

Sandhills

One is a flat spot, the size of a baby's fingernail. I sit on the couch with my baby on his back in my lap, take his finger between my finger and thumb. "Feel my spot," I say. I rub his fingertip back and forth across my spot, pick him up, kiss him, and set him beside me on the couch. I touch the tip of my finger to my spot, rub. It's grown. It's bigger than it was. I pick my baby up and set him on his back in my lap. We play the crane game. Then I kiss him and touch my finger to the side of his face, down an arm and down both legs. His skin is soft, even on the diaper-rash part, where, when I touch him, he splits open and bleeds.

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One spot, on my arm, I told a doctor about. He sent me to a specialist to have it cut off. The specialist had a nurse to assist him, to give me a shot to make me numb. The specialist cut the spot off my arm while I didn't watch. I thought of a word and watched his face. It was fair. He smiled a lot.

"I took a little extra," he said. "Better safe than sorry."

Of course he smiled, his white teeth. The biopsy came back benign. There's a little pink crater on my arm from where the extra was. If I went back to have all my spots removed, I could look like a soft, pink moon.

The spots that grow on me are not all the same.

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My baby's diaper rash is the kind that splits open when you touch. Did I already tell? He has little round red marks on the top parts of his legs, from where the diaper pins go in. He has a bruise under his eye from where I dropped him on his face.

He lies on his back in my lap where I sit on the couch.

We play the crane game.

I cross my hands in front of my chest, palms up, thumbs linked, fingers extended like wings that flap above my baby's face. I make cawing sounds. My baby watches me, watches my hands, my mouth, my eyes.

"It's the cranes. They're coming back," I say. "You'll see."

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My baby sucks. He lies on his back in my lap, looking at me over the bottle I hold with one hand. I look at him back, touch the tip of my finger to the short slope of his nose. He claps his hands at the bottle, at my hands where I hold it. I flick at his hands, my thumb releasing my finger to smack nail-first, making a sound that is small, a combination of small thunk and small thwack.

My baby screams, gurgles, sucks. We watch each other.

The telephone rings. I set my baby on his back on the couch and stand up. The bottle falls out of his mouth. He screams. I sit beside him, pick up the bottle, put the nipple back into his mouth. He sucks, his fists against his head. The telephone rings until it stops.

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The cranes will come back any day now. I sit on my couch with my baby on my lap, the windows open. The days are growing longer. I hold the bottle for my baby while he sucks himself to sleep. Once he's asleep, I take the bottle from him, slowly pulling the nipple out of his mouth. His lips part, and remain apart, slightly, looking very soft — the softest part of him.

I set the bottle on the table by the couch, listen to the noises from outside. The finches make long, twittering sentences that sound like gossip. I scratch, look at underneath my fingernails, and lift my baby up to hold him against me, his head on my shoulder. Gently I pat and rub his back. He burps in my ear, a soft, moist, opening sound.

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Sometimes I wash my hands first, then take off my clothes. I rub my hands flat over every part of me, turning and twisting in front of the bedroom mirror, my baby on the bed behind me, watching. He wears a diaper that I change every two hours.

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The insides of the rubber pants are spotted with small drops of wet. The diaper is yellow and darkens the changing pad. I drop the rubber pants to the floor beside the crib and unfasten the diaper pins, the clasp on one a blue plastic elephant, the clasp on the other a yellow plastic elephant. Both are smiling, the elephants, their eyes large and round. I pull the pins from the diaper, laying them in the crib beside my baby's fists. I pull the wet diaper off him, push with my foot the pedal on the diaper pail beside the crib. The lid on the pail opens. The smell comes out. I drop the diaper in, let off the pedal and pull moist baby wipes from the holder on the shelf over the pail. I wipe my baby clean. The skin splits open, and he screams.

“Oh, baby, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” I say. “I’m so sorry. It’ll be over in a minute,” I say.

I throw the bloody wipes into the garbage can next to the pail, pull a clean diaper in under my baby, lifting his legs, setting him back down. Right away there are tiny red spots on the diaper. I take the tube of fish-oil ointment from its place by the baby wipes and stack of clean diapers, open it, and squeeze ointment onto my baby, spreading it on him with my fingertip, rubbing. The tube is metal. It keeps in its shape the dents from where I’ve squeezed. I cap it and return it to the shelf, fold the diaper and pin it, careful to miss the tiny round red marks. The elephants have smiles on their blue and yellow faces, their trunks curving back to salute their foreheads. The elephants wear top hats. I reach a clean pair of rubber pants off the shelf over the pail, pull the pants up my baby’s legs, tuck the edges of his diaper in under the elastic bands.

“Wait, baby,” I say.

I go to the bathroom and wash my hands, taking with me the dirty rubber pants to drop into the hamper there. Returning to my baby in his crib, I touch the tip of my finger to the slope of his nose, across the bone of his cheek and under his eye. I pick him up and we kiss. I carry him on my hip to the kitchen.

The formula is already made, powder mixed with water and stored in plastic bottles of gentle colors in the white refrigerator that came with the house. I pull a bottle out of the refrigerator and put it in the microwave for forty seconds. It’s safe if you know how. I carry my baby to the living room, set him on the couch. “Just a minute,” I say, and I return to the kitchen. The microwave beeps its five times for done. I pull the bottle out and swirl around its contents, then turn it to sprinkle a couple of drops on my wrist as I return to the living room and couch. I sit and pull my baby to me, holding him while I put the nipple to his lips. He bats at the bottle with his hands, then holds his fists against his head while he sucks.

He sucks a long time.

We watch each other.

I find new spots on my arm, scratch while I watch out the windows across from where I sit. I scratch behind my ear, then stop. I listen. The sound comes faintly, from a ways off. I’ve never heard any other like it. It’s what I imagine desert people charging on horseback might sound like.

The sound is right at the edge of what I can hear.

“Baby, it’s the cranes,” I say.

I look down at my baby. He has stopped sucking, is asleep. I pull the bottle from his mouth, his spit shiny on the nipple, and set the bottle on the table by the couch. I hold him up to me, my baby, his chest against mine, his head on my shoulder, and stand.

“Come on, baby, it’s the cranes,” I say.

I carry him out the back door to the back porch, where I stop and listen to the sound moving back and forth across the edge of what I can hear, growing louder. I step off the porch and into the sand of the back yard. I am turning and turning my head. I search the sky. The moon is so small. Flecks flash against one part of the sky, and I watch where they were.

I see the cranes. They circle high above my house. They are up at the end of what I can see. They fly in formation like a scattering of pepper, or salt. As they turn against the sky, they flash almost white, disappear, then reappear at the other side of their circling as tiny spots, fingernail pink against the color of the sky. They fly closer to where I am with my baby, their one warbly noise growing louder and separating itself into their separate cries. I can see their complete circling, the dark bands on their wings.

“Baby, wake up. It’s the cranes,” I say. I kiss my baby to wake him, but he still sleeps. I hold him away from my shoulder and gently shake him. His head bobbles on his neck; his eyes stay closed. I let him fall back against my shoulder.

The telephone rings.

I look at the back door, where the ringing comes through the screen. I walk away from the house, my baby against my chest. We go deeper into the sand, away from the ringing of the telephone and closer to the voices of the cranes.

The cranes circling over my house stop their circling all of a once, breaking out of the circle to fly off in a new, loose formation, not a crane missing whatever has cued it for making this move. I stand in the sand, listen, watch, my baby hugged to my chest. Other cranes come, long lines across the sky, some lines becoming the tighter groups that circle high over my house a while, crying their cries before breaking away on cues I miss again and again.