

Tulips and Peonies

I felt a rush of water spilling down my legs, soaking the pink terrycloth robe I had tied above the bump that was you.

Hours before you arrived your dad and I walked the streets behind our home, slogging through the slush holding hands, me wearing your dad's green rain-boots because nothing else would fit around my swollen feet. I was desperate to bring on labour — so big I felt I would split open like a sausage and you'd just drop out.

When my water broke your sisters cried. Hovering around me like a pair of old aunties, dressed for bed in their pyjama sets, they could barely contain their excitement. Your dad sent them upstairs to fetch me some fresh clothes while I called grandma.

By the time we got to the hospital the contractions were coming quickly. "Is this your first baby?" the intake nurse asked from behind a sliding glass window. I shook my head no, bent over the counter in another wave of pain.

Your poor dad was rattled. He had been a perfect father to your sisters since we started dating, but he'd never experienced the birth of a child. We had prepared as if you were the first for both of us — attended Lamaze classes and packed a bag full of all the things necessary for what is usually a long first labour. But you weren't my first and the bag didn't even get cracked — the

massage oils, playing cards, and cassette tapes with carefully curated playlists your dad had so carefully bundled, never used.

Back to back contractions meant labour was short and fast. “Can I get you anything?” your dad asked, jaw hanging, the colour draining from his face as I unwittingly pulled his neck flesh in a direction it’s not meant to go.

“You’re a keeper if you’re still attracted to me after this” I grunted a few minutes later, on the bed on all fours like some sort of rabid animal.

I dilated from two to ten centimetres in less than an hour and before we knew it we were in the delivery room. The pressure to push was accompanied by a sudden calm as I transitioned to that magical place in which a woman isn’t *giving* birth. She *is* birth.

Reaching, breathing, swimming together, we transcended time in that sacred space as all the powers of the universe flowed through me, carrying you with them.

You emerged with your wise eyes open. I’d never seen blue like that — the colour of heaven. And just like that our family was transformed, reinvented, and you were the bridge that connected our love.

The next couple of hours were spent examining fingers and toes, the folds in your ears, the shape of your mouth, and weeping unabashedly — you lying on my chest, your dad's face resting against mine.

Tiny flakes of snow danced outside our window like confetti. Your dad went home to be with your sisters, leaving us to spend the night together. Just you and me. Roomies. I was so in love with you that I couldn't sleep.

I held you close and whispered promises in your ear, the curve of your downy soft head nestled next to my breast, the glow of moonshine across our pale blue sheets, the stars glittering in celebration against the snowy velvet sky, you and me united with that sky in a profound kind of oneness.

I watched you sleep, waves of joy flowing from deep inside me, radiating through my every cell. It was as if all the love in the world was in that hospital room with us.

Since that day you've caused other sleepless nights — excited Christmas Eves, excruciating earaches and warm compresses, homework that was left too late, your first heartbreak. And the nights during your teenage years, the ones that brought me to my knees, when so much was stirring in you and I learned how to surrender and just love.

Today marks exactly one hundred days since I've seen you. You couldn't have known that when you texted a photo of the flowers on your desk this morning. Crimson tulips and peonies soaked in sunlight — a reminder of how beautiful the world still is while you work from home during this crazy pandemic. I love that you delight in buying fresh flowers for yourself every week. I can't imagine many other six foot, two hundred pound, twenty-four year old straight guys would do the same — but you take such pleasure in them, just like I do.

My boy.

When I was pregnant with you, I knew you were my boy. I didn't tell anyone I knew. *The gender doesn't matter. We just want a healthy child.* And it didn't matter. But I knew.

One night, when you were three and your sister and I were tucking you into bed after reading your favourite — *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Stupid Fairy Tales*, I kissed your forehead and with that sweet lisp you whispered, "I'm tho glad I chose you."

"What do you mean, Jacob, you chose me?" I asked softly.

"Before I was in you. I chose you."

And I understood right away. Because somehow I already knew.