

on the outside. She must find the key, open the door, and set me free.

Scrolling through the website which is obviously trying to persuade the onlooker to deliver their child directly with money in hand, I read: "And you'll always feel safe. The dorms are locked at night with Safety Officers on duty through the evening and night. If you ever have any problems, the Dorm Faculty, Dorm Head, and Dorm Prefects are always there to help you out... Life at the academy is healthy. We have a drug and alcohol-free campus, so you'll be in a positive environment where you can push yourself academically, explore the world spiritually, and grow personally. You'll be living somewhere you can truly be yourself."

There is a photo taken overhead looking down at the campus. I recognized the path that the boy and I had walked down through the main courtyard that night and to the left I could see the stone platform where I had sat huddled at the entrance of the dorm, where I shivered, with butterflies in my chest, excited that a boy who I liked was giving me attention. My knees were pressed up against my chest, my arms wrapped around my bare ankles, and my curious eyes were looking out at the light snow falling from the dark sky. I zoomed in on the chapel at the center of the encampment. New windows had been installed a few months after I had been released from their custody, donated by a father of one of the boys who had raped me. I pondered the equation. My worth had been boiled down to windows in a church with sinners inside.

Like that grain of sand in the oyster shell, I have spent my life attempting to heal this small thing –not so small– that has caused an unnamable angst throughout my days, with my relationships, and with my perceptions. I have been seeking that which has always been here within me, infinite and invincible.

# FEEDERS AND GROWERS

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Every three hours, Naomi sprayed the pump with disinfectant, wiped it with paper towels, and wheeled it behind the portable privacy screen. She had made exactly one teaspoon of milk in the ten days since Maud's birth, and she no longer bothered holding the plastic flanges to her breasts; instead, behind the privacy of the screen, she ran the pump with the flanges on her knees. During these twenty-minute sessions she ate sour gummy candy, read the news on her phone, and watched her daughter breathe. Until Sasha started bothering her, Naomi had managed to fake-pump without interruption, enjoying the feeling of being alone with Maud.

Maud was jaundiced, and she lay under the bilirubin lights as if she were sunbathing, protective shields like white shells over her eyes. She was five weeks premature, and she took her formula through a thin orange feeding tube taped to her cheek. Sasha's baby also had a tube, but she wasn't a preemie, and Sasha was making plenty of milk. Naomi had overheard bursts of praise from the lactation consultants: *Look at you go! You could feed every baby in town.*

The first time Sasha knocked on the frame of the screen, Naomi pretended not to hear it. She glanced down and saw the girl's swollen feet in jelly shoes. Naomi thought of her as "the teen mom," though in truth she wasn't sure how old Sasha was. She

was young enough to name her baby Aspen and young enough to admire the pink hearts taped to the nursery windows in celebration of Valentine's Day. More often than not, she wore a ribbed, chocolate-colored maternity dress with the words *baby girl* in rhinestones at her navel. Her boyfriend sat with her all day next to Aspen's bassinet, speaking only to ask what she wanted from the cafeteria.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Spencer," Sasha said.

Naomi pressed her nose to the incubator wall.

"Mrs. Spencer, are you almost done with the pump?"

"Almost." Naomi dug a lime candy out of the bag, sugar lodging itself under her nails.

"You've had it for forty minutes."

"You're timing me?"

"I need it, you know? Before I try to get some sleep. It's nine o'clock."

Naomi sighed and stood up, turning the pump off and pushing it in Sasha's direction. She carried her clean flanges to the communal sink, where she washed them with soap and hot water, checking her reflection in the paper towel dispenser: sweaty, graying bangs too far to the left, coffee stain on the Peter Pan collar of her maternity shirt. Behind her, Sasha scrubbed the pump with an insulting amount of vigor. The room smelled of antibacterial wipes and artificial lime.

"We know," Sasha said, without looking up from her hands.

Naomi glanced around, but she and Sasha were the only mothers in the room. One of the night-shift nurses was stocking the blanket warmer.

"We know what you're doing." Sasha balled up a wipe and threw it into a wastebasket underneath a wall-mounted biohazard box.

"Excuse me?"

Sasha made a squeezing motion near her breasts.

"I feel bad for you, but you're making everyone else wait while you do that."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"It's easy to see through the gaps in the screen," Sasha said.

"By the way, your ride is here."

Naomi glanced over her shoulder. Her friend Rachel was in the hallway outside the nursery, her blond topknot hovering over the paper hearts. Everyone with access to the neonatal unit wore a florescent green bracelet from the security desk, and Rachel's flashed up and down her forearm when she waved.

