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KRAMER  
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a novel by  
Avery Corman



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House, Inc., 201 East 50th Street, New York, New York 10022.

This is an authorized reprint of a hardcover edition published  
by Random House Inc. The hardcover edition was  
published simultaneously in Canada by Random House  
of Canada Limited, Toronto.



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**BOOKS** are published by The New American Library, Inc.,  
1633 Broadway, New York, New York 10019

First Signet Printing, October, 1978

12 13 14

**PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

# One

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He did not expect to see blood. He was not prepared for this, neither the books nor the instructor had mentioned bleeding or the brown stains on the sheets. He had been alerted to pain and he was prepared to help her overcome that.

"I'm here, honey. Come on, do your breathing now," he urged as he was supposed to, the good soldier.

"One, two, three, blow ..."

"Fuck you!" she said.

He wanted to be the natural childbirth team member he had taken the course to be, the helpmate without whom none of it would be possible, but by the time they let him into the room, they had started without him. Joanna moaned random "sonofabitch"s, while in the next bed, a woman was screaming in Spanish for her mother and for God, neither of whom appeared to be at hand.

"We'll do the breathing together," he said cheerily.

He was superfluous. Joanna closed her eyes to swim in the pain, and the nurse pushed him to the side so she could wipe up the blood and the shit.

When Joanna first presented her belly for him to listen to "it," he said it was a miracle. He said this automatically. The first signs of life had not really interested him. She was the one who had initiated the idea of having a baby, and he had agreed to this as the next logical step in the marriage. When she became pregnant only a month after removing her coil, he was astonished. It seemed to have little to do with him—her idea, her baby, her miracle.

He knew he was supposed to feel connected to the chemical changes within her. What interested him most about her new body was not the life within it, but the pressure of her belly against his genital area during sex. He began to fantasize what sex must be like with obese women, staring at them on the street, wondering if the gracefulness so many obese women exhibit is desperate self-delusion or the secret knowledge of indescribable sexual pleasures given and received. Ted Kramer, who never permitted himself to linger over the pictures in the lobby of the porno movie house near his office, amused himself by wondering about the financial possibilities of a porno movie, *Ted and the Fat Lady*.

Joanna began to stain severely in her sixth month. Her gynecologist, Dr. Anthony Fisk, who had been identified in *Vogue* magazine as one of the most successful, eligible young gynecologists in the Western world, prescribed to Joanna, "Rest in bed and put the cork in." A discussion followed between Ted and Joanna as to the precise medical meaning of his ad-

vice. He placed a late-night, precoital call to Dr. Fisk, who was irritated at the nonemergency nature of the inquiry and none too pleased to talk to a man, least of all about semantics. He said that his meaning medically was "Keep her on her ass as much as possible and no more shtupping." Ted suggested they change doctors, but Joanna was adamant, so they departed for distant sides of the bed, where Joanna remained for the better part of three months, successfully reaching the full term of her pregnancy.

Joanna did not express interest in substitute love-making during this period, even though Ted quoted from one of the childbirth books in which variations on intercourse were officially sanctioned. "Intercourse between the thighs may prove to be an adequate, temporary solution."

One night, after she had fallen asleep, Ted attempted to masturbate in their bathroom to the fantasy of a fat woman he had seen that day in the subway. He switched before orgasm to a fantasy of Joanna herself so as not to cheat on her. Feeling guilty anyway about his indiscretion, he sublimated his desires thereafter by throwing himself into the growing obsession in the house over clothing, mattresses, cribs, mobiles, night lights, carriages, and names for the baby.

Joanna's attention to detail on such as the comparative merits of high chairs with beads for baby to spin and those without far exceeded his, and he ascribed it to the naturalness of motherhood that she, who had never been here before, had so quickly acquired the jargon of the trade. He had difficulty distinguishing between *layette* and *bassinet*, since *layette* sounded as though the baby should lay in it, rather than be the baby's clothes, while *bassinet* sounded like something the baby should bathe in, rather than lay on, whereas

*bumpers* were easier for him to identify—they went around the crib and had visual educational material on them, like bunnies.

