

## Birthday

Colt Foutz

The first time I saw Jonah, his tiny head appeared, crowning. The O.B.'s gloved fingers ran around the opening of Katie's vagina, relieving the pressure on his eggshell bones.

It wasn't nearly the gross-out I'd anticipated.

I mean, here was Katie, my love, her hair down there in its familiar dark pineapple pattern. There were bubbles, the pink of her vagina puckering outward like an inverted sponge, and bright, Technicolor blood, but I couldn't look away. Because a tangle of dark hair appeared in the opening, covered by a layer of purplish-grayish slime, thin and slick as the latex gloves worn by the doctor and nurse.

I held my breath.

Minutes before, I'd been pressed into service. "You're going to hold her leg," the nurse, Angie, said.

"I'm what?"

"Don't worry," she said. "I've got the other."

But I *was* worried. Because she knew what she was doing—and I didn't.

I had awoken that day to Katie's 6 a.m. call from the bedroom doorway. "We've gotta go," she said, voice shaky, but she was smiling.

Each subsequent moment melted into the next. We threw clothes in duffel bags, juggled a boombox and yoga CDs, darted through traffic. We spun through hospital halls, Katie clutching bath towels around her. I hovered beyond the rails of her bed, performing on cue for contractions, blunting her pain with images of the beach and tide and, someday, a boy with floppy hat and sand shovel. I held her hand, and stroked the hair back from her reddening, clenching brow—counting, coaching, giggling at the good fortune of her epidural.

She sank into sleep. The hours fell away.

At four that afternoon, I stepped forward, pulling Katie's right leg "up and back," following Angie's lead in coaxing this labor to climax. My lines: "Bring him home, honey," and "You were made to do this," and

“Almost there,” and a litany of good-jobs and come-ons and *push-push-push-push*.

Until suddenly, a head. His.

The next I knew, the doctor and nurse were yelling for Katie to “Stop! Stop pushing!” And the doctor’s hands were like frantic birds at the end of the bed.

It’s a funny feeling, knowing your heart has just split in two, and there is no pain. Your world is fuller than it has ever been, all that weight behind the one word, *family*.

I looked at my wife: panting, exhausted, all her being focused on just one thing—to bear down, to bring life into the world.

And there, my son, my blood and legacy, a little half-moon of promise straining into existence.

Would he cry? Would he squeeze out in a rush? Could the doctor catch him?

*And please, God, let him—them both—be OK.*

In that instant, he emerged—all of him.

He came out point first, forehead swept back like an alien in a sci-fi movie. His eyes were open, taking in this world for the first time. E.T., I thought. Those dark orbs, so glitteringly innocent.

“So pink and healthy,” the O.B., or Angie, said.

“He’s *purple*,” I corrected.

“That’s normal,” they assured.

They bundled him in a heap on Katie’s stomach, rubbing his skin dry, warming him. Then whisked him to the little table with the heat lamp and red digital readouts. I realized of all the places we’d been preparing for him in this life, here would be the first reckoning, the first pronouncements of his health and viability.

I didn’t know where to focus: on my wife in bed, shivering in recovery, or my boy, wriggling on the table under the hands of the baby nurse.

“He’s not crying,” she remarked. “I’m gonna try to make him mad at me.”

“Is he OK?” I shifted from foot to foot, paced the lacquered, imitation-wood flooring between wife and son. I held up my hands—they were shaking. Never had I felt so central to a situation, and so useless.

“Not everyone cries,” the nurse said. “It’s the extremes we worry about: crying nonstop, making no sound at all.”

And then I heard him. Jonah’s first chatters—little grunting, monkey noises—curious, confiding. The nurse bundled him in a double layer of blankets—our baby burrito—placed him in a plastic bassinet, and wheeled him to the bed. His eyes blinked up at us, the pointed end of his swaddled feet jumped and kicked. Katie laughed. I breathed out, placed one steady hand in hers and rested the other atop Jonah’s swaddled chest.

“Hey, family,” I said.