard, storm the hospital, file a lawsuit, kidnap our baby. Didn't he see that I was coming apart? Why had I

married him anyway? He had wooed me with his poems, so light and airy that the groaning breath of the world seemed to stand still. The poems held me tight, and I clung to them the way Matthew clung to me. Before we got married, my father had been calling at three in the morning, dawn, noon. "Whore, I know you're on drugs! No good Catholic girl runs away from home and shacks up with a man. Where you getting them drugs? Give yourself up." He said the narcotics squad had surrounded my apartment and would take me away in a white coat and lock me up. After months of intermittent calls, and the silence of my mother who drew the shades and told everyone I was dead, I said to Matthew, "Let's get married. Maybe it'll stop."

"Sure," he said. I picked out two rings at Woolworth's, 99 cents each, and when it was my turn to say I do, I started to laugh. The county magistrate, Myriam Whitley, said stop cackling or leave the courthouse. *But it's not in the plan. I'm not supposed to get married. Not supposed to be my mother.* I tried to think of one thing I liked about Matthew: even his poems couldn't save me now. Myriam stamped our marriage certificate: E 7766. The next day, my father called: "Now you're a legitimate whore." My mother broke her silence and took the telephone: "Father Bernard says now you're excommunicated. You didn't get married in the Church." A week later, Matthew received a telegram from his parents: IF YOU MARRY THAT POLISH GIRL WE NEVER WANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN.

During Ollie's second week in the hospital, I rented a breast pump. I couldn't hold him or nurse him because it would interfere with his traction. So he lay in his steel crib at night, under the weight of a Rube Goldberg contraption, while I lay in my bed with rubber suction cups over my nipples, trying to keep the nectar flowing between us. Matthew drank at his desk until the apartment was dark and the only poetry he could get out was a grunt. Mornings, I waited at the hospital with my Styrofoam cooler filled with plastic bottles of breast milk, peering through the glass door, counting minutes on the clock above the lobby desk until, at ten o'clock, the security guard released the latches, and a stampede of mothers were

let loose to find their babies. I gave my bottles of milk to the nurse, small offerings to let Ollie know that I was still the source of good things. But when shifts changed, the bottles were lost or emptied down the sink.

With Ollie's legs still crooked after ten days in traction, the doctor attached a heavier weight to loosen his hips. His body slid across the sheet, jamming against the steel bars of the crib. They strapped him to a board to hold him in place, but the straps tore his skin. "We have to get serious, mother," the doctor said. In the cast room, he drove a metal pin through Ollie's femur, drilling through bone without anesthesia. Matthew and I stood at the window watching Ollie's body stiffen and turn scarlet as the doctor hammered the pin through his leg. Ollie gasped, and I pounded on the window. His fists opened and closed like fish gills sucking in air, and I lunged for the door. He screamed, I answered, and for the only time since his birth, we were in complete synchrony: an aria of mother and child wailing. When the pin was in place, the doctor stopped drilling, wiped beads of sweat from his brow, and looked quizzical. "What's all the fuss about, mother? Babies don't feel pain."

I kept vigil at Ollie's bed. I would leave the apartment in the morning, mostly unwashed, often in the same clothes from the night before. Circling the hospital, I searched for the window to his room. From the moment the lobby doors opened, until a polite voice on the loudspeaker informed all visitors to leave, I was at his side, petting the downy hairs of his head through the metal bars as he lay on his board. He cried all the time, even in sleep. Matthew sat on the other side of Ollie's bed, no longer able to write an unslurred word, hiding whatever he found to drink in a brown bag. I circled the hospital again at night when the security guard forced me from his room. Sometimes I didn't go home at all but lived on Halsted Street, watching for light in his window. Late into the night, I sat on the curb feeling milk leak through my shirt. One day I took the last breast pump bottle and filled it with found objects from my daily circling: a bottle cap, a rusted paper clip, an expired bus transfer, half a holy card with the Blessed Virgin's head ripped in two. I sent it floating

away in the melting snow. Soon there was no more milk, and my breasts disappeared. Ollie and I were no longer a team.

A social worker came to see me. "I'm Miss Bennett. Could I ask you a few questions?" She was neat and pretty, like June Cleaver, the Leave-It-To-Beaver mother.

What a relief to talk to someone who didn't want to poke or probe Ollie.

