

Short Story by Amy Martin

GOOD

“Oh my god. Renee?”

At my name, I stop scanning my grocery list and look up to find a woman staring at me, her shopping basket clutched in two hands.

I think her name is Melanie. Definitely Mel-something. Melinda? Melody?

“How are you?” she asks, like I’m a long-lost relative or high school BFF.

“Good,” I lie. I try to move around her, but a sticky, jam-covered child is in the way.

“Lucy, watch out,” Mel says in that perky, patient, mumsy way as she hooks the child behind her with her foot. She glances around me. “Where’s your one? Home with her dad?”

“Mm-hmm.” I snatch a jar of pickled onions off the shelf, hold it up like a talisman to ward her off. “Better keep moving.”

“Sure,” she says. “Can’t stay away from them too long.” She transfers the basket to one hand, wraps the other around the little girl. “I miss this one like crazy when she’s in day care.”

I push my trolley past them, towards the end of the aisle.

“Of course,” Mel continues, “it’s not for much longer.”

My feet stall as my brain makes the leap of logic. “You’re pregnant again?”

“Three months.” Her gaze drops to her stomach. “But I swear I’ve already popped out.”

“You look great.”

Another lie.

She looks tired. She looks like someone who nurtured another human being for nine months and never quite recovered. She looks like she's happy to do it again.

"Where did you go with yours?" she asks. "The birthing centre?"

"Hospital," I say. My heart sends out a jolt of electricity then resumes an erratic rhythm, like it's forgotten how to do the one thing its built for. Like it's trying to hold on to the blood.

Blood.

On the bed.

On the floor.

On me.

On *her*.

"What's it like there?" Mel asks.

The room was about the size of a small bedroom. Snifter green walls. Washed-out yellow doors. Sterile cream ceiling.

The bathroom was up the hallway, but I was plugged into a drip, wrapped in monitors, couldn't get up.

I peed in a cardboard chamber pot.

With an audience.

In another room another woman screamed her agony. Then the mewling of a baby accompanied her relieved sobs.

How cruel, I thought, making me listen to someone who'd made it out the other side when I still had the worst to come.

“They’ve remodelled since,” I say. “I’ve heard it’s nice.”

“Oh, great,” Mel says. “I want to go to the birthing centre again, but you never know.”

“You never do.” I smile and nod and guide my trolley away.

One wheel protests as it rolls. Ba-bump...ba-bump...ba-bump. Like a heartbeat.

Something claws at my throat and I swallow against it. Sniff. Blink. Pretend I’ve got a cold and blow my nose on a flower-embroidered hankie.

I speed walk around the edges of the supermarket.

Ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump.

Grab milk, bread, frozen dinners. Double back for chocolate. Avoid *that* aisle. The one with nappies and pureed food and tins of formula and cute, colourful toys.

Ba-bump-ba-bump-ba-bump.

Check my list. Rule out the things I absolutely do not need today. Remember toilet paper.

“Oh, hey, Renee!” Mel is standing in front of oral care, basket on the ground, child spinning in circles beside her.

I toss a four-pack of rolls in my trolley and consider fleeing.

“A bit of advice?” Mel asks.

“Um...”

She holds up two toothbrushes. “This one says two to five, and this one says four to seven. Do you think this’ll be too big for her little mouth?”

I approach them—it’s the shortest route to the checkout anyway—and crouch down beside the little girl.

“Smile for me, honey,” I say. “Show me those pearly whites.”

She bares her teeth. Tiny little things, living independent lives in her mouth.

“Beautiful,” I say. I touch a jammy cheek to free a mahogany lock of hair. It’s soft and doesn’t want to stay behind her ear.

Would *her* hair have been dark brown like this, or white blond like in her father’s baby photos?

Would *she* have stood there grinning at a stranger or hidden behind me?

The questions are pointless.

I push to my feet, lean heavily on my trolley. “I think the smaller one will be fine for a while yet.”

“Thanks,” Mel says. “Sometimes it’s nice to get another mum’s opinion, eh?”

“Yeah.” I take one step and then another towards freedom.

Ba-bump...ba-bump...ba-bump.

“I’m part of a great online group,” she says, the words rushing out in an attempt to finish before I’m too far away. “Good advice, no pressure. You should join.”

“Maybe.”

“What’s your username? I’ll invite you.”

I can’t tell her. If she looks me up she’ll see the lack of baby photos, the lack of opinions on breast versus formula, the lack of reposted “you know you’re a mother when...” articles.

If she looks me up, she’ll know I’m not a mother any more. She’ll know I barely ever was.

“I’ll find you,” I lie.

“Great,” she says. “It’s wonderful to catch up. We missed you in the antenatal group.”

I'm almost at the end of the aisle.

She's almost yelling.

"Someone said you'd moved."

That was me. My lie.

It could've been true. Someone was walking around in my life, but she was a vacant room. It was the only way I could cope. Though it cost me everything in the end.

Maybe losing the baby wasn't my fault.

But losing my husband was.

"See ya," I say and turn away.

I keep my gaze on the floor as I weave my trolley towards the checkout with the shortest queue.

I transfer the groceries to the conveyor. Just the essentials. Just enough for one person.

The checkout operator offers me a cheery hello. "How are you today?" she asks.

I thought I was okay.

But the plaster I'd stuck over the wound was just torn off by the tiny, grubby fingers of a four year old.

But when people ask "How are you?" there's only one answer they expect.

So I take this grocery shopping trip from hell and lock it away with all the other things I don't want to remember.

And I try to sound convincing.

"Good."

THE END