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Morgan's Passing

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Author of SAINT MAYBE

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SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

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MORGAN'S PASSING

Anne Tyler

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1967

There used to be an Easter Fair at the Presbyterian church every year. Early Saturday morning the long, gentle hill out front would be taken over by tents, painted booths, mechanical rides on lease from the Happy Days Amusement Company, and large wooden carts slowly filling up their windows with buttered popcorn. A white rabbit, six feet tall, would bow in a dignified way as he passed out jellybeans from a basket. In the afternoon there would be an egg hunt behind the Sunday School building, and the winner was given a chocolate chicken. Music floated everywhere, strung-out wisps of one song weaving into another. The air always smelled like cotton candy.

But the Baltimore climate was unpredictable. Sometimes it was really too cold for a fair. One year, when Easter fell in March, so little was growing yet that the egg hunt was a joke. The eggs lay exposed and foolish on the bald brown lawn, and children pounced on them with mittened hands. The grownups stood hunched in sweaters and scarves. They seemed to have strayed in from the wrong season. It would have been a better fair with no human beings at all—just the striped tents flapping their spring-colored scallops, the carousel playing "After the Ball," and the plastic horses prancing around riderless.

At the puppet show, in a green and white tent lit by a chilly greenish glow, Cinderella wore a strapless evening gown that made her audience shiver. She was a glove puppet with a large, round head and braids of

yellow yarn. At the moment she was dancing with the Prince, who had a Dutch Boy haircut. They held each other so fondly, it was hard to remember they were really just two hands clasping each other. "You have a beautiful palace," she told him. "The floors are like mirrors! I wonder who scrubs them."

Her voice was wry and throaty, not at all puppet-like. You almost expected to see the vapor rising from her painted mouth.

The Prince said, "I have no idea, Miss . . . what was that name?"

Instead of answering, she looked down at her feet. The pause grew too long. The children shifted in their folding chairs. It became apparent that the ballroom was not a ballroom at all, but a gigantic cardboard carton with the front cut away and a gauze curtain at the rear. A child in the audience said, "I have to go to the bathroom."

"Ssh."

"Your name," said the Prince.

Why didn't she speak?

Really, the children saw, she was only a puppet. They sat back. Something had snapped. Even the parents looked confused.

Then Cinderella flopped onto her face in a very unnatural way, and a human hand emerged from her skirts and withdrew behind the scrim. The children stared. On the stage lay her dead and empty shell, with her arms flung back as if broken. "Is it over?" a child asked his mother.

"Hush. Sit still. You know that's not how it ends."

"Well, where's the rest, then? Can we go?"

"Wait. Here comes someone."

It was a grownup, but just barely. He felt his way through the bedsheet that hung at one side of the stage: a dark, thin boy in khakis and a rust-colored corduroy jacket, with a white shirt so old and well washed that all the life had gone out of it. There was something fierce about him—maybe the twist of his mouth, or the

defiant way he kept his chin raised. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, running a hand through his hair. "Boys and girls . . ."

"It's the Prince," said a child.

"Boys and girls, there's been . . . an illness. The play is over. You can get your money at the ticket booth."

He turned away, not even waiting to see how this would be taken, and fumbled at the sheet. But then he seemed struck by another thought, and he turned back to the audience. "Excuse me," he said. He ran a hand through his hair again. (No wonder it was so mussed and ropy.) "Is there a doctor in the house?" he asked.

They looked at each other—children, mostly, and most of them under five. Apparently there was no doctor. The boy gave a sudden, sharp sigh and lifted a corner of the sheet. Then someone at the rear of the tent stood up.

"I am a doctor," he said.

He was a lank, tall, bearded man in a shaggy brown suit that might have been cut from blankets, and on his head he wore a red ski cap—the pointy kind, with a pom-pom at the tip. Masses of black curls burst out from under it. His beard was so wild and black and bushy that it was hard to tell how old he was. Maybe forty? Forty-five? At any rate, older than you'd expect to see at a puppet show, and no child sat next to him to explain his being there. But he craned his head forward, smiling kindly, leading with his long, pinched nose and waiting to hear how he could help. The boy looked relieved; his face lost some of its tension.