Lady Madonna was the store where Joanna bought her maternity clothes, a name that seemed apt to him, since she had satisfied every notion of the beautiful mother-to-be. Her skin was radiant, her eyes were bright, a madonna and chaste, thanks to the wisdom of Dr. Fisk. Joanna Kramer was nearly professional in her looks, too slight at five-three to be taken for a model, possibly an actress, a striking, slender woman with long, black hair, a thin, elegant nose, large brown eyes, and somewhat chesty for her frame. "The prettiest girl around," Ted called her. His image of himself was less secure. A reasonably attractive man of five-ten with brown eyes and light-brown hair, he was self-conscious about his nose, which he felt was too long, and his hair, which had begun to thin. An indication of his self-image was that he felt most attractive when Joanna was on his arm. His hope was that the child would not, by some unfortunate irony, have his looks.

He was solicitous during the pregnancy, he wanted to bring her spareribs late at night, run out for ice cream, but she had none of these clichéd whims, so he often brought her flowers instead, which before this he would have considered excessively romantic.

Joanna slept peacefully for a woman now in her seventh month. His nights were difficult as he moved in and out of wakefulness, a vague disturbance flickering just beyond his reach.

Ten couples assembled in a Greenwich Village brownstone. The promise of the instructor was that the women could have control over their bodies,

which was greeted solemnly, no one noting the contradiction of ten bulging women, some of whom were having difficulty walking, having control over their bodies. The men, for their part, were promised they could be active participants in the birth of their own children. The instructor was an enthusiastic young woman in leotards, the only flat-bellied woman in sight and when Ted, in the middle of a discussion about the placenta, began having sexual fantasies about her and her flat belly, he took it as a sign that his period of fat-lady sexual deviation had ended.

His dream belly then introduced into the proceedings a series of shocks to Ted's system. They were color slides she projected onto a screen which showed the most graphic depiction he had seen yet of the development of the fetus, followed by pictures of new babies, awake mothers, beaming fathers. A real baby was coming, not a baby in a book or hidden within her belly, a breathing person, in his life.

The following day at lunchtime, while sitting on the steps of the 42nd Street Library eating an ice-cream pop, after having priced the birth announcements at Lord & Taylor and before rechecking the prices on cribs at Saks, the realization came to him, the flickering in the distance took shape. It was fear. He was scared. He was scared Joanna would die. He was scared the baby would die. He was scared Joanna and the baby both would die. He was scared that they would be all right, but later he would die. He was scared about being able to afford the baby. He was scared about holding the baby, scared about dropping the baby. He was scared of the baby being born blind, retarded, crippled, with one arm, or one leg, with missing fingers, splotched skin. He was scared



that he would be found wanting, scared that he would not be a good father. He told Joanna none of this.

The mechanism he chose for dealing with his fear was to obliterate it. He would be Godlike, control everything, leave nothing to ignorance or chance. He would be the best-trained, best-informed natural childbirth father anywhere. In the weekly classes, he was focused and intense. He could practically scan Joanna's middle with X-ray eyes like Superman and see the position of the baby. When Joanna began to experience increasing discomfort in her ninth month, he was extremely supportive. They practiced the breathing exercises daily at his encouragement. He was a model pre-daddy.

At the end of the natural childbirth course there was a motion picture shown in a local school of an actual birth by natural childbirth methods. In the audience were all types of expectant fathers and bellies of various possible shapes. He felt a kinship with these people, smiling at strangers. The film ended. The course was completed. Ted Kramer was ready to have the baby.

"Will you be disappointed in me if I don't succeed?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I was talking to somebody who had to be put out, and she feels guilty that she wasn't awake for it."

"There are no failures, like they said. Don't worry about that, darling. You take it as far as you can."

"Okay."

Just don't die on me, Joanna. I couldn't bear to lose

you—which he could not say aloud. He did not want to frighten her, or bring his own fears to the surface.

When the call came, he was at his desk in the office, right where he was supposed to be, a ten-minute cab ride from the house, in control. It began to slip away from him at the start. He had not counted on the speed and the severity of Joanna's labor, and he reached the house to find her doubled up on the floor.

"My God—"

"It's bad, Ted—"

"Jesus—"

All the training suddenly went out of his head as he saw the extent of her pain. He held her until the contraction had passed. Then he took the bag which had been packed for days—he had kept his cab waiting—and they were on their way to the hospital.

"I can't stand it."

"You'll be okay, darling. Breathe."

"No."