"We like to get a complete history whenever a family presents with birth defects. Is this your first child?" I shook my head yes. "Former miscarriages or abortions?" I shook no. "Did you ever take drugs?"

"You mean like aspirin?"

"No, I mean illegal substances."

I didn't even take Midol when I got cramps. I had tried marijuana, long before I was pregnant, but didn't like the burning in my throat so never smoked again. *They all have this thing about drugs. Does she know my father?* Miss Bennett explained that congenital malformations of the hips occur between the sixth and eighth week of fetal development. What was I doing back then? Later, I turned back the pages in my daybook to March, April, the beginning of spring. Shakespeare paper due. Boss on vacation. Matthew sold his blood to buy beer. What else? Malathion, scribbled in the margin of the calendar next to the Daylight Savings Time reminder. White fly! The begonia had white fly, and I had sprayed it with a weak mixture of Malathion. Could I have poisoned myself? The bottle did have a skull and crossbones on the warning label. Did I do anything else to cause Ollie's birth defects? Sex, masturbation, impure thoughts? Was the Church right after all? Was this punishment, retribution? Or was it something I ate? Too much red licorice? What about that time I ate the whole package of cupcakes with the pink frosting? Food dye! Could I blame the Food and Drug Administration?

During teaching rounds, doctors gathered around Ollie's crib and talked while he whimpered. If he cried too loud, the wall of white coats moved to the hall. The urologists were the worst. One doctor in particular poked and probed with analytic glee, as if my baby were a specimen for dissection. Ollie

screamed long after the doctor left. I put gin in his milk to help him sleep. If it silenced my husband, it might soothe my baby. But he threw it up. I could have killed him. I wanted to kill him. He was a tiny, quivering, imperfect baby whom I was helpless to protect.

Dr. Merman, the chief urologist, said that there was something wrong with Ollie's kidneys. He wanted to explore surgically. "Only one kidney showed up on X-ray, and even that one doesn't function as it should." I got on the Halsted bus and kept riding: through Greek town, through the Cabrini Green housing project, past Ernie's Gun and Ammo. I returned to the hospital with a soft blue blanket and a fleecy white dog, small penances to tuck around my Buddha baby. Ollie's file had been left in the room. The first thing I saw when I opened it was the social worker's report: *Mother admitted to taking drugs during pregnancy.*

Surgery took place just before Christmas. The snow was heavy, and Matthew and I argued all the way to the hospital. Borrowing money from his parents had put him in a bad mood. "Couldn't they offer up ten dollars for their grandson?" We could get more mileage out of ten dollars than ten Hail Mary's. They'd reminded him that he wouldn't have these problems if he hadn't married the Polish girl.

We waited in a room for five hours with a dozen other parents on plaid couches. One woman worked a rosary, her fingertips callused, waiting out her four-year-old's sixth surgery. Another passed out donuts while her daughter, Carmen, had a shunt planted in her skull. Alone in the corner, under a painting of the Himalayas, Matthew sucked Guinness from a brown bag. Halfway through Ollie's surgery, a doctor emerged from the operating room with a progress report: "Everything's fine. We want you to know that we removed his appendix as a bonus."

In the morning, we learned about ureterostomies. During surgery, Dr. Merman had decided to cut Ollie's ureter and create an opening in his right side to take stress off his baby plumbing. The chair next to Ollie's bed was laden with dirty sheets. He was throwing up. "We came here for crooked legs." *They've butchered my son.*

"Your baby has a rare kidney condition," the doctor said. "He probably won't live to be a year old."

How will he pee? The raw pink hole in Ollie's side leaked drops of urine.

"The urine bypasses the ureter and bladder altogether now. He'll wear a bag. An elegant surgery. We've never done one of these on a baby."

"He'll pee in a bag?" *Whip out his bag when the other boys are comparing notes in the boys' bathroom?*

"This'll buy him some time." Then it hit me. There would be no life. In the spring or in the fall, we'd put Ollie in a tiny coffin and say goodbye.

I dug out the diary from my Friends of the Library tote, but words were caked in me like scum on the oatmeal pot. I was under the porch stairs again, where I went as a child to examine my bloody welts. Crouching in the musty space, my back against the third step and my head bowed under the fourth, I killed my mother, my SS officer, Scary Sophia, over and over in a spiral Raggedy Ann notebook. By eighth grade I had killed her 107 times, the Blessed Virgin 13 times, and God twice. Now there was no one to kill.

