

## An Old Wives' Tale

A woman with a notebook clutched to her chest walked into the hospital room. Her buttercup linen suit tugged me toward spring's joys, but my heart remained slumped in winter's past. She closed the door and the room shrank two sizes.

"Hello, Ms. Robertson. I'm Mrs. Appelbaum from the Social Work Department," she said. She brought the notebook to rest on her hip and made her way to the bed. "Did they tell you I was coming?"

"Yes," I choked out, staring at that oversized notebook filled with tales of despair, knowing that my own story would join them.

She pulled a chair alongside the bed, then reached for my hand. "This must be a difficult time."

I nodded.

"Have you seen the baby?"

Sleep had given me a short reprieve from the truth in the nursery down the hall. Now it was time to talk about my child, the child I had never seen.

On April seventh, I became a mother. I told them upon my arrival at St. Elizabeth Hospital that I didn't want to know anything. The doctor obliged by discreetly handing the newborn to the nurse as if it were a drug deal going down. Then the nurse cradled the infant, pausing at the door an extra moment, giving me a chance to change my mind. She looked back over her shoulder and I knew what she must have been thinking. *How could you not want to see your own baby?* She dared not say it, she didn't have to. The truth was that I couldn't be

bothered with gender, eye color, and hair color, because of a much bigger question. Would I survive from this day forward? Then with one shake of my head, the door snapped shut, and my baby was gone.

Now I had to answer to Mrs. Applebaum for my decision. "There's no way I could...it would be difficult to..."

She leaned toward me. "Cara, do you have any doubts about proceeding with the adoption plan?"

"No. Absolutely not." The words slipped out so easily they were almost believable.

She opened her notebook and pulled a pen from her pocket. "Did your attorney explain the process to you?"

"Process? Oh, you mean the plan. Yes."

My attorney and I first met to discuss the adoption on a cold day last November, overcast with dampness so thick that it clung to me. I didn't complain about the weather; it felt only right to be dismal both inside and out. My father had arranged my meeting with his law partner, Henry. After making sure no one had coerced me into the decision, Henry informed me of Michigan adoption law and assured me that he could not share any information with my father due to attorney-client privilege, a term that had been thrown around our family for years.

Something I never fully appreciated until now.

The plan was simple. Henry had a colleague a few towns over from Mission Bay with clients thought to be a compatible match, though the couple was somewhat skittish due to a prior bad experience where a teenager backed out at the last minute. This time, they were looking for a more mature birth mother. I suppose they were thrilled to hear that I was twenty-four. They didn't know that I still struggled with my decision.

"You chose a closed adoption process, is that right?" Mrs. Appelbaum asked.

The word closed had never sounded covert before now. I felt the need to explain.

"I thought it best for all involved that we not know the other party. Since I wouldn't be staying in touch, I wrote a letter for the baby to read later on. I needed to...to explain the reasons." But would my child understand them?

There was the timing issue. My father had reminded me of the obvious. "It's hard to raise a baby on your salary, Tulip. You're fresh out of college. You've yet to establish your career, and that will take quite some time as an artist."

Mother pointed out that it was not the natural order of things. "How would you ever find a man willing to marry you, dear, with all that extra baggage you'd be carrying around? Men don't want to raise someone else's baby. Can you blame them?"

And my sister. "Who would want a baby with *his* genetic influence? It would be damaged from day one," Steph asserted. "Not to mention the jerk left you the moment you told him you were pregnant."

A more self-centered approach came from my best friend, Tory. "How would you ever find time to paint with a baby to look after? You don't want to be stuck working at the gallery all your life, selling other people's work, do you? And think of all the dates you'd have to pass up."

There were many excuses, but my hand had hovered over that paper for hours, unable to write a single word. Later, I rewrote each paragraph in an attempt to justify my decision, but the words that came forth never satisfied my conscience; guilt oozed from each page like a puncture wound in need of a bandage. The letter started out innocently enough. The first line simply read, *A letter to my baby, with love*, just like a valentine. I looked at the pyramid of crumpled papers at my feet and thought it a shame that the candy company never put the words *adopt me*

on any of those little colored hearts.

The following day I handed the letter to Henry and he promptly stuffed it into a business envelope. Then his secretary typed *Adoption Letter* on the outside, cold and proper.

Henry winked. "Don't want it to get thrown out accidentally."

I knew what he was really saying—it was a business transaction, a negotiation between two interested parties. The emotions needed to be tucked away in a lined envelope to protect everyone.

Mrs. Appelbaum squeezed my hand. "I hope the letter has brought closure for you."

Didn't she know that a simple letter wasn't going to solve anything? What was I thinking? The baby deserved nothing less than a book of at least three hundred and sixty-five pages, a page of reassurance for every day of the year.

"Now, how about the father? Is he in agreement with the adoption plan?" Mrs. Appelbaum asked.

"He doesn't know."

"Doesn't know? Well, he needs to be notified. What's his name?" Her pen went to the notebook and began to bob up and down as she fished for the truth.

"I'm not sure who the father is," I blurted.

Her hand came to rest. "Oh, well, that's different. So, you're not naming a father."

