

# Janis Hubschman

## Safekeeping

Lucy's cry, a sound that was inhuman in its persistence and pitch, wrenched Georgia from sleep with fresh, raw terror. Beside her in bed, Rob buried his head beneath his pillow. "The baby," he said when she hesitated a moment too long. How little his life had changed, she thought. It was easy to resent him as she groped for her bathrobe in the dark then stumbled down the hallway, stepping around two brimming laundry baskets, the vacuum cleaner, and a package of diapers. After three weeks, she was still waiting for her life to return to normal as though she were merely suffering from a temporary infection.

In the morning, Rob brewed coffee and scrambled eggs, while she nursed Lucy at the table. A light rain fell, leaving tiny slash marks on the windows. He slid the eggs onto their plates. She looked down at them, and her stomach lurched. She had lost her taste for eggs during pregnancy, yet each morning she forced herself to eat them, hoping to recover a part of herself that existed before.

"What have you got planned for today?" he said, joining her at the table.

"I thought I might swim the English Channel," she said. "Or interview the Pope." Then seeing his scowl, she hissed, "What did you think I was going to say?"

"Well, these were the last of the eggs," he said, cringing slightly. "Do you think you could get to the grocery store?"

"Look at me," she said, grabbing a hunk of her greasy hair. "I don't even have time to take a shower."

She watched his pallid face, saw him thinking: *Who is this shrew? What did they do with my sweet wife?* If only she had an answer for him.

"If you plan carefully," he said, "you can actually get a lot done with a baby."

"Says who?"

"Dr. Hazel Barry in *The New Parents' Guide*. Keep a packed diaper bag in the car. If you take Lucy out after she's napped and had a feeding, you should get at least an hour's worth of errands done." His tone was upbeat and breezy as she imagined Dr. Barry's to be: *Simply strap the baby to your back and mow down ten acres of grain with a sharpened scythe. If the Russian peasants could do it, so can you!*

"Imagine that," she deadpanned. "One whole hour." Never before had she advocated burning books, but now she yearned to strike a match to his useless manuals.

"So, what do you think?" he said, depositing his dish in the sink.

"I'll see how the day goes."

Just once she'd like him to offer information that hadn't come from a book or a newspaper. Rarely would he begin a sentence with *I feel* or *I think*. They could have long conversations about the downward spiraling housing market, or about the virus killing off millions of salmon in Chile, but they could never discuss his obvious disappointment in his father, a recovering alcoholic who'd left when Rob was an infant and started a whole new family. Rob might have his own fears and doubts about parenthood, she thought. But he would never talk about them; he hid behind a performance of competent manhood.

"Get some fruit and vegetables," he said. "The last fruit I had was the lemon slice in my vodka tonic on New Year's. I think I might have scurvy."

She smiled wanly.

Three years ago, when they'd first met, she was twenty-five, paying off college loans, living at subsistence level on a reporter's salary. Though she had sometimes wished for nicer clothes or a newer car without her Beetle's fuel-pump problems, she had adapted to a monastic lifestyle, had discovered a sort of tranquility in its simplicity. Where she saw a simple, uncomplicated life, Rob saw a problem. An engineer, he was by nature and profession, a problem solver. Before long, he was filing her taxes, investing her pitiful savings, and helping her to rewrite her résumé so she could land her current position at *The Bergen Leader*.

He looked at her now as though making up his mind about something, and she steeled herself for another unreasonable request. After a moment, he said, "Don't take this the wrong way, but I've decided to move into the guest room until she sleeps through the night."

"Why? You're not even getting up with her."

"I wake up when you get up," he said. "I'm not on maternity leave. I've got to give one hundred percent to the Wood Hollow project."

"I'm no good at math, but if you're giving one hundred percent to work that leaves zero percent for your family."

"Actually," he said, "that leaves my family with a roof over their heads, food on the table—if you make it to the grocery store—and health insurance."

