

—THE BIRDIE

by Stephen Couch

“They need you,” said the volunteer, and Donald figured that was a good thing, to be needed. It got him away from the ennui of the latest Jumbo Crossword Book; it got him out of his phone booth-sized office at County Memorial.

It got him in contact with real, live people, even if it was only for as long as it took him to take a picture.

The camera sat on top of the half-height filing cabinet, loaded and ready. Donald snagged it by the strap, feeling its familiar weight. The bag of lenses on the floor, long ignored, was passed up again. Months of art school training down the tubes that was. But then, you didn’t need telephoto or fisheye in a hospital. You didn’t need to take light readings when every room was fixed at the same level of fluorescent blandness.

All you needed was to engender a rousing chorus of ‘cheese’ and push the button.

The volunteer’s nametag read, MATILDA - HOW MAY I HELP YOU? She held the door for Donald as he hustled out into the hallway, and followed him to the elevator. “Five-fifteen,” she said.

The maternity ward: always difficult, but ninety percent of Donald’s work. Most times, he was lucky to get a picture where the baby wasn’t squalling with pain, the parents having had its ears pierced within minutes of it entering this world, introducing it early to the concept of unwarranted suffering.

That or they’d have slapped a bow on its head like it was some kind of Christmas present, giving it a head start on the idea of unwarranted humiliation.

Donald poked the UP button and waited for the elevator to arrive; the soft, intermittent dings of its approach drowned out by the intercom calling for Doctor This and Code That. Matilda stood by his side.

“I should tell you,” she said, “although I’m sure you’re used to it by now...”

He blinked, turned away from the procession of descending numbers over the elevator door. “Mm?”

She wrung her arthritic hands. “Well, it’s just...”

The last bell sounded and the door opened. Donald and Matilda went inside, sharing space with an orderly and an empty gurney. Matilda, seeing that they weren’t alone, fell silent and stared at the floor.

Donald cleared his throat. “What were you going to tell me?”

She glanced at the orderly. “It’s nothing.”

Donald shrugged. “All right.” He went back to staring at the numbers as they lit

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up then went dim, one by one.

Fifth floor, and the orderly and Matilda stayed behind as Donald exited. "Five-fifteen," she said again, looking as if she wanted to say more. The door closed before she could make up her mind.

Donald shook his head. The volunteers were matronly and compassionate, but at times overly so. He'd seen them coddling morgue attendants, for God's sake.

He supposed he'd find her later and see what she was all het up about. Nothing sadder than someone being denied a chance to care.

Donald found the room and knocked on the door, easing it open. "Photography service," he said.

Someone inside opened the door the rest of the way, and Donald stepped through to be met by a dozen or more people surrounding the bed. Everyone had turned out for the blessed event, it seemed.

A balding man popped out from behind the door and shook Donald's hand. He wore a bright blue #1 DAD button. "Thank you so much for coming," he said in a whisper.

Donald nodded. "What would you like done?" he asked, and reached into his pocket for a price brochure, which he passed off to the man. "A big group shot, and then some individuals of the mother?"

"Just the group," the father said. "It's a family tradition."

Donald gave a thumbs-up. "If you'd like to get everyone arranged around the bed the way you want them..." He busied himself with the camera as the man whispered and gestured to the rest of the family, shuffling them into formation around the bed.

Quiet kid, he reflected. Maybe this would be one of the easy ones. As soon as the flash went off and hit those sensitive newborn eyes, though, the kid's complacency would end in a flurry of crying.

The family finished grouping themselves around the bed, the understandably haggard mother cradling her newborn. Donald checked the viewfinder, twisted the lens into focus, and held the camera up to his eye.

"Smile, everyone," he said. "Watch the birdie." Not that he had a birdie for them to watch, but photographers' traditions had to be maintained.

The family smiled, proud as could be, and Donald snapped the picture. *Here come the waterworks*, he thought.

Nothing happened. The baby stayed still and quiet and the more Donald looked at the shot on the digital playback, the more he could see what he hadn't seen before, what he hadn't seen because his mind wasn't anywhere near the frame it needed to be in to think of such a...

The baby was unmoving.

The baby didn't react to anything.

The baby was dead.

Oh, God. Did the family not realize it? They were chatting and laughing and, no, no, looking down at the thing and smiling as though getting ready to play peek-a-boo with it.

There were only two things in the world Donald could look at in that moment—the frozen tableau on his camera's screen, and the live mockery of happiness in front of him.