"Right."

Withholding the father's name was not something that came natural to me because I had always been true to Mitch. Henry must have had faith in my character since he asked several times if I knew who the father was, but I never wavered. Mitch didn't deserve to be named after tossing a mere *good luck* over his shoulder as he walked out of my apartment for the last time.

As twinges of pain still crawled around my mid-section, I was certain I had made the right decision.

The social worker glanced at her watch. "Your attorney will join us at four o'clock to proceed with the adoption process. There will be papers to sign for temporary placement of the baby with the adoptive parents."

I noticed how carefully she chose her words. Using adoption plan and adoption process so neat and precise. Never once did she slip and say, "You're giving your baby away to total strangers because a baby would be a total inconvenience and put a damper on your future plans."

She must not have read the letter.

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Mitch had conveniently been on vacation when the pregnancy test confirmed that my morning queasiness was unrelated to the previous night's dinner. He'd been gone for two weeks, but was due back into town the following morning. With stick in hand, I called his office at nine o'clock sharp. His secretary answered and told me that he was not available, that the father of my baby was having breakfast with his wife.

The need to know overrode the necessity to breathe.

"He has a new wife?" I managed to squeeze out, before struggling for air.

She laughed longer than necessary, then said, "It's the same old wife he's always had. He shouldn't be gone too long. Can I take a..."

I dropped the receiver, then fell to my knees and watched it spin clockwise, then counter-clockwise until the dial tone reminded me that I was in this alone.

I hadn't known Mitch Sanders was married all the while he was on top of me, under me, and inside me throughout the year and a half we had dated. I suppose it should've been obvious, the way

we'd drive twenty-five miles to catch dinner and a movie because he was tired of the same old thing. How Mitch always came to my apartment where we'd have more privacy because his roommate didn't like company. The way he'd call me from his office first thing in the morning before I had the chance to call him. Such suspicions were easy to explain away when he looked into my eyes so lovingly and called me his one and only, the love of his life. In the throes of passion, there was little time for doubt.

He had been the frat boy, the All-American college football player that could have had any woman, but he chose me. I just didn't know that I was second string and would eventually be cut from the team altogether.

My friend, Tory Parker, took a seat beside the hospital bed. She foraged around in her purse and pulled out a silver tube along with a mirror, then re-applied the red lipstick that accented the small gap between her two front teeth, just wide enough to be sexy. She puckered to check for evenness and zipped her tongue across her teeth.

I knew the answer, but decided to ask anyway. "Do you think I'm horrible?"

She glanced up and snapped the compact closed. "Of course not. Do you have to ask? By the way, how was the meeting with the social worker?"

"She wanted to know if I had any doubts."

"You told her no, right?"

I looked out the window.

"Cara, you're doing the right thing. For God's sake, you've barely been able to take care of yourself since Mitch walked out on you. How many times have you called me in the middle of the night crying your eyes out, unable to eat, to sleep? You can't take care of a baby right now. And it's not like your family will be of any help."

I choked back my tears. "I know. But I didn't realize it would be this hard."

"It's the best thing...for both of you. You can get your life back in order and the baby will have a good start...a stable life, just like you said in that letter."

The letter. I closed my eyes and searched for a reason, any reason. Ah, yes, my baby deserves better.

Tory stood and pressed out her jeans with her hands and her multiple bracelets fought for better positioning. "You should get some sleep. I'll go make a few phone calls. Want me to try to reach Mitch?"

I bolted up in bed. "God, no! Did you forget the part about him being married? Besides, he's probably with her."

More than likely they were eating breakfast at the local pancake house. I pictured them seated on the same side of the booth, placing their need for closeness over comfort. He ran his fingers down the center of his wavy black hair while deciding whether to go with the blueberry syrup or stick with maple—her decision based solely on whether the word light was involved. He held his coffee mug with a firm one-handed grip, the same way he drank a beer. His wife hugged hers with both hands; gently tipping the cup to her lips in short bursts of energy as if to show moderation in all areas of her life.

Tory scooped her leopard print purse off the floor. "I'll be back shortly."

"Don't," I said.

A smile inched across her scarlet lips. "Don't what?"

"You know."

"Do I?"

"I think you do."

"Sleep. You're exhausted. I'll be back in a bit," she said before trotting out the door.

A clicking noise from her heels followed her down the hall, trying to catch up with the rest of her body. As I closed my eyes, my thoughts drifted back to the pancake house and I prayed that he got food poisoning. No, that *they* got food poisoning.

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My head hit the pillow and I soon found myself in an old schoolhouse; a sweet, fruity smell swirled about my head. A thick layer of dust covered the desk. I swiped it with my index finger and put it to my lips.

Mmm...orange, my favorite.

The schoolteacher was a plastic Pez dispenser with an elephant head, but for some reason I never questioned her authority. She walked over, flipped her head back, and coughed up a test.

I straightened in my desk chair. That's funny, I didn't recall any mention of an exam.

