

I was huddled over the table we only ate at when our dining room wasn't an operating theater. Filled to the brim with scribbles on who'd gotten treated, when and what with, the lines of the dog-eared notepad blurred between my eyes. Kol kept records of everything, including correspondence with the soldiers across the hill. But that wasn't my job, he told me, not yet.

"I'll handle the ledger, Mark. Go relax." His gentle voice floated towards me over the countertop. "Dinner's almost ready."

I rest my head on my elbows in surrender. Every night it was always the same, feeling too cautious to let my guard down in case we'd have to start working again. An aversion to being woken up in the middle of the night, definitely.

But the golden ceiling lights were so exhausting. I let my eyes flutter closed, just for a moment...

A sharp trill erupted from the kitchen. I darted up and snatched the receiver, waiting for the crackle from the other end.

I pinched the landline and looked at the calendar on the wall. June was pictured by a hummingbird in a vibrant forest, tranquil above the rows of hasty scribbles: *Needle shipment today. Penicillin for Katy. Julie: expected labor all month.*

I heard an abrupt crackle come through just then. "Hello?"

A rough voice answered me. Arne, who'd returned from the war in spring with a shattered elbow, just in time to care for his wife in the third trimester, spoke in rushed, rumbling words.

I pressed the receiver to my chest, shooting an urgent glance at Kol. "Uh, Julie's been having contractions all day. She—it's coming, she says it's coming. They'll be here in just a minute."

Kol wiped his forehead, smiling weakly. He switched off the burner and closed the lid over the pot. Steam fogged under the glass until moisture enveloped it all; stewed apples melting under white clouds. Arne told me one last thing—Julie's breath, it had started to lurch in time with the pace of the truck. The baby was close.

"Okay, that's good. We're going to be all ready for you. Bye-bye." I hung up.

"I'll get everything ready," Kol said, folding his apron around the oven handle. "Go out and help her into the bath."

"Kol." I hedged at the doorway. "Is it really going to be okay for her without anesthesia?"

We had been expecting Julie to give birth for weeks now, but long before her delivery period, our opium tinctures had once again quickly dwindled to one last ampule. We decided to ration it only for emergencies, and Julie claimed since her own mother had a natural birth, she was sure to handle it.

Kol anxiously tapped his fingers against his waist. “Hopefully, yes.”

I pressed my lips together. It was no birth, but I still remembered my teenage nights spent crumpled on the floor, when I still had a uterus that squeezed like a fist, pumping out blood with each painful spasm; he also remembered when I keeled over in his patient’s chair, begging for something, anything to be done.

Those kind, watery-blue eyes looked into mine now, crinkling with an endless patience.

“There is nothing we cannot handle,” he promised, squeezing my shoulder. “Now let’s get moving.”

I stepped out on the porch and checked the horizon. A silent evening, except for the faint crack of rifle fire across the hill. Only a sliver of moonlight hung above the houses of Partridge tonight. Ever since the fighting had broken out a few miles away, the dim stars had disappeared entirely from the darkness.

The screech of tires rolled around the corner as Arne’s battered Silverado pulled into our driveway. I jerked the passenger door open. Julie, flushed and sweaty, gratefully squeezed my hand as she waddled down, her distended belly bobbing on her tiny frame.

“Hi, Mark.” She was breathless, smiling, her stringy hair swept over her forehead. “He’s finally coming!”

“How’s the pain?” I asked her.

“It’s been okay so far. But not for long, I think.” She massaged her belly, and laughed. “He wants to come, I can feel it.”

“You’re strong!” I laughed. “We’ll get you into the tub now.”

Arne lumbered behind us, heavy footsteps muffled by the rugs. He had a good six or seven years on his wife, was twice as tall, and still wore a backwards baseball cap for a team that hadn’t played since the collapse of America. The splint I’d set for him in April was starting to yellow and fray, but with his good arm he helped Julie slide into the tub.

“Hi, dear.” Kol plopped on the tile floor beside the young mother. “Are the contractions regular?”

“I think so,” she said, and then suddenly strained, holding a large breath between her cheeks. “Oh. There’s one. It feels like—every five minutes. They’ve never been so close before...”



