

Love at First Sight

by

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“Put your hand here.” Janelle reached out and pulled her hand over to her belly. I was amazed at how large and round it had grown since I had seen her last. The sensation of touching her belly reminded me of touching an over-filled water balloon, smooth and taught but with a little bit of give.

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Just wait a moment,” she smiled at me. Her face suddenly took on a look of shock and she jerked my hand to another part of her belly.

“There, do you feel that?”

A small, hard, and moving lump broke the uniform smoothness of her belly. I pushed back a little with my hand, trying to get a more definitive feel, but the lump disappeared into the slightly firm uniformity.

“Wow.” Reflexively, I let out a little laugh.

“I know.”

“That was weird.”

“You should feel it from my side of things.”

As we spoke, a larger lump slowly pushed and rolled against my hand. I was put in mind of a large sea creature coming to the ocean’s surface only to recede again to the depths.

“Wow,” was all I could think to say for the moment. Janelle gave me the smile of a person who has shared an exciting secret. A type of love than I had never seen before filled her

eyes. The beams from her eyes entered my own, traveled down my spine, and filled me with a liquid warmth that slowly effused throughout my entire person. Originally foreign to me, I began to understand this new feeling; this was the love that a husband and father has for his family. I found myself smiling more broadly in return.

The large lump returned, pressing against my hand. We both looked down, watching it distend Janelle's belly. It felt like someone was rolling a baseball under my hand.

"Is that the baby's head?"

Janelle shrugged, stroking her belly in a motherly gesture. "I think so," she replied and we shared another smile.

"So," she asked, "do you think it's a boy head or a girl head?"

"A girl head," I responded without question. At her questioning look, I equivocated, "It could be a boy head, I suppose. I just think it's a girl's."

I did not reveal my dream. There were parts of it that still bother me, and that I plan to never reveal to anyone. Still, the dream I had in Chicken while separated from Janelle took place in the Chicken of the future. In it, a large resort-style hotel commanded the area from one of the nearby ridges. I was explaining to a young woman that the building had not existed when I worked there. The young woman had shoulder-length light brown hair and the face that looked like a mix of my sister and myself. I knew she was my daughter and also that she was the eldest of several children. The dream was so vivid that I was certain my first-born would be a daughter.

Janelle and I would continue to talk through that too brief night. I almost couldn't leave her; I almost didn't leave her, but my obligations pulled at me too deeply. Had I known that my return to Chicken would include a near-death experience, I would have stayed. Even though I

left her there in the apartment of our friends, I had fully realized at that meeting that I would do everything I could to never be parted from Janelle again. That feeling would pale in comparison to what I experienced at the time of Alexandria's birth.

Despite our attempts to secure Janelle a place on campus for the next semester, she instead had to spend it in a one-room efficiency on the second floor of a seedy apartment complex. Due to the murder in Janelle's dormitory the semester before, sign-in desks were established at the entrance of every dorm. She couldn't spend every night with me as Jerry had done with Tracy. With Fairbanks' limited bus schedule in the evenings, Janelle spent much of her time alone in her apartment unless she was able to get Shane, our only friend with a car, to give her a ride home.

My mother flew up from Michigan to help out as Janelle's due date approached. With my mother there, my friends and I also spent more time in Janelle's efficiency. Such was the case nearly two weeks after Janelle's due date. All of our friends were there as the contractions started in earnest. Having been told by the hospital that it was not yet time, we settled back down to our game of Risk. One game led to another, and finally my mother kicked everyone out, saying that we needed all the rest we could get before the labor went into gear.

At about five in the morning, we called Shane. I remember nothing of the drive there or of entering the hospital. I do clearly remember Janelle being hooked up to the baby monitors, and Shane and I commenting on the contractions as they registered on the machine. Janelle, experiencing the contractions first-hand, quickly got angry at our excitement about each contraction and our bets as to whether the next one would be bigger than the last.

Both Shane and my mother were requested to leave after a while as only one person was allowed in the room during the birth. The cafeteria was not open to visitors during our stay there and so I subsisted on the moon pies and sodas that I could obtain from the vending machines. It was certainly not the best diet for a nineteen year-old man already giddy with sleep-deprivation and excitement. Leading up the actual delivery, Janelle made her displeasure with me and my giddy humor plain. However, during the delivery itself, she held a death-grip on my hand.

I know all about the “miracle” of birth, how it’s a beautiful part of nature. Let me just say that my experiences with the actual process of birth have always shown it as disgusting, disturbing, and obviously painful event. It is the moment immediately after that makes everything up to that point seem worth it.