"How do you know that's my ride?" Naomi said. "Are you *watching* me?"

The nurse frowned at her for raising her voice.

Sasha gave an unapologetic shrug before she dragged the pump away by its cord like a dog on a leash.

Rachel waved again, and Naomi brought her face close to the incubator to say goodnight to Maud, who lay asleep, as she had been all day, in a wash of blue light.

Rachel, ever thoughtful, had brought both blankets and towels for the short ride to the hotel: a blanket because Naomi had bouts of shivering, and a towel because she was still bleeding so heavily. The car, a '92 Jaguar, was a tenth anniversary gift from Rachel's husband. The backseats were filmed with hair from their St. Bernard.

"I'm so thirsty," Naomi said. "I wish I had seltzer. God, I'm always so thirsty."

"I bought mineral water, but it's the kind that needs a bottle opener, so you'll have to wait."

"I had a bottle opener on my key chain in law school."

"Did you?"

"Sorry." Naomi was crying, palm against the bridge of her nose. "I hate leaving her there." Her two-bedroom in Menlo Park was only five miles away, but from the hotel's rooftop pool she could see the back of the hospital. It was almost like being in the same house with Maud.

"How much did she weigh today?"

“Six pounds, one ounce. It’s not the weight. The muscles in her cheeks aren’t strong enough yet.” Naomi wiped her face on her sleeve while Rachel made soothing noises as she pulled the car up to the tiered fountain outside of the hotel. The valets waited patiently; Rachel had chastised them earlier in the week for rushing Naomi, whose C-section scar emitted a mostly ignorable throb, except for when she had to get in or out of a chair.

In the room, Naomi went straight to the bed and lay on it, shoes and all, under a headboard-length photo of Glass Beach. “I’m terrible company.” She pressed a forearm over her eyes.

“Oh, stop.” Rachel reached into her tote bag and pulled out a quinoa salad, mineral water, two caramels in waxed paper. “Looks like they cleaned in here today.”

“I know. I can smell the bleach.”

“Hydration time.” She sat on the edge of the wheeled swivel chair and watched Naomi drink. The shapes of her knees were visible through her diamond-patterned yoga pants. “Have you heard from Love To?”

They called Simon “Love To” because when Naomi called to tell him she was pregnant, he’d said he would love to see pictures of the baby once she arrived.

“He texted to ask if Maud was home from the hospital yet.” Naomi set the bottle of water next to the bed. Some of it sloshed onto the carpet. “I wrote back no. Just n-o, period. It’s an insensitive question.”

Rachel spun a slow circle in the swivel chair. She was silent, which Naomi had come to recognize as her version of disagreement. They’d met in a yoga class two years earlier, and until they’d started going out for smoothies after vinyasa flow, Naomi had privately thought of her as the Trophy Wife.

Rachel’s breasts had been absurdly large for her frame, and she’d had a reduction shortly after she and Naomi met in class. Her husband, John, grew faint at the sight of the bloody bandages, and her sisters couldn’t fly out to Palo Alto to help, so it had fallen on Naomi to monitor the recovery. Naomi’s duties mostly involved

holding a straw to Rachel's lips so she could take sips of ginger ale. Rachel's pajama set was the faint pink of Himalayan salt. She'd gagged on her pills. She'd cried when they watched *Mr. Holland's Opus*. She had thanked Naomi by sending her a bouquet of ranunculus the size of a roasted turkey.

"You should eat something," Rachel said. Naomi watched her rip the plastic off the quinoa salad and scrape the ginger dressing out of its tiny container.

"Have I mentioned this stupid girl in the nursery who calls me *Mrs. Spencer*? I understand she got the last name from looking at Maud's bassinet, but why assume I'm married? She's not married, either, so I don't know why..."

"Here." Rachel held up a forkful of quinoa, bright with scallions and red peppers.

"Mrs. Spencer, what are you doing? Mrs. Spencer, you're taking too long with the pump."

"Okay." Rachel set the fork on a napkin and snapped the lid back onto the salad. "You're exhausted. It's right here on the nightstand when you're ready."

"You're too nice to me," Naomi said, yawning.

"I have to get going, but promise me you'll eat at some point tonight."

"I'll eat."

"You're sure you're okay taking an Uber to the hospital tomorrow?"

Naomi nodded.

"Fingers crossed that when we get back on Monday, Maud will be home."

"Are you and John really going to Tahoe?"

"What?"

"Are you just saying you'll be in Tahoe because you need a break from me?"

"Oh, stop. You're exhausted." Rachel kissed her cheek, leaving a smudge of peppermint lip balm.

