

OUR BABY

By

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In late 1953, at breakfast my parents announced that a third child was on the way. It was as though a Deus ex machina had appeared over our kitchen table and proclaimed to our family, "All will be well now, eat another biscuit, this child will change everything!" I think all of us entered into a fantasy that this baby would actually make the pain of being a Richey disappear.

My Brother and I decided the baby would be a girl. Mother wanted a girl, and Daddy had no use for boys. When she came, it was as though all our Christmases and birthdays had arrived in one magical little bundle. For months we had talked of the baby. Alicia would be her name, and she would be beautiful and she'd love us all as much as we'd love her. We dismissed completely any chance of a Lars Anthony joining the family -- he was the alternate who never happened. Thank Heaven. Another fucked up Richey boy the world didn't need.

Alicia was a beautiful baby, feminine and delicate. She had her own room adjacent to our parents' room. Mother had worked hard to make us boys feel as though she would be our baby as well as hers -- almost as hard as she worked to prepare the baby's room. I wonder if Mother had any clue that she would abandon her boys and become the obsessive parent of a single child?

Almost from her conception, my Brother and I thought of Alicia as Our Baby. For us boys, Our Baby's birth was anticipated with the intensity of a prolonged lightning strike. It finally happened -- Our Baby was born! But, it would be three long days before we could see her. Dirty little boys were not allowed in the hospital.

Alicia's arrival home was a pageant -- my Mother glowing in her new role as the mother of a daughter, our Father, treating Mother more like his Queen than his sweetheart, and Alicia, of course was our Princess. The carriage was our beat-up old Chevy. It pulled up our long driveway slowly and quietly, barely grinding the gravel so as not to break the spell which was unfolding. As the Chevy gently stopped, my Father placed a forefinger to his lips. We boys, who

had waited for what seemed hours beside the driveway, quietly stared with amazement through the window of the car at our miracle, our savior.

Their exit from the car was accomplished in absolute silence; the Queen and our Princess, who slept in perfection, were helped from the car by my very proud Father. I had never before seen him smile so broadly and for so long. Everything was pink, my Mother wore pink, Our Baby was wrapped in a pink blanket and she was pink, flowers that lined the backseat of the car were pink. Daddy even looked pink. I could smell pink. It was the pinkest moment of my life.

Mother played her role to the hilt. She moved as though she might have another baby any moment, never taking her eyes off the precious infant in her arms. As Daddy aided his all but helpless Queen up the steps to the backdoor of our house, he instructed with quiet reverence, "Bring those flowers in, boys, and if you spill'um I'll break your necks." I remember my Brother and I lifting the flowers from the car as though they were Our Baby, too. Our movement into the house to the kitchen table where the flowers were placed resembled a procession -- short, smooth, halting steps. We might have been wearing small tuxedos instead of our old cotton twill pants and t-shirts. The smell of flowers, the profusion of pink, and the heavenly loveliness of the moment were intoxicating.

Heaven can turn to hell in a heartbeat.

We all accompanied Mother to the crib in my new Sister's room. Mother lay her in the crib with great care. Mother resembled the Madonna in a stained glass window in the First Baptist Church placing the infant Jesus on a pile of hay. We all stood quietly about her for a while like the shepherds and wise men who attended the arrival of the Christ Child. It was my Brother who carefully ruined the moment:

"Can I hold her?"

"No, not today," Mother replied.

"You boys get out'a here." Daddy quietly ordered.

As there was always a threat in his words, we were in the kitchen before we could bat an eye, then we continued quietly to the back yard. Now what? Neither of us felt as though there was anything remotely familiar about being outside now. Could we make noise? No. Should we wait here near the door?

Maybe we should, as we really didn't know what might happen next -- Our Baby could wake up. It didn't occur to us to go play in the woods or on the rope swing or to pull ticks off our cocker spaniel, Curly, or anything we might normally do. Our world had changed and we were now strangers in it. We wanted to be a part of the baby's life, but how?

The next morning when I awakened, my Brother was not in the bedroom we shared. I didn't wet the bed anymore since my parents had made me sleep on foiled sheets connected to a canister loaded with batteries, the Wee Wetter Machine. It administered a buzz and a mild shock when little boys wet their beds. I had held it all night and needed to pee very badly. I started for the one bathroom in the house hoping my brother wasn't there hogging the pot as he often did.

Before I made it to the bathroom I heard the scream. It was my Mother. She didn't scream actual words, it was like she tried to say words, but the scream wouldn't let her. The scream came from Our Baby's room, and now Our Baby was crying. I ran to see what was happening there. Mother was holding Alicia with one arm and slapping my Brother about the face with the other, slapping hard and frantically as though she were trying to put out a fire. Daddy was there now, too.

"I didn't hurt her! You said I could hold her today!"

My Brother, thinking he had every right to hold his baby Sister, picked her up from her crib, and was discovered by our Mother. She had said "No, not today," but that was yesterday. Now Daddy was shaking my Brother violently.

"Don't you ever touch her again!" You hear me?!" Then looking directly at me, "You boys are never to come in this room! Never! You are not to touch this baby! Do you understand?!"

My Brother broke away and tried to run past me, but he slipped and banged his head hard against the door frame. I had peed a large puddle in the doorway. Next thing I knew, Daddy grabbed us both by our hair and dragged us through the kitchen to the back door, where he literally threw us out. The door shut and locked. There we were, two pee covered kids in our underpants.

We stood there by the door for what seemed hours. My Brother was the first to move. He sat on the wooden steps to the kitchen door and began killing

ants with his forefinger, smashing them against the wooden steps as if they were being punished. I noticed for the first time that the paint on the steps was peeling. I have no other specific memory of that day.

I was angry with my parents, particularly my Mother, who was supposed to be the one who loved us. I watched Mother carefully after that horrible day trying to detect any love or interest in us boys. It was as though she had left us. Her abandonment wasn't on a dark road in the night, but the betrayal was equally significant. Just as hurtful, my Brother and I rarely caught a glimpse of Our Baby. I resolved then that I would punish my Mother.

A few weeks later, my willfulness, like a boil, festered to a head. Mother was ironing Daddy's dress shirt for the Sunday services we all had to endure the next day. I don't remember what it was that I was trying to talk to Mother about, but I couldn't engage her. She didn't look at me; she appeared to be lost in her thoughts. When she put the iron down to fold a sleeve, I picked the iron up with my right hand, and placed it on my left hand palm down on the ironing board. I removed my right hand from the iron and stared at her. I awaited a reaction. My self-torture seemed to snap her into a moment which included me. She looked at me for a split second, daring me to leave the iron on my hand. I didn't move it. The hot iron was making a frying sound as it burned my skin. Mother removed the iron. I could see regret in her eyes. I didn't cry. For a moment she was reminded that she was my Mother, too. I was satisfied.

As Alicia grew up, she was like a flower opening. Alicia was pretty and smart and talented. She did make life better for us all -- Daddy would never hurt us boys in her presence. Of course Mother's obsessive attention to Alicia was smothering, but that meant Mother rarely noticed what we boys were up to, and that was fine with us as we grew older. I often cared for my Sister after school while Mother taught piano lessons. It was a blessing to grow close to a family member who never once hurt any of us.