As my daughter’s head emerged, the doctor mentioned that she showed signs of fetal distress. They stopped Janelle from pushing after my daughter’s head emerged so the doctor could remove the cord from her neck (something that has been necessary for each of our children) and suction her mouth and nose. He turned the purplish head and I found myself looking into my daughter’s open eyes.

A jolt shot through my entire being. I knew her. She was my daughter and I felt she had been a part of my life forever. She gagged on the blue suction device, and I worried that everything would be all right. As her long body finally came out, I breathed in deeply, not having realized that I had held my breath. I was given the cord to cut, but I hesitated and only proceeded when the doctor assured me that it wouldn’t hurt the baby. After cleaning her up and making certain she was breathing properly, my daughter was returned to me.

I had come to disbelieve the idea of love at first sight. There had been times in my life when I was immediately attracted to a girl or woman, but never had it been more than physical attraction, never had one reached into my soul and lit something within me. I believed that love of that sort was something from stories, a fanciful notion fabricated by poets and romantics. That all changed the moment I held my daughter.

There was nothing that I would not do for her. There was nothing in the world that could keep me from her. I studied her features, trying to burn them into my memory. I wanted to show her everything, to let her know everything, to protect her from everything. I was filled with a liquid light that I'm still surprised didn't show on photographs of the time. The pictures do show a gangly young man in a red flannel shirt holding a bundle that, from the look on his face, must be full of joy.

My world opened on that day. I never really thought about having children, yet now children were a part of my world. They had always been there, but now I would actually notice their existence. My sympathies rather than annoyance now went with parents. And I would be forever confused about how parents could fail to love their children.

I believed that I would never feel that way again, but the birth of my second daughter proved that wrong. While I still fell deeply in love, I was amazed at the differences between her and her sister. As an educator, I tend to believe that peoples' experiences have a greater control over their attributes and personalities than any amount of genetics. However, it was immediately apparent that Katrina was very different from her sister. Katrina refused to cry or even breathe through her mouth no matter how the nurse flicked or pricked her feet. I watched her face

crunch in babyish anger, but she stubbornly inhaled through her nose. I felt her anger and confusion with her, and loved her completely.

Having two children and half a dozen years of experience, I expected to love my third child when the time came, but I had forgotten the power of that emotion. As Trevor announced his arrival with his cry, I was filled with the sudden pride of having a son. I was content with my daughters, and a part of me has always been concerned that I could raise a son properly in a society such as ours, but it wasn't until I met him that I realized how much I wanted, how much I needed, Trevor in my life.

My heart broke when Janelle told me she could no longer feel the baby move. We both hoped that it was nothing, but knew otherwise. When the doctor confirmed that our fourth child had miscarried, I felt an entire future crinkle into ash like a ribbon of burned paper. The pain of it is such that I can still keenly feel it. Janelle's ability to deal with the emotionally damaging months of medical bungling that followed proved once again her strength of character.

Connor's plight immediately following his birth chokes me up even thinking about it. I had witnessed my older three children's births and had never seen a baby come out as solidly blue as Connor did. I watched helplessly as the doctor distracted Janelle from the scene and the nurses desperately tried to get Connor to breathe. My legs nearly fell out from under me as I heard him cry. His bruised face was testament to the painful and difficult process that birth puts

both mother and child through. Just as surely as his siblings, he bound himself deeply to me the moment I held him.

I never felt the baby move during Janelle's sixth pregnancy. Though I felt loss when she told me that the doctor could no longer hear the baby's heart, most of my sympathies went with Janelle and the difficult process that she would have to face. Though the medical procedure went without problems this time, I still wish I could have done more to help my wife through the experience. I again marveled at her strength.

Rowen's birth went by the most smoothly of our children. We did not know his name when he was born and had several options available to us. Rowen had been a name that we considered early on, but had discarded. Yet, when he was born, I knew that it was his name. The nurse claimed that he had a full head of red hair, though it was more from the lighting than anything else, and Rowen means "little red one," so I figured it was destiny. He came into the world and seemed instantly interested in his surroundings. His eyes found mine and the two of us just stared at each other for a long time while Janelle recuperated.

I view my life differently since the birth of my children. Intellectually, I understand that there were times when they were not a part of my life, but spiritually, I feel that they have always existed, that I have always known them. My family has become my life; my family has always been my life. I have changed since meeting each of them; I have always known all of them. The bonds of love that I feel for all of them defy any description.