

Baby Season

It's baby season.

Today is photo day. They come, filling his studio with roundness, ripe bodies, cheeks dotted pink. It makes him itch, all this fruitfulness, like his own skin is splitting. But harvest time is dangerous. Not for him; he was chosen for his eye. He merely observes, makes the choices required to for the Network.

And after each visit, Jacob sends his reports with the photos. After that, the Network chooses. He's glad for the ignorance. Once the information leaves his studio, he can imagine it doesn't exist. An overexposed or underexposed photo that nobody will remember.

In the summers Before, he picked peaches from his Grandfather's tree, their sweet perfume heavy in the air. He would walk around the trunk, carefully selecting the fruit to be plucked. A darker blush, a fuller bloom, hiding the promise of the sweetest flesh under the skin. Sometimes, it was a peach hidden behind another. But he would always know the right ones.

When the birds came, they pecked at the fruits he'd left behind, hollowing them out.

Now, the shutter clicks, hard noises cutting through the softness. "Smile," he says, and the woman does, but he sees how it is merely a flicker, a ghost. She is trying not to remember Before, trying not think of Tomorrow. They're alike that way.

"Is it hard?" she asks him.

He doesn't answer. She wriggles uncomfortably.

"Doing what you do?"

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He swallows and it's bitter. "I am good at my job," he says and the woman rests her hands over the crest of her stomach, smoothing her dress over the mound. The maternity dress skims her contours. It's startling blue, like a fairywren's plumage; a bird he hasn't seen for years.

"This is silly," she says, bending with some trouble to the bag she placed on the floor next to the chair. "I feel like a child at school."

She hands him a peach, round and ripe. There's a teardrop of condensation still on the curve by the stalk. She lowers her voice as their hands brush during the exchange. "Is this...enough?"

He remembers his Mother's dresses, smocked and voluminous, skirting over her stomach holding his brother in. He muses now that perhaps his Mother thought his brother wasn't secure enough. That she must stitch him in place with cottons and threads.

Of course, they didn't know back then, Before, what would be expected of them. The Network chose its fruits with the same precision he had.

"Turn to the left," he says now and the woman complies. In his studio, they all do as he instructs. Face right, chin up, look down, kneel. Everyone has their orders to follow.

"We'd like some portraits of the baby when she's born," the woman says, stroking the sides of her distended belly. In her voice is hope now. The promise of something sweet when the skin splits and the juice spills across your tongue and down your cheeks so the sticky nectar marks you, if only temporarily.

As with anything, the traces of it can be wiped away.

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She shifts on the seat and a twinge of pain passes over her face. He clicks the shutter just at the right time. Gets the money shot.

He loves the mood of the darkroom. The digital era, while it lasted, stripped the slow burn, the drama, the anticipation from the process. The wet slap of paper against the sides of the chemical bath. The red light casting elongated shadows that stretch across the wall, thin and pointed like winter trees. The sharp aroma stinging the membranes in his nose reminds him he's alive. Down here, where he develops the stories behind the images, there are bottles and packets of photographic paper, trays and racks. There are choices playing out.

What he loves most, what keeps him from the spiral of despair that threatens to suck him further into this maelstrom of fear and uncertainty every day, is that amongst all the equipment and materials and chemicals, the most sought-after information lies in the intangible. He's good at his job. He's good at spotting that indefinable thing that sets one photo, one face, one life apart from another.

The woman's face emerges, lines marring her brow, eyes narrowed, mouth popped open. He can still hear the sharp intake of breath she took. With the right exposure, he can manipulate, with shadows and highlights and depth.

He pegs the photos to the wire and watches them waft on the warming air. The camera never lies. But people do. His Mother told him his Father would come back. She said his brother would not be chosen. But that helpless boy was as good as gone when he was born. His boss tells him they are lucky. All they have to do is deliver the merchandise. Take the photos, hand over the reports, let The Network do its job. For the greater good.

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Under the darkroom there is a secure storage place. As he descends the ladder, with the photos under his arm, he imagines it a little like an air raid shelter, or a bunker those people they used to call doomsday preppers deck out. There are probably thousands of those preppers living on canned peaches underground right now. It pays to be prepared. Even if you're mocked. Even if you spend hours and hours living in the dark, just waiting for the briefest moment of opportunity to blossom.

When his Father took his briefcase and went to work that Tuesday morning, the wind blew all the fruits off Grandfather's tree. Sweet pickings for the birds. By 3pm the Internet crashed. By 6pm, Father wasn't home, the news didn't come on, grey static bursting across the television screen. The crust on the pie burnt, but Mother served it anyway. They ate in dense silence, charred flakes of pastry fluttering to the plate. He lay awake all night, listening for the sounds of his Father's footsteps up the path. Sometimes, he catches himself listening still.

Along each wall are shelving units with sliding doors so that Jacob can lock away the photos and reports. A net over the fruit of his complicity.

Later that week, the woman returns for her baby portraits. The husband comes too, arms bracketing his wife's shoulders as she clutches the swaddled baby to her front. Jacob shuffles them inside quickly, checking the street in each direction.

"Did you bring the dress?" He asks this as he adjusts the lighting stand, tilts the umbrella.

The woman nods to the small bag her husband is carrying. The blue is even brighter in the glare of the light.

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“We don’t know what to say.” The husband picks the quick of his thumbnail.

Jacob says nothing. Thinks about peaches as the woman brushes the sleeping infant’s downy hair. A leaf of hope unfurls in his stomach. He takes the photos, directing them to smile. The light will pick out their fear, but he will adapt the images accordingly.

The camera doesn’t lie, but the photographer will.

The woman slips the dress on. The husband tucks the baby inside the front and draws the fabric belt around her stomach. She pulls her coat around her, covers the swell. Jacob shakes the man’s hand, slipping him the small square of paper with the address of the safehouse on it. He shows them out the back door then sinks down to the darkroom. He develops the film, sluicing the paper in the liquid, watching the image appear. Like growing the sweetest, ripest fruit, it’s all about timing. Expose for shadows, develop for highlights. Too long or too little. The truth can be fudged.

Later, he will call his boss and tell them the merchandise was not delivered. And later still, he will get a message from Mother who will tell him the merchandise is safe and well.

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