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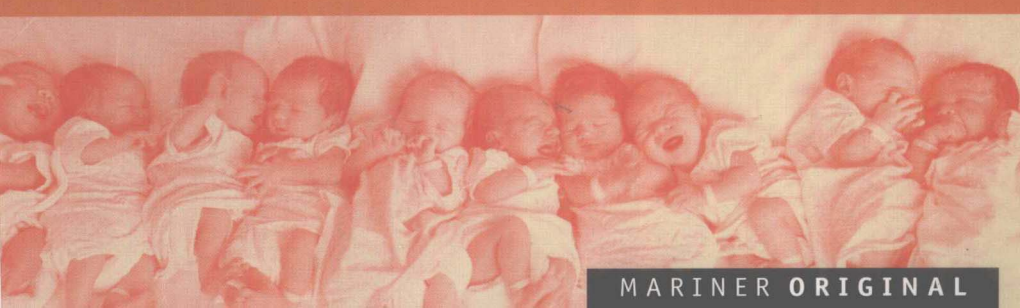
nodding my head in recognition."

— CHRIS BOHJALIAN



Love and MODERN MEDICINE

stories by
Perri Klass



MARINER ORIGINAL

*Love and
Modern Medicine*

S T O R I E S



P E R R I K L A S S

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Love and Modern Medicine

BOOKS BY PERRI KLASS

FICTION

Recombinations

I Am Having an Adventure: Stories

Other Women's Children

Love and Modern Medicine

NONFICTION

A Not Entirely Benign Procedure:

Four Years as a Medical Student

Baby Doctor: A Pediatrician's Training

*In memory of William Abrahams,
with love*

Love and Modern Medicine

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For Women Everywhere

ALISON, in her ninth month, finds she can no longer turn over in bed at night without waking up. The hydraulics of shifting her belly are just too complex, and to get from her left side to her right, she has to maneuver herself delicately, tucking her elbow under and using it as a lever, swinging her abdomen over the top. Turning over the other way, belly down, is not possible; if she could, she imagines, she would look like a circus seal balancing on a huge ball.

When her best friend from high school arrives to keep her company and wait for the birth, Alison hopes to be distracted; lately, she thinks of nothing but the advent of labor. When will this baby come out, when will the pains start that will be unmistakably something new, something she has never felt before? Her obstetrician suggested that they might feel like bad menstrual cramps, which Alison has never had. And she is now accustomed to the small tightenings inside her belly that occur every now and then; Braxton-Hicks contraction, she tells her friend Doris, who thereafter asks her, if she should happen to clutch herself, "Another Brixie-Hixie?"

It is very nice to have Doris around. For one thing, unpregnant, Doris is easily as big as Alison in her ninth month. Doris was big in high school and she's bigger now. She buys her clothes in special stores that sell silk and velvet and linen for the

fat working woman, and all her lingerie is peach. She smells of a perfume named after a designer, familiar to Alison because of little scented cardboard samples in a million magazines — open this flap to enjoy the magic — opposite honey-toned photos of naked bodies arranged like fruit in a basket. Doris's possessions fit surprisingly well into what she calls the tawdry jungle glamour of Alison's apartment. Among the overgrown plants with Christmas lights strung through them and the life-size stuffed animals and the bongo collection, Doris reclines in her jumpsuits, taking her ease as if waiting for her palanquin. When Doris and Alison walk down the street together on their way to get hamburgers and onion rings, Alison feels like they are a phalanx. Finally she has the nerve to wear a big straw hat with fuchsia flowers out in public, stealing it off her stuffed giraffe. Hey, big mamas, she imagines someone shouting (not that anyone ever does). Together, she and Doris take up their share of the street and of the hamburger restaurant, where the waitress greets them by saying, The usual, right?

