

War Songs

Mother had sent him to me three days before. She said I'd been alone in the city too long. It's times like these you need blood relatives, she said.

So my little brother Jack Lee sat in the waiting room. Right off the elevators so he could watch the nurses. It was all I could do to keep him in waiting, everyday a trip down to the hospital gift shop. Three comic books, one an "Archies for Jesus" that I slipped in for the good of his soul. Sixty-four crayola crayons, with the one color called flesh that don't look like any flesh I've seen. (And I can say that, I've seen some.) Two coloring books, a crossword puzzle book, and, after Jack Lee nagged enough, a tiny pocketbook about superstitions with a lady on the front.

She stared at him and he stared right back.

They kept the tiniest babies at the end of the hall. It's the room you go to when you're not new enough to be newborn anymore. I don't know how they tell. Maybe it's something in their eyes.

My baby's eyes were blue. "Don't get too excited," the nurses kept saying, "Most babies start out with those milky blue eyes. Besides, his mama's eyes are brown."

That they are. Isaac's eyes were two spots of blue in purely the oldest face I've every seen. Looked like one of those dolls Grandma Visser used to make with dried out apples for heads.

He was in the last row of the tiniest ones. There was a window. Not much of a window. And the oxygen tank coming out of the wall looked like something you could play with.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Brammer." A nurse came up behind me. She scared me, even though she wasn't any bigger than a doll herself. She was taking morning temps. Something new I'd learned.

"Good-morning. How was his night?"

"Pretty stable." She looked at her little dollhouse clipboard. "Uh-huh. He rested. We had a good night, didn't we?" Isaac arched his back against her hand against his chest. There was a Turkish towel rolled up against the soft spine to keep him on his side. He remembered to breathe better on his side. "Oh, yes. Oh yes. Yes, we did." Then she said, "You came just in time for breakfast, Mama."

"Oh good." Well now, what was so good about it? I can wonder that now. I wonder who that nurse's real mama was, and if she ever taught her any manners.

They said Isaac didn't know how to suck. They let me go dry and they brought in the tubes. The very most slender one, seemed like no wider than a blade of

grass, was taped to his cheek. The tape thicker than the cheek. It went through his nose and down into the stomach that couldn't seem to keep anything in it. No matter how smooth.

I said, "Are you hungry, baby?" The nurse hung another bag of waters on the pole. I wonder if it tasted familiar. And when it came sliding down all those tubes.

"Now look at that." Isaac's little grandma mouth, all snugged in, he was sucking air. I swear it. "He wants me to feed him." It was too late, even though once, when he had been inside me, I could go wet for thinking. Just the thought of him. "Please look." I tugged on her sleeve. "He does know how to suck."

She smiled at me. "He's having a good morning, isn't he?"

Christ, I don't know. Is he? He was like no color in Jack Lee's crayon box. Waxed paper.

He coughed. His ribs moved in and out. Don't cry now. They don't think I can do anything either.

The first cigarette of the morning and Jack Lee was playing one of those games you play with string and kids.

"Ruthie, here," he said, "stick your hand through here."

I stuck my hand through the middle of the web. He yanked back tight on either side and my hand puffed out like a balloon on a string. He said he'd pull 'til I was blue and I had to hit him with my purse to make him leave go.

"The hill of Zi-on yields a thou-sand sacred sweets--"

"And you're one of 'em," he whispered. We were scooted down behind the last pew, hiding from his daddy, Pastor Dean.

"Be-fore we reach the heav-n'ly fields--" Pastor Dean was singing, and leading the youth of the church in marching around the sanctuary. He beat time with the flat of his hand on a maroon "Service of Christian Worship" hymnal.

Gene and I, when we couldn't stop kissing, hid under the stained glass window that showed Jesus suffering the children. The sun would shine mostly through His face and the window sky above the children was so blue a person could say it was "azure."

"Be-fore we reach the heav-nly fields,
Or walk the golden streets."

"Ruthie, would you walk the golden streets for me?" Gene pulled me down closer to him. You see that with us it didn't matter what the question was. I always said yes.

