



In The Near Dark

a short story by ALEX MINDT

THOMAS CLARK

At first there's darkness, and then darkness becoming less dark, then vaguely dark, then just shadows and the glow of sunlight pushing on closed blinds. There's Melanie's tangled black hair falling on the pillow inches from my face, a snuffle and the ruffle of sheets as her leg moves. There's a siren howling closer and closer and then fading. The phone rings, then rings again.

"Probably Mike," Melanie mumbles.

"I called and told him you wouldn't be in." I roll over and grab the phone from the nightstand and turn the ringer off, then lie on my back and stare at the various shades of darkness on the ceiling. In my mind I see shadows on a monitor, a flashing light in the center.

"Maybe I should go in," she says, her voice flat, tired. There's a long silence. "I don't want to go in."

A few months ago we gave up, surrendered. We accepted a life without kids. After four years and forty-six thousand dollars, after being so single-mindedly focused on procreation that it almost tore us apart, we relinquished hope and, strangely, entered into a second courtship: clinking glasses in French bistros, dancing arm in arm to the tunes of street musicians, going to the theater, the improv, comedy clubs. We did Ecstasy at a party at a rundown house in the Rockaways and then caressed and petted each other on the subway in the middle of the night. We took weekend jaunts to Montauk, Cold Spring. We had sex all over the apartment, in Melanie's office in Midtown, in my tiny office at Columbia, in public places, without expectation.

And then, sitting on a blanket with a bottle of Mouton Cadet on the Great Hill in Central Park, we watched a performance of *King Lear* put on by one of those small troupes that pop up around the city in the summer. Old Lear, beaten and battered, betrayed not so much by his daughters as by his need to believe a lie, raged against the storm, and, as if on cue, the sky opened up. Lightning flashed, rain fell, and thunder shook the ground. Lear, broken, his dead child in his arms, howled, "No, no, no life? Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more, Never, never, never, never, never!"

And the rain kept falling as the actors bowed and Melanie pulled me off the wet blanket, down the hill, across the street, and into the dark North Woods, in among a stand of oak and ash trees; it kept falling as she pushed me back against the brick wall of the armory, as she kissed my neck, as she unbuttoned my pants, as I spun her around and pulled her skirt up, as I entered her, as I pushed hard and then harder, as she let

it out: *Never, never, never.*

But no. Not never. In surrendering, we prevailed. Suddenly the blood didn't flow, and that was life.

In a darkened ultrasound room, a light flashed on a monitor full of shadows, and a Russian sonographer named Yeva looked at her screen and said, with a heavy accent, "That's the heartbeat." And Melanie and I wondered, *How?*

We'd gone through years of IUI, IVF, IVM, ICSI; of hormone injections and tests and more tests; of testing my fucking testes. The verdict: for me, abnormal morphology; for her, endometriosis. At one point, after her laparoscopy, my sperm somehow made it through, and she got pregnant, but we lost it within two weeks. Then another year of trying, and another miscarriage. And then we tried again, but even though I cut soy out of my diet, stopped exercising, no longer wore briefs, and took only lukewarm showers, my sperm still floundered around in the dark. And so we picked a sperm donor: a six-foot-two, brown-haired, blue-eyed Princeton undergrad with a nearly perfect SAT score, a volunteer for Habitat for Humanity who enjoyed writing poetry and teaching kids to ride bikes. He was two inches taller than me. And for the week that his sperm was inside my wife, I hated him.

When Princeton didn't work, we went to a German herbalist in Hoboken, then an acupuncturist in Chinatown. For weeks we ingested only cauliflower, ginseng, guava, and Chinese licorice root. We stopped visiting friends with babies. We bought a box of tissues for the nightstand. And I took up running again, a daily loop in Central Park, training for 5ks and 10ks, running until it grew dark and then running under the streetlights so I didn't have to go home to our apartment.

A few weeks after *King Lear*, sitting in that semidark room and looking at the screen full of shadows, we thought we had a chance — until Yeva sat back, frowned, and returned the ultrasound wand to its holster. "I be right back."

Did we ever think that we really had a chance? The flashing light told me that nothing makes sense and everything makes sense and sense isn't something that we need to make. It wasn't a warning, and it was. It was the beginning of something and the end of something all together.

Dr. Pradeep, Melanie's new OB-GYN, came into the room. An East-Indian woman with long black hair and dark circles under her eyes, she gave us a close-mouthed smile, picked up a plastic bottle, squeezed blue lubricant onto the wand, and inserted it between Melanie's legs. "Let's see here."