"Come with me," he said. He lifted the sheet higher.

Stumbling over people's feet, sliding past the children who were already swarming toward the exit, the doctor made his way to the boy. He wiped his palms on his thighs and stooped under the sheet. "What seems to be the trouble here?" he asked.

"It's her," said the boy.

He meant the blond girl resting on a heap of muslin

bags. She was small-boned and frail, but enormously pregnant, and she sat cradling her stomach—guarding it, looking up at the doctor out of level gray eyes. Her lips were so colorless, they were almost invisible.

"I see," said the doctor.

He dropped down beside her, hitching up his trousers at the knees, and leaned forward to set a hand on her abdomen. There was a pause. He frowned at the tent wall, weighing something in his mind. "Yes," he said finally. He sat back and studied the girl's face. "How far apart are the pains?" he asked.

"All the time," she said, in Cinderella's wry voice.

"Constantly? When did they begin?"

"About . . . an hour ago, Leon? When we were setting up for this performance."

The doctor raised his eyebrows—two black thickets.

"It would be exceedingly strange," he said, "if they were so close together this soon."

"Well, they are," the girl said matter-of-factly.

The doctor stood up, grunting a little, and dusted off his knees. "Oh, well," he said, "just to be on the safe side, I suppose you ought to check into the hospital. Where's your car parked?"

"We don't have one," the boy said.

"No car?"

The doctor looked around him, as if wondering how all their equipment had arrived—the bulky stage, the heap of little costumes, the liquor carton in the corner with a different puppet's head poking out in each cardboard compartment.

"Mr. Kenny brought us," said the boy, "in his panel truck. He's chairman of the Fund-Raising Committee."

"You'd better come with me, then," the doctor said. "I'll drive you over." He seemed fairly cheerful about it. He said, "What about the puppets? Shall we take them along?"

"No," said the boy. "What do I care about the puppets? Let's just get her to the hospital."

"Suit yourself," the doctor told him, but he cast an-

other glance around, as if regretting a lost opportunity, before he bent to help the boy raise the girl to her feet. "What are they made of?" he asked.

"Huh?" said the boy. "Oh, just . . . things." He handed the girl her purse. "Emily makes them," he added.

"Emily?"

"This is Emily, my wife. I'm Leon Meredith."

"How do you do?" the doctor said.

"They're made of rubber balls," said Emily.

Standing, she turned out to be even slighter than she'd first appeared. She walked gracefully, leading the men out through the front of the tent, smiling at the few stray children who remained. Her draggled black skirt hung unevenly around her shins. Her thin white cardigan, dotted with specks of black lint, didn't begin to close over the bulge of her stomach.

"I take an ordinary, dimestore rubber ball," she said, "and cut a neck hole with my knife. Then I cover the ball with a nylon stocking, and I sew on eyes and a nose, paint a mouth, make hair of some kind . . ."

Her voice grew strained. The doctor glanced over at her, sharply.

"The cheapest kind of stockings are the best," she said. "They're pinker. From a distance, they look more like skin."

"Is this going to be a long walk?" Leon asked.

"No, no," said the doctor. "My car's in the main parking lot."

"Maybe we should call an ambulance."

"Really, that won't be necessary," the doctor said.

"But what if the baby comes before we get to the hospital?"

"Believe me," said the doctor, "if I thought there was the faintest chance of that, I wouldn't be doing this. I have no desire whatever to deliver a baby in a Pontiac."

"Lord, no," Leon said, and he cast a sideways look

at the doctor's hands, which didn't seem quite clean. "But Emily claims it's arriving any minute."