"You can do it. Please, breathe!" And she made an attempt at the breathing rhythms, which were supposed to deprogram the brain away from pain.

"It's gone."

"Darling, you've got to try to get on top of it next time. Remember. On top."

"Maybe they should just put me out."

At 79th Street and Park Avenue the cab was stopped by a traffic jam.

"We can't have this!" he shouted at the cabdriver.

"What can I do, mister?"

Ted leaped out of the cab.

"Emergency! Woman in labor! Emergency!"

He raced out in the middle of traffic, holding cars up, directing others, an instant, crazed traffic cop.

"Move that truck, goddammit. Let's break this up." Hardened New York City drivers bewildered by the sight of this maniac responded. In a moment of grandeur, he was a heroic figure rescuing his pregnant wife from a New York traffic jam. They sped to the hospital, the driver leaning on his horn at Ted's admonition—"Go through the lights. I'll pay the fines."

His moment was over, having lasted but a moment. When they reached the hospital, Joanna was taken upstairs, and he was alone in the reception room waiting, yesterday's hero. *They* were in control now, and they had her and were shaving her pubic hair away.

"This is unfair," he protested to the receptionist. "I'm needed upstairs with my wife."

"They'll call down."

"When?"

"It takes about twenty minutes, Mr. Kramer."

"These minutes are crucial."

"Yes, we know."

In the reception room was a beefy man in his thirties, who lounged in a chair with the calm of someone watching television.

"First time?" he said to Ted.

"Do people really say that?" Ted snapped. "First time?"

"Listen, fella, I'm just being friendly."

"I'm sorry. It's—my first time," and Ted began to smile at himself.

"Third for me."

"The waiting. Just when you're feeling closest to her, they take her away."

"It'll be over soon."

"But I'm supposed to be there. We're doing natural childbirth."

"Right."

"Are you?"

"All due respects, that's crap. Knock her out, no pain, you got your baby."

"But that's primitive."

"Oh, yeah?"

"And don't you want to be there?"

"I'll be there. In a few days, in the middle of the night, I'll be there."

They had nothing else to say to each other; Ted fidgeted in the correctness of his decision, the man relaxed with his. The receptionist told Ted he could go up, and he went to the maternity floor, where Joanna was theoretically waiting for his help. On the way, he went over the variety of tasks he was to perform: time her contractions, help her with the breathing, engage her in distracting conversation, dab her brow, moisten her lips. He would be in control. He would not even have time to be scared.

He walked into the room to find Joanna twisted on the bed in the middle of a contraction, and it was then that he received her "Fuck you!" when he tried to introduce the correct breathing procedures. The woman in the next bed was screaming in Spanish. The nurse was pushing him to the side. It was not going according to the course.

Eventually, Dr. Fisk arrived, tall, a full head of blond hair. His first words to Ted were "Wait in the hall." After a few minutes, the nurse motioned for Ted to come back into the room as Dr. Fisk nodded and walked out.

"Won't be long now," the nurse said. "On the next contraction, we're going to have her push."

"How are you doing, honey?" he asked Joanna.

"This is the worst experience of my life."

The contractions came, he encouraged her to push,

and after several waves of severe contractions and pushing, he saw slowly appearing a black patch, the crowning of birth, the first signs of his own child. It was all of it outside his control, awesome.

"Mr. Kramer?" Dr. Fisk had returned. "We're going to go in and have our baby."

Ted kissed Joanna, she forced a smile, and he went with Dr. Fisk to a room off the hall.

"Just do what I do, Mr. Kramer."

Ted played doctor. He scrubbed, put on a blue gown. And standing there in his doctor's gown, looking in the mirror at the evidence of the charade, realizing how little control he actually had over any of it, he was suddenly engulfed by the fear he had been denying.

"Are you going to be all right?"

"I think so."

"You're not going to pass out in there, are you?"

"No."

"You know, when they first started letting fathers into the delivery room, somebody around here came up with a theory. He said that after seeing their wives give birth, some men became temporarily impotent."

"Oh."

"He figured the men were either overwhelmed by the birth process, or they felt guilty about their wives' pain. You know, what had their penis wrought . . ."

Dr. Fisk had an interesting washbasin manner.

"Anyway, we don't have any real proof the theory holds up, but it makes for intriguing speculation, don't you think?"

"I'm not sure."

