

A River In Egypt

Tuesday, December 31st

The wee hours

Maggie's eyes snap open, and she gasps. She looks at the clock—3:07 a.m. She blinks. This is the third time this week she's dreamed of wetting the bed. She feels the sheets, just to be sure, then hauls herself out of bed and stumbles to the bathroom. The cat thumps to the floor. Sam stirs, and asks "Are you okay?"

"Shh. I have to pee. Go back to sleep."

"Are you sure?"

"Shhh."

He mumbles something else, and sinks back into sleep. He starts snoring almost immediately; Maggie wishes she could get back to sleep that quickly. She has cultivated the habit of never fully opening her eyes during a nocturnal bathroom visit, but her brain is harder to fool. This business of having to get up every night is for the birds. Especially when it never really brings relief. She tries not to think about anything, but that often doesn't work. There've been a few really long nights when she ended up playing solitaire on her computer in the guest room for hours. Maybe this won't be one of those. She shuffles back to the bed and crawls in, rearranging the half-dozen pillows that help her sleep somewhat comfortably.

They just bought a new bed a couple of weeks ago, and the novelty of a wide, firm king-sized mattress hasn't worn off yet. Maggie hadn't realized how uncomfortable she was on the old waterbed. They bought the new one because of an article in a parenting magazine that said

that waterbeds are dangerous for babies (apparently a baby could suffocate on a waterbed—they didn't have to deliberate long over the decision), but after she slept on it the first night, Maggie's back was less stiff than it had been in weeks. There's room for the cat to have her own space now; Maggie can wiggle her feet without dumping Sheba on the floor.

She looks at the clock. It's 3:15. She sighs, and thinks about the fact that it's 9:15 in England. She could call. No. She wills the thought out of her mind, and trots in a line of sheep, instead. Sleep is important; she can call her dad in the morning. He'll still be up. The sheep are fleecy little things, running around on an empty hilltop, like a mountain bald. There are a whole bunch of them, kicking and jumping and bleating. She wonders if this is *gamboling*. That's a good word—one you don't see every day. She contemplates it sleepily for a minute, then mentally lines the sheep up and brings in a length of fence. One at a time, they go over. She counts. This is hard work, counting sheep. At number seven, her mind wanders off to remember the wet-bed dream. She brings it back to the task at hand. At number eighteen, she begins a mental grocery list, but quickly makes herself abandon it. At twenty-five, she starts to wonder if she should write another article about the Mayan calendar; she'd like to get that out to a wider audience than just academic archaeologists. But it's not conducive to sound sleep, so when she realizes that four sheep have slipped over the fence unnoticed, she resolves to think about it in the morning, and lets the idea float away. It'll be back.

The sheep are still there, so she counts a few more over the fence, but then the baby wakes up. She lies there, one hand on the side of her belly, feeling the squirming and wiggling. The wild, soaring flips and turns of the second trimester are long since over; she can tell, now, that the baby is jammed into way too small a space, and needs to spread out. Hard, bony little

Rosen-excerpt

elbows and knees and feet push with a force that amazes her. She stays very still, absorbing the sensation. It won't be much longer now. She can't remember what it was like when her body was quiet. She felt invaded, somehow, from the very beginning—long before that bizarre moment when she felt movement—real movement—for the first time. That made up for a lot. But not quite all. It was a welcome sensation, by then, but alien, nonetheless. She still felt like she was sharing her space. Just because you invite guests into your house doesn't mean it's always easy having them there.

When Maggie wakes up again, Sam is getting dressed. She sees him in the bathroom, tying a yellow tie, and yawns. She is careful to restrain her stretch; pointing her toes makes her calves cramp up.

“Did I sleep through the alarm?” She sounds doubtful; she sleeps way too lightly now to miss an alarm clock.

“No. I just woke up for some reason. I think I'm stressed about getting everything done. I feel like it's the day before vacation and I've got to get two weeks' worth of work done.” Sam grins at her, a big goofy grin. An excited morning person is unbearable, and Maggie just blinks at him.