On Christmas Eve, the five other cribs in the hospital nursery were empty, the lights dim. Ollie had a 105-degree fever. The nurse packed him in ice and hung a red Santa on his bed. I leaned over his crib, lips close to his face, tasting his baby breath. *Feel my warmth and take me in.* I had nothing to give him. Not my milk, not my arms. I was like my cat, licking her stillborn kitten back to life. But I didn't know how to protect him. "Let me stay." The voice came over the loudspeaker for the end of visiting hours.

"You can't. Against policy," the nurse said. "We don't have room for parents. If you stay, all the other parents will want to stay."

I looked around the empty room. "What other parents? Please, please, I won't take up any space, just let me stay with my baby. You can have my leather jacket. I'll do anything. Sweep the floor, file. Please. I'll hide in the closet if security comes. Please, please, he's so little, so scared. Let me stay with him."

A few days of traction turned into a month, then two. Not long after Ollie's kidney surgery, the orthopedist came to see me. Matthew was at school trying to convince a professor not to fail him, even though he had not written his *Tale of Genji* paper, and had gone to class so seldom that when he showed up, the professor thought he had come to repair the leaky radiator. Having quit work and dropped out of school, I was a permanent fixture next to the steel crib. I never showed up again anywhere after Ollie was born. Nobody knew where I was, except my parents, who offered up a Mass for Ollie's soul. I had damned him by not baptizing him. "The kidney is punishment," my father said. "God don't abide no pigheadedness." "*Nerka, nerka, nerka,*" SS lamented. "The baby's damaged because his mother thinks she knows things."

"He seems to be doing better," the doctor said, when Ollie was out of traction. "Healing nicely." Drops of pale urine dripped from Ollie's side, and I dabbed them with gauze. His skin was too raw for an adhesive bag to stick. Everything was clear now. We'd take him home where he belonged, home where he began and where nothing would hurt him again. He'd have a sweet time on earth, however short. I was already preparing my arms for him to die.

"I've scheduled surgery for Thursday," the orthopedist said.

"He *had* surgery." Couldn't he keep his patients straight?

"No, orthopedic surgery. The traction didn't accomplish what we had hoped, so we'll go in surgically now and repair his left hip. He'll have to wear a body cast for a few months. Then we'll do the other hip."

"Why?" Was I missing something?

"So he can walk when he grows up."

"Don't you guys talk to each other?" I pulled down the crib bars and started to dress Ollie. The doctor put his hand on my arm. As if by signal, two nurses and an aide swooped down on me like a swat team. "I'm taking him home. Get away!" A scrimmage for my baby.

"You can't do that." He squeezed my arm harder. "I'll get a court order."

"But he's going to die."

"Maybe. Then again, he may not. In medicine, nothing's

certain. At least give him the chance to walk. Without surgery, he'll never stand up. He deserves that much. Don't make me get a court order."

Did we take Ollie home to die peacefully, defying medical advice, or leave him in the hospital for further repairs, on the off chance that he might live? Was the glass half empty or half full? Was there some unifying principle holding this all together? I chewed my nails and bit the skin until it bled. I had taken to snitching Ollie's chart to see what the doctors were planning. The orthopedist had scribbled in red ink: *Mother repeatedly thwarts doctors' efforts to help baby.*

Two surgeries later, wrapped in plaster from his ankles to underarms, Ollie came home to an apartment littered with empty beer bottles and open books. I put him on a soft pillow in his crib. He lay stiff, legs splayed in the full spica cast, unable to move anything but his head and arms.

It was spring, and I opened all the windows so Ollie could hear the sounds of the neighborhood and watch the dance of the origami animals on the ceiling. Matthew folded them at night while he drank. I tried to hold Ollie, maneuvering his bulky cast to bring his face close to me, but he arched his neck and pulled away, refusing my touch. He held his own bottle, as if he needed no one. I spent my days sitting by his side, mourning for my baby. Or deep in the rabbit hole of my diary, trying to write my way out of the maze. Or wandering from room to room, eating whatever I could find, thinking of things to amuse Ollie, ashamed of not loving him enough.

