

Robert Pepper-Smith

Amber

"Give your mama a good night kiss," said Paul. "And then you can play over there." He pointed to the crayons and paper spread out on the living room floor.

Instead the boy lifted a pasta necklace from under his nightshirt and showed it to his mother Anna.

"Look. I made it at school. It's just like yours, isn't it?" He'd stained macaroni and rigatoni noodles with food dye and strung them together. He shook the necklace to make it rattle.

"It's exactly like mine, pet," Anna smiled. She was in her maroon dressing gown at the kitchen table. Anna opened her gown to show him the amber necklace, which reminded the child of spoonfuls of cold honey.

"It makes the same noise as yours," she said, tapping the beads together.

"That's what I was talking about." Daniel kissed her knee. Then he drew the pasta necklace under his nightshirt and went into the living room to color.

"What should we talk about while we're doing this," Anna said.

"Let's talk about the holiday last summer," said the boy's father. "Since we're not going this year." He'd lifted clay out of a plastic bag and was kneading water into it on the table. Soon the clay filled the cracks and lines in his big hands and covered the nails. "Please talk to me," Paul said. "Don't pose."

"I'll tell you what I remember first of all," she said. She yawned and stretched, then adjusted the robe. "Hundreds of dragonflies on the road

to the beach. You stopped the car, rolled down the window and said, listen. We could hear the edges of their wings touching, making a rustling noise."

"How long is this going to take?" she added.

Anna saw her forehead take shape in the clay under his hands. Rather than watch the hands Paul would look at her and at the world map on the wall. Like the doctor, she recalled, who had wanted to find the baby's position.

"This might be the bum," the doctor had said.

The doctor was pressing the heel of her hand on Anna's belly, not looking at her but gazing at the chart on the wall, then out the window. "It doesn't feel like the head but more like the bum. Yes, yes it feels like a breech. I wouldn't worry," she'd said, returning to the desk and scribbling on the chart. "I'd say 50% of my patients have breeched babies at this point. So this is not really something to worry about. But if it's still breeched a week from now, let's talk."

Now Paul was shaping her hair in the clay. "This won't take much longer," he said. "Actually I can work from memory if you're too uncomfortable."

"What are you going to do about this," Anna said, touching her swollen wrists. "Are you going to leave that out about me?"

"You and the baby are going to get better, that's what the doctor says and that's what I believe." He'd closed his eyes for a moment while his hands kept working the bust.

Anna led the boy down the corridor to the bathroom. He'd eaten some of the pasta on the necklace, so his lips were stained yellow.

"You're going to get a stomachache," she said, "And be up all night. You should only eat pasta cooked."

Water had spilled out of the cat's dish under the sink. She handed Daniel a wadded towel.

"I can't bend over," she said. "It makes me dizzy."

She watched him sop up the water. All of a sudden she ruffled his hair. The child looked up from under the sink. He climbed onto the toilet lid, opened his mouth and she brushed his colored teeth.

At the clinic, Daniel had announced: "Mama has a bleached baby." They were leaving the clinic. The receptionist looked up and smiled at the boy as the mother opened the door.

"A *breeched* baby," said the mother. "Breeched means lying across the tummy, like this." She drew a finger across her womb then buttoned her loose sweater. She knelt beside her son, hiked his pants and tightened the adult-size belt, the tongue of which circled his waist and hung down to the knee at the side.

"Mind you don't get this caught in the elevator door." She waved the loose end in his face.

"Beached baby," said Daniel at the elevator. "That almost rhymes. Beached and baby. Baby went to the beach. Ba-bay is a beached *ball*."

Now they were in the elevator among others; Anna tapped him on the shoulder.

"We have a beached baby," he announced, but Anna pressed his shoulder.

Outside, she said: "You're thinking of whales that get confused and swim onto a beach. That's the difference."

She added: "And don't call me a whale, it's bad enough as things are."

Anna studied the traffic. Reaching a hand down into the void, she wiggled her fingers till Daniel grasped them. They crossed the boulevard and turned up the sidewalk toward the new housing development. All of a sudden the child yanked at her fingers. He was pointing to the juniper berries in the bushes fronting the hospital.

"Make a necklace out of them," he said. "Like at school."

She went ahead while he picked a few. Then she'd stopped and looked back. He was quickly filling his pockets with chestnuts that had fallen from one of the boulevard trees. It was a late fall afternoon, cloudy. A few snowflakes were drifting around her and into the traffic. There was a peculiar shaft of light under the tree not far from her son, which turned out to be strewn popcorn when she went up to him.

Now he asked, "What's dad doing in the kitchen?"

"You'll see, it's a surprise. You'll see in the morning if you sleep well and don't fuss."

On the bed, he asked for her necklace.

"Oh now," Anna said. "I know I'm being a little silly, but your Gramma thinks it might help with the swelling. So I have to wear it all the time. When the baby's born safe you can wear it first thing, I promise you," and kissed him on the lips. Then she hesitated.

On the bed she stretched out beside him.

"Look into this bead. Inside you can see an insect."

While Daniel held it up to the light, she explained how the insect had become trapped in tree sap thousands of years ago, how the tree had fallen into the Baltic, and how the lump of sap, rolling around on the bottom of the sea, had turned to amber.

