

Planet  
Grim



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7.13  
Brooklyn, NY

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Printed and distributed by 7.13 Books. First paperback edition, first printing: October 2017

Cover design: Gigi Little

Cover photo: Lewis Watts

Author photo: Heather Maxwell Hall

ISBN-10: 0-9984092-2-7

ISBN-13: 978-0-9984092-2-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017944227

This collection is available in a variety of electronic formats including EPUB for mobile devices, MOBI for Kindles, and PDFs for American and European laser printers.

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# THE COURTSHIP OF EDDIE'S FATHER

I get a ride with Ann-Marie, the mother-in-law, to the family picnic. She turns left from the road into Golden Gate Park, bullying the Honda over the curb, onto the bike trail, and toward the picnic area.

“Cool it,” Ann-Marie says. She waves at me while she speaks, and her thin, gold bracelet nearly hits my fucking face. “If we get stopped, point out the cooler in the back. People drive to these picnic spots all the time. That’s what the trails are for.” She likes to be bad. She yanks on her skorts. Jenny, my wife, has a matching pair. She told me that a skort is shorts and a skirt put together. I am truly sorry to know.

I try not to look at Ann-Marie’s tan, waxed calves, knees, and thighs, shiny with tennis buff. I slink down,

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shut my eyes, and stick my foot on the dash.

“Down, please,” she says, nudging my thigh. I cringe. Mothers-in-law should not touch any of sons-in-law’s body parts that attach to “privates.” Especially when said son-in-law wears shorts and his mother-in-law touches skin with (I open my eyes) pale, silver nails.

A kid in a camouflage outfit stands by the trail, his feet outspread in the patchy grass. He shoots at our windshield with a high-powered water gun. Cherry liquid smashes against the glass.

I roll down the window and flash the peace sign, but the kid, no older than eight, raises the gun to shoot again. Ann-Marie agitates the windshield wiper. “Damn brat!” she says. I say nothing. I like his style. He could’ve been my kid, if I’d ended up with his mom, whoever she is, instead of Jen.

“So, we’re here!” Ann-Marie says, once again thrusting me into family submission. “Do you see that woman? Crystal?” She slams the brakes on the grass.

I sit up and look for my wife and kid. I look for Crystal, our kid’s birth mother. He has her smile.

Jenny walks up to get the stuff from the car. She looks pissed but maybe it’s because she’s not wearing her sunglasses. She has a natural squint. Her legs, though—just like her momma’s. She’s wearing skorts, too. Red ones. But her top is stretchy and tight.

The baby monitor had sputtered this morning with the animal whines of our child. Jenny straightened out so her butt no longer pressed against my stomach.

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I rose to fetch Eddie, feeling the ache in my lower back. The kid was crying, no doubt, because he wanted the soft plastic nipple of his bottle. I have Jenny's audacious breasts to myself—when I'm lucky. Eddie got to suck tit for only the first few days of his life, before we adopted him.

"Where's the baby?" I ask Jenny.

"At the children's playground—with Crystal."

"Did everything go OK?"

"Yeah. Her plane was on time," she says. I wait for more details, but she adds, "Why are you so late?"

"Oh, honey," Ann-Marie says, opening the back door of the car. "I was out of gas. Then we needed money."

"She forgot her card. We had to go to our bank," I say. I feel nervous, as if covering for something perverse and tawdry, but Jen can't read my mind.

"Jesus." Jenny turns to carry cups, napkins, and other crap to the picnic area.

"Is that a nice thing to say?" Ann-Marie calls after her. "This is our day, honey. Your first Mother's Day."

Gary, one of Jenny's brothers, steps out from the grill and throws a football at me. I duck, and the strings on the ball scrape my cheek. He's wearing a Cal sweatshirt with the sleeves torn out. He calls out, "Dude. Set an example! You don't want Eddie to grow up to be a wuss." I try to balance the football on my finger to impress him, but Gary walks back to the grill to man the tongs.

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The chipped picnic table staggers with plastic bags and soda bottles. No one bothers to talk to me. Gary's new girlfriend looks good in her turquoise tank top and shorts, squirting suntan lotion on her arms. Gary and Mike—Jenny's other brother—fuck with the BBQ, and four of their kids use a jump rope to tie the fifth—the youngest one—to a eucalyptus tree. I feel bad for him. Those trees are sticky.

