

None But The Righteous

by M. F. Sullivan

Susan was twenty-four when it happened again, but she had neither the patience nor the attachment to see it through. She still remembered The Baby from time to time and, as much as she hated to say it, she wondered. How was he? What was he doing at that very moment? How old was he first learned to sleep through the night? What was his first word? 'Mama', probably, meant for somebody else. Some imposter.

How funny, her jealousy. She didn't even want the boy. But in the quiet of sleepless nights, and there, in the clinic exam room, she admitted to herself that it was as if every human being was born with a certain spark of compassion. The spark sputtered a little lower in the face of tragedy, of pain. If too much happened to a person, soon, their spark would die. A lot had happened to her in her life. It seemed The Baby had taken the last of her spark, and now this thing inside of her was threatening her very livelihood. It was all so ridiculous, surreal. This all seemed impossible. Susan, getting an abortion. Only stupid women had to get abortions, she'd thought, ignoring her own first time pregnancy because that was an unavoidable condition of her life at the time, and because it had ended in adoption—but now, eight years later, here she was on an exam table not unlike the one in her real gynecologist's office. In the waiting room outside there had been five different women, a few of them there with a friend or a lover. Never in her life had she felt so displaced in a group to which she belonged.

"When was the first day of your last period," the blueberry nurse asked, the second person to ask her that in as many appointments, mind.

She sighed, shifting the awkward paper skirt over her waist. "February—seventeenth," she estimated, her gaze trailing over to the two by two beach photographs hanging on the wall above her perch. The carcass of a row boat, half-smothered in the sand, bathed in the red sunset. She liked that one.

“And when did you test positive?”

“The second week of April.” Oh, how her breasts had ached! That was how she'd known to take the test, how she'd known the first time, too. Even as a young woman, then fifteen, the agony had felt unnatural, past the point of growing pains. She could not suffer them to be touched, could not so much as lean against a rail, or lie face down, or accept her Uncle's embrace. This second time it was even worse, and now, by the day of her appointment, she was bursting out of bras. She'd ruined two of her favorites, in fact, and expensive ones. Of course the clasps could be darned, but it was the principle. Damn this thing. Damn her for letting this happen again, like a fool.

“And it was determined to be six weeks along at your appointment last week,” the nurse asked, reading off a clipboard. Susan nodded and she went on. “What form of birth control are you using?”

“Luck, generally,” Susan said with a hollow laugh. It was humiliating. She was smarter than this, and tried to justify it. “My boyfriend is— he's a lot older than I am, and—” There was nothing she could say in her defense, and she hated that. Hated being wrong, hated feeling stupid. So stupid, look where you are—what were you thinking! Lewis was 75, after all, and though his wallet made her wet, there wasn't much concern about fertilization. But after getting nothing except his shriveled doggie paddlers for the past year, her womb no doubt thrilled at the opportunity for viable sperm. Just the way she thrilled at the opportunity for something a little different when she met that boy, Tim, at her boss's party, which started at a barbeque and ended at a bar. He wanted her, and she wanted the attention, someone her own age, an exciting night, a break from her life of permanent performance. Just a break. When the boy called her the next day, she politely asked he never call again, and he never did. Now, she regretted it. He should have been the one paying for this.

The nurse watched Susan, who had never finished her sentence, and had instead stared into the tile floor. With her face arranged in a soft expression of empathy, she touched Susan's shoulder. “I know,

sweetheart. Sometimes it's for the best. You've considered adoption, haven't you?"

"No. That happened with the last one. I don't want to go through that again."

She nodded, and with another friendly squeeze, said, "Let me get the doctor. In the meantime, I want you to consider getting on the pill."

"I was for a while. I don't like how it makes me feel. Sick. Not myself. Your hormones are so much of who you are. That's why I want to get rid of this," she said with a wave to herself.

The nurse didn't like that answer. "Think about it," she insisted.

Soon, Susan was alone for what she sensed would feel like hours. There was no clock in the room that she could see, just posters. What the bleeding should look like after, for instance. Apparently it was normal for a pad to look like a crime scene, and abnormal for it to look like a swimming pool. According to the reading materials they'd provided her, she could neither have sex nor take baths for four weeks. She didn't mind the lack of sex, though she'd have to come up with some very creative excuse for Lewis. Fortunately it seemed he went to bed earlier each night they spent together, and was just as happy with her mouth or hands.

