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What Are You Looking At?

The babies are inside devices like little coffins, the ward stacked with humming graves. They have tiny wrinkled bodies that rest like broken old men, pain cracked into every stringy bone.

“Which one is it?” Paul’s breath is hot on Hana’s exposed neck.

“Second row. With the green blanket.”

“Is it supposed to look like that, Hana?”

“It’s. He’s -- maybe.”

Their baby’s attached to instruments that purr like metal monsters, so many that it’s impossible to tell where plastic ends and skin begins. He’s silent, machines forcing his tissue-thin lungs to flutter. He’s soggy and heavy, thin and crumbled, like a bag full of water and blood.

“It just looks dead. Is it dead?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s dead. I think.”

“I said. I don’t *know*, Paul.”

“God, it looks dead. He’s dead. Dead. *Dead*.”

Hana squeezes Paul’s arm and the muscle gives like fatty meat, red blooming once she’s released. She presses a hand to his wrist, and his pulse is sporadic with fear, jumping into a pounding crescendo and then fading away into a whispered lull. She holds onto it, each shu-shump a shiver of hope, her own red-hot heartbeat a stubborn staccato, thick in her throat and sticky. *Alive*.

“Not dead yet,” Hana whispers.

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When their child learns to inhale, his breath creaks like a busted old heater, cracking and shaking with each gasp. Paul names him James after a forgotten grandfather. A nurse calls him James Bond, pretending that he’s just going undercover as sick.

They can finally bring him home. James is tiny, delicate and broken, like a bruised, shriveled peach.

Hana hovers her hand over his slimy skin, where indigo and red have watercolored into a sickly, bloody sunset. She traces James’s face, stopping at his veiny eyelids. His body vibrates like a refrigerator.

“He’s almost like the others,” she whispers. “Small.” Hana’s children are always too greedy for life, too young. She remembers before James, when they slipped out of her in pasty gooey plasma, thick as raw egg, splattering across the bathroom tile in clumps of inky, black blood. “I just don’t know.”

“By God.” Paul’s pupils are slightly unfocused. He’s got tiny wrinkles, she notices, his skin loose against his skull, folding over itself at the corners of his eyes. He looks old. “Why don’t you ever just *stop*?”

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“I’m worried,” Hana whispers. Outside, the city goes dark and then flickers to life, skyscrapers wrapped in coiling yellow light.

“Don’t be.” Paul curls his fingers around the shoulder of her cotton shirt. Hana scratches under her eyes and concealer flakes off, matte smoothness crumbling to reveal where the skin’s gone puffy and blue.

“I’m serious,” she says.

“*Don’t be.*”

They lean on the doorframe as James sleeps, his exhales snuffled. He’s five months now, with a crown of fluffy curls, but he has the emptiness of an infant, personality soft and crumbly as white bread. A scarecrow of a boy, hollow like his insides are made of straw.

“He failed the test. The... what’s the damn thing. Movement test -- assessment. I mean -- He’s *at-risk*. For all *sorts* of.” Hana licks her lips, the flesh already peeling and soggy from abuse. A horrible something curls in her fingers, sticks in her throat like a fat chunk of bread. “Intervention’s time sensitive.”

Hana watches James and remembers all the times she’s lifted him up and his head has lagged, neck loose as overcooked pasta. All the times he’s fallen away from her, lying on the carpet unmoving for hours, mumbling lips chewing on soft sounds that never quite become words. She knows that under his firetruck duvet, his body is floppy and stiff, muscles so tense that they’ve gone useless.

“But look,” Paul mumbles, his smile cracked like broken glass, “he does that thing you do, with his thumbs. Look at him, with his little feet, h-his, his little tiny nose. One day, he’s gonna be a lawyer, or a teacher, or, I dunno, businessman. He’s the one, I’m sure of it. God, Hana, he’s amazing, he’s so *perfect*. He’s just taking his good sweet time. Stubborn.”

Hana watches Paul’s hands as they stutter by his sides. They’re large and sturdy, and sometimes unexpectedly clumsy in times like this, stumbling as they trace the hem of Hana’s shirtsleeve. Her stomach floods with a sort of burning affection, a chunky warm feeling like hot thick stew settling low in her belly.