"We're mar-ching to Zi-on,
Beau-tiful, Beau-tiful Zi-on--"

Gene, just eighteen, with the eyebrows that followed the curve of his eye just-so, and the blood of pheasants staining the seams of his jacket sleeves. And me, with the ring that said "84" and "Eugene" and showed a swimmer just ready to hit water that was azure, like the window.

"We're mar-ching upward to Zi-on.

The wonderful city of God."

"You are God's army!" yelled Pastor Dean, and slammed the hymnbook down on the lecturn.

"You are God's treasure," Gene kissed me and snuck for the door, and the last thing he said before he left the church for good was "Mrs. Brammer."

Isaac had morning tests. They looked through him time and time again, tracing every little pathway through his body. I bet that I could've seen through him if I could've taken him out into the sunlight. Jack Lee needed the sunlight, like any little boy, so we went out that morning and sat on the steps of the downtown Methodist church. He took off his shirt and we watched the nursing students on their way to lunch, already starting to pink from the May sun. I feel like leather around city girls.

"Ruthie, does Isaac have a mirror?" Jack Lee was starting to freckle. He hugged his superstition book tight to his chest.

"A mirror?"

"It says here in my superstition book that some people don't let babies look into mirrors. 'Cause of the evil eye." Jack Lee's eyes got big as saucers. He loved things that made big people sick. It was his age talking.

"Heathen talk!" I made to slug him, but he knew I was kidding. "If Mother were here she'd skin you."

"What do you think?"

"'Bout what?"

He waved his fingers in my face, "The evil eye!"

"If there is one, it's in your own peahead." If there is one, it looked at my baby's face.

Jack Lee clenched his fist and ate at his thumbnail. "Ruthie?"

"Yeah?"

"Is the baby gonna. . ."

We looked at the sun.

"It's too damn hot for May, Jack Lee. Here, blow on me." I blew in his face, hard. He blinked and sneezed.

"I ain't gonna blow on you." He wiped his nose on his sleeve. I'd embarrassed him.

"We oughta get back."

“Here, Ruth, I made something for Isaac. Maybe you could put it where he could see it.” Jack Lee reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded-up piece of paper. He’d torn off the back cover of his dinosaurs coloring book and drawn a basketball player, in green and gold, driving for the basket. The ball came down off his fingers like it couldn’t help but swish right into the basket, and a huge grin like a “C” on its back said, well ma’am he couldn’t help but win this basketball game. “For Isaac Eugene Brammer,” written across the top in fat crayoned cursive. Jack Lee wouldn’t look at me even when I caught him by the ear.

“This is so sweet.”

Jack Lee jerked away from me so hard he took two steps back before he caught himself. “It is not!” he yelled. He ran two traffic lights ahead of me before I could even try to catch him. Tell me what I said.

The monitor, no bigger than Isaac himself, screamed. It was the size and shape of a television screen. It hung in front of Isaac’s not-much-of-a-window. Isaac was tethered to it in three places. The red one to his leg, ending in a red dot of plastic the size of a half-dollar. The white one to his back. And the black one? Straight to his heart. Isaac tugged his fist to his face. Lines snap tight.

I couldn’t move, but I didn’t have to. My baby couldn’t remember breathing. The nurses called it a blue spell, like something that happened in olden times to ladies with tight corsets.

“It’s so cold in here. Is he just too cold, do you suppose?”

A nurse with tiny blue china hearts in her ears put her hand on my shoulder. “That one wasn’t so bad,” she said. “Just another nasty blue spell. All he needed was some suction and a little more oxygen.”

“I can’t get used to this not breathing. Let me hold him.”

I couldn’t get close enough to him. His skin was like paper. Is he warm enough? Does he seem warm enough to you?

Isaac opened his eyes. I only saw the blue of them for a second.

He fell asleep.

“Come here.” Gene pulled me into the bathroom. “Don’t you know babies come from cards and dancing?”

“Gene, honey, you’ll wreck my dress.” My wedding dress, peacock blue, that’s what the saleslady said. “Don’t now, they’ll miss us downstairs.”

I heard Mother say, “The only time Ruth has ever been sick or laid up was when she was five years old.”

“A real handful!” Aunt Ruby yelled.

