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Fairytale

ONCE UPON A TIME A MAN AND A WOMAN HAD A CHILD WHO LIVED. Then they had another child and it died, and then another child and that child also died. The first child was a little girl, the second and third were boys. The children were named Katherine, Benjamin, and Robert, but their names were mostly shortened to Kathy, Ben, and Rob. After the death of the third child, the man and the woman chose not to have another child but instead to have a dog that their young daughter christened Lady. The man took pictures of his wife, his daughter, and his dog and then asked his wife to take a picture of himself. The photos were developed and put in the photo album. “Finally, we are four!” the woman wrote beside it, but barely three years later, she left the man and thus, indirectly, her daughter and dog as well.

Once upon a time a man and a woman had a child who lived. Then they had another child and it died, and then another child and that child also died. The first child was a little girl who went on living and got bigger and bigger until, one day, she did not get any bigger: she was fully grown, ready to have children herself who would live or not live.

The little girl knew that once you’ve bled you can have babies, but she bled many times before that finally came to pass: look mama, look papa, a belly for you, a little baby is in there.

The man, the woman, and the daughter sat by the fire and stroked her belly that became fuller and rounder and brought the new child closer. Months went by but the child still wasn’t born. They felt it move in the full, round belly and saw it somersault. Finally they realized the child would never be born and would never die. The little girl would stay pregnant forever and ever; the pregnant belly would be in their midst for always.

Had I dared, I would have shorn off all my hair and carved up my chest with a sharp knife. I would have starved myself and gone around in baggy black clothes. I would have become repentance and mourning.

The night before you died, your father drank from your milk. After that, I couldn’t bear for my breasts to be touched. I didn’t nurse your brother who was born one year later. I wanted to become unsexed, disembodied. There were men, quite a lot of men, for whom grief seemed sexy, who wanted to be in that body trying to disembody itself. The image I had of myself was hardly sexy. A woman who has been skinned and set out on display, naked and rubbed with

salt. Wind is blowing. But nobody sees I am naked and unsexed; nobody sees my veins and muscles and nerves exposed, the salt that stings inside. I must speak. I must open my mouth and let sound come out of it. I am surrounded by beings who laugh and move and eat and roar. They scare me.

I lie in bed and a man lies next to me. My husband. It's dark, pitch black, we see nothing, only feel. I don't know what he feels, but what I feel is this: I sit in a deep well and he sits in a deep well. When we both scramble out of our well, we'll be able to hold hands. It's not possible to dig a tunnel from my well to his well. There aren't any ladders against the well's walls.

Despair's natural laws are these: a desperate body tries to annihilate itself. There cannot be any contact between desperate and non-desperate bodies. A desperate body that seeks out or has contact with another body is no longer desperate.

Pure despair leads to suicide, to the annihilation of the body, that is to say, of the bond with life, with experience. For the desperate self, the decision to commit suicide means the end of despair. There is a way out after all; living is no obligation. This is a comforting thought. The problem remains: how?

My son has been cremated, and everyone who has come to the party—because that is, anyway, what a funeral meal is like to some degree—has finally left. I've had to ask them: go away, please go away. I go and lie down on my bed, always the need to go lie down in bed, as if you were going to go lie in your grave or crawl back into the womb. I lie in bed; there are brown sheets on the bed, a wedding present. That brown's not nice, but it doesn't show the dirt easily. I don't think much, I think: umpf, now I can die. I think that I will do it in a week or two; I'll be out of the country for a conference. What also appeals to me is the car in the garage, hose on the exhaust and through a window, into the car, me there, quietly reading a book. The garage doors and windows are sealed with newspaper. I have my parents' garage in mind—that must have to do with the longing to return to the womb. I don't think about who will find my body. I don't think about their despair. Not for a second. I only think about how I will do it.

“Mummy.”

My daughter is two and a half and can't reach the doorknob. She is on the other side of the bedroom door and wants in, in my bedroom, my bed.

“Mummy, mummy.”

How long does she say ‘mummy’?

Something shifts in my head. I get out of my bed, my grave, walk to the door, open it, and let her in. “Sweetie.”

Later, I'll wrap my arms around her a hundred times, feeling her alive, thinking: sorry, sorry that I had forgotten. Her father will be angry with me for a long time. How could you? he says.

The desperate self forgets a lot. A lot must be forgiven of the desperate, but she isn't forgiven for much. A desperate person burns a lot of bridges.

The desperate self feels dead to itself, but it's expected from her that she

perform the activities of the living. The desperate one thinks: don't people see I'm dead? No, people don't see it because the desperate one is not dead.

When does despair end? The desperate body heals. It gets a new skin that covers over the raw flesh. Despair comes to an end too when the desperate body meets another desperate body. Even if the two sit together in a deep well, it is no longer called despair. In the well of despair, there is no room for two.

8 September 1983

I think he is cold. I feel him shiver.

After Ben AB

Before Ben BB

9 September 1983

Words.

Black.

And: the days are too long.

15 September 1983

I wish there were an underworld into which I could descend and go looking for you.

28 September 1983

First people come because he is born. Afterwards they come because he has died.

1 October 1983

Now I won't ever have to worry about you. Now I won't ever have to be afraid because you'll never die again.

February 1984

When it happened: this isn't real, we only act as if it were, and when we've all cried hard enough, then you'll come back.

Ben is a photo on the dresser.

Nowhere at home because you aren't anywhere.

In the newspaper: "Benjamin Karel Smith spent the beautiful summer of 1983 with us."