They glared at each other across the table. In truth, she envied him his project. She'd lost her nerve at work. It had started with the piece about the local schools' superintendent. Her editor smelled impropriety in Dr. Peale's sudden resignation, even though the superintendent insisted he just wanted to spend more time with family. *Keep on digging*, Vicky had urged. But Georgia had dropped her spade, despite her gut feeling, despite his heavy-lidded *louche* gaze.

Rob pushed his chair back from the table. "Let's not have this Ozzie and Harriet fight now," he said, getting up. "We're both tired and irritable."

"Okay," she said, thinking she was much more irritable, and justifiably more tired. "But I'm not going to pretend I'm happy you're deserting our marriage bed."

"Technically, I'm not. We had that futon in Teaneck. Remember?"

Lucy started to fuss.

"Here, let me," he said, reaching for the baby. He looked stiff and uncomfortable, as though his mind were too busy working out the logistics of holding an infant to enjoy the experience.

Lucy began to howl.

"Uh-oh," he said, handing the baby back. "You're better at this than I am."

She looked at him sideways as she rocked Lucy into silence. The rain had turned to hail; it crackled the windows. He crossed to the door but stopped before opening it.

"Will you be all right?" he said.

"Go. I'll be fine," she said, listlessly, feeling as though she were being slowly spun into a silky cocoon. Through the soft, lustrous filaments, she saw him studying her with concern.

"I'll check in later." His voice sounded faint coming through all those layers of silk. The muffled thud of the door was a mistimed heartbeat she felt inside her chest. She sat at the table without moving, the eggs hardening on her plate, her arm prickling beneath the sleeping baby. The hail had stopped as suddenly as it had started, making her wonder if she'd imagined it.

\*

Lucy was an irritable baby. Colicky, they called it. The smallest stimulus would set her off. Sudden noises, bright lights, undressing, even too much cuddling could turn her into a squalling bundle of indignation. The way Lucy howled in her bath now—hunching her shoulders and wringing her tiny hands—broke Georgia's

heart. She found herself apologizing as though Lucy were an inconvenienced houseguest. Even after three weeks, the baby seemed like a stranger, a small wrinkled visitor from a foreign land whose language and customs were unfamiliar. Georgia wrapped her in a white towel and spoke softly, reassuringly, about what came next. The endless chatter had no apparent effect on Lucy, but it soothed her own shaky nerves.

“The house is a pigsty, and Mommy’s body feels like a big fat booboo wrapped in Spandex, but Daddy is sending us out for fruit,” she said. “Even at the risk of Mommy falling asleep at the wheel, Daddy must have his damn fruit.”

\*

The bright lights and the bloody packages of meat made Georgia woozy. She didn’t know how long she’d been staring into the butcher case, deciding between a rump roast and a London broil when several women started to jostle her. Lucy, who had been asleep in the infant seat attached to the front of the cart, began to fuss. Her fists moved jerkily and she made little mewling noises. Georgia reached for the London broil, feeling her nipples prickle with the letdown of milk.

“*Someone’s* hungry,” said the squished face butcher lady. She was unloading cellophane packages of meat from a big steel Frisbee on wheels.

Georgia forced a smile.

“How old?” The woman tossed a couple of steaks into the case like a zookeeper. Georgia half-expected her to toss one to Lucy who had started to howl in earnest, her face turning scarlet inside her pink hood.

“Three weeks,” she said.

“What’s her name?”

“Lucy.”

“A nice old-fashioned name. It seems like everyone’s going for the far-out names these days. Just yesterday, I heard a mother call her kid Kodiak.” Her squished face further contracted with disgust. “I mean, what’s that? A camera?”

“It’s an island in the North Pacific,” Georgia said through her teeth as she struggled with the straps on the infant seat. “Also a bear.” *You twit*. The front of her blouse was soaked through now. Lucy was making choking sounds, gasping for air between screams. Finally, she unlatched the strap and lifted Lucy free. Straightening, she met the other woman’s gaze. Not since adolescence had she come under such unforgiving female scrutiny.

“When’s the last time you fed her?” the woman said. It sounded like an accusation.

“She’s not due to eat for another *hour*,” she said, silently cursing Rob’s stupid baby manuals.