"It is," Emily said calmly. She was walking along between them now, climbing the slope to the parking lot unassisted. She supported the weight of her baby as if it were already separate from her. Her battered leather pocketbook swung from her shoulder. In the sunlight her hair, which was bound on her head in two silvery braids, sprang up in little corkscrewed wisps like metal filings flying toward a magnet, and her skin looked chilled and thin and pale. But her eyes remained level. She didn't appear to be frightened. She met the doctor's gaze squarely. "I can feel it," she told him.

"Is this your first?"

"Yes."

"Ah, then," he said, "you see, it can't possibly come so soon. It'll be late tonight at the earliest—maybe even tomorrow. Why, you haven't been in labor more than an hour!"

"Maybe, and maybe not," said Emily.

Then she gave a sudden, surprising toss of her head; she threw the doctor a tilted look. "After all," she said, "I've had a backache since two o'clock this morning. Maybe I just didn't *know* it was labor."

Leon turned to the doctor, who seemed to hesitate a moment. "Doctor?" Leon said.

"All my patients say their babies are coming immediately," the doctor told him. "It never happens."

They had reached the flinty white gravel of the parking lot. Various people passed—some just arriving, holding down their coats against the wind; others leaving with balloons and crying children and cardboard flats of shivering tomato seedlings.

"Are you warm enough?" Leon asked Emily. "Do you want my jacket?"

"I'm fine," Emily said, although beneath her cardigan she wore only a skimpy black T-shirt, and her legs were bare and her shoes were ballet slippers, thin as paper.

"You must be freezing," Leon said.

"I'm all *right*, Leon."

"It's the adrenaline," the doctor said absently. He came to a stop and gazed off across the parking lot, stroking his beard. "I seem to have lost my car," he said.

Leon said, "Oh, God."

"No, there it is. Never mind."

His car was clearly a family man's—snub-nosed, outdated, with a frayed red hair ribbon flying from the antenna and WASH THIS! written in the dust on one fender. Inside, there were schoolbooks and dirty socks and gym bloomers and rucked-up movie magazines. The doctor knelt on the front seat and swatted at the clutter in the rear until most of it had landed on the floor. Then he said, "There you go. You two sit in the back; you'll be more comfortable." He settled himself in front and started the engine, which had a whining, circular sound. Emily and Leon slid into the rear. Emily found a track shoe under her right knee, and she placed it on her lap, cupping the heel and toe in her fingers. "Now," said the doctor. "Which hospital?"

Emily and Leon looked at each other.

"City? University? Hopkins?"

"Whatever's the closest," Leon said.

"But which have you reserved? Where's your doctor?"

"We haven't reserved anyplace," Emily said, "and we don't have a doctor."

"I see."

"Anywhere," said Leon. "Just get her there."

"Very well."

The doctor maneuvered his car out of the parking space. He shifted gears with a grinding sound. Leon said, "I guess we should have attended to this earlier."

"Yes, actually," said the doctor. He braked and looked in both directions. Then he nosed the car into the stream of traffic on Farley Street. They were traveling through a new, raw section barely within the city

limits—ranch houses, treeless lawns, another church, a shopping mall. "But I suppose you lead a footloose sort of life," the doctor said.

"Footloose?"

"Carefree. Unattached," he said. He patted all his pockets with one hand until he'd found a pack of Camels. He shook a cigarette free and lit it, which involved so much fumbling and cursing and clutching at dropped objects that it was a wonder the other drivers managed to stay clear of him. When he'd finally flicked his match out, he exhaled a great cloud of smoke and started coughing. The Pontiac wandered from lane to lane. He thumped his chest and said, "I suppose you just follow the fairs, am I correct? Just follow the festivities, stop wherever you find yourselves."

"No, what happened was—"

"But I wish we could have brought along the puppets," the doctor said. He turned onto a wider street. He was forced to slow down now, inching past furniture shops and carpet warehouses, trailing a mammouth Mayflower van that blocked all view of what lay ahead. "Are we coming to a traffic light?" he asked. "Is it red or green? I can't see a thing. And what about their noses, the puppets' noses? How'd you make the stepmother's nose? Was it a carrot?"

