***Empathy***

**Jamie was in his mother’s arms when she was shot to death.** The bullet, intended for the guy standing beside her, missed its mark and killed Yolanda instantly. The incident was not uncommon in Yolanda’s neighborhood. What was remarkable was that her month-old son was unharmed. Placed in the custody of his grandmother, Jamie was well cared for in the weeks to follow. But his health would progressively deteriorate.

\*

**Geoff assumed it was the baby’s ordeal that triggered Claire’s decline**. He should have known. Claire’s beauty was witch-scary, her spirit too intense, her composure too easily shattered.

\*

**Jamie refused to eat**. He cried incessantly and failed to respond to his grandmother’s attempts to soothe him. Hours would pass and the baby’s rabid cries would not abate. His grandmother tried everything: holding, rocking, singing. A social worker told her about the bundling technique: *Wrap up the baby tightly in his blankets so that he feels as secure as he did in the womb*. The grandmother followed the social worker’s suggestion, learning exactly how to fold the blankets so that the infant resembled a papoose. It didn’t work. The crying persisted and Jamie continued to refuse a bottle. A neighbor told the grandmother to run the vacuum cleaner. The white noise would calm the baby, the neighbor said, because it would remind him of the womb’s fluid swishing sounds. The grandmother tried it but Jamie’s cries became more tormented.

\*

**As a child, Claire instinctively felt the emotional pain of others** and was compelled to alleviate it. In elementary school, she took it upon herself to befriend the outcasts who suffered ongoing taunts and humiliations. Although her beauty and un-showy intelligence would have assured her a position on the highest rung of popularity, she pulled away from the well-liked cliques and watched out for the sad ones: the fat girls who everyone else snickered at, the pointy- headed boys who were too goofy smart and awkward to avoid ridicule.

She felt it was her responsibility to quietly prove to these undesirables that they were understood and loved. At lunch Claire sat with Penelope Gross, whose very name drew sneers and whose hunched posture and potato shape made her look prematurely aged. Claire graciously traded her Oreos for Penelope’s soggy graham crackers and told Penelope she liked her new brown glasses. Because she could feel his despair as if it were her own, Claire chose Arthur Blanger (another unattractively named pariah) for her third-grade dodge-ball team. *So what if we get hit by the ball?* Claire reassured the toothpick-bodied Arthur, whose homely face broadcast his panic as the ball was about to be hurled by an ace-shot on the other team. *It only hurts for a second*, she promised.

 \*

**The grandmother had little time to grieve for her murdered daughter**. Her energy was spent trying to care for her distressed infant grandson, who was now losing weight due to his inability to take the bottle. She cuddled and sang to him as she tried to ease the rubber nipple between his lips, but he would shake his head from side to side and his crying would increase*. I am your mommy now,* she would whisper, *the only mommy you’ve got*. But the baby boy couldn’t hear her over his own wails.

\*

**In college, the first in a string of lovers accused Claire of being too nice**: *Your sweetness makes you dull. You have no edge. You need to expose yourself to the world and get kicked around*. Claire took the boyfriend’s criticism to heart and resolved to put herself into situations where she could experience the hardships that would enlighten and strengthen her. She took a year off from her college studies and joined AmeriCorps, accepting a tutoring position in a gang-infested neighborhood. On her way to a student’s home one evening, she was accosted by a group of toughs from the high school. *Hey teacher! Sexy fox!* they taunted. One of the teenagers grabbed at her breasts and crotch as the others stood by and laughed. As she firmly broke away, Claire saw in the young man’s eyes abandonment and terror, and she felt in her own bones how lost he was. He can’t help it, she told herself. His family is broken.

 \*

**Claire appreciated her mother’s exuberance and daring** but knew Madeline was not like other moms. During Claire’s junior year of college, Madeline left Claire’s father to test the waters of independence, flirting with men in high class clubs and hoping to get something going. Claire understood why her mother needed to break free from her loyal yet dull father. She also felt her mother’s self-loathing beneath the cheerful, make-up sweetened face that struggled to attract an exciting lover. Madeline never found the man she was looking for and returned to her demoralized husband who took her back, no questions asked. Empathizing with her mother’s failed quest for the passionate life, Claire also felt the deepening sadness of her well-meaning father who would never elicit passion in anyone.