We snapped latex on our hands. Kol pushed her thighs apart while I observed behind him. She was a few centimeters dilated, four or five. Julie wasn't the first woman I'd seen in labor, but she was definitely the smallest. The hole of her swollen, puckered cervix was no larger than a clementine, and certainly not large enough yet to fit an infant's head.

"Okay. Well, it looks like he hasn't dropped yet. Nor are you fully dilated." He massaged her lower belly, cupping the growth with his palm. "He would be about here. Your water hasn't broken, has it?"

Julie and Arne exchanged worried glances.

"No," she said. "But I feel him right on top. The pressure is so heavy—it's gotten stronger all night."

"He's in the right spot then," Kol reassured her, squeezing her hand. "Don't worry. It takes a lot of time, that's going to be normal. Moving around tends to help get things going."

By midnight Kol had Julie on all fours after she'd tried it all—squatting, clenching to the rhythm of her contractions, hustling up and down the stairs, but the baby hadn't moved an inch, even though she'd dilated completely: ten centimeters, fully effaced.

By one in the morning, her water had broken. Yet no matter how she twisted, turned, and screamed, he wouldn't come.

Once again she laid spread-eagled, shaking in the bath, tears streaming down her little cheeks. Every few moments she would convulse as a wave bigger than she could contain rippled through her.

Kol and I had looked at each other, and we both knew. Her labor had effectively stopped, but the baby was still lodged too close inside her and was now stuck in one way or another.

"I *can't*," she sobbed. "I'm pushing, but I can't push any more!"

I looked at her gaping cervix with horror, my own loins curdling—as if my vagina was closing in and shrinking in fear. I could feel the palpitation of my heart teem on the verge of explosion, could feel myself succumbing to her panic, the first rule Kol had taught me to never falter in—but what if we really *were* going to lose her? What if we were going to lose both of them?

Arne had been helplessly pacing, and now he knelt at her side, squeezing her tiny hand.

"Is this normal, doc?" His big voice trembled.

"Yes, it can happen. It is not uncommon for labor to be stalled." Kol sighed. "In a proper hospital we would have the means to solve it appropriately."

"What's happening?" she wailed. "Why can't I get him out?"

Kol frowned. "The baby is stuck. His head may be too big to fit, possibly." He craned his neck. "Or it might be more accurate to say that your canal is too small for him."

"Oh, my God," she sobbed. "What do we do?"

"It'll be a tiny change of plans. We'll have to cut him out in a cesarean section."

Arne's eyes grew to dinner plates.

"Julie can't handle that," he said brusquely. "She ain't had no anesthesia."

Tears and sweat streamed down her face. She shook her head violently.

"Just do what it takes," she gasped, her knuckles clawing the tub in a death grip. "Just do whatever it takes to get him out."

“Don’t worry, Julie. You won’t feel a thing under anesthesia. Go get it, Mark.” Kol sucked in a quick breath. “It’ll be alright, honey. It’ll be over with now very, very shortly.”

Before he finished, I was already halfway to the armoire, scrambling around in the cabinets for the last vial. This was real—two lives in our hands, and it was happening.

There was not any room for failure. There was only room for trust in his abilities and mine. But when I returned, Kol was only apologizing profusely, stroking the back of her palm.

“I’m sorry to put you through this, sweetheart. But I promise that it’s going to be all right. Are you holding up alright?”

“Yes, I’m—I’m good,” she heaved, but her brow was rigid, hair plastered to her forehead.

“Okay, Julie. Now you’re just going to lean forward for me. Arne is going to pull you a little closer so that I can get to your spine, okay?”

Everybody helped Julie tilt into position. She moaned as her belly bulged forward, keeling slowly between her legs. Kol pressed on her spine, once, twice, feeling for the softest point.

She whined incoherently, baying her pain to the hollowness of our bathroom. I touched her, felt the tremble pass her vein.

“You’re doing a great job,” I soothed.

She squeezed my hand—hard. Then, as the needle withdrew, her fingers relaxed. She sighed in audible relief, her body sinking against the tub’s edge.

“How does that feel? Nice and numb?” Kol asked.

“It’s *heavenly*.”

“Okay. We’re just going to wait a bit for your body to settle. Keep breathing for me.” He shot me a glance and began to rattle off a list: “Scalpel, iodine, sutures, rags. And bring me a change of gloves.”

