HITS & MISSES
stories
SIMON RICH
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THE BABY
It was understood that, when the baby came, Ben’s office would become the nursery.

Ben would miss his beloved writing room, but he knew he was making a relatively minor sacrifice. His wife, Sue, had spent the last two years taking stomach-bloating vitamins and getting poked in the vagina by an elderly Polish gynecologist. She’d quit Claritin-D and martinis. The least Ben could do was find some other place to write his novel.

Besides, by the time Sue gave birth, his book would almost certainly be finished. He was already up to the last chapter, and according to Pregnancy.com, the baby was still just the size of a small turnip. He had all the time he needed.

As he leaned back in his custom writing chair, Ben found himself daydreaming about his book’s reception. His novels so far had been modestly received, but maybe this one would take him to the proverbial “next level.” He pictured himself traveling the world, with Sue and the turnip in tow, on a glamorous international book tour. It was while he was reveling in this fantasy that he caught sight of his watch and remembered that he had somewhere to be.
“Sorry I’m late!” Ben said as he hustled into the little white room. “I was stuck on the subway for an hour.”

“Oh man, that sucks!” Sue said. She kissed Ben on the forehead and he smiled, relieved that she’d accepted his excuse.

“You are just in time,” said Dr. Kowalski as he squirted some goo onto Sue’s belly.

Sue turned to Ben and giggled. “You ready?”

“Ready,” Ben said. He squeezed her hand as a black-and-white image took shape on a nearby monitor. It took some getting used to, but before long, Ben was able to identify the baby’s legs and torso.

“What’s that thing?” he asked, pointing excitedly to a small white smudge.

“Is penis!” said the doctor triumphantly. “It means you have boy!”

“Whoa!” Ben said as he and Sue laughed with amazement. “A boy!”

Ben pointed at another blurry shape. “What about that thing?”

“Is pencil,” said the doctor.

Ben’s smile faded. “Did you say pencil?”

“Or pen,” the doctor said. “Is too early to know at this stage.”

“What does it mean?” Ben asked nervously.

Dr. Kowalski grinned.

“It means you have writer!”
That afternoon, Ben spent some more time on Pregnancy.com. He was surprised to learn that a fetus's profession was usually apparent by the sixteenth week of gestation. For example, if you could detect a hoodie in the sonogram, that generally indicated your child was a coder. If your fetus held a tiny plunger, he or she was most likely a plumber, and a gavel almost certainly meant judge. Statistically, writers were less common, although the odds went up significantly if one of the parents was an Ashkenazi Jew.

Ben reached into his pocket and took out the strip of black-and-white photographs Dr. Kowalski had given them. The images were pretty hazy (they’d agreed not to blow $1,400 on the exorbitant, non-insurance-covered “4-D” option). But Ben could still make out a few details, including an open moleskin notebook. He couldn’t read the baby’s handwriting. Still, he could sense the work was confident. There were very few scratch-outs, and a couple of sentences were underlined. Unlike his father, the fetus didn’t seem to have any difficulties focusing.

Ben tossed the pictures into a drawer and slammed it shut, annoyed with himself for wasting the whole day. He turned on his laptop, opened his novel, and stared at the screen, watching the little cursor blink and blink. And blink.

The next day, Sue’s mother, Joan, drove in from Scarsdale. She was wearing a sweat suit and flanked by a pair of cowering teenage movers.
“Start clearing out everything!” she shouted as she flung open the door to Ben’s office.

“Do we have to do this right now?” Ben asked her gently.

“Why wait?” she said. “The baby’s gonna be here before you know it.”

She snapped her fingers and the movers jumped swiftly into action, packing Ben’s files into cardboard boxes. Ben could feel himself begin to panic. His book was a historical novel—a postcolonial epic about General Custer’s last stand. He couldn’t finish it without his notes.

“Please,” he begged his mother-in-law. “I’m still using everything you’re taking.”

“You’re going to have to get used to this,” Joan said in a singsongy voice. “There’s going to be a lot of changes around here.”

“I’m aware,” Ben said.

“Instead of that desk, there’s gonna be a crib, instead of that printer, there’s gonna be diapers, and instead of your novels, there’s gonna be his novels…”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Ben said, waving his arms in the air. “We don’t know for sure that the baby is a novelist. He could be any kind of writer. According to Pregnancy.com, there’s a forty percent chance he ends up blogging.”

Joan rolled her eyes, smiling. “You wish.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She jabbed him playfully in the ribs. “You’re jealous of the baby.”

Ben forced a laugh. “That’s ridiculous.”
“Relax,” she said. “It’s normal for new fathers to be jealous. Don’t worry. When the baby’s born, you’ll take one look at him and know just what to do—”

“I’m not jealous!” Ben shouted. He flushed with embarrassment. He hadn’t meant his denial to come out so aggressively. He shot the teenagers a mitigating smile, but they both avoided eye contact.