“Okay,” she whispers, leaning into Paul’s arm. “Okay.”

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“He failed the test, Paul, at five months. If I’d caught it then. I *should’ve* caught it then.”

“Hana, James isn’t gonna. I mean, he’ll be fine.”

“God, I’m so stupid. Three years at law school and I’m still.” She laughs, breath catching. “*God.*”

“It’s not like it’s cancer. We’ll just use a...*stroller*, or whatever. Like other kids.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s not going to die, fine. But one day he’s *not*. Not going to be able to use a stroller. What happens when he’s an adult rolling around and drooling? He won’t be able to eat. He won’t be able to urinate without an, an *aid* or something.”

“There was nothing.” Paul swallows, dry. “Nothing you could’ve done.”

“He failed the *damn* test!” Hana gasps. “It’s too late now, for intervention. He’s almost *three*, it needed to start — *earlier*. I don’t know. I *don’t* know!”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not. It’s *not*! When he’s old and wheeling around like a goddamn *idiot*, everybody’s gonna stare at him when he’s on the street, and he’s never gonna. Gonna be able to walk — *talk*. God, his high school education will be learning and *relearning* the *alphabet* in a classroom with, with those *stupid* posters --

the kind with cats hanging off branches and captions like *'hang in there.'* Like, thanks a lot, cat, but *this* is his *life!*" Hana gags for air. "Cerebral palsy. That's gonna be his *goddamn* life."

"What do you *want* from me?" Paul whispers, shattered. "I can't *do this* anymore."

"Stop. I want you to stop -- Just *stop*, Paul." Hana pulls at her fingers, feels her joints pop in and out of alignment.

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When Paul loses his job, he pulls out the drugstore wine, stuff the color of Children's Tylenol. Paul turns into a firecracker when he drinks, silent until he's flared into explosion, a single spark causing him to unravel into thousands of flaming ribbons. Lately, he's been a seesaw, swooping high to low, teetering on the edge.

Hana drifts away from Paul, slowly, painlessly, and suddenly it's normal that they're sleeping at the ends of their shared bed, that they're not eating together, that they're signing divorce papers. And then Paul's skidding down the driveway in his dull blue Honda -- she keeps the kid, he gets the car -- and attempting a twisted half-wave. He knocks over the recycling bin, milk bottles and newspapers tumbling onto the sidewalk.

He doesn't stop to pick them up.

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When Hana sees him at the Safeway, the first thing she realizes is that he has a little girl.

She's a pretty toddler, the kind that can walk, little feet stumbling in red mary janes, leather scuffed, lacy socks dirty with playground sand. She's loud, whining for candy, one hand tugging unabashedly at the edge of her pink cotton panties and the other clumsily swiping at the corkscrew curls escaping her fat poufy bun.

Paul picks her up then, swooping her onto his shoulders, like he used to do to James but different. She grabs at his hair and he smiles, picking up a tomato. And Hana knows that he sees her. It's nearly impossible not to, with James strapped into his wheelchair, which is almost too wide to fit down the produce aisle.

The lady next to Paul touches his arm, whispering something, her nails manicured a shiny pale pink. He laughs, and Hana is reminded of two things:

First, when she's stuck sitting in freeway traffic, watching the city-bound cars blur past her in the opposite direction, cursing her decision to move to the suburbs, wondering if she can change lanes and knowing that she can't.

Second, the Barbie her sister banished to the basement, the one with sticky hair.

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James sits in his wheelchair, legs dangling and helpless as bones, smelling like sweet sticky urine. She's forgotten the diaper.

“God, I’m sorry. I’m sorry, James, sweetie,” Hana mutters, pressing her hand to the wetness spreading down his pants, pooling in his wheelchair. James gasps, voice rusty and creaking with disuse. “It’s all my fault. I’m *sorry*, honey.”