I sit at the picnic table, hoping no one asks me to do anything important, like find Crystal. I'm scared of her. I saw her intestines, after all. That's about as intimate as you can get with a virtual stranger. It was in the adoption plan that we could be at the birth, and she ended up having an emergency C-section. I almost passed out when they cut her open. Jenny, however, watched everything.

I take a fat Meyer lemon from a bag, slice it open, and squeeze it into a glass. Just one lemon produces about a quarter-cup of juice. I add bottled water, and the membranes float in the liquid. The seeds sink to the bottom. A genetic waste. We don't ingest and shit them onto the ground for procreation.

There's a shame in our marriage, and her whole family knows it. It sparked nice and bright at our first adoption meeting. Jenny and I sat with a group of strangers in a fluorescent-cursed room and chewed pepperoni sandwiches with extra mustard. Everyone grilled each other about who spent more on medical treatments, with the fat lady up front exhorting us

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on what fools we were to spend money on in vitro fertilization. “If I had a business where I’d take twelve thousand bucks from desperate couples with only a twenty-five percent guarantee they’d get what they want, why, sign me up!” And everyone talked about who did the pricking with the inch-long needles and who had the endometrioses and who had the chemical pregnancies and who had the mangled tubes and who produced eggs one by one, like a chicken. None of the guys with the folded arms copped to dead sperm, though.

We spurted out our tale: seven years of marriage and five miscarriages due to a pH imbalance. “They’re all your children. You have to honor that,” the lady said. We told them Jenny’s body rejects my DNA. It rejects our fetuses. “But you’re so young!” the counselor said. “You can adopt! We can help you,” and she put a sticker with a baby’s face on my shirt.

Jenny’s body thinks those mini-fetuses are an infection, an invasion. She barely shows an interest in me anymore. The last time we told the family we were pregnant, one of Gary’s kids, the delicate genius, leaned his head on Jenny’s belly and said, “I don’t hear babies crying inside you anymore.” I didn’t say that at the meeting. I can keep some secrets.

Jenny described how we went on as a happy couple, enjoying our annual trips to Carmel, and how I taught lessons at the back of a guitar store in Berkeley, but the lady interrupted her and said, “Then you felt

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something's missing, didn't you? You realized God has another plan for you." Jenny looked stricken. A true atheist. I got her a Coke. She swallowed her tears and turned pink.

After lunch, a couple came in with their baby, a crawling, squirming girl. The guy told us how he had bought a twelve-pack and sat in a hot tub the first night they brought the baby home, too overwhelmed that a person, their birth mother, could give up her baby so they could be parents. Everyone stared at the little girl as if to eat her up. But I looked at the guy. Later, I guessed he was half in love with their birth mother.

That's because it's happened to me. Crystal. She burns me. Makes me lean and giddy. And what's she doing now? Who's she fucking these days?

I hadn't emailed Crystal or called or anything since Eddie was born almost a year ago. She needed to deal with her grief. That's what the social worker said. We couldn't help her beyond sending a few photos. Jen stayed in touch. She invited Crystal to the picnic, even though Ann-Marie was dubious. Crystal still lived with her mother, who encouraged her to see us. Strengthen the bond. Holy shit. Too many times recently, when Jenny was at work, I held Eddie up by the phone machine and played Crystal's tentative phone message with the flight info. Eddie must remember the voice, during those long, wet months inside her. It comforted him.

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And now, Crystal in the flesh, on the park trail headed toward us. I stand too quickly and bang my knees on the edge of the picnic table. Eddie's snug in a striped onesie, stuck in a front-facing baby carrier, and all I can focus on are Crystal's cutoff jeans and black hair. "Hi, Mommy! Hi, Daddy!" she calls, as if speaking for Eddie—her son/our son. She's been trained well by the social workers. She puts the baby carrier on me, adjusting the straps. She's close. And I stiffen, awkward, almost rude. I do a hug that pushes her away. Eddie's between us. He mews—squished—and I picture kissing her and putting my hands down Crystal's pants, lying beside her on the grass and tracing my tongue on her C-section scar.