“I won’t make you dance.” Gene put his hands flat on the mirror. Me on

the sink, my mother's house - I don't know why I'm telling all this.

"And she fell off the toilet -- well she did -- pretending to be a ballerina on top of a music box." We heard the laughing through the vents. The three of us. Isaac was there even then. He was my secret, no bigger, they say, than a walnut. I made love to him as much as to his daddy.

More.

"Mrs. Brammer." Isaac's doctor, with eyes like an old poodle, talked to me that day in the waiting area. Jack Lee was spread out all over the floor with his crayons, and ladies were stepping over him and hanging me these looks like I should tell him to get up from the tile. I didn't.

Isaac's doctor held both my hands in his. "And how are we today?"

Well, I don't know about you, mister.

"I hear we had another blue spell today."

"Yes, and — "

"We are trying to decrease his oxygen, and he is responding as well as we could hope — " He stopped. He was so damn careful with me. Like talking to a five year old. "You know and do remember how we described his lung condition?"

I nodded. "He just didn't have enough time in u - inside me - to. . ."

The doctor smiled like a widow reading newspaper death columns. Sick babies keeping him in money. "To secrete the hormone that makes the lungs expand and contract. Oh, then, we'll just wait. Every day is a miracle." He squeezed my leg, then walked away.

"Yeah, what does he know about miracles? You know, if Gene were here he'd look him in the face and say, "This hospital ain't worth a plug nickel."

Jack Lee looked up from his colors and put his hand on my foot. "He's just a faggot anyway," he said. He sounded all ragged.

"Jack Lee!" I grabbed his skinny little arm. "Oh well, I can't very well slap you into heaven, can I?"

"Ruth?" Jack Lee said, "Do you feel chastised?"

"What? Do I feel what?"

"Mom says that Isaac is a sign from God, like to take you down a peg or two. To chastise." And he said "chastise" like a hard word for something easy. Urinate when piss will do.

I stared at the sign that said to not let kids under fourteen past this point. The little bastard. What kind of question was that? When I didn't answer Jack Lee watched me and I knew he wouldn't forget me looking like that, because he was of an age, you know. All of nine and the most man I had.

Jack Lee jumped up and sat beside me. "I'm sorry, Ruth. That was dumb.

Here - um - I'll sing you a song.
Onward Christian Soldiers!
Marching as to war,
with the cross of Jesus going on before."
In our family we know all the war songs.

I was a bride yet, not even a wife. We hadn't even sent out all our thank-you cards. Mother moved Jack Lee into the back bedroom with all of Grandma Visser's clothes and the necklace with all the hair of her dead babies in the locket part. Just like when she'd lived there.

He'd come into our bed at night and crawl between us. It seems he felt Grandma there. "She says it's sad being dead," he kept saying. "She wants to take me with her." To where, Jack Lee?

"To Heaven. And I don't want to go!"

Gene said a few good licks would take care of ghosts. You can't blame him. He would go to lift up my nightie, and I just couldn't. Jack Lee needed me.

Gene left that night, like some other nights. "I'll be back, sugar," he said.

He was so proud of his rifles. We had pheasant for Sunday dinner all November.

Mother came to the door and said something like Jesus -- oh sweet Jesus .

Jack Lee sat up in bed beside me.

"What's wrong, Mother?"

She said it was Gene. Jack Lee ran for the door, and Mother grabbed him by the shoulder. Threw him up against the door, and him kicking like a rabbit. Tell me. Tell me.

"There's been an accident. Oh, don't go, Ruthie." Bitch. Tears. Where'd they come from?

We all fought at the door. She had me by the armholes of my yellow nightie. The one with the big red strawberries. "Leave her go!" yelled Jack Lee. He bucked free and ran for the stairs.

"Let me get to my husband!"

We all got to the shed at the same time, me running after Jack Lee, Mother running after me. The grass was slick. Warm dew.

So this is what they mean by washed in the blood.

And I remember how she wouldn't let me look. "This isn't a sight for someone in the family way." She pushed my head to the ground. I was wearing the earrings I'd made with copper wire from the phone company and safety pins and tiny green beads. They found one there later.

"No Eskimo pies!"

“Why, Ruth?” Jack Lee could eat even in that place. Mint green plastic trays. The milk tasted like sugar water.