She peels the soggy pants off James’s skeleton legs. They plop to the floor, squelching. His skin is red and rashy, urine still tacky against his starved thighs. She loops her arms around James and lifts him up, sloshing over to the shower. He’s still so terrifyingly fragile, his brittle bones made of milky porcelain. She steps into the bathroom, cradling James in her arms like a kid, his elbows stabbing into her stomach, and she realizes that she has *no idea what she’s doing*.

Bathroom was Paul’s job.

Pain blooms in her chest, stinging and hot. She pounds everywhere, burning inside. It’s like all the times she’s had to crush James’s wheelchair into the car trunk one-handed while her groceries spill out onto the concrete. Like all the times she’s fed James instant mac ‘n cheese powder raw, because it takes him two minutes per swallow of food and she just doesn’t have the time. Hana glances up to the ceiling, attempting a laugh that sounds more like a sob. She blinks and her eyelashes are wet.

She misses Paul, whole and complete, with all the stupid little things that made him real. She misses the Paul who had the nervous habit of chewing on ballpoint pens until blue ink spilled all over his lips, who couldn’t stutter out a speech. The Paul who smiled with his lips pressed together because his teeth were yellow-brown from too much coffee, who was going prematurely bald from stress and pretended that chocolate was healthy if it had nuts. Paul who crushed their teeth together when they kissed, who tasted like sour dimes and mint toothpaste, who’d looked at James with the beautiful blind eyes of a hopeless optimist.

And she shouldn’t miss him, because he’s gone off with that chick and has a stupid blonde toddler, but she does and she *aches*.

“It’s alright,” she whispers to James, “I’ll clean this all up.”

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They’ve gone to the zoo for the day. It’s hot: James’s cheeks are splashed with sunburn, and tears of sweat slide down the gap between Hana’s breasts.

Hana hates the way that they gawk at James. They walk by, pause, take in James’s shiny blue wheelchair, his broken chicken legs. Look at James, his puffy slumping muscles contorted into a sitting position, his arms shoved into a wrinkled pine-colored vest dusted with orange powder. Stare at his face. Wonder how it’s so loose and fat, drooping like a melting candle. Whisper about how he’s so tiny, a preteen like a toddler, his neck supported by a plastic brace. Then they see Hana, see her ruffled clothes and greasy hair. Smile indulgently.

James is humiliated, burning with embarrassment. By the time they get to the parking lot, he’s crumpled with frustration, quietly watching his body betray him with empty eyes.

Hana’s done with it all -- done feeling like another exhibit. James isn’t an ape. She’s not a damn flamingo.

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Hana looks to where James is slumping, watching some daytime television program on mute, his eyes half-closed.

He's almost thirteen now, with a crooked set of adult teeth and tiny blackheads scattered across his oily nose. The problem isn't that he's empty but that he's too *full*, his brain a brilliant prisoner trapped in a doughy, clumsy body. He's like an astronaut lost in space, thrashing and flailing in an endless, unresponsive sea of blank blackness, struggles only bringing him further away from home.

Sometimes, he'll scream for hours. His screams are raw, sticky and stinging as lemon flesh. He won't even stop when his throat gives out, continuing to force out gasps of broken air. Her heart creaks a little with every tiny shriek.

It's just that he deserves so much *more*.

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"It's so not fair, you know. Paul. James. It's just not right." Hana's sister sighs over the phone, exhale cracking and snapping over the line. "You were so smart, too. What a darn waste."

"I'm still smart," Hana mutters.

"It's a pity. It's a real shame. I'm sorry for you, you know. For James."

Hana looks at James. He's a scarecrow. He's James Bond. He's a set of shaky skeleton legs, a bruised peach, an astronaut. An exhibit, a wheelchair, a floppy face, a dumped doll. But he's *more*. He's a hurricane, he's a strong softness, made of a burning intelligence and cracked, bitter stubbornness and too much powder cheese. A dynamic, winding whirlwind: part Hana, too much Paul, mostly just himself.

"No," Hana whispers, sliding her fingers over his wrist. She feels his pulse heavy against hers, the beats colliding and intertwining, weaving into and around each other. She can taste the red-hot persistence: thick, screaming, greedy. *Alive*. "We don't need your pity."