The other woman raised her eyebrows then wheeled her Frisbee a short distance away. Georgia followed.

“Excuse me,” she said, raising her voice. “Is there somewhere I could nurse her?”

The woman looked at Georgia’s face and then at her breasts. She wiped her hand on the front of her white smock, leaving a rust-colored smear.

“Follow me,” she said.

Georgia trailed after her through a swinging door into the icy butcher room. A heavy-set man was hacking away at slabs of meat with a cleaver.

“Hey, Rose,” he said, without turning. “Jim’s not back from his break, and I’m fucking dying for a smoke.”

“Watch your language,” Rose said. “Baby coming through.”

Georgia glanced at the glinting cleaver poised over a slab of meat then at the fleshy boyish face before she followed Rose down a short dark hallway. He reminded her of someone, but she could not think who.

“Here you go,” Rose said, flicking on the light.

Georgia entered the tiny bathroom and closed the door. Lit by a bare bulb in the ceiling, the walls were streaked with what she hoped was animal blood. A cigarette butt floated in the brownish water of the lidless toilet. With nowhere else to sit, she balanced on the rim with Lucy on her lap. She unzipped her parka and hiked up her shirt with her free hand. Lucy screamed and twitched.

“Come on,” she urged, holding her heavy breast like a water balloon. “Get on with it; there’s a man out there with a cleaver for god’s sake.”

A knock sounded.

“You almost done in there, lady?” A man’s voice. *The butcher’s?*

“Give me another minute!” she said. More time was not what she needed; Lucy was not going to nurse.

“Another what?” he said. The knob jiggled. “You need what?”

“I said—” she began, but the door swung wide open. She sprung up, pulling down her bra and shirt at the same time.

He stood directly in front of her, leaning one hand against the doorframe, an unlit cigarette bobbing from his lipsided mouth as he spoke. “Don’t worry. I didn’t see nothing,” he said. A leer crept into his face.

It came to her in a rush. The fleshy-faced butcher resembled the superintendent. She ducked under his arm, and walked briskly through the store. Her breasts ached; they throbbed. When the authorities confiscated Peale’s computer several days before his scheduled departure, they got all the evidence they needed. A key figure in a child pornography ring, Peale was doing time in federal prison now. She hurried past the meat cases. Rose didn’t look up, even though she must have heard Lucy’s screams. Everyone in Food World could surely hear the commotion. The cries bored through her eardrums and vibrated inside her skull.

She hurried down the canned goods aisle, bumped into a watery-eyed, well-dressed older woman who was contemplating a display of Campbell soup cans as though it was designed by Andy Warhol himself. “Well!” said the woman. But she hurried on without apology. She was sorry for so many things—she wouldn’t know where to begin. If she had forced herself to gaze head-on into the face of evil, into Dr. Peale’s clean-shaven, asymmetrical face, maybe she could have saved a few children. As it was, she had barely saved her job.

\*

Without deadlines to mark off time, one day blended into the next. Georgia stood at the window sipping tea, listening to the thick splattery sound of the rain as it fell in heavy drops. One of the neighborhood girls walked past the house with her nanny sheltered under a big red umbrella. For every step the woman took, the girl took three. Five afternoons a week, they walked home from the bus stop on the corner. It surprised her to realize that other people’s lives had remained unchanged, while hers had become unrecognizable.

This was uncharted loneliness, loneliness without coordinates or contour lines. Her two best friends did not have children. At lunch last Sunday, Amy and Helena had looked at her like she’d grown two heads when she’d gotten teary-eyed talking about the alleged connection between inoculations and autism. “Nothing in my life has prepared me for making this kind of life-altering decision,” she said. “Whooping cough?” she raised her right hand, palmed turned upward. “Or autism?” She raised her left hand. Her friends stared back at her nonplused. Only when she talked about her weight gain and her aversion to sex did they chime in with their own diet and sex stories, until she itched with boredom and stole peeks at her watch beneath the table.

