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False Alarm

by James Calvin Schaap

When she came back from the clinic, she walked in the front door, stood there for a moment on the throw rug, and leaned back with her shoulder to shut the door behind her, not once taking her eyes off him. He was a half-room away on the couch, where he'd been paging through the paper; but he was close enough to read what she meant to say when she shook her head.

They didn't really want a baby—that was the wrong way to say it, of course, but he didn't know exactly what to say just then because there was no hint of joy on Shar's face, even though that morning when he'd left she'd been just as glum. But the answer was no. False alarm. Something in him loosened. He let out a breath loud enough for her to hear and raised his eyebrows into a smile. False alarm. And then, finally, "It's good news," he said, in a tone so iffy she could pull it apart in any direction she wanted.

"I ought to be happy," she said, standing still. "I really am, too." Her jacket hung over her arm as if she had elsewhere to go.

"So am I," he said. "So am I, really." And then he did a good thing, he thought. He patted the couch beside him, urging her to sit.

"It's not like this happens all the time," she said. "And I'm no rookie either. Shoot, Mark, we've got three kids—are they home?"

"No," he said, assuringly.

"It's not as if I'm stupid or anything—my word!"

"It's a good thing," he said. "You know it is."

She walked over to the chair across from him, where she sat, her coat in her lap, her eyes down on her twirling fingers. "I guess in a way I'd already convinced myself of the bad news, you know—I was sure."

He closed the paper in front of him and laid it aside, then sat forward on the couch, elbows on his knees, sifting through the right words from the rummage in his mind. "Shar," he said to get her attention, "Shar, it really is a big relief—you know it as well as I do. It's all for the best, you know—it's best for us, for pete's sake. All we needed was another kid at our age. I'm forty." The moment it was out it felt arrogant—my age, my life. "I mean, Shar—did you really look forward to re-doing something into a baby's room?" he asked.

"New wallpaper, just picking out colors—"

"That'd get old real fast, honey. A bassinette, a crib—"

"We've got a crib," she said.

"That's for grandchildren."

"Mark, my goodness—April's still in high school."

"She's *already* there," he said. "We're talking *caboose* of major proportions here."

"I know all that," she said, and she folded her hands together and bounced them on her knees. "I know all that, and I know this is by far the best." She looked at him again. "I'm old too. There's no guarantees anymore. You know what they say about old women—the odds of problems and all of that—"

He tried hard to laugh. “Anyway, you know what Marv always says about tail-enders—how having Jeffie like that after so many years just about did him in. ‘My friends visit colleges and I’m tagging along to kindergarten roundup. I’m old enough to be the kid’s grandpa’—you remember that.”

She toyed with the belt buckle on her coat. “A half-dozen times at least I heard him say that about Jeffie—as if he were a curse.”

“You realize what it would be like if things had turned out the other way.” He raised his hand through the slant of afternoon sunshine from the south windows, swung it around as if he could clean up the particles of dust that hung, planet-like, in the bright trough of light. “You realize how hard you’d be bawling, Shar. Think about it. We’d be sitting here in each other’s arms right now, wailing—no kidding, and you know it.”

“I know it, she said.

“I’d be bawling myself,” he said. “Another kid, shoot—”

She looked back down at her hands. He slapped the paper to the other end of the coffee table. Where were the kids?—he thought. The house never seemed so quiet.

He pulled himself to his feet and stepped out from behind the coffee table. When she didn’t look up, he clearly got the sense that she wasn’t to be touched just yet, so he turned away from her to look out the front windows. “Can you imagine another nine long months like the last time? Morning sickness, depression—big fat ankles. And how about a squashed bladder? Good night, Shar—babysitters again on weekends. Finding good ones.” He tried hard to laugh. “We’re free, honey. Another kid would have tied us up in knots. Crying jags—remember April’s all-nighters? I’ll never forget the two of us in bed, lying there on razor blades waiting, finally, for her to stop crying.”

He remembered the way she could sleep only on her back during those last months of pregnancy, her bloatedness, her mushroomed stomach, her horrible discomfort, varicose veins. “Bottles and baby food, all over again,” he said.

Still, she said nothing. He pulled the shade back from the window on the front door and looked past the late afternoon shadow standing in a gray rectangle over the front lawn.

“It still feels empty, doesn’t it?” he said, turning back to her. “Seems like there’s a hole here, something missing—how come? What kind of feeling is it anyway that eats out your insides, when everything in my head says *no* is for the best for both of us?”