Alison is by now pretty well used to the rude and stupid and none-of-their-business things that people say to her. But good old Doris walked into her apartment, put down her two suitcases and her handbag and her camera case, and informed Alison, looking narrowly at her ballooned abdomen, "Alison, you are doing this For Women Everywhere." Then she gave a Bronx cheer.

"Right," said Alison with relief, wondering how Doris knew. The world is full of well-meaning people who feel the need to tell Alison how brave she is, how they admire her. I always wanted a baby, but I don't know whether I would dare, they say; or, This is a really great thing you're doing. Alison's mother sends clippings from *People* magazine, keeping her up to date on Jodie Foster, Madonna, Rosie O'Donnell. Even Michael, when he calls up, shyly, to ask does she really think this baby might be

his, and won't she please tell him when it's due, and is she going to find out the gender, and would she tell him if she knew — even Michael feels a politically correct need to tell her what a strong woman she is.

"Some people never grow up" is Doris's comment after Michael's next call. At first Alison thinks she is referring to Michael, which is really unfair; of the three of them, Michael could be considered the one who most notably *has* grown up. He has a house and a marriage and two children and all the correct car seats and coffeemakers. "You," says Doris. "Here you are at your age, and the best you can manage is a friend you went to high school with and a boy you've been sleeping with since high school. Don't you ever think about moving on to a later stage?"

There is some justice there, Alison supposes, but if you are thirty-five and your favorite people are left over from when you were fifteen, then that's the way it is. *What am I doing, after all, she thinks, if not moving on to a later stage?* Michael's marriage, acquired in adulthood, does not make Alison's mouth water. Neither does Doris's legendary liaison with a penthouse-dwelling real estate tycoon. Doris is mildly, or maybe avidly, curious to know who the other possible fathers are, and makes some pointed remarks about people who expect their friends to Tell All and then hold back on their own juicy details, but Alison is not telling and not willing to be drawn into the same game of twenty questions that Michael keeps wanting her to play. Is it anyone I know? Is it anyone you care about? How many possibilities are there, anyway? "I am not," Alison says with pregnant dignity, "the kind to kiss and tell."

Alison is consuming something close to four rolls of Tums a day at this point. Automatically before and after every meal she reaches into her pocket for the cylinder, pops off three little chalky disks, and crunches them, feeling the burning go away.

Doris tells her this is somewhat disgusting, and Alison informs her loftily, "My obstetrician says I have progesterone-induced incompetence of the lower esophageal sphincter."

"Talk about disgusting," says Doris.

But it is a pleasure to have Doris there to go with her to the obstetrician, a pleasure not to go alone for the umpteenth time. She hands Doris the straw hat and steps on the scales unhesitatingly, watches the nurse move the weight from 150 to 200, then back to 150, then start messing around with the next smaller weight. One eighty-two; very good. Smugly, Alison steps off the scale; how educational for Doris, she thinks, to realize that when you are pregnant you get on the scale proudly and hear a number like 182 and then a commendation. But Doris is studying a wall chart, a drawing of a full-term baby packed into a mother. Note the scrunched-up intestines, the way the baby's head presses on the bladder, and so on. "Yich," comments Doris, and follows Alison into the examining room, there to be notably unmoved by the amplified fetal heart.

Alison's obstetrician, Dr. Beane, is a good five or six years younger than Alison and Doris, and is such an immaculate and tailored little thing that it is hard to imagine her elbow-deep in the blood and gore that Alison envisions in a delivery room. Also, she has such tiny hands; can she really grab a baby and pull? Is that what an obstetrician does? Alison started by dutifully attending the classes, but she dropped out long before they got to the movie; she has never been one to read instruction booklets. Dr. Beane gives Doris the once-over, considerately doesn't ask any questions, and feels around on Alison's belly with those small, surprisingly strong hands. "You're engaged!" she says, as if offering congratulations.

Alison wonders briefly whether this is some terribly tactful way of acknowledging Doris's presence (better than, say, Is this your significant other?), but it turns out that *engaged* means the

baby's head has descended into her pelvis and the baby is in place, ready to be born.