It had been hard enough trying to explain the morning sickness to him. It got so bad she'd taken to drinking each night, getting uproariously, violently drunk, so that way when she was vomiting for hours the next morning, she had an explanation. Just the day before he'd told her he was worried she was developing a problem. Indeed, she was, but fortunately the Supreme Court had ruled eleven years prior that women could halt such development if they felt it was the kindest thing to do. In this case, it certainly was. She could barely love herself, let alone anyone else, let alone a child.

At least she had friends she could tell. Thaddeus and Anita, the siblings she worked with, were waiting for her in the lobby. In the whole of the city, they were the two people she trusted the most, maybe even loved the most. They were good people, one a bouncer and one a singer like her, and it seemed she hadn't met many good

people to whom she could truly relate. But she'd known she could go to Anita and confide this horror to her. And Anita said right then she'd take her to the doctor, and asked if she could tell Thaddeus so he could help, too, because, "Those doctors aren't going to give you the type of pills you need, but T's got a guy."

And all this, they were doing for free. Even putting her up a few nights in their house so she could recover and get over the worst of the bleeding. Lewis thought she was out at Virginia Beach with girlfriends. As she waited for the doctor, she tried to figure out what she'd done for these people aside from take drugs with them and talk to them and work with them, but she kept coming up with nothing. Why were they kind to her? What had she done? Altruism was such a strange concept. Perhaps, she decided, they were just doing her favors now in order to ask for something later.

Finally, the door opened, and to Susan's disappointment it was only another nurse, but at least it was someone.

"Hi, there," chirped the nurse, a pretty little blonde pixie in a pink uniform, "how are you today?"

"Very glad to see you." She laughed despite herself.

"I'll bet you are." With a deft hand, the nurse pushed up the left sleeve of Susan's paper vest and attached the blood pressure cuff, which she pumped to life while asking, "Were you waiting long?"

"It's hard to tell. This whole month has been long."

"I'm sure it has. Who's waiting to take you home today?"

"My friends," she said, adding, "my boyfriend is older. He doesn't like to drive anymore."

"Well, just be sure when you go home that he waits on you hand and foot. No moving around. Stay on bed rest a day, at least. Two days, if you can. Do you work?"

Susan nodded as the woman left the cuff on her but moved away. "Everyone has been very understanding, though. I have a week off."

"Good, I'm glad to hear that." The nurse recorded some notes on the chart and confirmed, "And you haven't eaten since midnight, right? No water or anything? Good. Go ahead and lie down, now comes the fun part."

Susan sighed as the woman turned towards a tray of implements most menacing. Little plastic tubes, syringes, needles attached to all of them, vials of fluid, little cups. She hated the sight of it and shut her eyes.

“I don't suppose you give a sedative for the sedative, do you?”

The nurse laughed merrily, a blessed ray of sunshine, a hero in the dark of all this. “I wish! Sorry, we don't. But once this goes in, you won't even care.”

Susan looked just as the woman selected one of the curling tubes attached to a needle, the kind sitting in the translucent flesh on the back of an elderly person's hand. Susan turned her face to the wall and hummed the song she'd heard in that old movie with Humphrey Bogart, the name of which she couldn't remember because she kept thinking about the room she was in and what was happening, what was about to happen.

“All right,” the nurse murmured as she arranged Susan's right arm so the crook of her elbow was exposed, “you'll feel some coldness from the alcohol swab, and then a pinch. You ready?”

“Just do it.”

Needles. Oh, she hated needles, hated them more than she could explain. Why did she hate needles? They'd only ever done good things for her. Sewn up clothes. Given her drugs, vaccinations. But for some reason they just— “Ah!”

It was the pain, the peculiar type of pain. The feeling of penetration where there should be no penetration, the feeling of having something stuck there, of helplessness. Her flesh was hot and cold at once and the sting didn't go away as the nurse said, “I know it hurts, but it should stop in a second.”

“It's burning quite a bit,” she gasped. “Whenever you touch it, when I breathe.”

“Oh dear,” said the nurse, gently taking her arm and examining it. She touched it lightly, or maybe she didn't. Susan couldn't stand to watch. She could only stare at the ceiling and gnash her teeth and then release a dry sob as the nurse said, “I'm sorry, Susan, we're going to have to try it again.”

“Oh, God, why.” She almost laughed, let her head fall back against the table as the nurse removed the needle.

“I know. Let's try it again, here we go.”

