

Déjà vu

A short story by Susan E. L. Lake

She came awake as the first ring ended. Even before she picked it up, Claire knew what was coming. The anxiety made her teeth grit.

"It's me, Mom," Ben croaked with dry mouth excitement. "We're on our way."

So it's finally here, she thought as she reached to turn on the light. I wish Tom were with me, but he wasn't there that other time either

For months, her daughter Paige had talked excitedly about natural labor and breast feeding and Lamaze and birthing chairs. Whenever it had come up, Claire had changed the subject. She knew Paige was hurt that she didn't seem at all excited about this baby. But she couldn't tell her.

As Claire dressed, she tried to tell herself that there was plenty of time. After all, this is her first. That's what they told me at that army hospital long ago. And it had taken such a long time.

Tom had been away on maneuvers. The Red Cross reached him, but not until it was over - at least the delivery. It hadn't really been over for nearly a month. A month of hope and despair and sympathy and tears.

She'd been so young - too young to cope or understand. Only 19, living far from home at a God-forsaken army camp, pregnant and poor. She'd never even thought about what might be. She'd only been married a few months when she learned she was pregnant. She hadn't been surprised. That's what had been happening to all the other young brides around her.

One by one they had their babies. They called each other to pass on the news of sex and hours in labor. Of course, there wasn't time and it was too far for family to arrive, so they acted like family to each other. Casseroles mixed with care seemed enough. They were young and resilient, so their bodies bounced back like pioneers. Soon their babies became toddlers, and they were pregnant again.

She had awakened when her water broke. She didn't know what it was at first. Then it dawned on her what her friends had meant during all those postpartum discussions. Today mothers go to classes, she thought, but those conversations served the same purpose.

Sam and Jenny next door had said, "If Tom's away, you call." They'd been so good to her during those months. Full of excitement, they'd driven her to the base hospital. It hadn't been too bad; the contractions didn't start until they were on the way.

She'd been so scared though. It wasn't with any sense of foreboding, just with not knowing. Everyone talked about the first moment of the baby's coming, but other than "It took seven hours," they never seemed to fill in details.

She had arrived at the base hospital, checked in, and been quickly added to the ward of six other women in various stages of waiting. The enema, the shaving, the impersonality of doctors and nurses, and the physical exam had added to her fright.

Sam had left to contact someone about finding Tom. Even if he could have come in time, she hadn't wanted him to see her - not like that. He would have waited with the other fathers, wondering.

Hours had passed. It had been hot even with the fans trying to blow away the summer humidity. She had cried out. She had been too scared, and she had hurt too much. She had begun to wonder why - why she was here - why she was doing this. She'd never asked for a baby. She'd only pretended to be glad.

Jenny had come in, but the ward was too small. Besides she hadn't been able to help. Their time as friends had been too short to support the strain. Claire had eventually pulled away from Jenny's efforts to comfort her.

As the time came nearer, she had cried out more and more. Finally a nurse came over. "Shut up. You think you're the only one who's ever had a baby." It had made her quiet for a minute, but it had soon become too much to bear.

A doctor, hurried and impatient, had come in to check her again. They had never waited for a moment when it wasn't too bad. They had thrust their searching fingers high into her. "Please quit," she had cried out.

As he had hurried out, she heard him say, "'This one's almost ready - 8 cm." She knew he didn't even know her name.

They had come and pulled/pushed her onto a rolling table seemingly unaware that she hurt.

The delivery had come quickly. It was an end to 36 hours of heat, pain, and confusion. The baby had cried, the cord was cut, and she hadn't known enough to realize that impersonal doctors and nurses usually allowed a moment of their lives to reflect the joy of new life. She had been so used to their brusqueness that the toneless, "It's a boy" seemed natural.

She hadn't expected to be given the baby. They had wrapped him and taken him away. The placenta was delivered, and she had been taken back to the ward, exhausted. She hadn't known there should be joy and elation. All she had wanted was to sleep.

She had awakened to Tom standing over her looking forlorn but stoic. "Honey, how do you feel?"

"Okay, I guess. I'm hungry."

"Was it too bad?"

She hadn't known how to tell him, so she hadn't answered. She had realized she was still in a delivery gown and colorless and unbrushed. Her search for lipstick had stopped when Tom said, "Have you seen the baby?"

That had made her aware that her breasts hurt; they felt hot and full. That's probably what had awakened me. She began to understand why the ice bag had always been near the beds of the other mothers she had visited as each baby came in its turn.

"No," she answered. "I just woke up."

"I'm afraid there's a little trouble."

"With what?" she had asked not even realizing he had meant the baby. She had immediately thought of money, T.D.Y's or the record he tried so hard to keep clean.

"The baby's not quite normal. It's his arms." He had stopped with that. She had never seen so much unhappiness in him. She hadn't even known there was anything which could affect him this way.

He had been overjoyed when he had learned she was pregnant. They had talked of names and plans. She hadn't cared that much and had quickly agreed to name the baby after him if it were a boy or after his mother if it were a girl.

"The doctors have a technical term for it, but it means he doesn't have complete arms. They have called in an orthopedic specialist. We'll know more tomorrow." The words had come out one at a time as if he had to think about each before he could say it.

"Have you seen him?" Claire asked.

"Yes, they have him in a room apart from the others. I saw him a little while ago."