The insect in the bead looked like a tiny dragonfly; that was why she'd mentioned the dragonflies earlier at the table. It had reminded her of the dragonflies on the road, of their rustling wings.

"It's not moving," he said. "It's dead."

Anna nodded. "Feel how the bead grows warm in your hand."

The boy drew a finger across the amber. "The bug is beached," he said. "It's a beached bug."

She took it away.

"Can I keep mine on?" he wanted to know and she said yes. He did a somersault on the bed and lay with his face to the wall.

Paul had washed the clay off his hands when she returned.

"It's good," she said. "That's me all right." She draped the necklace around the bust drying on the table. Amber will help you get better, her mother had written from Spain. But what did it amount to? The swelling had not gone down. You'll be *okay*, the doctor had said. Don't worry. Maybe she would give the amber to her son in the morning, or slip it under his pillow before she went to bed.

"Dadda," cried the voice from the bedroom. "The cat's in here."

He dried his hands and rushed down the hall. The cat was on the dresser, batting at the chestnuts Daniel had left there. He put it into the hallway, then closed the door.

"I'm afraid," said the boy. He gazed up at his father with wide-open eyes.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, the cat's out now." He stroked Daniel's hair but only for a moment.

"What if I had a nightmare?"

He looked around, taking a chestnut from the boy's collection on the dresser. He bent over the boy and stuck it under his pillow.

"Nightmares can't stand chestnuts," he said. "They can't even stand to be in the *same room* as a chestnut. So there you are." Then he made a gesture, as of throwing a nightmare out the window.

He drew the blanket and tucked it around his son's shoulders. But at that moment they heard the cat scrabbling at the door. He lifted the cat in then held it to his chest, turning the reflector-green eyes away from the bed.

"The cat's in the basement," he said as he returned to the living room. "Just till big D. goes to sleep."

"Come over here and relax. You have to go to work in an hour." Anna was lying on her side on the couch and he sat on the floor beside her.

"Maybe we should make your lunch now," she said, and stirred as though to get up.

"That's funny," he said. "Eating lunch at 4 a.m. on the paper machines. Everything tastes like hot wood pulp." He went on not looking at her as if he were still working the clay. Instead he gazed at the crayons and the sheets of newsprint on the floor.

"Now don't give me that. Are you having trouble eating again?"

He took up a crayon and scribbled the child's name on the drawing near the couch.

"So what have you been doing with your lunch. Throwing it in the garbage? Let's move. You go back to school, finish your degree, and I'll teach."

"And the baby?" he said. "And what about that necklace you should be wearing?"

"Thank God my mother's in Spain," adjusting the long arms of her robe over the wrists. "Between the two of you I think I'd go out of my mind. We're okay, no malevolent god is out to get us. Just look around you, we're okay."

"I'm scared that's all." Which she didn't need to hear, not now. He struck his thigh; he gathered crayons from the floor, dropped them into a plastic container. "Maybe I should stay home, I'll call in sick."

"No you go," she smiled. "We're fine."

He punched in his time card at the mill gate. He reslotted the card and turned into the gatehouse, where he asked to use the phone.

"It's okay," Anna said, "I wasn't asleep. Sure I'll remember to put the cat out. No, I'm okay, really. If there are any signs I'll call the mill. But I've got something to tell you," she said and then laughed. "You know how *disoriented* Daniel is when he gets out of bed at night to pee. Well just after you left he wanders by me into the kitchen and stands looking at the garbage bag, as though he were thinking of peeing into it. I say, What are you doing? He turns around, says, Don't you talk to me that way. He goes over to the table and looks at the bust; then he touches the eyes and pushes it over. It broke on the floor. Are you mad?"

"I'm not mad," he said.

"I gave him the amber. He says the chestnut you put under his pillow isn't working. Nothing is working," Anna said all of a sudden.

"I'll tell you what I think. I should come home tonight. I'll tell them I'm sick, that's all." Through the window he could see the sluice box. Short logs were bumping down it toward the chippers. Below the window, sprawling puddles reflected the arc lamps on the recovery boilers.

"Nothing is wrong, really," she yawned. "We'll be fine, you'll see. Just don't get hurt in there. Stay out of the rollers, promise me. If there's a paper break let someone else go into the rollers. Something else," she laughed. "I'm full of little goodies tonight. My mother just called from Spain. She's already bought some baby clothes for the baby. Wonderful, frilly Spanish things, she's that confident. And she wants you to do another bust of me."

"Tonight," he said. "When the tour boss falls asleep. I can work from memory, there's no problem in that."

"Now you take care of yourself in that damn place," she said.

Outside he walked under the sluice box in the glare of arc lamps. A forklift roared by, throwing up water from the pavement and he stepped aside into the shadow of a low building that housed the machines.

It was the same as every night around this time: the lit-up plumes hissing from the recovery stacks, the faint salty smell blowing in from the ocean, the gleaming, empty rail tracks that curved to the warehouse. It

was the same as every evening; but he'd never felt anything so terrible and godforsaken as this empty lane that led to the machine room door.

We don't stand a chance in hell, was what he heard himself say.