“Look, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m right in the middle of a chapter. Can we please just not do this right this second?”

The movers turned to Joan for approval. She groaned histrionically and threw her hands up in the air. “Okay, okay, fine,” she said. “But we’ll be back.”

Ben waited until they were all gone, then yanked open his desk drawer and held the sonogram up to the light. There was only one thought on his mind: What the hell was that kid writing?

“I thought you said it was, like, fourteen hundred dollars?” Sue asked as Ben rubbed her stomach with some almond oil.

“It’s actually less,” he said brightly. “Like, thirteen eighty.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “It seems kind of pricy for a slightly more detailed sonogram picture. I mean, that’s like the equivalent of five thousand diapers.”

“Damn it!” Ben snapped.

“Whoa!” Sue said, taken aback. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

Ben thought for a second.

“I guess I’m just paranoid,” he bluffed. “I want to see
him—really see him—just so I know he’s one hundred percent all right in there. You know? Just for my own peace of mind.”

“Oh, baby!” she said. “I had no idea you were feeling this way.” She kissed him loudly on the cheek. “If that’s how you feel, then of course. I support you.”

Dr. Kowalski was his usual upbeat self as he booted up the high-tech 4-D scanner. But when he put on his glasses and squinted at the screen, his face went slack.

“My God,” he murmured softly. “My God in heaven.”

“What’s wrong?” Sue asked the doctor.

Dr. Kowalski swiveled around and laughed. “I am sorry!” he said. “Everything is fine with baby health! It is just this thing fetus is writing. It is so engrossing.” He shook his head with amazement. “I forgot there were other people in room! Until you spoke, I was just, like, ‘in it!’”

Sue exhaled with relief. She tried to squeeze Ben’s hand, but his fingers were limp. He leapt up and hurried toward the scanner. “How did he get that typewriter?” he asked.

Dr. Kowalski shrugged. “Is normal at twenty-five weeks.”

Ben was disturbed to notice that the fetus was using a hip, vintage Underwood. He was almost certainly a novelist and probably a literary one.

“What’s he writing?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

“Is historical novel,” said Dr. Kowalski. “About General Custer.”

Ben’s heart raced. “He’s writing about General Custer?”
“Yes,” said the doctor. “But it is about so much more than that. It is suspenseful, lyrical. In some ways, it is story of America itself.”


“He stole my idea,” Ben murmured as they climbed up to their fifth-floor Brooklyn walk-up.

“How is that even possible?” Sue asked. She was exhausted and a little out of breath.

“They can hear stuff through the womb,” Ben said. “He must have heard me talking about it or something.”

“But you never talk about your work,” Sue reasoned. “I mean, until today, I had no idea you were starting a book about General Custer.”

“I’m not starting it; I’m finishing it! I’m up to the last chapter, God damn it!”

“It’s going to be fine,” she said soothingly. “There can be two books about the same thing, right?”

But Ben had already bounded up the stairs, leaving her to walk up the final flight alone.

Ben raced into his office and did some mental calculations. Even if the fetus was nearing the end of his novel, he was still stuck inside Sue’s womb. He wouldn’t be able to physically turn in a manuscript until after he was born. Assuming the due date held, Ben had fifteen weeks to finish his draft and submit it first to publishers.
He closed the door and flipped open his laptop. He was about to get to work when his phone began to buzz—an unknown Manhattan number.

“Dr. Kowalski?” he answered wearily.

“I’m sorry, no!” said a polite female voice. “I’m from the Wylie Agency. Is this Ben Herstein?”

Ben stood up with excitement. He was between literary agents and had been hoping for some time for a call like this one.

“Yes, it’s me!” he said. “What’s up?”

“I’m calling about your son,” she said. “I tried to reach him directly, but my understanding is he hasn’t yet been born. Anyway, I was wondering if he might be interested in representation.”

A knot of tension formed in the center of Ben’s spine as the agent praised the fetus’s work in progress. Apparently, an unscrupulous nurse had posted the 4-D scan to Reddit, and the link had gone viral.

“He’s not interested,” Ben said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!”

There was a light knock on the door.

“Honey?” Sue asked. “Are you okay?”

“Just leave me alone!” Ben said. “I’m trying to work!”

“Mom and the movers are here,” she said. “Remember? To put in the crib?”

Ben whipped open the door. “I’ve made a decision,” he said through gritted teeth. “I’m not giving up my office.”
Sue tilted her head, genuinely confused. “I don’t understand,” she said. “We already talked about this.”
She reached for his arm, but he jerked it away.
“Everyone just leave me alone!” he whined.
“Baby, come on——”
He slammed the door, giving himself over to the tantrum. “No!” he screamed. “No, no, no, no, no!”

