

Warm Milk

By Lea Klibanoff - Ron

Translated by Ilana Masad

It was the hottest summer in a century, and September was its hottest month. If it weren't for that, I suppose he would have been born long before. But in that heat, two minutes after the labor hormones began spreading through me, the fetus fell asleep. It happened time after time, so he simply wasn't born.

The induction shots led to short contractions. Even those couldn't keep him awake. And without him doing his part, there wasn't a chance he'd be birthed. Twice I had appointments for C-sections, but the first time the surgeon was snoozing and the second time the anesthesiologist fell asleep. The anesthesiologist had worse luck than the surgeon, who'd zonked out on the couch in his living room while fanning himself with the weekend paper; the anesthesiologist was already on his way to the hospital and fell asleep at the wheel on the freeway. Naturally, the anesthesiologist didn't put anyone to sleep for a C-section again. Or any other surgery.

The heat worsened, and the fetus slept. He only awoke and moved for meals, especially when I ate bubblegum ice cream with glacier sauce and sea salt. The glaciers had to be flown in huge freezers from the North Pole daily because the overburdened electric grid collapsed every couple hours. The price of ice cream soared, but there wasn't anything else I wanted. We ate ice cream together six or seven times a day.

So the fetus ate and grew. The last ultrasound, at the beginning of the eleventh month, indicated he weighed over eight kilograms. There were no further ultrasounds, since the power went out for good, and the hospital generators were only used for life-saving operations. But I felt the fetus keep growing. My stomach reached my thighs and I felt the kicks all the way up my throat. I saw double when I looked in the mirror. Seemed he'd be bigger than me soon.



Most of the time I sat on the floor and tried to soak my sweat in sheets, but the puddle spread throughout the room. I almost couldn't move; I almost couldn't sleep.

When I did manage to doze off, I dreamt of animals. Big animals. Elephants, giraffes, sometimes even bears came with their young. One time it was a black panther and her cub. I tried to figure out what they wanted to tell me, but they were silent night after night, and November came. The weather showed no signs of changing. On the afternoon of November 12th, I felt movement in my stomach. I understood suddenly that this was his breathing inside me, as full and deep as my own. I don't remember what happened next. I fell asleep on the floor.

It wasn't the chill wind that woke me, nor the raindrops, but the sudden disappearance of my body's fullness. What woke me was the emptiness. Only my breasts were still stuffed.

When I opened my eyes, I saw a handsome youth sitting beside me, naked as a newborn babe and smiling. I recognized his eyes, so like mine, but it took a while for me to realize that he wasn't naked *as* a newborn babe, but that in fact he was one.

We were silent.

"I'm thirsty," I finally whispered.

"Me too," he replied, his pubescent voice breaking.

"I'm hungry," I said, a little louder.

"Me too, Mother. I've been waiting a long time for you to wake up and nurse."

The youth kept smiling. I didn't.

He handed me a diaper.

I didn't take it. It was meant for a newborn anyway, so how would it fit him? The youth met my eyes. I shut them. And shivered. The cold was seeping in.

"Mother," he called, and I didn't reply, and again he cried, "Mother," and again, I said nothing.

When I opened my eyes, I saw he was still looking at me and handing me the diaper. "I can't," I said, and began crying. I put my fingers in my mouth to soothe myself, but kept on sobbing.

The youth gazed at me. Finally, he nodded, folded the diaper, and rose. "Well, Mother, if that's what you want."

He left the room, and I heard his footsteps fade, the door lock, and my cries soften, though not cease. An hour or two passed, or maybe ten. When the door opened, the youth was dressed.

He came in, a bottle of milk in his hand, and sat beside me on the floor, softly whistling a lullaby I didn't know. Gently, he put the nipple between my lips and I drank from the warm milk.

I fell asleep once more.