“Go back to sleep, pumpkin. It's only seven. I'll call you around lunchtime; I'll try to get home as early as I can.” He looks at her for a minute. “How do you feel? Anything?”

“No. I don't know. I don't think so. I'm so tired.” Her head drops back onto the pillow, and Sam leans over to kiss her forehead.

“Later.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She hears him start down the hall, and pulls the covers up and sprawls across the bed. This is the second day in a row that Sam has gone to work and left her in the bed, and it’s beginning to weird her out a little bit. Lazing around is one thing on a Saturday, but she’s not used to staying in bed while he goes to work. She is still for a few minutes, then realizes she can hear rain in the tree outside the window. Yuck. Rain on New Year’s Eve. How depressing. She dozes for a while in the warmth of the bed, but eventually the rumbling of the Georgetown bus wakes her up again, and this time she’s up for real.

She wanders into the kitchen in her bathrobe, too hungry to shower first thing. Ever since that morning sickness in the beginning, she’s had to eat breakfast as soon as her feet hit the floor. There have even been a few times when she had to get a snack in the middle of the night. Pimento cheese at four a.m. may sound like a bad idea, but for some reason it really hit the spot. Not this morning, though. Toast sounds just about right. Maggie puts two thick slices of oatmeal bread in the toaster, and pours a glass of juice. She spreads one slice with butter, the other with peanut butter, and sits down at the table. Sam has left the paper for her. She smiles, knowing he likes to take it with him, but she whined at him last night about how she felt cut off from the world since her maternity leave started. The paper is his offer of entertainment, of community with the world. But there, on the front page, is a yellow sticky note:

CALL YOUR MOTHER

Maggie balls up the note and sticks it in the pocket of her robe, then she opens the *Post* and reads it, cover to cover. As she’s finishing, and starting to squirm in the hard kitchen chair, the phone rings. Here we go, she thinks. Today’s parade of “had that baby yet?” calls. She glances at the caller ID, sees that it’s her sister, and picks it up.

Rosen-excerpt

“Yes, Dara, I’m still here. No, I haven’t had the baby. Yes, I feel dreadful. No, I didn’t sleep well. And Sam’s gone in to the office. Is that everything?”

“Well. Good morning, merry sunshine. Maybe I’ll just hang up and call back when the kid’s old enough to answer the phone.”

“Sorry. I’m getting grumpy.”

“No kidding. We’ve all noticed. Seriously—how *are* you feeling? Anything happening?”

“No. Just misery. I can’t get my back comfortable anywhere. And I’m bored being at home.”

“Ah. I can solve the boredom for you. I have a message from Mom.”

“Oh good heavens. She can’t even call me herself?”

“Not so much. Not sure if you’re aware of this or not, but you’re having a baby.”

“I know. I wouldn’t mind having my mother around.”

“Don’t hold your breath. Maybe it’s better this way . . . Anyway. Here’s the thing. She’s dug up some rose bushes, and she wants you to go get them, and transplant them to your yard.”

Maggie doesn’t respond, certain that there must be more to this odd request, something to explain it.

“Maggie? She wants you to go today.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. It’s raining. And cold. And—why? Why on earth is she digging things up? Why do I want her roses? Why doesn’t she?”

Rosen-excerpt

“I have no idea. You know how she is. She called while I was out last night and left a message on my machine. I promise—I have no idea. Just go do it.” Dara sighed. “Then have your baby.”

Maggie looks out the kitchen window at the thermometer. 38 degrees. “Fine. There’d better be a reason for this.”

“Like I said, don’t hold your breath. Anyway—I’ve got a closing this morning, but I should be done by lunchtime-ish. Then my calendar is clear for a couple of days, so seriously, you really should go into labor. This is a good time for me.” Maggie rolls her eyes, but she hears her younger sister’s excitement. It feels like a good omen.

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