

Echoes

"We two form a multitude." — Ovid

"You look like a whale," John said to the woman lying next to him. "How'd you get so big?"

Shelly smiled and called the man a jerk. Her eyes narrowed in mock hostility.

"It'll get worse," she said. "There's plenty of time."

A brisk wind buffeted the house. Surrounded by cold, the bricks of the structure sheltered the couple from an angry winter. Covered by a blanket, the man and woman languished side by side in the warmth of the bedroom. In their early thirties, they struggled to become a family.

"You know I'm jealous of you," said the man.

Shelly folded a book across her lap and looked over the top of her glasses. In a practiced manner she rubbed her hands across her bulging midriff. Her face glowed with expectation and was calm and patient, a schoolteacher's face accustomed to dealing with petulant children.

"Since you seem determined to annoy," she said in an academic tone, "I will dispose of any pretense of reading and listen. Hmmm?"

The man leaned closer to the woman and stared at her playfully. The woman opened and closed her eyes in a deliberate blink and stared back with a wide-eyed expression.

"Cut it out," he said and pulled his face away. "Anyway, I am jealous, you know."

"As well you should be," she said and placed her hand on his side of the bed.

"Would you like to hear why?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders to disguise her fatigue. It was past her bedtime. She had to work in the morning.

"All right," said John, "because. . ." He scrunched his face in mock agony.

"Well—?" she asked.

A memory nipped at his thoughts and caused him to hesitate. Though the woman beside him was radiant in her splendor, he felt paralyzed by what might lie ahead.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm just kidding."

The woman sighed and prepared for a difficult time.

"Come—" she said, "out with it. What's bothering you?"

"Nothing," he said. "It's just. . . you're so beautiful tonight."

Shelly shook her head. Strands of hair fell across her eyes. "Is this about sex?" she asked in a tired voice.

"Will you listen to me for just one moment?"

A cat slipped into the room and paused at the foot of the bed. Guardian of the house, the animal purred before springing onto the mattress. The creature blinked and followed its routine to the bowl of biscuits resting on the table next to the woman. The couple continued their conversation unaware of the animal's activities.

"I feel left behind," said the man. "It doesn't seem fair. In one brief moment you're transformed into a fertility goddess while the best I can do is lay masonry from nine to five."

He strained his face into a scowl and gritted his teeth. The storm gathered outdoors and increased its pressure against the bricks of the house.

"You're acting silly," she said. "You can do whatever you want."

"Fine, I'm silly."

The man leaned forward and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. A T-shirt clung tightly to his chest. He sat with his back toward the woman and watched a few drops of sleet splatter against the window. His body was strong and healthy with broad shoulders and tawny arms.

"What's wrong, John?"

"I don't know," he said. "It's my—"

He let out a sigh and bobbed his head as if listening to an echo from the past, a refrain from an earlier life.

"I'm worried," he said and turned his head toward her.

"Something could go wrong, you know, and even if it doesn't we'll still have a baby to deal with and —Christ Almighty— there's money to worry about and what kind of parent will I be and if it's a boy will it grow up hating me the way sons always hate their fathers and if it's a girl how will I know how to treat it and on and on."

The cat looked up from the biscuits and stared toward the center of the room. The outburst disrupted the rhythm of its routine.

"We'll make do," said the woman calmly, "and you'll be a fine father. I'll see to it myself."

"I know," he said and leaned against her shoulder.

The cat blinked and yawned. The light would soon go off; the night enfold itself around the animal's perfection.

"Don't you see?" he continued. "That's it. You don't need me. You're as self-sufficient as Bruce."

Upon hearing his name the cat sidled instinctively toward its

mistress.

"I thought I was the one who was supposed to be hormonal," she replied.

"Ignore my feelings."

The man rolled onto his back and lay on top of the covers. He stared at the cracks that spread across the ceiling like a river of veins.

"See if I care," he continued. "But remember—I know more about this than you think. I've been through it. I know what a shit thing it is for me to be helpless while you bitch and moan and play god every day. And then when the big moment arrives I'm the messenger between you and the rest of the world. The whole thing sucks; but never mind any of that, we'd better turn out the lights so you can sleep."

In the silence of the room, the man and the woman, sheltered by a layer of Puritan brick, lay next to one another and were still. Resting comfortably in a groove of alienation, they wondered to themselves about the ordeal awaiting them: the expulsion of life, the sleepless nights, the obliteration of routine. They feared what they could not understand. And they waited for the days and weeks and months to slip away and relieve them of the burden of the unknown and unexpected.

"There it goes," she said. "See if you can feel it."

The woman took the man's hand. In a gesture as old as humanity, she placed it upon her protruding stomach.

The man waited a few seconds and felt a pressure.

"Did you feel it?" she asked.

He nodded and smiled. "I did," he said. "I felt the baby." Tears beaded in his eyes and a sense of melancholy—deep and old—took hold of his senses.

"That's right, honey," she said. "Your baby and mine."

"I know," he said as if in a daze. "Your baby, my baby and God's baby; isn't that the way it is?"

"Yes," she answered, surprised by the reverie in his eyes. "You, me and the Lord creating something from nothing."

An echo nudged at the man's memory. Words forced their way to the surface.

"Someone once told me a baby represents the union of God and man," he said, "a joining of the sacred and the profane. They referred to the Bible where Jesus says let the children come for the Kingdom belongs to them."

In the sanctity of the bedroom where life begins, a shadow, cast from the glow of the lamp, moved like a cloud across the wall.



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The animal walked to the foot of the bed and looked for the perfect spot to rest for the night.

"You loved her, didn't you, John? You did love her."

"I guess so," he said and squirmed beneath the covers. "I don't think about it anymore."

"Do you ever wonder where she is?"

He closed his eyes and tried to picture what she looked like.

The image was old and out of focus. He could detect a youthful smile and cheerful eyes, but the vision faded. In the wake of the pain that had split them apart like fragments of bone he saw a face that was worn from effort.

"Yes," he finally said.

The storm moved overhead and unleashed its wrath upon the house. The bricks repelled the pounding of the cold like fists against a husband's chest.

"Sometimes I think about what would've happened if the pregnancy had been different," he said and stared at the ceiling.

Pure white with hollow eyes, the animal bumped against his owner's arm. The woman picked up the creature and dangled him in front of her before setting him down in the hollow of her lap.

"Was it a boy or a girl?" she asked.

"I never knew," he said. "Afterwards, we just wanted to get away and start over. We ran from one another like frightened animals."

"So you divorced?"

"It's why we married in the first place."

She rubbed her hand over the warm fur and felt a nudge from within.

"Maybe we should get married," she said.

A purring noise sounded in the air, surrounding the couple.

"Maybe," he said and switched off the light. "I think we should wait."

The woman reached for the man in the darkness. The cat returned to the foot of the bed. Snow pelted the windows of the bedroom.

"Not much longer," she said, and squeezed his hand beneath the covers. "I don't want that."

The cat raised his leg and began to groom himself. With eyes shut he licked at the silky fur over and over again like a bloody wound. In the growing darkness, two hands relaxed and separated. Silence settled over the room.