Ben spent the third trimester writing incessantly, barely stopping to sleep and eat. But no matter how frantically he worked, the fetus kept gaining on him.

In the thirty-sixth week of Sue’s pregnancy, The New Yorker published an excerpt from the fetus’s unfinished book. Ben couldn’t bring himself to read the entire thing, but he forced himself to skim the first three columns. It was unbelievably intimidating. The fetus had boldly chosen to portray General Custer as gay. Not just a little gay—fully gay. He’d also included a black character, and written his dialogue in dialect, but somehow managed to pull the thing off tastefully. Ben flipped to the Contributor’s Notes and was horrified to see that “Unnamed Fetus” was listed as a “Staff Writer.” He cursed out loud and chucked the magazine into the garbage.

As the weeks wore on, Ben found himself spending more and more time in his office, and less and less time with Sue. He still massaged her belly every evening, but he rushed through the ritual like a squeegee man at a red light, calling it quits after a couple of perfunctory swipes.

At night, while she snored in her Snoogle, he pounded
out page after page, racing toward his novel’s denouement. He was nearing the final scene when he heard a soft knock on his door.

“Sweetie?” Sue said. “Can you please come out of there?”

“I’m busy,” he said harshly. “Can it wait?”

She let out a sharp breath. “No.”

“Look who decided to show up,” Joan said, glaring at Ben with undisguised contempt.

Ben avoided eye contact and followed his wife into the delivery room. She was lying on a gurney, surrounded by nurses, anesthesiologists, and Scott Rudin, who was trying to option the fetus’s book for a film.

Ben gave his wife’s shoulder an obligatory squeeze. “You’re doing great,” he said. “Great job.”

“Where have you been?” she asked.

Ben forced a laugh. “What?” he leaned down and smiled at her. “What do you mean?”

She gripped his hand. Her eyes were soft and glossy from the drugs, and her forehead was beaded with sweat. “I’ve missed you,” she said, her voice breaking. “Where did you go?”

Ben felt his throat go dry. He started to apologize, but before he could get out the words, Sue’s body was racked by a violent contraction. He winced as his wife grunted through it, breathing bravely through the spasm of white-hot pain.

“Here it comes!” said Dr. Kowalski. “It’s a big one!”

The nurses guided the manuscript out of Sue’s vagina,
making sure the title page was facing up. The book was
called *Last Stand* and somehow featured an advance blurb
from George Saunders.

The baby himself popped out a second later, looking
smart but understated in a slim tweed blazer and a pair of
Warby Parker glasses. The doctor laid him on his mother’s
chest. He seemed calm at first, but within moments he be-
gan to scream. Sue tried to calm the newborn with a kiss,
but the infant kept howling, a wail that built steadily in
pitch, like a fast-approaching siren.

“Is this normal?” Ben asked. “What’s happening?”

“I do not know,” said Dr. Kowalski. His face was pale, and
his eyes betrayed a small degree of fear. “It is louder cry than
normal. I am not sure what it is.”

Ben watched as the baby flailed desperately, grasping at
the air with his tiny bluish fingers. He had never seen any-
one look so helpless. When the infant turned toward him,
his eyes wide with fear, Ben felt an odd sensation in his
chest. In a flash, he knew just what to do.

Ben followed his son’s gaze across the room, to where the
nurse had set aside the manuscript.

“Does anyone have a pen?” he asked.

Joan shook her fist at him. “What do you need a pen for?!”

“Just give me a pen,” he said firmly.

Joan raised her eyebrows, taken aback by Ben’s confi-
dence. She dug into her purse and handed him a purple Bic.

“He wants to make a revision,” Ben explained to the hos-
pital staff. “That’s why he’s screaming so loud. He’s worried
the manuscript will go out to critics before he’s made the edit.”

He carefully placed the pen in his son’s hand. The baby gestured frantically at his novel, tears streaming from his frightened eyes.

“I know,” Ben said soothingly. “I know. It’s hard.” He carefully flipped through the pages, making sure the baby had a chance to scan each one. They were six chapters in when the baby started bawling.

“Is it this page?” Ben asked gently. “Is it something on this page?”

The baby sniffled.

“Okay,” Ben said. “Shhh. Okay.”

He lowered his son to the manuscript and watched as the infant dragged his pen across the page, trimming the final sentence of a dense, descriptive passage.

“Good cut,” Ben said, impressed.

The baby let out a long, contented sigh, then fell asleep in his father’s arms. Ben studied his son’s tiny features. His fuzzy, bulbous cheeks, his softly swelling chest. It was hard to believe this was something he’d helped to create. He turned to his wife and noticed there were tears in her eyes.

“I love you, baby,” she said.

“I love you too,” he said. “Now come on. Let’s get this little guy into his nursery.”