She turned from the window. A stack of newspapers in pale blue plastic bags were piled high in the foyer. She wouldn’t allow Rob to recycle them, even though she had no interest in reading the paper without her byline. After the Dr. Peale story hit the major papers, Georgia was demoted, assigned to the evening planning board beat. One night, eight months into her pregnancy, she covered a meeting at the Westwood borough hall where residents had come out to complain about their neighbor, a Charles Manson look-a-like, who operated an illegal junkyard on his property. In the lobby afterwards, “Charles” edged through the crowd, sidled up to her, and before she knew what was happening, lunged at her, tearing the steno pad from her hands.

“What did you write about me?” he said in his busted muffler of a voice. “I have a right to see what you’re

writing.” She must have screamed. She didn’t remember. The police appeared, took the man away, and escorted her to her car.

For weeks, she’d looked over her shoulder everywhere she went. To be safe, the story ran with another reporter’s byline. She was reassigned again. Now she wrote soft news, feature stories about women’s clubs, senior citizen exercise programs, and firemen who rescued kittens from trees. No threats there. No glory either. But if she wanted to keep a toehold in the newspaper business, she had better start interviewing childcare candidates. It seemed an impossible task to find her substitute. If pedophiles could pass for school superintendents, they could also pose as babysitters.

The baby cried out. Georgia climbed the stairs to the nursery with something that felt like relief.

\*

Georgia could not get used to sleeping alone. In her dreams, Rob was beside her, wearing his striped pajamas, snoring lightly, as real as the ghost pains from a missing limb. It was a shock to wake and find him gone. Then she’d remember, and anger would spider through her veins.

After a good night’s sleep, he was able to leave the house earlier. Now she ate breakfast alone. On the countertop, he’d left a carafe of coffee and an article clipped from the *Times* about colic. Cross-eyed with exhaustion, she pushed it aside. Up five times with Lucy, she had seen parts of *Rear Window*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*, and then later on as the sky whitened over the rooftops, a special on Ted Bundy.

Her eyes stung with tears. Lately, it seemed, she swung from rage to affection to despair with such abruptness that even she was caught off guard and left as shaken and stunned as an innocent bystander.

By noon, the rain tapered to a drizzle. It dribbled down her parka and beneath her sweatshirt as she pushed Lucy’s carriage down her long driveway and out onto New Castle Drive. It had rained nonstop since Lucy’s birth. Eight solid weeks. She was convinced of this, even after Rob had produced internet weather charts to prove her wrong.

“You’re just depressed,” he’d said, as though to reassure her.

The only sign of life in the neighborhood was the Walker’s black cat, skulking along the curb with something dark and squirming in its jaws. Predators were everywhere, in the schools, in sleepy neighborhoods. She’d read that pediatricians were implanting microchips under children’s skin to help locate them in case of kidnapping. Or was that dogs and cats?

She hurried past the cat as Lucy’s screams rose and shattered in the cold air. The baby had been crying without pause for two hours. Three months was supposed to be the magic number for colic, according to the pediatrician. “One month to go,” Dr. Goodhart had told her over the phone on one particularly bad day. “Hang in there, Mrs. Fox. It’s not so long.”

*Not so long?* She didn’t know how she was going to make it through *this* day let alone thirty more without sleep.

In the park at the end of the street, she sat on the cold metal bench and gently rocked the carriage. In the trees, big black crows cried out: *caught, caught, caught*. She shoved her cold hands deep inside her pockets amid the balled-up tissues, a pacifier, the pediatrician’s appointment card—the inventory of her new life. It was ignorant to think that she would resume her old life, pick up where she left off like a poker player returning to the game. The sooner she accepted that, the better off she would be.

She poked the pacifier in Lucy’s mouth, but the baby spat it out, crying harder now. A car passed on the road, its tires hissing through rainwater. She followed it with her eyes, until it turned the corner and was only a rumble in the distance, a ribbon of blue smoke near the stop sign. How she longed to be inside that car, moving somewhere. Anywhere.

She looked down at the red-faced baby who had broken into her life like a burglar, robbing her of her sense of certainty and safety. With both hands, she shook the carriage, shouting, “Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!” Rain trickled down the back of her neck, and her hands were raw with cold, but still they gripped the carriage for what seemed like forever, until something broke inside her, and she saw herself as from above, with her grimy white jacket, her hair soaked and matted to her skull, and her face twisted ugly with rage.