Yeva came and looked over Dr. Pradeep's shoulder at the computer screen that Melanie and I couldn't see. We stared up at the monitor in the corner of the room.

"Ah, there it is," Dr. Pradeep said. She leaned toward the

computer and pressed a key on the keyboard. "There's the fetal pole," she said. "And it does have a heartbeat."

I squeezed Melanie's hand.

"But," Dr. Pradeep said, "it's only seventy beats per minute."

"Only?" I said.

"It should be between 120 and 160." Her voice had a tight, pinched quality, as if her words were naturally unruly and needed to be controlled.

"But it's alive, right?" Melanie asked.

Dr. Pradeep adjusted the wand a bit, and the images on the monitor blurred. "Let's wait a minute and see," she said.

Melanie looked up at me, biting her bottom lip.

I said, "My wife and I are runners. Do you think that could have something to do with the heartbeat?"

"I used to run," Melanie said. "I haven't in years."

"You ran cross-country at Penn," I said. I turned back to Dr. Pradeep and said, "My pulse is usually around fifty."

Dr. Pradeep shifted the wand around and then pressed a few keys on the keyboard. "This is what we're going to do," she said. "It's early. Ultrasounds at this stage are not always accurate. I want you to come back next week. We'll see if the heartbeat has improved and if the fetus has grown."

"So," I said, "we've got a chance with this?"

Dr. Pradeep's lips tightened. "Right now, it's not looking good." She removed the wand from Melanie and placed it in its holster. "You can clean yourself up now."

"Can you give us a number?" Melanie said. "A percentage?"

Yeva turned on the light. Melanie squinted and wiped the lubricant from between her legs.

"Just go home and relax," Dr. Pradeep said, "and next week we'll see if there's any improvement. OK?"

A week later, in the same room, with the lights off and the monitor above us, the light flashing at its center, Dr. Pradeep said, sounding even more stressed than before, "The heartbeat is down to sixty, and the fetus hasn't grown at all. The size should've doubled over the past week."

Dr. Pradeep told us to go on about our lives and expect a miscarriage.

"I'm cramping," she mumbles.

My pen scribbles a few words on my legal pad.

"You're not writing about this, are you, Doug?"

"What? No, I'm jotting down some thoughts on *Antigone*. Lucia wants to direct it for her thesis."

"I had a dream that you were writing about this, that it was all a play, with actors in masks. Please don't write about this." She rolls over, takes a deep breath, and says, "It's ironic."

"What is?"

"I married you because I thought you'd be a good father. You're so solid, you know? Even-keeled."

"I hope that's not the only reason," I say. "What about my sex appeal? My sense of humor?"

"What do you want me to say? I could lie to you."

"Please do."

"I feel nauseous." She swallows and clenches her teeth.

"Mike called again. He's doing his usual high-pitched Mike thing about the Arise Coffee campaign."

"Maybe I should go in."

"Sweetie, look at you," I said. "He can take care of it."

"I don't want to go in," she says, tears filling her eyes. "Oh, boy." She starts crying and pulls the pillow over her head.

On the third day after the ultrasound, I move the TV into the bedroom. Melanie props herself up and watches the Home Shopping Network and the *telenovelas* on Telemundo, which she says lighten her mood and improve her Spanish. "Adíos, mío," she says when I leave the room.

I clean up the abstract of my essay "From Noh to Brecht: Madness in the Mirror and the Mask," which I'm trying to place in *Comparative Drama*. I make coconut-crust chicken cutlets for dinner and cajole her into eating a couple of bites before she goes back into the bedroom to watch a *telenovela* about an ugly woman who is transformed into a real beauty.

(end of excerpt)

So now, here in this indistinct darkness, on the bed we have slept in together for ten years, we wait for the fetus to die in the womb. I try my best to help. I call Melanie's office again and lie. ("It's some pesky stomach virus.") I make a breakfast that she doesn't eat. I bring her a glass of Ovaltine. She attempts to smile. I massage her feet. Maybe we should bring the TV into the bedroom. Should we paint the kitchen? What color? Terra cotta? Blue? And then she sleeps.

In the middle of the afternoon, Melanie wakes from her nap and asks me why I want a baby. Her voice is slurred, as if she's not fully awake.

"Huh?" I say, not eager to understand whatever it is she's getting at. "How are you feeling, sweetie?"