I take Eddie out of the baby carrier, and I lie with him on a plaid blanket. He crawls away—our old game—and I pull on his legs. We're a little rough. It's OK. Crystal sits by me, her plate smeared with macaroni and cheese. She lies down, oblivious (I hope) to anyone except Eddie and me. She's got purple nails, bitten to the quick.

I sit up, embarrassed, and tickle Eddie, who fusses at me, as if he can tell he's a pawn. I almost say to Crystal, "We want another Eddie. Will you donate eggs for us—and they can go inside Jenny? And it'll be my sperm. And I'll think of you when I jack off." No, I won't say "jack off." It'll make me seem like an ass. But I don't say anything special to Crystal. I think of walking with her, with Eddie, and showing her the

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dinosaur plants in the park and the tunnel where the bad saxophonist plays. I think of walking with her somewhere, so we can fuck.

I look up at Ann-Marie, videotaping the bowls of Jell-O and whipped cream, and I want to scream, “So what if I want to fuck Crystal. Your daughter rejects me!”

If I could only inject Ann-Marie’s libertine charm into Jenny, I’d be OK. I know it.

We say, “Happy Mother’s Day,” and Ann-Marie gets choked up.

Jenny takes Eddie from me, and Crystal and I go for a walk, ostensibly to get Popsicles for the kids. We are not in step. Not like I am with Jenny. I try to look into Crystal’s eyes to see what I see when I look into Eddie’s. But she keeps her head down, averted. Disco roller-bladers, spandexed bikers, and families cheering their kids on trikes fill the section of road closed to cars. They pour out across the pavement as if from a faucet of good health. I feel optimistic. I lead her up the path to Stowe Lake, and we walk to the pier. I can’t think of what to say. A turtle slips off a log into the green water. I wish I could submerge myself in it with Crystal—or without her—I’m losing my chance. I buy her popcorn.

“You know what my mom said when I told her I was pregnant?” Crystal asks, wiping her nose on her sleeve. “She was like, ‘Every victim has a key to her own prison.’”

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“Do you believe that?”

“I don’t want to think about it. Can I tell you something?”

“Sure,” I say. “You can tell me anything.” I calculate the age difference—sixteen years. That won’t make me look like too much of a shit, would it?

“I don’t think Jenny likes me. She thinks I’m a slut or something.” She takes a handful of popcorn and drops the kernels into the water. Ducks approach, bobbing their heads. I don’t tell her the popcorn is bad for them.

“I don’t think so. She’s shy. She’s grateful for what you’ve done.”

“But that doesn’t mean she likes me. I even brought a picture of me as a kid, you know, for Eddie later. She barely looked at it.”

“Give it time,” I say. I count to five and kiss her. My tongue tastes buttery. I rub her back and draw her to me, hard, but she looks away. She steps back and wipes her hand over her mouth, smearing her lipstick.

I apologize, but she says, “I don’t feel well. You’re nice. Your family’s great. Please let it alone.”

She doesn’t seem to notice anything I’ve said. She never did.

At the picnic area, I get another hot dog, cursing myself, erasing Crystal’s taste with grilled onions. My wife and Crystal walk off to look at the rhododendrons. I try not to think about what they might say.

I change Eddie’s diaper, wondering if he gave me extra shit on purpose. He gives me a kiss, too.

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Open-mouthed, and I die a little inside from love-sickness.

I wipe off the onions and feed a piece of hot dog to Eddie. “Here’s a bit of chemical meat for you, buddy. We need to make you strong.” He hands it back to me, half-chewed. I pop it in my mouth. I’m his example, after all, and I need to show him I’m game for anything.

## About the Author



Alex Behr has taught creative writing residencies at Portland, OR, high schools through Literary Arts' Writers in the Schools program. Alex's work has been published, or is forthcoming, in *Tin House*, *Salon*, *Nailed*, *Mutha*, *Bitch*, *Manifest-Station*, and other publications. She has performed nationwide in the comedy show *Mortified*. She can be found online at [alexbehr.com](http://alexbehr.com) and on Twitter @alex\_behr.

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