She let go of the carriage and ran from the park, leaving the baby behind.

When she reached the street, she stopped, looked both ways and crossed. She was walking quickly now, not quite running. She was thinking clearly enough to know she didn't want to draw attention to herself. In her mind a plan was forming. She would call the helpline for postpartum depression. She would call Rob. A car slowed beside her. The driver ducked slightly to peer at her through the passenger window then pulled away. Just ahead was her house. She was stunned by its familiarity: the blank brick face, the parallel rows of tall windows, the green fringe of arborvitae. She opened the door and walked quickly down the hallway into the kitchen. Lucy's things were everywhere: her car seat, her pink sleeper, packs of diapers—all of it oppressing like souvenirs from a disappointing vacation. She had been staring for a long time at these things, trying to make sense of them, when a man's voice called out from the front door.

She made her way down the hall. A uniformed man stood inside the doorway. Her first thought was the police, but it was Ed, her mailman, dripping water from his dark unbuckled galoshes.

"Whoa, Mrs. R. Fox," he said, addressing her by the name on her junk mail. "You shouldn't leave your door open like that. All kinds of kooks and crazies out there."

She stared at him without answering, trying to figure out why they had sent the mailman to arrest her.

"Having a rough day, huh?" He handed her some rain-beaded envelopes. She shoved them into her pocket without looking at them.

"I'm not kidding about locking your doors," he continued. "The Smithsons over on Orchard were robbed a couple of weeks ago. What they call a home invasion or a push in. The bums broke in and knocked Mrs. Smithson right over. Crazy, right?"

She nodded though she wasn't sure what she was agreeing with. The world was dangerous? Everyone knew that.

"Oh, and the Walkers, over on Northwood?" he said. "They have one of those fancy alarm systems, so the crooks took whatever was outside, the hammock, a rake, the Weber grill." He began to chuckle then stopped abruptly. "It's not funny. Really. The old timers at the Post Office talk about that murder back in the sixties. Whole family shot in their beds. Kids, too. And, for what? Sixty dollars it turned out."

She swayed then clutched the doorway for support. She felt close to vomiting. *Lucy*. What had she done?

He didn't seem to notice. "But I don't want to be the bearer of bad news. Just greeting cards and magazines."

He turned to go. She brushed past him on the stairs, raced across the wet lawn, and into the street. Her arms groped the air; her face was grotesque in its concentration. Everything was clear now. No one was safe, nothing was certain. The park was only a hundred yards away—she could see the slide through the new leaves—but it seemed as though she'd never reach it. She felt light-headed, but wide-awake, sprung from her fuzzy cocoon.

In the distance, the blue carriage was unnaturally bright in the mist. In the seconds it took to reach it, she lived a lifetime without Lucy, without her soft fragrant skin and wispy hair, without her tiny oval fingernails and dimpled knees. So prepared was she to find the carriage empty that the sight of Lucy asleep with her eyes swollen shut made her cry out with shocked relief. She had the odd sensation that she and Lucy were the only solid figures in the landscape. Everything else wavered and blurred. She took firm hold of the carriage and pushed it over the roots and rocks and the fallen twigs in the direction of home.

---

**Janis Hubschman** lives in New Jersey. Her fiction has recently appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, *Storyglossia*, and *Literary Mama*. Her essays have been published in *The New York Times* and *New York Runner*.

“The tall brick front porch of my childhood home in suburban New Jersey, where my parents still live, was a gathering place for me and my three siblings and all the kids on my block. It boasts views of the old maple I used to climb and, incredibly, the lake at the end of the street. On that porch, we played a game called school. The ‘teacher’ hid a rock in one fist, and if you guessed right you were allowed to move up one step, or grade, until you reached the top—graduation! The porch is where we posed for photos, wearing home sewn Easter outfits, or swim team bathing suits. It was home base in games of tag, and a place to leap from whenever you felt like flying.”