As I swiftly passed the hall, I heard their muffled voices echo.

“Arne,” Julie groaned, feeble and exhausted, “Tell me something. Anything.”

“Honey,” Arne warbled. “You don’t have to worry. Just don’t worry.”

When I returned, Julie was flat on her back, exhaling slowly. Kol scattered my armful of offerings on the tile floor.

“Keep talking to her, Arne. Julie, I want you to close your eyes and rest while we help you deliver.” Then he adjusted his gloves. “Now, Mark, look closely.”

His blade glided quickly down her stomach, exposing the fat bubbling underneath, hewing firmly through the fascia. I blotted away the blood as he cut and snipped. The process was like an intricate dance, quickly stepping in whenever he required me.

Kol had always possessed some middle ground between the delicacy of an artist and the ruthless strength of a butcher. My eyes followed in pure fascination—it was a sight to behold. I could only attempt to imitate his sheer confidence and precision.

Arne was babbling about when they’d met in the summer, how beautiful she’d looked in that striped dress and how he’d known in that moment he’d wanted to marry her right there and everything. He couldn’t decide whether he wanted to look, stare straight ahead, or just plain screw his eyes shut, and was cycling between all three. I attempted to drown out his panic, but the stakes were hardly letting up. I was only barely composed enough to follow the operation.

“Now pull the abdominal muscle to the side,” Kol said.

With a firm tug, it relented, and Julie’s body gave deeper underneath my fingers. We excavated underneath all the fleshy layers of motherhood, until at last, we reached the womb: pale, shiny, full of child, coated in a gentle aura of mucus. So here it was.

I glanced at Julie’s face. She seemed almost delirious, blinking so slowly. I wondered what the sensation felt like: a gentle prodding deep inside the core of her body, to be opened, to witness it all, and yet survive. For my own surgeries, I’d been put to sleep entirely. What would it have been like for me to watch my own procedure?

Kol slowly carved a bloody half-moon, a tender back-and-forth motion until he’d found just the right spot. He paused for a moment, and then plunged his hand straight through, flesh stretching around his fingers.

Julie moaned, shivered a little. My eyes honed in on the incision wrapping around his wrist, so visceral and strong. That looked almost rapturous.

Then my pulse laid hollow in my throat. The baby—

“I feel him,” Kol said triumphantly, a rush of air to his words.

Everybody stirred with anticipation. I couldn’t breathe as I watched it emerge: he pulled his hand deep, and grabbed something soft and bloody. The infant came loose, slowly appearing, fleshy appendage by appendage.

I found myself lost in breathless amazement. The sight of a child being born—this being my third delivery—never failed to stir me deeply and profoundly. But this time it was visceral, watching life emerge through the miracle of surgery itself.

We all just watched, stunned for a moment. And then the gooey little baby took its first breath, and began to shriek.

“Wait a moment,” Kol said, and laughed heartily as he turned the infant over and handed it to its mother. “It’s a girl!”

We all made little noises of surprise and wonder, but Julie gave the softest cry of all. She clasped the fleshy bundle to her chest, weeping and laughing.

“Congratulations,” I whispered.

And with a firm snip, the umbilical cord came free. Blood flooded the placenta just as Kol pulled it loose. What had felt like the hardest part was over. The relief swelling in my heart washed away all the overwhelming tension keeping my muscles tight.

But I took a deep breath to compose myself once again. It was far from over. Now that Julie was empty of her child, her body looked both swollen and deflated at once. Her open, bleeding incision pulsed, begging for attention. We took to the thread and needle.

The process of sewing her back was much more complicated than her delivery, but she didn’t seem to mind at all. She cuddled her newborn close. Then Arne and I carried her out of the bath and sat her on the toilet.

“Oh, it’s a girl,” Julie wept. “Oh, Arne, she’s just so *beautiful*.”

The pair huddled around their cooing newborn. It was more than I could handle, trying not to cry in our bathroom past midnight, watching two parents fall unconditionally in love with the mere sight of their child. Kol wrapped his arm around me, rubbed my shoulder. My father was right here, my real father. My heart picked up, soared with joy.

“Did you have a name for her?” he asked them.

Julie glanced up at Arne.

“We were so sure she’d be a boy,” Arne admitted.