And she did. She tried it again right next to her original spot. That didn't work at all, but it was a much shorter attempt, the poke coming and the nurse sucking her teeth and saying, “Okay, let's try it a little higher.”

Susan moaned in frustration while the nurse said, “I know, but we've got to try, or else I'll have to have get the doctor in here to put it in your hand, and that's going to hurt a lot more.”

“I know,” wailed Susan, who tried to imagine something, anything, a boulder falling on that man she'd met at Miles' party, a truck hitting him as he crossed the road, that bastard, that bastard, unprotected sex was all well and fine for men because they didn't have to suffer like this. They didn't understand. They couldn't imagine the hell of having a nurse stick you not once or twice, but rather seven different times in the elbow, the arm and the wrist, each time coming up for nothing. Finally, apologetic, the nurse set Susan's arm down, a sensation she could barely feel over the burning, over the cold panic that gripped her. “I'm going to have to go get the doctor, honey, I'm sorry.”

“Whatever it takes,” she groaned, refusing still to look at her arm, still feeling the horrible ghost-pain of tunnels pierced in her flesh by needle after needle. Karmic retribution for her stupidity, maybe. Soon the doctor was there with them, a tall black man with a gentle, approachable demeanor who had met with Susan the week prior to discuss her options with her.

“Let's see what's going on here,” he said, pulling up a rolling stool and examining her hand. “How are we doing today, Susan?”

“You tell me.”

He chuckled as he took the apparatus of her torture. As he glanced at Susan's blood pressure, the nurse helpfully supplied, “Her numbers were a lot lower a few minutes ago.”

“I can't imagine why,” he said as he swabbed Susan, and then told her, “Don't you move, girl.”

“Oh, don't you worry.”

The needle punched through her hand and she whined, but truly didn't move, focused on the beach, sitting in that shattered boat, watching the screaming gulls flap above the waves, and after a few more seconds of uncomfortable jostling and something being screwed to something else, warmth poured into her hand. Relief flooded her, but she couldn't help thinking she shouldn't be able to feel the drug pooling in the back of her hand like that. Still, how was she to know? It wasn't as if one got such a procedure done every day, after all. And it hurt very much, but it was supposed to hurt very much, an injection in the hand. It was supposed to hurt when her hand moved. And it would hurt more if they had to try it again. So, she didn't say anything about it, and the doctor said, “Great job, Susan. Okay,” he turned to the nurse and said, “Let's get Clarissa in here and we can get started.”

As he left to go get her, the nurse started preparing Susan, helping her legs up onto the peculiar stirrups over which she was to drape her knees. She slipped backwards twice while trying to do so and laughed each time, the room swaying, her thoughts a giddy carnival of blurred euphoria. “What a wonderful drug this is!”

“Isn't it wild how fast it works,” laughed the nurse, taking Susan's blood pressure again and smoothing her hair. “Have you thought about where you're going to go eat after this?”

“Mm, I don't know.” Now that the nurse mentioned it, it was a fabulous idea. Asian food sounded great. “Maybe Chinese.”

“Oh, I love Chinese! Where at?”

There was that little place down the street from Anita's apartment. The women had eaten there dozens of times. Such good gyoza. What was it called, though? Started with a 'b'. Or a 'd', maybe. “Ba...da...oh, I know it...ba...I can't remember,” she giggled at last, covering her mouth with her un-punctured hand. “How funny.”

“That's okay,” said the nurse, laughing along with her, and soon the doctor returned with the blue nurse in tow. The doctor took a seat between Susan's legs and said, “All right, sweetie, are you

about ready to get this done?”

“I think so.” It felt like a swirling dream, that room, the people, the silver tray down between her legs. The doctor said, “What you'll feel is my speculum going in, and some stretching. There'll be some pressure when we give you the shot, and then some suction for just two minutes. Okay?”

What was all this? This madness. She shouldn't be here. How stupid. She wished her Uncle was here with her, here to hold her hand and take her out for ice cream after to cheer her up. He had done that when she broke her foot dancing in middle school. It was a nice day because he hadn't expected anything for his kindness. He had just wanted her to feel better.