He walked up behind her. She was running her wedding ring up and down her finger. “Sometimes it felt almost like a miracle or something,” her told her, “a big thing we never planned, something somebody laid in our lives, one thing that we didn’t figure on—all of a sudden a baby. I mean, as far as I was concerned, the whole family thing was over, and all of a sudden it seemed so outrageous to think that it could happen again.” He laid his hands on her shoulders. “The silly kid felt like God’s own hand in my life—like he just stuck his finger into our house when we didn’t figure on him. Like a reminder or something—that kind of thing. You know what I’m saying?”

She reached up and touched his fingertips.

"It was as if God had said, 'This little thing here is just to let you know that I'm around,' you know? 'Just to let you know that I'm not tucked away in some steeple somewhere. So don't take me for granted, y'hear?' You know what I mean, Shar? It was almost the voice of God, almost."

"I heard a baby crying," she said. "I don't think it was God. I wouldn't want to blame him for what I'm feeling."

"Shar, we didn't want a baby," he said.

"We didn't?" she asked.

"No, sireee. We didn't. Just imagine how you'd be crying right now—just imagine."

"I'm half crying anyway," she said. "I am."

"It's for the best, and you know it."

"I know it's for the best," she said. "I know it in my head, but I can't get it straight in my heart, okay?"

He took his hands from her shoulders, put them in his pockets. "It's really unthinkable," he said. "Both of us up there in front of church baptizing a baby when we're old enough to be grandparents." He circled her chair and took a deep, audible breath before reaching for her hands. She laid her jacket neatly beside her, then reached for him, and stood. He aimed them both back to the couch, where they sat, together, his arm beneath hers, his arm over her stomach, her flat stomach. "It's much better this way, Shar—for us," he said. "You know that."

The shaft of light hit the beveled edge of glass on the coffee table and projected a burning rainbow against the north wall.

"It was like a bad dream," she said, "until today, until just now, until it wasn't there." She shook her head. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"It's a kind of post-partum maybe—"

"How can you say that?" she snapped.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't mean it bad, but there was something there, even if there was nothing there, you know?"

"How can there be something where there's nothing?"

"Well, if there was nothing, what are we crying for?"

"I'm not crying."

"I am," he said.

"You are not," she said.

"Inside."

She grabbed his hand in hers. "You feel it, too?" she said. "You feel as if something's been taken away?"

"It was always there, till now," he said. "I mean, this morning at school—I'm saying to myself that I can do it—if it turns out positive and we get a caboose, then I can do it. It's been done—that's what I'm telling myself. So it was there—the baby. The baby was there in my mind for the last week already. It's been done—I know it. Others have done it, so can I." He banged their hands down on her knee.

She squeezed his fingers hard. "We had too much time to think about it—some

little yawning, pink-faced darling. I mean, he was already there in my heart, you know?"

"I kept seeing a girl," he said.

She snuck her left hand behind his back. "It's going to take some getting used to, I guess," she told him.

"I'd already conditioned myself for dirty diapers—all that yellow slimy stuff, and the smell—"

"—Stinky ammonia smell all over the house, eating the varnish off the bathroom woodwork—"

"We're up late every night—"

"What do you mean, *we*?"

"Okay, *you're* up late every night."

"Sitting there in the old rocker," she said. "It needs paint, too. You'd have to paint it, Mark. For a new baby, I wouldn't rock in that thing right now—"

"We're too old, Shar—"

"I know," she said.

"We're too old for a kid who never really was at all."

"I know that," she said again, and she brought both their hands to her face where what he felt seemed like silk. "You're so right, Mark. I've been telling myself every second since I left the clinic that it's all for the best. You haven't said one thing wrong— not a thing. You're so very, very right that it hurts."

He let it go, let it all fall into silence.

She took his hand and strung it over her head, as if she were dancing, wrapped it over her shoulder and brought it around to her lips, then kissed it, soft as first as a mother's touch on a wound. But when those lips tightened against his hand, when she held it there tightly against her face, he knew she was using him to block the tears finally emerging from her broken heart.

"I fell in love with a child that never was," she said.

He pulled her closer, nothing left for him to say. He pulled her closer wishing there was something he could do to cure it all, to make it all right. But there was nothing left to say, nothing she hadn't already thought of herself.

And then, the shriek of the old back door opening.

Her shoulders straightened. She slid up on the couch and turned towards the kitchen, to the clatter of small feet up the back stairs, the sucking sound of the refrigerator opening, the smack of a plastic tumbler against the countertop, the splash of milk, the crumble of paper from an open bag of cookies. The sounds of one of theirs coming home, he told himself, were right then the very words of the Lord.