They had soon brought him into her room. The nurse had been nicer than those she had met during delivery. She had brought him in all bundled up. You couldn't even tell there was anything wrong. The nurse had been full of bustling cheer as she had handed him to her. "Well, this boy is ready for breakfast." She had a bottle tucked in beside him and handed it to Claire after the baby had been placed in the crook of her left arm. Claire had fed enough of her friend's babies to know how to begin, but this baby seemed so little. He had started to suck, though, as soon as the nipple touched his lips.

Claire hadn't been able to take her eyes off the baby's face. He had a shock of dark brown hair and a round little face. She hadn't been able to see the color of his eyes. They had been scrunched tight from pleasure.

She had realized she was grinding her teeth as emotions washed over her. He had been so much more wonderful than she had expected. He had seemed so perfect, so perfectly wonderful. Tom must have exaggerated. How could there be anything too wrong? Why, this was HER baby. She had pulled him tightly to her with feelings of protectiveness and pride.

As the baby had stopped his greedy enjoyment to catch his breath, the nurse had arrived at her side to show her how to burp him. Claire had looked up. "Isn't he beautiful?" she said as the nurse had placed him upon Claire's shoulder. The nurse's eyes had darkened and then smiled with an understanding that went beyond medical knowledge.

"Yes, he's a fine boy."

But the moment of bonding had passed, and as the nurse took the baby away, she had said, "Dr. Harris will be in to see you."

Tom had come in soon after that. Maybe he had been waiting for the babies to leave. He had looked tired, but tried to smile as he came over. "I've sent telegrams to everyone. I said there were a few problems, and we would tell them more when we know. My C.O. has put me on temporary emergency leave, so I'll have a few days."

A white coated very official looking man pulled a curtain between them and the others on the ward. "Hello, I'm the orthopedist in charge of your son. I've examined the baby carefully. He has a classic foreshortening which should cause no major problems in later life. Some plastic surgery may be needed, but right now you may take him home." He had smiled at them both as he left the room.

She had taken him at his word, and when the baby had been brought to her the next time, she had carefully unwrapped him to find two chubby little arms which seemed strange but not grotesque. He had become her baby.

They had been discharged in a few days to go home to encouraging friends. She remembered that there had been a casserole waiting and letters of comfort from her father. Of course, no one had come. With the war, travel was restricted, but there had been baby presents from her mother-in-law and aunt.

But it had been hard. The greedy baby hadn't grown well. He had cried a lot which could be heard by the neighbors. She had known he disturbed them, but she hadn't been able to do anything about it. Jenny had reassured her, "He's just a little colicky. Don't worry, it will get better." She had tried all the remedies suggested by friends - the teaspoon of whiskey, the hot water bottle, and extra careful burping.

She had taken him to the base doctor. The morning's wait until their turn had lasted forever. All he had told her was that some babies didn't gain as fast as others, and nervous mothers needed to relax. But she hadn't been a nervous mother. She had taken each new stage as it came-not expecting it, but not surprised either. The baby's face had become gaunt and his eyes seemed

large in his face. He had continued to cry nearly all the time, but it was no longer loud enough to disturb the neighbors. Instead, it had sounded like the mewling of a hungry kitten.

Tom kept saying, "Are you sure he's okay?" She didn't know. All she did know was that she spent her days feeding, bathing, and changing him. His little arms she had learned to take for granted just as she did his crying.

Finally, Tom had insisted that she once again spend the morning waiting at the clinic. Only that time, when the doctor saw the baby, he hadn't called her a nervous mother. No, he had put little Tom back into the base hospital.

It had taken the whole week for the baby to die. Once again Tom was placed on emergency leave. He had again sent out telegrams. It had passed over her, though. For there had been men dying everywhere. This baby, her baby, was just part of the casualty list. She hadn't even been surprised at the little box placed in the ground with the small engraving, Thomas Robert Johnson, II.

Soon Tom had been shipped overseas. She had worked during the day and played at night with nobody to interfere. Friends had commented on how well she handled the loss.

Time had passed quickly. Tom had come home, and they went to live in oil camps with roaches and rats. When she had once again become pregnant, she had been far from a hospital. They had made the hour long trip together. That time Tom had been there. That time she had known what to expect except that there had been nuns who treated her kindly. That time there had been joy in the room as the baby was delivered. She had been surprised when they gave her the baby to hold. That time there had been no look of sorrow on Tom's face; instead, he had been enraptured by his perfect little daughter. This baby had eaten and cried, but mostly slept. At each visit to the doctor, he had admired her progress. And the baby's shock of dark brown hair had turned curly, and her blue eyes learned to crinkle in laughter.

As Claire drove to the hospital, she thought of all she had wanted to say to Paige. Be asleep, don't invest yourself in this baby. Babies die. But instead, she had joked with Ben and Paige about not being old enough to be a grandmother. Paige had drawn away as the day got closer. That was probably why Ben had been the one to call.

How do you tell someone that they are living your nightmare? A nightmare that 40 years ago you tucked away as a part of life too painful to talk about. The drive ended at the hospital's visitor parking lot. She walked slowly up the stairs, got on the elevator, and pushed 3rd floor maternity. As the door opened, she could see the rows of newborns lined up behind protecting glass. She wondered where they put the imperfect ones. These were all beautiful and whole. A smile of joy and release began to spread across Claire's face as she hurried toward her waiting grandchild.