The young mother stroked the baby’s little fingers with her thumb. “Ruthie,” she declared suddenly. “After Grandmaw.”

Long after the parents headed home, I was still scraping stew around my plate. Kol was watching over me with deep concern. There had been appendectomies and ruptures before, and people bleeding out on our tables, soldiers dead on arrival. But never once a mother with child. The apple-mush slid against my soft palate.

He picked up my hand: slender and white against the pink wrinkles of his age. I looked at his drooping nose and bushy gray brows.

What the hell would I even do without my father? Over the years, so many years, I'd of course been worried about the end of everything more times than I could count. Now I had some years under my belt, and I still needed him more than ever.

"I couldn't ever do it on my own," I finally said, when it became harder to swallow my food than to just talk. "The C-section. The..."

I sat back and stilled. Kol touched my hair, the wispy locks around my cheeks, and tucked them behind my ear.

"You're not over your fear."

The deep timbre of his voice spread through me as he pulled me close, his chest deflating with a heavy sigh. Warmth unfurled in my chest, even with the fireplace bare and cold. We hadn't burned wood for over a year.

"Think about how far you've come," he murmured. "And you were plenty of help back there. You'll never know how grateful they were for you. It won't be tomorrow that you learn how to do these things on your own. But that's what I'm here for until then."

A swell of pride lolled through the exhaustion. So there were good days and bad days all in the same 24-hour shift. But I still couldn't stop blinking away tears. It was all too much.

"Marrying a midwife, it made it easy, you know?" He was so mellow. "If she was still around, there'd be plenty she could teach you."

His hand fell slack in my hair, and then the euphoria slowly fizzled away. I still never knew how to react when he talked about his late wife. His gaze had trailed towards the window again. I could see him turning gears.

"Well, we're going to have to do something about the opium," he murmured suddenly, leaning forward.

I kept mute; I couldn't possibly imagine that he had any better ideas at this point. We were resigned to a life of being at the economy's mercy—whether the war was turning in our favor, or not.

In the beginning, Kol had former coworkers, contacts who had connected us to suppliers, but they'd gone dark a couple months ago. Outside of our little community to keep us afloat, most of the budget having gone to supplying the war effort, we were isolated—left to fend for ourselves now.

He stood, and resumed his usual position at the window; two fingers holding apart the blinds, the Royal Albert teacup nested in his other palm. The flare of constant gunfire lit up that little corner of the sky, tiny pink streaks arcing across the twilight.

It was no use anymore trying to get him to look away. In the early days, I was just as anxious about it as him. But at some point or another I had learned to ignore the war outside our door. After all, it was just another one of those changes I couldn't control.

"It's just a matter of time until they come down here again," he said. "I hate it, but... We have to bargain with them." He bit his lip. "I have to do something. I don't see how we're going to get our hands on supplies otherwise at this point."

My heart fluttered, the beat gone stagnant. "Kol, no way."

He rocked silently on the balls of his feet. I realized then that this wasn't the first time he'd thought about this—he'd just chosen to omit it. My chest constricted, heavy and tight.

"What do you exactly expect to do, walk up there with money in your hand? They're not going to be friendly—and if they come back into town..."

But the memories I conjured then rendered me silent. The first and only time I had seen Loyalist soldiers with my own eyes was from behind the front window, when a little squadron of men dressed in black from top to bottom marched through our streets, waving their battered flag.

Suddenly several of them collapsed, sniped and picked off like flies from somewhere high. On that bloody day the rest of them killed six people before our resistance drove them off the streets. Kol and I had tucked ourselves away behind the bookshelf, holding each other until the fire finally stopped.

That was the most patients we'd ever had at once. It was still hard to believe how long ago that'd been. 'Partridge was off-limits', Jo Gables shouted, a mother of twins before she'd gone to war.

He ruffled my hair and got up, hugging his cardigan around his narrow shoulders.

"We should really get some sleep now," he said.

"Yeah." I blinked away the tears again, my vision stabilizing, and put down my plate. "Yeah, okay."

I floated up the stairs to my bedroom, on the edge of collapse. Drifting in and out of sleep, exhausted and still imbued with adrenaline of witnessing life brought into the world, my muscles were sore and weary.

The images of the day flickered in my mind like a quick-rolling tape: Julie's anguished face torn into screams, then her uncontrollable joy as she held her weeping baby.

