

My mother and I used to play this game when I was growing up. Every time I had a question she couldn't answer, she made me write to my imaginary father, Mr. Brezsky, who lived on the moon. I would later learn that Mr. Brezsky was my biological father, but he could just as well have been Santa Claus for all I cared. In fact, in 1976, when Santa Claus was down with the flu, it was Mr. Brezsky who left me a mechanical train.

My letters were addressed like this:

Mr. Brezsky  
The Descartes Highlands  
The Moon

Mother and I always sat out in the backyard whenever the moon was full. The moon always seemed bigger and brighter in Westchester, where there was nothing much else to see. Among the dark patches of the moon were the peaks of the Descartes Highlands, where the Apollo 16 mission scooped samples of rock and soil. You could see the tracks left by the moon rover with a telescope. She told me they were left there in the year I was born. Man's tracks on the moon, she said, were like my Bethlehem star. They were going to be visible for a million years, and a million years from now they would remind people that I was once on earth.

One afternoon, when I was eight, the school principal pulled me out of class and said my mother had come to pick me up and take me home. She had told them it was an emergency. They were all nice to me, thinking someone had died. My English teacher slipped a Hershey bar in my hands, nodding quietly as I accepted her gift, tears welling in her eyes.

Inside the car, Mother rolled the windows up, took a deep breath, and told me the truth. "I am not your mother."

\*

That was when she began telling me about the real Mr. Brezsky.

"It was September, 1972. He was a very young man. He had no money. He sold you for three thousand dollars. Five months later, he wired the money back. Then he died. That was his story."

From then on she never stopped talking about him. Now that she had opened up the subject, it seemed like everything was all right, and she was never going to keep any secrets from me ever again.

Every time she retold the story, some new detail would be emended, but Mr. Brezsky remained as murky as ever. I finally had to ask her why she even bothered to tell me the story in the first place. She replied, "Frank died in a hurricane in the Dominican Republic." And as an afterthought, she added, "His girlfriend died too."

That seemed to her enough of a reason, and since then she told me the story even more frequently, in fact way too often than necessary. Here's another

version: Andrew Brezsky died at the age of 20 in a military prison in Manila. She got that one from ex-communists in Manila who had tracked her down through the Life Crusaders' hit list and wanted to talk to her for a report on human rights violations around the world. Through the years, and several more calls from them, that version acquired even more details, some incongruous, others simply incredible. In prison, anti-American students allegedly beat Andrew Brezsky up and left him for dead. In yet a later version, some petty criminal or corrupt police officer assassinated him for his money, which, if you put two and two together, he must have earlier wired to us to get them off his back. Always the ending was sudden, violent, unresolved, and likely doubtful.

In time, I caught on and realized a lot of it was probably just made up. It was like she was trying to figure out, in the redundancy of the telling, if this Andrew Brezsky had been unknowingly pivotal in her life, if that one brief encounter sparked off a karmic chain reaction whose repercussions were still felt today. And by repeating the story over and over, she would finally realize that there had been some detour she had failed to see, signs that could have told her where to turn.

"He was such a beautiful boy," she said. "You could tell he was going to die young."

\*

One night, while she was in bed with Frank, the phone rang and she picked it up. The caller immediately hung up. The same thing happened for the next three nights, and on the fourth night Frank himself grabbed the phone. He

didn't say a word. He kept the receiver pressed against his ear, listening as though he were trying to catch the faintest rumor of some mysterious, important missive. And then for a fleeting moment he looked at her, and she saw something she had never seen before. Something inexpressible. Such sadness in his eyes. Not just sadness but fear. Not just fear but her fear conjoined with his, a mesmerizing mirror in which she could only see a self-reflected horror.

That was when she decided she wanted to have a child.

She had read that at forty-five a woman's biological clock was a ticking time bomb; it was now or never. The next day she went to a gynecologist, a friend of Frank's. That evening, with Frank still out in the city, she found a message for him on the answering machine. The message was very brief, *please call back, please*, but the desperation in that woman's voice was so immediate, so apparent, that she felt something apocalyptic churning in her guts, and the next morning, when the gynecologist told her she was incapable of conceiving a child, she thought for a moment, *Frank made you say that*, but she didn't say anything, and the word barren kept whirring tauntingly in her mind like a chainsaw.

*Barren barren barren.* Frank came back that night. He had had to meet a friend, a lawyer who could help them file a lawsuit against the Life Crusaders who were harassing them to leave town. Et cetera, et cetera. *Barren barren barren.* His voice sounded disembodied, out of sync. The sooner we took care of this, the better, he said; no more mysterious calls. She said, "You've been fucking someone." She didn't actually say it. The words filled her mouth, she could taste their bitterness, and she felt like choking. Frank asked her what was wrong. She said, "That young patient of ours, that eighteen year old girl who's coming from the next county, I want to keep her baby."

\*

She was well aware that that wasn't going to happen. The girl was suffering from hysterical fits and had to be sedated for the abortion. Under the drug, she had delusions that the baby was crawling through her veins, contaminating her blood, and that she would burst open at the pores, like a fruit exploding. There was no way she would make the hard decision and forego the procedure.