I stood over him, singing "You Are My Sunshine," daydreaming about the other babies at the hospital: the tiny Mexican girl with cleft palate, the Hasidic baby with cerebral palsy, and the one with the bowling ball head and the shunt for draining it. The mother of the four-year-old gave me her rosary with aurora borealis beads when her boy died. I had used it to distract Ollie when the doctor cut a circle in the side of his cast and the nurse showed me how to put Kotex over the hole in his body to soak up the pee. He whipped the rosary across my face, nicking my cornea with the edge of the crucifix. His skin was raw now. Urine leaked into the layers of plaster, burning sores into his back and wetting his cast. I fanned

him with a Chinese fan, shooing away flies that landed on his toes and buzzed around his head. One day I poked my finger into the doughy plaster and noticed tiny translucent larvae wriggling in the soft spots of his cast. Flies had laid their eggs in the crevices that were soggy with urine. I put my head out the window and screamed. I put a pillow over Ollie's head and wished he would die. He was mine to protect, and I couldn't keep the maggots away.

One evening, as we were listening to the "Midnight Special," I asked Matthew, "What are we going to do for money?" Rent was past due, and the superintendent of our building, a no-nonsense guy from West Virginia in an undershirt, had been at the door twice with threats and a shotgun. My father tried to get Matthew a job, driving a truck or washing windows like him. But even my father knew that some men are not made for work. Matthew had hands like a Florentine Jesus. His body was gaunt and stylized, nourished on tobacco and spirits. "Money's the root of all evil," Matthew said.

"Is that why you sell your blood?" Money was driving us apart. When Debbie, my acquaintance from the maternity center, and her husband, Sam, came to visit, we had no food to offer them. Sam couldn't bear to be around Ollie. "Man, look at that poor little thing. It breaks me up. I can't take it. Shit, Debbie, we gotta go, honey."

"Maybe if we had some cheese or a cake to offer Debbie and Sam, they would have stayed," I told Matthew.

"Yeah, and maybe if I returned Sam's kisses when he followed me into the bathroom they would have moved in." And maybe if we had a healthy boy with plump legs and perfect kidneys, the world would be different. In the night, Matthew woke me up to describe a trip to Mars and I knew he was on acid. Purple microdot had replaced poetry.

Every day I planned how Ollie would die. The details changed—in the morning, in the night, after a spring rain, during a storm—but in my fantasies, he was nestled between Matthew and me, our three hearts beating together until Ollie's stopped and there was only the two of us. That's the

part that scared me. But Ollie thrived. When he didn't die by the end of his first year, I drew a tiny grim reaper in a birthday hat in the margin of my diary. Dr. Merman said, "These things are unpredictable. Your boy surprised us." Then he said Ollie wouldn't make it to his teenage years. But I stopped listening. "He has thirty percent function of one kidney," the doctor said. "I'm sorry, but no kidney with that damage can withstand the raging hormones and systemic changes of adolescence." From then on I pretended that the glass was half full. Together we would look for the rest of the nectar.

One day, when Ollie was almost three, I sat on the stoop in front of our flat, watching him play on the sidewalk. He fed ants lumps of bread, then put the ants, along with a damaged grasshopper, into his pocket. "My friends, Mommy." Everything seemed right with the world. Matthew had a job working in a preschool, and the rent was paid. I had completed my bachelor's degree, squeezing in courses piecemeal between Ollie's hospital stays; I wasn't even sure what my degree was in. Ollie's hips were held together with steel, and he had learned to walk. He could even pee. Dr. Merman had decided to sew up his ureter. "The truth is, we don't really know what's wrong with his kidney, but thirty percent function is enough to get by, for *now*." Ollie dumped more crumbs on the sidewalk, some for the ants, some for him, and I looked up from my book. I was reading about the life of Isadora Duncan, the part where she waves goodbye to her small children, Deirdre and Patrick, and watches their rolling car plunge into the Seine, killing them. I read her words aloud, accompanied by the Spanish dance music blaring from a window across the street: "Only twice comes that cry of the mother," Duncan wrote, "at birth and at death." One the cry of joy and the other of sorrow. And they were the same. Ollie asked what I was mumbling. When he started to run, his long stick legs pumping awkwardly beneath his checkered shorts, I decided to have another baby. I would name her Isadora, and she would dance for us, teaching Ollie to move his legs with freedom and teaching me to open my heart.