

UNDESCENDED

By Wendy MacLeod

A tired-looking woman, 40ish, in a hospital gown sits up in a hospital bed. There is a bouquet of flowers on the tray table beside her.

I don't know what I was expecting but it wasn't how I expected. It wasn't how you see in the movies. *Mr. and Mrs. Maddon you have a beautiful baby boy!*

That's old-fashioned now, I suppose, now that so many people *know* what they're having. In order to decorate the nursery. Order the birth announcements. Hide their private disappointments in the delivery room. Because no matter what they say, the fathers all want boys, and the mothers all want girls, hoping against hope for a little help with the housework.

But Henry and I didn't care. We just wanted a *child* after so many years, so many miscarriages. Four, in fact. My friends only know about three because I couldn't go through it all again with the last one. The pitying looks as they jiggle their strollers back and forth, doling out Cheerios like Vicodin; women who only have to *think* of a penis to go full term.

Most women my age have careers or children or both but I had neither. I was working at the Starbuck's down the street for a little something to do between pregnancies, just treading water, holding my place, doling out advice to the lovelorn 20-somethings working there. It was hard not to lose my patience. I mean, what does it matter if *this* guy doesn't work out? They're 24 with the creamy skin and the waspy waists and the firm upper arms. All they have to do is walk around the block and they'd find *ten* men who'd want to fuck them!

I shouldn't talk like that, I suppose, now that I'm a mother. And I shouldn't complain now that we *have* a baby, it's just that He always manages to surprise us, doesn't He? That's He with a capital "H."

I had an epidural, I wasn't brave, didn't want *natural childbirth*, didn't give a damn about the "birth experience." I just wanted to come home with a

baby. I bring up the epidural in the spirit of full disclosure, to say that I *might* have been a little woozy after the baby was whisked away to the nursery.

After the delivery, when the nurse walked in, my first thought was that she didn't *look* like a nurse. You're probably thinking: *What does a nurse look like?* But wouldn't you expect a nurse to be *clean*? Well, this one had dirty fingernails. Hands like a landscaper! A car mechanic! Staph infections waiting to happen. What had she been *doing* down there at the nurse's station? And when was the last time she'd scrubbed in? Not only *that* but she had red hair with an inch of grey roots. That all-over color, you've got to keep it up.

Turns out she was a temp from some sort of medical agency, but she swore up and down she was a real pediatric nurse who just wanted the "flexibility." Which, thinking back, probably meant a malpractice suit or nursing school in the Bahamas.

It was New Year's Eve and if I'd gone a few more hours ours might have been the first baby born in the new year. It was now closing in on midnight and the pediatrician was nowhere to be found or if he was it was probably with a lamp shade on his foolish head. He was one of those with the teddy bear ties, the Beanie Baby on the stethoscope, all but handing me rainbow stickers when they wheeled me in, even though I couldn't be more of a grown up at this point, given my (*making quote marks*), "advanced maternal age."

(Sometimes I wonder, what will I *do* when this child actually wants to *play*? I can't see me getting down on the floor, clapping my hands and saying: *I know what!* Because I won't know what.)

The nurse said it fell to her to deliver "the news" because the doctor was unavailable. In my head I sang a jump-rope song of everything that could possibly be wrong with him: Spin-a-bif-i-da, cer-e-bal pal-sy...thinking if I *expect* it, it won't *be* it. Because that's how God works. You smoke Camels for years, brace yourself for lung cancer and then BAM, a semi comes around the corner and you die of internal injuries.

It was obvious to me that she *enjoyed* being the messenger and I began to understand why messengers historically are so often put to death.

She enjoyed having the news, delivering the news, and watching my face as it registered the news. And it was only *my* face registering the news. Henry had run home to check on the dog. And I thought to myself: I'm not sure Henry can *take* any more news. I mean, first the Annunciation and now *this*.

Oh. I forgot to tell you about the Annunciation. During my ultrasound we found out that our baby did not have Down's Syndrome and that he was going to be the Messiah. I mean the second Messiah. Or the second coming of the same Messiah. I wasn't exactly clear on that. It all happened so fast. The angel. The reverb. The strange aureole of light.

Having a Messiah was as real to us as having a baby, by which I mean, it wasn't real as all. When you're pregnant people are always saying, "Aren't you *excited*?" To which I knew to answer "*so excited*" without having any idea whether I was or not. I knew I was nauseous, I knew my lower back ached, I knew my pants were tight. I mean, we wanted a child, but what was it to have a child? We didn't know. Not really. And that angel was in the room about as long as the average doctor, by which I mean, not nearly long enough. It was only afterwards that I started to think of all the questions I should have asked. Like: *Why us?*

I mean I'm not a church-goer or a do-gooder. I don't walk for cerebral palsy. I do give clothes to the Goodwill but that's really about cleaning out my closet. It's not that I don't *believe* in God; when I was a child I used to give myself headaches with the question: *Where did God from?* My mind would swoop backwards in time and space until it slammed into a wall. And the atheists ask a different question but they must run into the same wall when they ask: *Where did the world come from?* And the scientists have their Big Bang theory but they have to run into a wall called: *Where did all those combustible gasses come from in the first place?*

She shakes her head, and resolves to get back on track.