Abortion, said Frank, was an act of desperation, arrived at either after agonizing deliberation, or in an emergency. In almost all cases, there was no way they could save the mother's life without sacrificing the fetus. That's what they always told the countless Christian lunatics who came to spit Jesus in their faces.

The clinic in Dobbs Ferry had had its share of troubles. Several nights, from the two-bedroom apartment above it where they lived, they heard streams of cars passing by, the drivers yelling at them to burn in hell.

Frank himself didn't want any more children. His own children hadn't spoken to him in years. He hardly talked about them, and whenever he did, it was always as if he were talking about an ancient, unhealed wound. He hardly ever mentioned their names. Sometimes he seemed to have forgotten who they were.

Obviously, the only alternative was adoption. There was Romania, Russia, Sri Lanka, Thailand. But adoption was expensive, tedious, and complicated by corrupt bureaucracies of donor countries. Just to find out for sure, she applied with a couple of agencies. They denied her application upon learning of the kind

of work she did. There you go, Frank said; that's the kind of people you'd have to deal with.

Then a couple of their friends came back from the Philippines with a perfectly normal, legal, healthy Amerasian boy. They had bought the baby through an underground adoption ring operating there. The baby was handed to them just a couple of days after its birth, a scrawny creature, pink and hungry and full of need.

They brought the baby over one evening. They seemed transformed by this new presence in their lives, and they came with all the accoutrements that signified that change, an unwieldy baby carriage and FAO Schwartz bags brimming with bottles, diapers, and silly toys. They said they felt like a closer couple now, their relationship made more meaningful by a kind of aegis, a holy trinity. They talked of themselves no longer as individuals but as a single unit, a *family*. Suddenly their lives were mapped out more clearly, with plans for the next ten, twenty, thirty years. It was cloyingly sweet and she loved it. She held the baby in her arms. It was soft and small and breathtaking. She was unaware of the growing anxiety on Frank's face, even when she turned to him and said, "I know what I want. I know what to do."

\*

On the Delta Airlines flight to San Francisco, she read a story in the *New York Times* that Frank had told her earlier that morning, before she boarded a taxi to JFK. A certain Arthur Herman Bremer had shot the governor of Alabama,

George Wallace. Doctors said the governor was going to be paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life.

Neither she nor Frank cared much about the governor or his assassin. But Frank said there you go: that's the kind of world we'll be bringing a baby into.

She transferred to a Japan Airlines jet in San Francisco, and as soon as the attendants started rolling dinner out she set her watch twelve hours forward to Manila time. She realized that by doing so she had just jumped into the future. She looked out. The moon was a flat disk of light. Just less than a month ago, two humans were out there digging dirt. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine what it must have been like, but there was a constant hum in the plane that she found distracting. She was awake all through the sixteen-hour flight.

She had the name of a contact given by the couple who had adopted earlier. It took a few weeks for someone from the adoption ring to call her back. The couple had told her this was normal. They were doing a background check to make sure she wasn't just some decoy.

An "agent" met her at the lobby of her hotel apartment in Manila. The transaction was informal. It made her feel like she was purchasing a line of home products from a traveling salesman. It was also simple. All she had to do was put some cash down. One of their boys, an American, had already impregnated a local woman. The agent hesitated at the word "impregnated," and apologized for not knowing a term less vulgar. He was a middle-aged man in a business suit that seemed too heavy for this weather. He was constantly dabbing his forehead with an already soppy handkerchief. She felt sorry for him and offered him a drink, which he declined. He seemed like he was in a hurry to get this business over with. He said the Filipina mother was expecting in a couple of months. All

papers, he added, were going to be arranged through contacts with the local authorities. Mentioning this, the agent's face suddenly seemed transformed by what she thought was a hint of personal pride. "You have nothing to worry about," he said, smiling broadly. His teeth were stained red with tobacco and betel nut. "We know people. We take care of all the bribes."

She handed the down payment, and then she waited. It was like going through an actual pregnancy herself. The next couple of months were unbearable. She called Frank everyday. The weather in Manila turned from torrid summer to torrential rain. She hardly strayed too far from the apartment. Cities terrified her, and Manila seemed more hostile than any other. Beggars and homeless children were everywhere. The streets were littered with trash. There was a pervasive indifference to suffering and pain, either one's own or those of others. Beneath the veneer of hospitality reserved for tourists, she sensed an overwhelming self-contempt and a simmering hatred for one another. In August, floods washed away several farming villages. A group of peasants came marching to the president's palace to ask for aid. They were met with tear gas and truncheon-clubbing police. Sometimes the hostility boiled over even to foreigners themselves. From her terrace overlooking the bay, she watched students lob molotov cocktails at the American embassy nearby.

In September, in the middle of the worst tropical storm of the season, Frank called to say he was having second thoughts.

"About the baby?" she asked.

"No," he said. "About you and me." He had a hard time trying to tell her exactly what was wrong. There was a fuzzy sound coming from the other end. She realized Frank was crying. He said he felt awful, he didn't know what to do.

He'd been seeing someone else, a nurse from Montefiore, down in the city. She was twenty-three.

When she hung up, she saw something spectacularly eerie. An entire coconut tree had been uprooted by the storm. It was hovering just outside her ninth floor window, as though suspended by an invisible string.