Her parents’ off-kilter relationship and her own ambivalent response to it drove Claire to become a psychologist.

 \*

**On the fourth day after the murder, Jamie was so weak he stopped crying**. He was still refusing nourishment and had lost two pounds. When the social worker came by and discovered the severity of the infant’s condition, she ordered the grandmother to go to the E.R.

 \*

**Claire decided to focus her psychology practice on survivors of child abuse** after hearing a friend’s story of being sexually abused by an uncle. Adults who struggled with the after-effects of having been sexually, physically, or emotionally abused by a father, stepfather, teacher, or even a mother, recounted the years of being unable to trust or have normal sexual relationships—and worked with Claire to regain those abilities. Then there were the children, many of whom could not use words to describe what had happened to them. So Claire offered crayons and paper, dolls and other toys to allow the younger ones to tell their story.

When friends asked Claire about her practice, she would respond only in generalities. The horror of what her patients had been through was too painful for Claire to describe. She was a powerful advocate for her clients, who experienced her as the strong protector they had lacked during childhood. She was caring yet professional during therapeutic sessions. But outside her office, she was haunted by the cruelty and degradation her clients had suffered. Injuries inflicted by a parent’s beating, vaginal and anal tissue torn by a brutal rape—Claire felt the pain in her own body. Eating dinner alone in her apartment after a long day of treating her patients, she couldn’t think about a particular client’s story without feeling as if it were happening to her. Tears of rage and sorrow would mount and she would switch on a TV program or open a novel to try to escape.

 \*

**The baby improved slightly with intravenous feeding**, but it was a protocol that could not be undertaken indefinitely. The doctors informed Jamie’s grandmother that they knew of no physical reason why the baby couldn’t eat. The grandmother wondered if she would soon be burying another piece of herself.

 \*

**Claire heard stories** of fathers raping daughters as young as six years old and imprisoning them in a web of lies throughout their childhood; of young boys being sodomized by an uncle or family friend and threatened with worse if they told; of women so confused and traumatized by what had happened to them that some had turned to prostitution, others to a cautious, sexless existence. The simple act of listening was balm for the victims’ emotional wounds. As Claire validated their sometimes buried feelings, her clients became open to the possibility of healing the scars of betrayal. But the stories became embedded in Claire’s psyche after she left the office: during workouts at the gym, when she was oblivious to the guys trying to chat her up; at dinner with friends, who noticed she was never fully present.

Since the first day she began her work with abuse victims, Claire was aware of the fact that she could not separate herself from the lives of those she was helping. She could not erect a sturdy boundary between herself and the horrors her clients recounted. Gradually she began to feel the abuse in her own body. The punching and bruising of flesh; the marks left by rough insistent hands pressing over her mouth to suppress a scream; genital tissue violated and scraped raw; and worst of all, the ongoing fear that a trusted human being could turn into a monster in a heartbeat.

Claire’s gift—and curse—was her ability to suffer in her very cells what her clients had suffered, so that they could purge the terror from their minds and bodies, giving it up to their all-caring therapist.

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**More than a week after the shooting, the baby’s father, Alonso, came to see his son** in the hospital. He had attended Yolanda’s memorial service and told Yolie’s mother he would be by to see the baby, but this was the first time he had made it. Jamie was no longer crying but still wasn’t eating and was getting weaker.

*Your boy may not survive*, the grandmother told Alonso. *He’ll make it*, Alonso said, stroking Jamie’s face with the back of his hand. *He’s a fighter like me.*

 \*

***I met someone in the bakery who would be perfect for you,*** Madeline told her daughter. *I just have this feeling…*

 *The bakery?* Claire took deep breaths as she struggled to recover from today’s session: a twelve-year-old client raped by her grandfather as he pressed a huge fat hand over her mouth.