The other students smiled and placed their hands in front of them, accepting the paper as eagerly as their First Communion. With heads bowed they set to work, the confident scratching sounds from their pencils magnified my lack of preparedness. I had not studied. Not for the stupid math test, the pregnancy, the birth or the adoption. I was going to fail. Fail the test, motherhood, and life.

The first question: One baby minus one baby equals blank.

It didn't seem logical, but I knew I had to put something down on paper, so I leaned to the right to copy off the girl sitting next to me. As my neck stretched outward, a trunk firmly tapped me on the shoulder.

"Don't you know that cheaters never prosper?" the teacher warned, in her candy-scented breath. "If you don't know the answer by now, you never will."

Suddenly, the school bell rang. While the other students ran out to the playground, I fell out of my desk spiraling downward three stories before stopping just short of the faculty parking lot.

I shot up in the hospital bed and gasped for air, then suddenly understood the real test had yet to come. Tory stood at the foot of my bed with a man. I furiously rubbed my eyes in hopes of erasing him.

She cringed. "I know...I know. I thought Mitch would at least want to see how you and the baby were doing."

He stepped from behind her. I had forgotten how his shoulders filled a room. His extra large shirt tapered down to his thin waist, tucked neatly into jeans that were neither too old nor too new.

"Oh, Christ, Tory!" I said.

The thought of killing her on the spot flooded my mind. The coroner would hover over her lifeless body. "Yep, she's dead all right," he'd say, giving a quick nod to solidify his diagnosis. His assistant would zip the body bag closed and they'd hoist it onto the metal gurney. Fortunately for her, I was armed with nothing more than a plastic spoon on my food tray.

Mitch turned to Tory. "Can you give us some time?"

"Sure. Just be nice, Mitch. You promised, remember?" She spun around on the spikes of her shoes and left the room.

It was awkward, just the two of us. There was a time when I would have given anything to be alone with him. Now I longed for an interruption. He made his way toward the bed with that casual walk of his; hands stuffed deep into the front jeans' pockets as if flaunting my inability to hurt him.

"Cara, I know you must hate me."

Throughout my pregnancy and labor, I had thought of a million reasons why I hated him.

As he stood there in front of me, looking more handsome than I ever remembered, not a single one came to mind.

"But I knew you'd make it on your own," he said.

Now there was a reason. I stared at the crucifix on the wall and longed for him to suffer like that.

"Please, say something." He shifted his weight from right to left, and back again.

"Why did you come here?" I held my head steady to prevent tears from spilling over onto my cheeks.

"Guilt, I suppose. I'm not sure, exactly."

"Really now," I said through my clenched jaw.

He took a step closer to the bed. "I know you won't ask your parents for money, so I'll help what little I can from a financial standpoint. It wouldn't be much, but..."

I bit my bottom lip to stop the trembling. My heart grew cold as I realized that it was, indeed, guilt that had brought him to see me. "I don't want a dime from you. What I need...what I *needed*...was a father willing to help raise the baby."

"I can't do that."

*Why do things you already know hurt worse when said aloud?* "Did you ever love me, or was I just a fling for you?" I grabbed the side rails of the bed to brace myself for the impact of his response.

"Do you have to ask?"

"Did I have to ask whether or not you were married?"

He glanced toward the door, but decided to stay. "Look, I should've told you, but I can't change that. Whether you believe me or not, I care about what happens to you."

"Don't. I'll manage just fine without your concern. Spend it on your wife."

He cleared his throat. "I went to see her."

"Your *wife*?"

"No, the baby."

My hand cupped my mouth. *God, it's a girl. A little, baby girl.*

Then I saw her for the first time. Chestnut hair and dark brown eyes. My eyes, to see a world filled with beauty to capture on canvas. Not his useless, blue eyes that could not even see how much pain he caused us.

"I knew she'd be beautiful. She looks like me," he said.

His narcissism jolted me back to the issue at hand.

"You better hope your wife never sees her."

"Well, I certainly don't plan on...anyway...I hope you know that I won't cause you any problems. I won't pursue custody rights."

Did he really believe that he had such a right? I tilted my chin up and fluttered my wet eyelids as I did every time I watched a sad movie in a theatre full of strangers.

The word old wife infiltrated my mind again. I had no choice but to hurt him and searched for just the right words, truth or no truth. *Now I'm the teacher. Don't you know that cheaters never prosper?* I looked deep into his eyes. "I'm not asking a single thing from you, Mitch. In fact, I'm not positive the baby is even yours."

He forcefully exhaled as if he received a blow to the stomach. "What?"

"You might not be the father."

"You're lying."

"Nope."

"Cara..." He yanked his hands from his pockets. "Are you serious?"

*If you don't know the answer by now, you never will.* "I swear."

He pinched his eyes closed with the tips of his fingers and swayed back and forth like a boxer who'd been dazed, then shook his head as if to throw off the punch. "Well...I guess we're both guilty then."

"I guess so." Relief settled in as I swallowed the last of the lie.

"I'm sorry it had to be this way," he offered, staggering toward the door.

"Me, too."

The door closed behind him and a deafening silence hovered overhead. I closed my eyes and felt myself spiraling downward once again. I had never felt more alone.

My beautiful baby girl lay in the nursery down the hall.