"Have you thought about anesthesia?" asks the doctor, who then launches into an educational lecture on spinals and epidurals, both of which involve having a needle inserted into Alison's back and pumping drugs into her spinal column.

"Yich," comments Doris.

"I think I'd rather die," says Alison.

"You won't die one way or the other. You'll just have pain. And if the pain is too bad, you can have Demerol, just to take the edge off for a while."

"In sorrow shall you bring forth children," says Doris, biblically enough.

"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," says Alison, not to be outdone.

"Any time now," says Dr. Beane, cheerful and unperturbed.

Twenty years ago, in high school, Doris and Alison and Michael were the three smartest of their year, Doris and Alison were best friends, and Michael and Alison eventually fumbled their way into bed. Michael and Doris, however, were the true co-conspirators of the high school, the ones who destroyed every sewing machine in the home economics classroom with a tube of Super Glue and a jar of Vaseline, the ones who reprogrammed the guidance computer so that every senior received a printout recommending Notre Dame as the most appropriate college, the ones who slipped copies of *Oui* and *Penthouse* into the heavy plastic jackets reserved for *Life* and *Smithsonian* in the library. Alison was more or less a chicken. Doris is now the only person in the whole world who more or less understands how Alison can go on sleeping with Michael every couple of weeks or so, year in and year out, and never want either to escalate or to de-escalate. There are other guys around from time to time, but in a funny way she still likes Michael best — even though

she doesn't like him more than once every couple of weeks. And when Michael got married and they didn't miss a beat, Doris was the only one to whom it was perfectly obvious that his relationship with Alison was covered by a grandfather clause. Alison knows that Michael called Doris up at the time, stricken with the kind of moral qualms with which he occasionally likes to agitate himself, and she knows that Doris told him to shut up and put out, and she is grateful. Michael's marriage is a brilliant success, as far as Alison can see, though she has not actually met his wife. They are both professors, Michael of math, of course, and his wife of something with ceramics in it, which is not art but high-tech semiconductors. Or something; Alison reserves the right not to be interested and wastes almost no time visualizing the marriage, two total weirdo science drones trying to be domestic. She has never imagined that this is what she wants, and she is not going to be fooled into imagining it now.

Alison and Doris parade themselves to the hamburger joint for the usual once again. Alison has medium rare with cheddar and onions, Doris has rare with guacamole on top; both have onion rings. Alison's maternity wardrobe has dwindled; nothing fits, and she cannot bring herself to buy anything, since the whole process should be over in a week or two. She has one floral drop cloth, contributed by her mother, who also sent four pairs of support hose that are still intact in their plastic. Over her one pair of cotton pants with a very stretched-out elastic waistband she can put either a bright pink, extra-extra large T-shirt or a breezy little yellow rayon number, bought at a yard sale, which was meant to be a pajama top for a very large lady. She has been working at home since her seventh month, easy enough since much of her work has always been done at home. She writes the in-house newsletter for a large company that manufactures communications equipment and works happily

on various examples of their latest technology right in the comfort of her own living room. She is paid a ridiculous amount for this and has no intention of ever teaching freshman English again. The only problem, as of the last week or two, is that she cannot sit up at her desk anymore for long periods of time. The inhabitant of her uterus starts to do calisthenics, and to have a full-size baby doing rhythmic jerks in her belly, it turns out, means she has to lie back on the couch and give it room.

She lies back, pulls up the pink T-shirt, pulls down the cotton pants, and she and Doris stare at her stomach, at the road map of stretch marks. "God, it's like some kind of earthquake," says Doris, as the striated skin over Alison's belly button heaves upward. Today Doris, in honor of Alison's apartment, is wearing her leopard-print jumpsuit and blood-red earrings to match her fingernails.