I slammed my tray on the metal conveyor. It was like school lunch all over again. “‘Cause I’ve spent too much money as is . . . Here, fill up on the macaroni noodles . . . I swear I don’t know how Mother thought I was planning on keeping a nine year old’s gut in food.”

He wouldn’t take anything after that. I put things on his plate and he took them off. The lady who ran the cash register was tall as a man, with skin the color of Karo Syrup. There was a birthmark like a sugar maple on her cheek. I think Jack Lee fell in love. It was the closest he’d ever been to a colored person. Me too.

“Is that what Mom calls tryin’ to pass?” he asked while he watched me eat.

“This time I will slap you.”

He knew I kept my promises.

The waiting area filled up with daddies after dinner. They came off the street, some still in workclothes, sweat on their faces. Jack Lee was excited to be left with the men.

“Wait for me. I want to say good-night to Isaac.”

“Say good-night for me, too,” he yelled after me. “I’m the uncle,” he told the man next to him. The man didn’t answer.

You know, I didn’t see Isaac smile that day. He never reached for me like he needed me. All I saw when I saw Isaac were tiny lungs all hugged up and scared to breathe.

Isaac slept. The machines didn’t. I could see cars, so many cars, out the window on the street. A long hot drive before bed. No stars.

When Isaac was sleeping he looked like a baby. He looked like nothing else at all. Only the machines to tell you different. Good-night. And the nurse said, “We’ll call you.”

There was a calico cat with a frayed ear crouched by our door. Jack Lee chased it across the gravel parking lot. The motel was very clean and the air conditioner was wedged into the window with crumpled up magazines. *Field and Stream*, I think.

Jack Lee wouldn’t stop waiting, even in a room that wasn’t meant for waiting. He played solitaire on the bed. Crossed his fingers for a red jack.

The phone rang.

“Ruth. Bless you darlin’. It’s mother.” That lavender voice.

“Mother.” I listened to the wires hissing. How many miles? I could imagine travelling that distance. Burning a gully through Iowa. Burning my bridges behind me.

“Now, Ruth. Is Jack Lee behaving? And how is my grandbaby today?” Mother wouldn’t call him by name. It’s easier to kill him that way, isn’t it?

“They say no change, Mother.”

“Well now, Ruth, the ladies are here for prayer meeting again and we want to help heal that precious child. Mrs. Aubrey received the gift of tongues just last Wednesday.”

“Praise the Lord.”

“Yes, and she wants to get on the extension and pray with you for the miracle we -”

“Ruthie?” Mrs. Aubrey on the extension in my old room. A little blue phone, with buttons.

“Hello, Mrs. Aubrey.” I could see the old knot of a woman, the phone on its black iron stand near the oval window. She could hear the Catholic church bells. Whenever a Cervetti dies.

“The Bible has many promises in it, as you probably know.”

“Yes ma’am.” Not too far down the road was the Sinclair station. Is it a Dairy Sweet now? Things turn into things at home.

“In Phillipians it says ask and it shall be given to you. Do you believe that?”

“Oh yes, ma’am.”

“Then ask, child! And if it’s God’s will you shall receive a healthy child. Every promise is like a blank check. I want you to pray with me. You just claim that promise. You just sign that check.”

Just buy me a well Isaac. If I could’ve done that I’d have sent off a check. With XXX and OOO running along behind the signature. That’s what I’d do.

“Ruthie?” Jesus. That lavender voice.

“I feel like I’m in a pie,” Jack Lee said.

“You what?” Jack Lee and I leaned on the screen door.

“A pie,” he wiped his forehead. “Like I could scorch the bed.”

“It is hot.”

Jack Lee pushed his nose against the screen. There was a used car lot across the road with red, white and blue pennants flapping, and a Volkswagen on top of a platform that said “A-1 Used Cars.” “How did that sawed-off little thing get up there?”

More questions. How things get where they are. The not knowing is like nettles working out of my foot. The not knowing keeps us here.

And my baby in that place, all drawn up like an Amish purse.

And me here with my own blood.

“Good-night, Jack Lee.”

“Night Ruth.”

— Jennie VerSteeg