Then all the excitement eventually melted into darkness, into the comforting notion that all there was left to do was rest for tomorrow. That knowledge helped me sleep easy, even when the wind was blowing hard through the cracks, fluttering over my cold skin.

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A few hours later, when soft blue glowed through the pleated muslin curtains, I woke to the floorboards creaking, muffled voices rising from down the hall.

I rubbed my bleary eyes and forced myself lucid. Occasionally patients had emergencies early in the morning. Maybe something with Julie was wrong and she'd come for help.

I padded out of bed and pressed my ear against the door, just to collect myself for a moment. The gap between the doorframe was too narrow to see who was there, but I could faintly hear Kol, incensed and aggravated.

In all the years since he took me in I'd rarely heard him raise his voice. It was rising louder now, sharp as a whistle.

"...can't *do* this. With all due *respect*—"

I opened the door. My father was cornered by two soldiers dressed in all black: vests, guns, the collars up to their neck, everything black save for the white cross patch ironed on their arms.

The Loyalists were inside our house. Pointing their guns at my father's chest.

Every muscle in my body tensed as they looked at me. Kol stared at me too, frightened. Helpless.

"Just go back inside," he said, hushed. "I need to talk with our customers."

I curled my hand around the banister, utterly frozen. *He* had brought them to our home?

"Quit running your fucking mouth," the soldier growled. "Just pack all your shit and you're coming."

"I've been very clear," Kol said in a gentler tone, trembling. "The townspeople need a doctor—"

"Fuck your *fucking* townspeople. We could spray a whole clip into this town, crush your pathetic little resistance and then they wouldn't need you at all. Now if you don't go grab your shit, all your little fuckin' tools, that's exactly what we're gonna do."

Then Kol hesitated, and my mind careened to a halt. They'd come to make him work for them, that's what this was about.

In a second, my mouth was already running. My chapped lips dropped open.

"I—I'm a doctor too," I exclaimed hastily. "You can take me!"

Kol's pale eyes bulged from their sockets. "No, Mark," he whispered.

"I can operate and—and everything. My education, it's very good." My mouth ran beyond me. "You're looking for a surgeon, right?"

The soldier stepped back, composed himself, adjusting the grip on his gun. "Right."

"I'll go. What do you need? What should I bring?"

He furrowed his brow, like I was audacious for even asking. "All the shit you got, kid."

"Mark, *stop!*"

"Okay." My thighs were shaking so violently, I thought I would collapse, but I flitted down the stairwell, a gangly, flighty mess. I was really and truly leaving the nest—thrust out by a poacher's gun.

"Get the hell going in a hurry," the other soldier called. "Five minutes, no trying anything funny."

I moved my limbs in a trance, ransacking the oak dresser, turning over the bathroom cabinet. I didn't want to take Kol's beautiful silver tools, or the medicine that our injured had been desperately needing—what else was there to give? Cheap gauze and plastic catheters?

"Please," Kol begged. "We can give you anything else. We can trade—we'll trade. We'll pay you—for your medicine. For your opium. We can buy it from you, give you money. We'll treat your soldiers with it. We can give you food." His voice clawed in desperation, leaving air in between the whistles.

"Your son already made the trade." He adjusted the hand on his rifle. "A pretty good one. No more bargaining."

Kol shook his head. "No. You can take whatever you want, but not my son!"

The lean soldier thrust his gun at Kol's face.

"No!" I yelped.

"No more talking," he growled at Kol, before turning the barrel to me. "And don't you start either."

My heart jumped and sank. I stared down the dark chamber and waited.

A sharp, tinny ring pierced the canal of my ear and then sat for a while. At any moment it would blow. So I stood, and watched.

“Mark!”

I startled into focus. The bullet was locked inside but the trigger did not recede. I looked back up. A hard push, and the soldier handled his gun again. He forced me out the porch, ripping me from the vestiges of safety.

My heart drummed hard between my ribs. I turned my head.

I did not look back. I watched the sky flock away from me.

A howl screamed all the way down the street from my father’s porch, the shrill cry of an aging man losing his firstborn. Then I tried to look back, but a thick, ruddy hand turned my head away.

I didn’t dare say a word. Nobody else was outside, civilian or soldier. I saw the curtains jerk open across the street, then close quickly.