"Are you quite comfortable?" Alison asks her abdomen. The acute angle of a little elbow juts out clearly, squirms around, then retreats into its crowded bath. Actually, Alison finds herself overwhelmed, reduced to awestruck mush, by the contemplation of her belly, by the thought that tightly curled up in there is a full-grown sardine of a baby. How can this possibly be? A fetus was one thing, for all its hormonal cyclone, the morning sickness and all the rest, but how can she be carrying around something that properly belongs in a baby carriage? And something with such a mind of its own; it seems now to want to put its feet just where Alison believes she keeps her liver.

When Michael calls, Doris takes it upon herself to talk to him. She describes the action in Alison's belly, which she refers to as heavy weather in the Himalayan foothills. Alison, still lying on the couch, can hear the firm tones in which Doris discourages Michael's surreptitious questions. She's fine, we're fine, don't be ridiculous. Sometime soon, you don't need the details. No, Michael, you'll never know. You'll take care of your

own children, Alison will take care of hers, and everyone will be just fine.

Alison thinks of Doris in the tenth grade, when she wore only black and made frequent references to her dabbles in the occult sciences. Her room, in her parents' pleasant Tudor-style, two-car-garage house, had been converted into a sanctuary of Satan. Doris had removed the light bulb from the ceiling fixture and put two white, skull-shaped candles on either side of an altar, on which the girls' high school gym teacher was regularly tortured in effigy before being sacrificed. Doris's mother had minded the writing on the walls more than anything else. But after all, once the walls were written on they would have to be repainted anyway, so why not write on them some more? So Doris and Alison and Michael decorated them freely with song lyrics that seemed particularly meaningful at the time. Also poems. The Who, William Blake, Hermann Hesse, and Leonard Cohen figured prominently in the graffiti; Doris and Alison and Michael were all smart, but hardly exceptional. Anyway, lying on the couch, Alison remembers Doris in her high priestess phase: massive in black, making oracular pronouncements, suggesting death or disfigurement for those she disliked, promising the favored that they would prosper.

"Lots of Brixie-Hixies, huh?" says Doris a few minutes later, finding Alison leaning against the wall in the kitchen, holding her stomach.

"I don't know, this might be more than that."

"No false alarms now — you don't want to go getting me all excited for nothing."

"Let's time them," says Alison.

Twenty minutes apart. Fifteen minutes apart. Starting to hurt a little. Lasting thirty to forty seconds. Doris notes them down systematically in permanent Magic Marker on Alison's one clean dish towel, contributed, needless to say, by her mother.

She suggests to Alison that these numbers will make a humdrum dish towel into a priceless memento. Alison tries to remember whether they said anything about breathing back in those first couple of childbirth classes.

"All right," says Doris, coming to the bottom hem of the dish towel. "Get that cunning little bag you have all packed and waiting and let's get moving."

"You really think it's time?"

"Do you want to wait for Sherman to take Atlanta? Get into the pony cart and let's go."

At the hospital, the nurse puts Alison into two little gowns, one with the opening in the front, the other in the back. Strangely enough, all the way over in the car, even as she experimented with panting, with taking big deep breaths, with moaning and groaning, Alison expected the hospital staff to look at her blankly, to send her home, to wonder aloud why she was wasting their time. Instead, along comes this nurse, Madeline, a black woman even larger than Doris. *The three of us*, Alison thinks, *would make quite a singing group*. The nurse puts an IV into Alison's left hand and hooks belts around her waist to connect her to a fetal heart monitor. Doris finds the monitor quite interesting, and when the nurse leaves the room, she experiments with the volume control, turning up the gallop-a-trot of the baby's heartbeat as loud as it will go.

"Noisy baby you have there," she remarks. "I thought this was supposed to hurt. Does it hurt yet?"

"Are you looking forward to watching me writhe in pain?"

"Just remember, you will be writhing for women everywhere."

Alison is immeasurably glad to have Doris there. Does this mean, she finds two seconds to wonder in between contractions, that she is in fact going to want someone there from now on, that she is going to find herself alone with this baby and feel