Suddenly, the sensations happened as they'd been described, but she didn't feel just feel a pressure. She felt the shot in her cervix. The sedative, pooled in her hand, hadn't all made it quite to where it should have, or maybe it wasn't enough, but either way she was feeling everything far clearer than she'd been led to believe she would. Soon after the shot, the noise of suction started, a terrible, sloppy sound like the machine at the dentist, and then the pain, violent pain, pain for which she'd been entirely unprepared, as bad or worse than her labor had been. If the cramps that visited her once monthly were agony, this was hell, this eternity where it felt as though her uterus was being turned inside out, like they were going to pull it out of her to put on display. Like she was aboard some alien spaceship and investigated, dissected, stared at by these masked monsters around her. Her skull was spinning and she didn't move, but she writhed her head, and she didn't scream, but she did cry out, and the doctor tried to distract her:

“What do you do for a living, Susan?”

What little sedative she'd gotten mixed with the pain thundering in her gut and made it impossible to articulate her thoughts, let alone form them. Somehow she managed to sputter out, “I— I'm a singer—”

“Really? What do you sing?”

“Jazz, mostly, and— and old rock and roll—”

“Okay. Who are your favorite singers?”

“Hah— hah— Nina— Simone, she's my hero!” As Susan's sentence ended, keened in pitch to alert the doctor that now was no time for conversation. Blessedly, he picked up on that, and left Susan alone to work through the pain as she would, to be entombed and possessed by the pain that rocketed from her womb and into every limb. Anita had said she hadn't felt a thing, couldn't even remember it. Maybe Anita had been anesthetized right. Maybe Susan was just unlucky. Maybe she'd built up a tolerance to prescription drugs by doing recreational ones. Maybe she could die right now and not have to feel this.

Between cries which varied from soft to loud with no discernible pattern, Susan opened her eyes enough to focus on the short-haired nurse, a pink blur from her wet eyes. “Can I hold your hand,” she asked, the strangest question she'd asked someone in all her life.

“Oh, of course,” cooed the nurse, her brow furrowing, and she slipped her hand into Susan's and let the patient grip it tightly, let Susan give her some of that pain, that good woman, that kind woman, the kindest woman Susan had ever met, and just as she began to cry, the machine stopped, but the pain did not. It lessened just a little, only a little, but it did not stop, the terrible contractions and crumpling of her uterus. The beach was gone, and the thing was gone, and there was only the sweat on her brow and the blood running down her backside and the tomb of this white exam room.

The doctor made a final examination to ensure the fetus was extracted, then announced, “We're all done. And I probably shouldn't say this, but: beautiful. You did a great job.”

Still gasping, batting wet eyes, Susan managed to thank him, and he rose, smiling while the blue nurse hustled out with the silver tray Susan couldn't manage to see inside. “We're going to keep you here for a little while to see how you do,” said the doctor, “and then we'll send you home. Get a nice hot water bottle, a good book, a copy of *The High Priestess of Soul*,” Susan smiled at this, and so did he, “and you'll be right as rain in a couple of days.”

“Okay,” Susan gasped, “okay. Thank you.”

The pain took a solid hour to become something close to manageable, and even then, it was crippling. By then, her right arm had bruised in places she hadn't even realized they'd poked her. The needle-wielding nurse was the one to walk her out, and hugged her as she left. It was strange how sentimental this sort of situation made the strongest person. Susan sighed against her, then walked from the nurse, to her friends, friends who had volunteered to take care of her, friends who would buy drugs for her, friends who would lie for her. Anita shot out of her chair and rushed to support Susan as though she were a cripple.

"I've got you, mama," her friend said, nodding for Thaddeus to get the door. The six-foot brick wall led the way to the car, glancing over his shoulder only to say, "You took so long in there. You were starting to get me worried."

"I just wanted to see you sweat for once." Surprised by the hoarseness of her own voice, Susan rested her head on Anita's shoulder. "Can we get lunch?"

"Whatever you want, mama, but let's get you that morphine first, huh? T-Love, they know we're coming, right?"

"Yes ma'am," he said as he got the door for Susan, who fell into the back seat to curl up and die. "Well, they know I'm coming. Ya'll ladies can sit in the car. Discretion and all that."

Yes, discretion. That was what she needed. Nobody needed to know about this except the people who were owed an explanation: her boss, and anyone she needed help from. This event was occurring in a bubble, and when it was over, and she had recovered, it could be edited from her memory. She could get her tubes tied and move on to a life where nothing like this was ever possible again.

But would she remove it from her memory? The compassion of the nurse, the feeling of her friends speeding a little when they realized how much pain she was in. These things were beautiful, and all at the price of a little discomfort.