That was good—except that I would die alone, with barely a witness. I needed someone to see. If I went, who would come back for the rest?

We twined along the empty road, passed the long strip of trees, cut into the overgrown woods. The silence hung heavy in the air, the crunch of soldier’s boots and my tennis shoes against the leaves. SAVE PARTRIDGE FORESTS, an old sign read, stapled to a tree. NO APARTMENTS, NO REZONING. SAVEPARTRIDGE.COM.

Suddenly we had opened into the mouth of the highway, and I tensed up. This was death’s territory—everyone knew that any civilians or rebels crossing would be shot.

I squinted to make out the shapes in the middle: yes, there was a group of other civilians, all men—a throng of them in T-shirts, windbreakers and sandals, human bodies oscillating in the moist summer morning.

I stared, my breath harsh, my brain almost numbed by the terror of it all. Was this it? Everything I had worked for in my life, only to be executed en masse?

The soldier pushed my backside. “Go on,” he said gruffly.

Eyes burning, I walked forward in my trance, and cast my gaze down to inhibit the width of how much suffering I could see. If I looked up from everyone’s feet, I knew I would start to cry.

“Walk!”

We shuffled ahead in a forward march, herded like livestock around abandoned trucks and burnt tumbleweed. Just in the periphery of my vision, I saw a body charred to a crisp. It had been there for much, much longer than just a few days, and was so desiccated it was impossible for even an autopsy to be of much use.

The stench was overpoweringly, hideously rancid. Nausea swelled in my stomach and lurched up my esophagus, but I closed my eyes and fought the pounding throb in my skull, up until enough yards had passed, as if the corpse had never been there at all. But I knew that the sight and the smell would linger with me.

Even more yards passed, and every few feet, I braced myself for the quick clap of gunfire.

But it never came.

Then I could finally see it: the tower that stretched into the sky, mounds dug around it. From here the Loyalist territory looked like a little ant colony, the oil well as their prize.

The faint scent of urine drifted in the air now, from somebody in the front. I didn't recognize the men beside me; they certainly hadn't been patients of ours. Maybe they were from neighboring towns.

A sickening noise of somebody doubling over and retching just behind me—then the putrid, stomach-curdling stench of vomit. I startled, turned on my heels.

Runny chunks clung to the rolls of the young man's belly. Before I could start to speak, the man with a child's eyes looked up, chin smeared with sticky green, and startled me.

Instantly, I zeroed in on his face, my heart clamping up. There wasn't a world where I wouldn't have recognized those ruddy cheeks, those big black eyes.

“Joey?” I gasped under my breath.

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Critiques which I'd like to integrate are on the following page:



TIME FOR THE PERCOLATOR Today at 9:18 AM

hey gayboy, so what i like the most by far is the surgery scene and the accompanying discussion, its great, its tense, its beautiful its gross, love it. I like the conversation that it precedes between Kol and Mark as well. Maybe some work to be done on the preamble before hand? I couldn't really gleam the location and place very well, some more descriptions of the small house to give it character maybe, but not too many as to slow the pace scene to scene. Though its good if the parts before and after the surgery are paced slower.

My main issue is the dialogue of the soldiers is a bit cartoony, there's something malicious and real about cruelty being mundane to the cruel, the soldiers are a bit ridiculous. also im not sure why Mark is a better deal then the father? Why they wouldn't attempt to take the medicine after the father had mentioned it? i think this can be fixed by some kind of lie from mark, or mark approaching the soldiers off to the side and lying to them privately about who is the more proficient surgeon. doesn't really make sense to me as is. Maybe even just a little more convincing on why Mark would be a better option. As far as my knowledge goes the medical profession really is one where experience trumps everything, so it'd be good to make a sort of excuse here.

finally once mark is on the porch it'd be good to give the town a lil quick description, just to give the place a sense of self and bed the reader more, cus its quite frenetic.

Shits cool so far! i could make a bunch of random grammatical suggestions but im not an editor and they are mostly personal. Most pertinent thing to say on that front is use less commas and more connective words? just for flow, or just make shorter sentences. Pretty good! love the vibe.



blythe heathcliff Today at 9:19 AM

thank u so much man!!!! I shall integrate this, very helpful 