*We started chatting while I waited for my Danish. He does something with computers but seems real sensitive. And he’s gorgeous. Tall, single, thirty-something.*

Claire rarely dated. After too many confusing sexual encounters she was trying to keep her personal life uncomplicated. She had too easily fallen, not in love but under a kind of spell that she found disorienting. If she had been able to engage in casual sex, she could have avoided the sense of losing herself whenever she became involved with a lover. But there was nothing casual about Claire. And after working with her troubled clients, she craved solitude at the end of her long day.

*What makes you think he’s sensitive?*

*He bought me two black-and-white cookies and told me to give one to you.*

*Sweet… And how did he know about me, Mom?*

Claire didn’t have to ask, knowing that her mother loved to brag about her. She had a clear mental image of her mom reaching for the photo in her wallet as she told the stranger about her brilliant psychologist daughter.

*I showed him your picture and gave him your number*.

Claire didn’t have it in her to disappoint her mother. She wanted to quell the fears Madeline had about her not being normal, and she knew her mom would relax a little if a boyfriend were on the horizon.

*Thanks, Mom…I’ll look forward to hearing from your cookie guy.*

 \*

**The doctors could not send the baby home** until he was able to take a bottle, and that was still not happening. Every day the grandmother sat by his hospital crib, expecting the worst but praying for a miracle. She watched as the nurses attempted to feed Jamie, only to see him listlessly turn his tiny head away. Why was this little one so stubborn? Didn’t he want to live? Didn’t God want him to grow up and fill the space in her heart that Yolie had left? The grandmother held the special rosary beads that had belonged to her mother, but for the first time in her life she had little faith in their power.

 \*

**Claire liked the sound of Geoff’s voice** on the phone and agreed to meet him for dinner.

*How’d you like the cookie?*—his first words when they met outside the Indian restaurant. She liked him immediately and could tell that he was attracted to her. Unfortunately, he was too attractive. She would have to hold herself in check. It had been months since she had slept with anyone and she already knew she wanted him. During dinner there had been the obligatory questions about each other’s careers, and he looked at her with concern when she gave him the abbreviated version of her work with survivors of child abuse.

*How do you handle all that pain?*

*Sometimes I can’t.*

 \*

***I know of someone who may be able to help.*** The social worker had visited Jamie’s grandmother several times over the course of the child’s hospital stay, informing her of various resources that would be available to her when she brought the baby home. But until now she had not offered the grandmother any advice on dealing with the crisis of the baby not eating.

*There is a psychologist who comes highly recommended. She would be open to meeting your grandson.*

The grandmother thought the suggestion strange and inappropriate, and she was suspicious of the social worker’s intent.

*I don’t need to talk to anyone. I don’t have a problem. The only problem is my baby won’t eat.*

The grandmother suspected that this woman with the stylish hair and expensive jewelry was trying to get the goods on her, trying to take her grandson away from her. She would not allow it. Yolanda’s baby was hers now. A psychologist would twist the truth, ask questions she wouldn’t be able to answer, and make it seem like she would not be a good guardian for Jamie.

*No, I don’t want to see a psychologist.*

*The baby would be her patient, Mrs. Guerrero, not you*

 \*

**Claire fooled herself. *I can do this***. *I can have a relationship like a normal thirty-four-year-old woman.* Over the years whenever she had tried to have a night out with friends, she couldn’t stop mentally replaying one scene or another from the week’s disturbing case histories. It was as if it was her ongoing duty to never let go of her client-victims, to keep them uppermost in her consciousness regardless of the social gathering she was peripherally engaged in. After all, how important were drinks after work or a colleague’s birthday party compared to the rape of a first grader? If she let the survivor slip her mind, what did that say about her priorities?