"Excuse me?" Emily said. "Nose?" She didn't seem to be concentrating. "I'm sorry," she said. "There's some kind of water all over everything."

The doctor braked and looked in the rear-view mirror. His eyes met Leon's. "Can't you hurry?" Leon asked him.

"I *am* hurrying," the doctor said.

He took another puff of his cigarette, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger. The air in the car grew blue and layered. Up ahead, the Mayflower van was trying to make a left turn. It would take all day, at this rate. "Honk," Leon said. The doctor honked. Then he clamped his cigarette in his teeth and swung out into the right-hand lane, where a car coming up fast behind

nearly slammed into them. Now horns were blowing everywhere. The doctor started humming. He pulled back into the left lane, set his left-turn signal blinking, and sped toward the next traffic light, which hung beside a swinging sign that read NO LEFT TURN. His cigarette had a long, trembly tube of ashes hanging from it. He tapped the ashes onto the floor, the steering wheel, his lap. *"After the ball is o-ver,"* he sang. He careened to the right again and cut across the apron of a Citgo station, took a sharp left, and emerged on the street he wanted. *"After the break of morn . . ."* Leon gripped the back of the front seat with one hand and held on to Emily with the other. Emily gazed out the side window.

"I always go to fairs, any fair in town," the doctor said. "School fairs, church fairs, Italian fairs, Ukrainian . . . I like the food. I also like the rides; I like to watch the people who run them. What would it be like, working for such an outfit? I used to take my daughters, but they're too old now, they say. 'How can that be?' I ask them. 'I'm not too old; how come you are?' My youngest is barely ten. How can she be too old?"

"The baby's here," Emily said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The baby. I feel it."

The doctor looked in the mirror again. His eyes were more aged than the rest of him—a mournful brown, bloodshot and pouched, the skin beneath them the tarnished color of a bruise inside a banana. He opened his mouth, or appeared to. At any rate, his beard lengthened. Then it shortened again.

"Stop the car," Leon said.

"Well . . . ah, yes, maybe so," the doctor said.

He parked beside a hydrant, in front of a tiny pizza parlor called Maria's Home-Style. Leon was chafing Emily's wrists. The doctor climbed out, scratching the curls beneath his ski cap and looking puzzled. "Excuse me," he said to Leon. Leon got out of the car. The doctor leaned in and asked, "You say you feel it?"

"I feel the head."

"Of course this is all a mistake," the doctor told Leon. "You know how long it takes the average primipara to deliver? Between ten and twelve hours. Oh, at least. And with a great deal more carrying on, believe me. There's not a chance in this world that baby could be here yet."

But as he spoke, he was sliding Emily into a horizontal position on the seat, methodically folding back her damp skirt in a series of tidy pleats. He said, "What in the name of—?" It appeared that her T-shirt was some sort of leotard; it had a crotch. He grimaced and ripped the center seam. Then he said, "She's right."

"Well, *do* something," Leon said. "What are you going to do?"

"Go buy some newspapers," the doctor told him. "Anything will be fine—*News American, Sun* . . . but fresh ones, you understand? Don't just accept what someone hands you in a diner, saying he's finished reading it . . ."

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God. I don't have change," Leon said.

The doctor started rummaging through his pockets. He pulled out his mangled pack of Camels, two lint-covered jellybeans, and a cylinder of Rolaids. "Emily," he said, "would you happen to have change for a dollar?"

Emily said something that sounded like yes, and turned her head from side to side. "Try her purse," the doctor said. They felt along the floor, among the gym clothes and soda straws. Leon brought up the purse by its strap. He plowed through it till he found a billfold and then he raced off down the street, muttering, "Newspapers. Newspapers." It was a cheerful, jumbled street with littered sidewalks and a row of tiny shops—eating places, dry cleaners, florists. In front of one of the cafés were various newspapers in locked, windowed boxes.

The doctor stepped on his cigarette and ground it into