Did we feel worthy of having the Messiah? Of course not. But who

among us *is* worthy of having a child? Any child? To be responsible for someone else's life? They vet you more thoroughly at the Humane Society!

I tend to be anal-retentive and Henry, he's not a "Daddy." He's a *writer*. He likes to read the New York Times cover-to-cover. He doesn't even like to read out the interesting bits. If I express the *slightest* curiosity about what he's reading he just hands me the section. And I don't know where we're going to put all that plastic junk and how I'm going to get my nine hours a night. It's just been the two of us for so long and now there's going to be this *stranger* living in our house making noise and *needing* things. A baby is overwhelming enough, much less a Messiah, much less a Messiah with some sort of...birth defect.

Wavey line back to the present. Well. The more recent past.

It's one in a spectrum of birth defects, the pediatric nurse is saying to me. *Undescended testicles are not uncommon*, she says, which may be true but *I've* certainly never heard a lot of playground chatter about undescended testicles.

And I say: *When will they descend?*

It could be tomorrow, she said, *or they might never descend*, which means you have a baby of indeterminate sex.

I had a boy, I said, *the doctor saw it on the ultrasound*, we saw the penis when he was born!

He may be a boy. She said. *It's too soon to tell.*

If he's not a boy, then what is he?

A girl.

A girl with a penis?

Or a very large clitoris.

At this point, I frantically pressed my call button, trying to attract the

attention of a nurse with clean fingernails, one who went to Harvard or Yale or even Case Western Reserve, craning my neck to see if Henry were coming down the hall. But it was like a Fellini film out there, with all of the nurses and doctors in glitter masks and paper top hats, tooting away on their foolish noise-makers. I wanted to get that angel in here. I wanted to know *why, if God wanted to have a baby using the womb of a 40 year old barrista, He might forget to descend the testicles!*

The nurse was droning on about "*surgical interventions*" which could be done now or later. The downside of now being that the child might later decide he's a boy and I would have cut off his *dick*.

Hello! If this was in WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE EXPECTING, I missed it. Is it *ever* alright to cut off somebody's penis? To steer someone surgically towards a gender? At what point do we *know* that we're a boy or a girl? *Are* we a boy or a girl or are we *told* we're a boy or a girl? Is this what God is trying to tell us? That He is neither boy nor girl, but something larger than pink and blue, Barbies and trucks, who asks who out. Probably.

But if I *get* the metaphysics, the gender politics, I'm also his *mother* and I'm the one who has to figure out what to put on the birth announcement and what to name him and what to tell the gang at Starbuck's. *I'm* the one who has to decide what he wears and which rest room he uses and what box to check on forms.

You look at those parents pushing the little wheelchairs with the lolling heads and you think how do they *do* it? How do they love this thing that went so horribly wrong? The answer is perfectly obvious to me now. They do it because they *have* to! Nobody *asked* them! Nobody asked me! All I said was I wanted a *baby*, I didn't want a *fancy* baby, I didn't want the *Messiah*, and I certainly didn't want a "special needs" Messiah! Given the choice, I'd have gone barren to the grave! Been an aunty! A godmother! A *regular* godmother.

So take it back, I pray. Go to the next name on the list! My friend Beth Ann teaches Special Ed! Her husband coaches T-ball! They even go to church in the summer! They'd be perfect!

Nothing happens. Of course.

But God isn't here, for all intents and purposes, which leaves *me* to explain to the child why this thing happened to Him! Her. And why His Father didn't fix it. God, I mean. Not Henry. Henry. I have to tell Henry. I have to tell my *mother*.

The woman shudders. A baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, a yellow blanket actually, is slowly lowered in from the ceiling. The woman catches it, pulls it to her chest, and opens her gown to nurse.

Then, another nurse, a male nurse with stylish glasses and a recent manicure, rolls in a Plexiglass bassinet. And he says: (simultaneous voice-over) "Somebody's hungry."

Notice how he elides the gender and how he's cleverly wrapped the baby in a *yellow* blanket. He lifts the baby into my arms, arranging my body into what they call the "football hold." The baby roots around, madly sucking on whatever comes his way, giving my chest a hicky before finally finding the bulls-eye. Needing to know, needing to *see* the situation with my own eyes, I let the blanket fall open.

She looks down. Then up at the audience.

No balls.

She looks down at the child.

My eyes move to the child's face. I look down at the child, I *gaze* down at the child, and my heart does a little somersault. I feel a sudden sharp stab of love and I think of Mary, the first Mary, and of every Madonna and child ever painted, of every mother and every child who ever lived. And it happens. With a rush of relief, I realize I'm feeling what I'm meant to feel, what they *said* I'd feel. I love this baby. I love the me in him, I love the Henry in her. The *trust* God shows in us.

And as the baby happily sucks away, it all falls together. In my mind, I mean. In what can only be called a vision. *We do nothing surgically. We check Other on forms. We name the child Sam. One day, Sam falls in*

love. With whoever. I don't know everything yet but I do know this much. The birth announcement reads: Unto us, a child is born.

"What Child Is This?" Plays as the lights fade.

END OF PLAY