 \*

**The grandmother was so focused on Jamie that Yolanda’s absence had not sunk in**. Maybe she couldn’t think about her daughter because the pain was too great. Maybe she had to avoid her grief in order to be strong for the baby. If an image of Yolie broke through while she sat watching over her grandson, she pushed it away. Yolie riding her tricycle in the rain. Yolie spinning her globe, asking, *which country is this one, mommy*? Yolie heading outside on that last Saturday afternoon, her new baby in her arms. Glimpses of her daughter were too sweet and too brief to bear. The infant boy was where her attention must remain. She had finally agreed to the crazy idea of a psychologist after the doctor told her they were running out of options.

*I know it doesn’t make much sense for a psychologist to treat your grandson, Mrs. Guerrero, but Jamie isn’t taking a bottle and he can’t stay on I.V. forever.*

So she gave her okay. But who ever heard of a baby needing a psychologist? Yolanda’s boy was not crazy.

 \*

 **Claire had never treated a baby**. The youngest client she had ever seen was three years old. His mother had beaten him so badly that his eye was swollen shut and two baby teeth were knocked out. It had taken her a number of sessions to gain the boy’s trust and begin the slow process of helping him understand that not every adult was someone to be feared. But a five-week-old infant? How would she approach him, communicate with him?

The baby’s file contained medical reports on his condition since the day of the shooting, as well as the police report, which included photographs of the crime scene. The seventeen-year-old mother had been standing on her front lawn near the sidewalk with the baby in her arms, talking to a male neighbor. A car drove past, slowed down, and a male passenger shot at the neighbor, missing him but hitting the baby’s mother on the left side of the chest. Upon the bullet’s impact, the mother fell to the grass, the baby still in her arms. The child, having been held on the right side of the mother’s chest, was not hit. The neighbor fled and the baby’s grandmother ran outside, grabbed the screaming baby and called 911. The mother was pronounced dead at the scene. The photographs showed her lying on the grass in her jeans and bloody sweatshirt. Her arm was still positioned as if holding the baby. The grandmother stood off to the side, the crying child in her arms.

Claire would meet the baby in the morning.

That evening she mentioned the case to Geoff on the phone after they’d made plans to get together that weekend.

*Poor little guy. He needs someone like you on his side.*

*Can you imagine what it would be like to be in the arms of your mother as she is shot to death?*

*I don’t think an infant is aware of all that. He probably was startled in the moment, but a baby isn’t aware of what a gunshot is.*

*Right. But he’s aware of what his mother is.*

 \*

**Claire stood outside the hospital room trying to compose herself**. Reviewing the report, she heard the gunshot: thundering and abrasive, shattering the baby – the bereft baby in the hospital and herself as a baby – both of them going deaf from the awful blast. She experienced the mother falling, crashing to the ground, the single shot obliterating the baby’s world. Claire felt the bullet entering her own chest, her arms loosening their hold on the phantom infant.

Claire had to hold herself together now. Meeting the grandmother and the infant for the first time, she would be calm. She would learn from the baby what he needed from her.

 \*

**The grandmother was not expecting someone who looked like Claire**. Tall and beautiful, like a strange goddess from another world. Wild blond hair that hung past her shoulders. A cape for a jacket and sandals like in the bible days. But the woman looked her directly in the eye when the social worker introduced them.

*I’m Claire. I’m so sorry about your daughter.*

The grandmother could tell she meant it.

*May I hold Jamie?*

 \*

**Claire took off her cape and lifted the baby out of his hospital crib**. He whimpered softly, lacking the energy to cry. She had not held many babies in her life, but after adjusting her arms to accommodate his tiny body, she felt comfortable. He continued to whine in his weak voice. She looked into his eyes, brown and pale, letting him know she wanted to understand him. Careful not to create a jarring motion, she swayed slowly from side to side and continued looking into his eyes. The boy in her arms weighed so little that the substance of her own body seemed massive. Was it a human that she held or some small, helpless animal? She listened to his half-cries, waiting for the clue to his misery. Blocking out the others in the room, she closed her eyes and tuned in fully to the person in her arms. The sounds he emitted were of a deep distress emanating from a place shared by every human regardless of age. He was trying to communicate in the only way he could his wordless protest: anger… fear…despair…grief.