"Come, Mr. Kramer. Don't pass out—and don't get impotent," Dr. Fisk said, laughing, his insider's joke

going unappreciated by Ted, whose face was frozen with tension.

They entered the delivery room, where Joanna lay without dignity for this peak experience. She was prepared as though for some bizarre sacrificial ritual, a sheet hung down her middle, her feet up in stirrups, in a room busy with people, doctors, nurses, and three student nurses who were there to observe Joanna with her legs up.

"Okay, Joanna, only push when I tell you and then stop," the doctor said. They had practiced this at home; it was part of the course. Ted was momentarily reassured that something was familiar.

"Mr. Kramer, stay next to Joanna. You can observe here." He indicated a mirror above the table.

"Now. Push! Push!" the doctor called out, and then everything went very rapidly—Joanna screamed as the waves of pain kept coming, she tried to rest taking deep breaths between, and then more pushing as Ted held on to her, his arms around her as she pushed forward and forward, "Think *out*, baby!" Ted said to her from the course, and she pushed with him holding on to her and pushed and pushed, and a baby was out crying, Joanna was crying, Ted was kissing Joanna on the forehead, on the eyes, kissing her tears, the others in the room, not cold observers after all, beaming, even the star doctor, smiling, and during the celebratory mood as the baby was placed to the side to be weighed and tested, Ted Kramer stood over William Kramer and counted his limbs and his fingers and his toes and saw with relief that he was not deformed.

In the recovery room, they talked quietly—details, people to be called, chores for Ted—and then she wanted to sleep.

"You were fantastic, Joanna."

"Well, I did it. Next time I'll mail it in."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

He went upstairs to the nursery for a last look at the baby, lying in a cardboard box. He was sleeping, a peanut.

"Good night, little boy," he said aloud, trying to make it real for himself. "I'm your daddy."

He went downstairs, made the phone calls, and for the next few days, aside from visits to the hospital when the baby's presence was actual, while at work, while at home, Ted kept seeing the recurring image of that peanut face and was deeply touched.

He had not been the helpmate they talked about in the course, but breaking up the traffic jam was special, and then there was the moment—holding on to Joanna, physically holding her at the very moment of birth.

Later, when it all turned and he tried to remember if they were ever really close, he reminded her of that moment.

"I don't distinctly remember your being there," she said.

## Two

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They met on Fire Island, where he had a half share in a singles' group house, which permitted him to come out every other weekend, and she had a quarter share in a house, which gave her every fourth weekend, and with what was left of these arithmetic possibilities, they were at one of three open-house cocktail parties that were held on the Saturday of the weekend they both happened to be there.

Joanna was circled by three men on a crowded porch. Ted was watching her and their eyes met, as her eyes met with a dozen other men who were also hunting. Ted had been shuttling between a group house in Amagansett and the house in Fire Island, assuming out of the combined total of two singles' scenes he would meet a Someone or at least a Someone Or Other. He had acquired the beach equivalent of street smarts by now, which was to know where to stand and what to do to meet the pretty girl on the



deck surrounded by three men and about to leave with one of them.

When Ted saw it was a person he had played volleyball with, he walked down to the front of the ramp to the house and leaned against the rail. He stopped him, exchanged banalities, and rather than appear to be rude, the man had to introduce Ted to his friend. She was Joanna and now they knew each other from the deck.

He did not see her on the beach the following day, but he took a guess at her being on one of the three busiest ferries off the island on Sunday night, so he sat at the ferry dock, trying to look like a nonchalant weekender reluctant to part with the sunset. She lined up for the second ferry. Ted noted she was not with a man, but with two girl friends. Her friends were attractive, which would appeal to Larry of the station wagon. Ted's friend, Larry, was divorced and an old station wagon was left over from the settlement. Larry used it to offer women something of value at the end of a weekend, a ride back to the city. Entire group houses of women could be given rides, Larry in his station wagon looking at times as though he were chauffeuring teams of stewardesses back from an airport.

"Hello, Joanna. It's Ted. Remember me? Do you have a ride?"

"Are you on this ferry?"

"I was just waiting for my friend. I'd better see where he is."

Ted strolled to the beginning of the dock and as soon as he was out of view, raced back to the house.

"Pretty ladies, Larry!" and he rushed him out of the house down to the dock.

Heading back to the mainland it was one of