As soon as the door closed, Naomi ate the two caramels and

put the salad in the mini fridge. She changed the enormous, weepy scab of her pad and fell asleep with the TV remote in her hand. She woke intermittently for water, and each time it took her a while to get back to sleep. Sometimes she thought of the milk she couldn't make; sometimes she thought of Love To.

She and Love To had been together for fewer than forty-eight hours, attending different conferences at the same Chicago hotel. He wore a bespoke suit and polished shoes. "Naomi *Spencer*," he said in the lobby, with joy, as if he knew her; he was reading her name tag. He had a loud, insecure laugh and immaculate teeth, and he held her arm on their icy walk to Cloud Gate in Millennium Park. It snowed while they stood there, admiring the brilliant bean, which Naomi drunkenly referred to as "the egg."

After Cloud Gate, they ordered tequila shots in a sticky dive bar. She allowed this not because she wanted his tongue taking up the salt from her skin, but because she knew he would marvel over how good she smelled. Every man did. Her ex used to joke that she didn't have sweat glands; even her twice-used towels were faintly sweet. It was an odd little blessing, like her cheekbones, that occasioned a few rewards.

When he asked her where she was from, she gave her wary, standard answer: "My mother is black, my father is white."

"But where are you *from*?" he said. "Where'd you grow up?"  
"New Hampshire."

"New Hampshire? *I love* New Hampshire!"

He loved skiing, he loved the White Mountains, he loved Portsmouth, where his friends ran an inn. He told her this while he played with her hair. But where are you *from*? He was not as stupid as she'd thought.

In the morning he brought her hot coffee. He'd forgotten the cardboard sleeve, so he opened the window and held the cup outside until it cooled down.

"I took one of your business cards," he said, "and I put three of mine in your coat."

"Three?"

"In case you really, really, really need to reach me." He laughed.

By the time she needed to reach him, she had to exhume the coat from winter storage. When she called, holding the phone to her ear with a shaky hand, her skin smelled of cedar chips.

Thirst woke Naomi at three a.m. She tried handfuls of tap water in the bathroom, but she craved seltzer badly enough to make her way down the hall towards the vending machines. She passed a couple struggling to unlock their door, then recognized their fluorescent green bracelets: Sasha's quiet boyfriend, holding a duffel bag, and Sasha herself, in a purple hooded sweatshirt. At their feet, a soft cooler, zipped only halfway, filled with storage bags of breastmilk.

They neither heard nor saw Naomi, who went straight to the vending machines and bought a can of lemon seltzer and a bag of expired cashews. When she risked a second look at them, they were arguing quietly inside the room, door ajar, belongings unattended. She took only one bag of milk, certain they didn't know how much they had. There was too much to count.

In her room, she turned the deadbolt and spent a minute or so with her eye to the peephole, but no one walked by. She set the milk, seltzer, and cashews on the desk and took the salad out of the fridge. It had a small coat of frost on the surface, but she started eating it anyway. She felt giddy. Mrs. Spencer stole some milk! Who could she tell? She imagined poor Rachel's horrified face. She imagined Love To's confused silence over the phone. There could be no gloating; this was clearly reprehensible. Still, Naomi was hungry for the second time since giving birth. The first time was during the dazed, shaky hours that followed her C-section. Placed on a clear diet, she dined on chicken broth and cherry Italian ice, both so delicious she vowed to serve them every year on Maud's birthday.

By the time she was four, Maud declined the broth and the cherry ice. By the time she was four, her favorite snack was a



mash-up of chocolate chips, bananas, and saltines. She slept with a “magic” rubber band on each of her bed posts. She loved Tina Turner, and frequently hummed “Proud Mary” from her car seat. When asked where she wanted to go, her answer was always, “the beach.”

Knowing none of this – knowing only that her daughter was ten days old and had yet to leave the hospital nursery – Naomi found herself with the four-ounce bag of milk in her left hand, then her right hand, then next to the sink. She’d heard that some mothers sought donor milk when they couldn’t produce themselves. Some met in shopping mall parking lots for quick, furtive sales. Naomi herself had ordered ten cases of organic formula, scheduled for delivery on Monday, though she had no idea if she and Maud would be home to receive it.

She opened the bag, sniffed it – odorless – and let half an ounce fall. The silver drain turned opaque, reminding her of the tufted ivory pillows on the chaise lounge in Rachel’s bedroom. Another half-ounce splashed down: another sip of relief. Splash. Splash. She rinsed the bag tenderly, like a wound, waiting until the water ran clear.