 \*

**The psychologist visited her grandson three times**. Twice in the hospital, once at home. During the first visit the woman said nothing, just held the baby and swayed from side to side so that her body became a cradle. On the second visit, she did the same thing but talked to the baby as if he could understand her.

*Oh, Jamie. I am so sorry. I’m so sorry, Jamie. So very sorry.*

Over and over she spoke to him in a quiet voice as she walked slowly around the room with him in her arms.

The baby started to take the bottle after the woman’s second visit, and the grandmother wondered if the psychologist was some kind of *curandera.* She had broken the spell. Yolanda’s child was recovering. He would survive.

On the third visit, when the psychologist came to the grandmother’s house, she did not look well. She held the baby and talked sweetly to him, but she seemed frail and tired. Her long bushy blonde hair was losing its color.

 \*

**It was a simple discovery: the baby needed to grieve** and no one had realized that until Claire held him and listened. She knew as soon as she heard his weak, insistent moaning. Everyone who had dealt with him—the police officials, doctors, nurses, child welfare workers, and even his grandmother—had assumed he could be handed over to a loving substitute mother and that would be enough. They had neglected to factor in the child’s irreplaceable loss. He had suffered more than the trauma of a violent incident. He had lost his mother, and as young as he was, the baby needed to mourn that loss.

At first, Claire had just listened to the child, respecting the sounds he made as his only means of communicating. Then, with the tone of her voice and her few words, she let the baby know that she was deeply sorry for his loss, that she understood his intense sorrow and suffering. *I’m so sorry, Jamie. How horrible this loss is for you. Your dear mother taken from you. I’m so sorry, dear boy*.

 Although he didn’t understand the words, he understood the feeling behind them. Offering the same sincere emotion she would give to anyone who had lost a loved one, Claire conveyed her heartfelt condolences, but she also let Jamie know that she acknowledged his unique agony. His mother had been shot and he had witnessed it, but he was unable to speak or to understand his own confusion and terror. He was devastated by the loss of the most important – the only important – person in his life. In an instant his world had been shattered.

 \*

**Claire’s ability to experience what the baby was feeling, and to let him know that**, allowed the child to release some of his pain and begin to heal.

But now, having given Jamie the comfort that would save him, Claire had fully absorbed his grief. This time the transfer of her client’s agony was complete. She could not release the infant’s anguish from her own terrorized body.

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**Geoff hadn’t heard from Claire** since the night before her first hospital visit with the baby. She had called him to cancel their date. A week or so later, on the night of her last visit to the infant boy, Claire knocked on Geoff’s door. *I need you*.

They didn’t talk. He offered her some wine and then they made love. It was frantic, violent. Claire pounded him with her body. Sobbing. Pounding. Beating her fists against his body. Crying out like a wounded animal.

She left in the middle of the night.

 \*

***I never knew the whole story****. I knew my mom died holding me when I was a baby and that she was shot by some gang banger even though the bullet wasn’t meant for her. She was only seventeen. My grandma told me that my mom wanted to travel the world. And she was a good student, liked math like I do. I don’t know if she was into art at all, but if she were alive I could tell her that I’m getting an internship at a graphic design company after I graduate. She’d probably think that was cool.*

*My grandma and I were talking about my mom and how she would be proud of me, and I said wasn’t it kind of a miracle that I wasn’t killed when she was. And she said, yes, it was a miracle but there was another miracle she couldn’t tell me about before. She didn’t want to burden me with another sad story, she said, because my mom dying was enough for any kid to handle. But now that I’m old enough…*

*And then she told me about the lady who came to the hospital when I was a baby and whispered to me when I wouldn’t eat. She walked around with me and whispered to me, and I’m not sure why it saved me, but my grandma says it did. My grandma said the lady died a few days after I got better, and that her death was a big shock. There was nothing physically wrong with her. She just died.*

*It’s too bad my mom isn’t around to go to my graduation, but my grandma says she’ll be there in spirit. It’s also too bad that lady had to die so young because now I’ll never be able to tell her thanks—for everything.*