Sunday 28 August 1983

My husband is supposed to go cycling with my brother, but I say to him: hey, let me go, I have to get out. This is the second time I've left my son, born

on the sixth of July. Yesterday I left him so I could quickly quickly go buy some clothes. I bought a long gray flannel skirt. Why did I do that? I don't know; it's summer and nice weather. But I will wear the skirt to my son's burial. It's a secondhand skirt; maybe I bought it because of that. I'm in a phase where I don't find clothes to be very important and so I don't want to spend much money on them. In a secondhand store you have to be happy with what you can get. Yesterday I left my son with his father and with a bottle, from which he refused to drink a single drop. My oedipal son roared from the moment I stepped out the door. I feel really proud. I think: that's right, kiddo, at least you know what loyalty is. Still, I'll leave him again today with his father and a bottle. I'm beginning to cut the umbilical cord. He'll be really angry with me for that. Yesterday, when I came home from shopping, all sorts of people sat on the carpet in the living room, both windows were open, that was weird, normally only the window on the garden side would be open, but it's true that it's been an unusually hot summer. Your father held you in his arms and tried to shush you. I took over from him right away.

But now it's Sunday morning. I'm going cycling with my brother. I tell him how good it's going, how strong and happy I feel. When I come home, my husband stands there again with the baby in his arms. He stands by the fence and shows him off to the neighbors: what a healthy baby! What chubby cheeks! That's right, kiddo, no bottle for you, you can drink from your mama. Your mama has tasty milk for you. Look, says his father, and he shows me a plastic bag with small sweet pea seeds. The sweet peas have blossomed and he's gathered the seed to sow next spring. I go inside to feed the baby.

I didn't know that could happen, that a baby could just die like that. I didn't know it and nobody had told me. "Babies don't just die," I often said to my pathologically anxious mother. "At least not a healthy baby." She didn't say anything to me, just looked up. Her mother had lost two sons. I knew that, of course, but that was before, a long time ago. And there was something the matter with those babies. One child was born dead after ten months of pregnancy (Can that be? I wonder now. Is it possible they let the baby stay in her belly for so long?), and the second child caught the flu from a nurse who wasn't sick herself but who had been in a home where the flu was rampant. Medical negligence. Something from olden times.

And that's not true either. Friends of friends had gone through it. Their first child, a boy. He was five months old. It was talked about a lot. The term "cot death" was mentioned. But those were other people.

How I loved my body in the summer of eighty-three. It could fuck and get pregnant and give birth and nurse. I was hugely pregnant; I had sat, naked, in front of the mirror, had not been able to believe I was all of that, and indeed it wasn't all just me, it was you and me. After your death, someone said: it is actually a sort of infertility. I suspect that that was after your little brother had

also died. And me, who had always been so proud of my fertility. Of my breasts, my hips, my womb. I thought: I bear death. I wanted to destroy my body. Another one of my girlfriends said: we were small gods. Small? I was riding in a chariot high above the clouds, I was a mother of all. To give birth was, for me, the ultimate orgasm, pain and pleasure, life and death; well, death followed some weeks later. I thought: there must have been a big sadist up there working on this. Someone that said: let us really amuse ourselves, that one there, with the black hair, we're going to make her really happy, we're going to lift her up real high and then make her land with a thump. Hubris. I have a mother who says she's a Christian but who actually believes in the Greek gods. Their indifference. Cruelty. Fickleness. You with the black hair. You.

I called you my talisman.

Did it matter it was a boy? I think so. To lie with him on the bed—da da da, sweet sweet Bennyboy—tickle his belly—hey, c'mon and smile for your mama, da da da, that's it, fine fellow gives his mama a smile—then with utmost effort: ga ga ga, deep gurgle in his throat. I was a mummy hopelessly in love. Foolish people who are happy. Blind.

Nosy, posy, pudding, and pie. There's a nipple on Ben's nose and a nipple on mommy's.

When we found out I was pregnant, my husband planted a seedling that never grew. It was planted in the fall, lost its leaves, and never grew new ones. After Ben died, we sawed it off at the roots. We couldn't stand the sight of the dead tree. Each time I went by the stump, I thought: this is Ben's grave.

We had adopted two stray cats. One afternoon we heard a mewing by the front door. It was raining and cold. Two furry animals shivered on the doorstep. They would be jealous when the baby arrived, but we made a warm nest for them in the kitchen anyway. First one was run over, then the other. Each time it was my husband who found the body on his way home from his evening class. Stupid cats, we said, but the house was set on that sort of road. Not a street, but a road where traffic zooms from or towards the motorway junction. And the tree? Of course it didn't grow. It stood there unprotected in the draft between two houses. Who plants a tree in such a place?

4 July 1983

A sizzling hot day. I am heavy and round, tired of waiting. Go cycling, a friend had said, that'll get labor going. A doctor, he should know. So I put Kathy in her child bike seat and go cycling. The ground isn't flat, I pedal on briskly, hope to get labor started this way, and before I know it, I'm in Bertem at the churchyard behind the beautiful Romanesque church. How did I arrive at this place? I don't know. My bike leans against the church and I wander in and about

the graves with Kathy. It is a nice, sunny day. I look up at the blue sky and the green tops of the trees and now I also look down below. I stand by the children's graves, the graves of little angels, two years, seven years, eight months, six weeks old, called to Him, small white graves. It is as though a cold hand were placed over my heart. I take Kathy into my arms, flee that place.

Sunday afternoon, 28 August 1983, about ten to three

Your father and I have been married five years today and I turned twenty-eight yesterday. We sit out back in the garden at my brother's for a barbecue. My brother starts to tell about friends of his who have lost a child. Cot death. Or, maybe the baby was found in time and has his breathing hooked up to a machine now. I don't remember. Whatever, the words death and cot death are said out loud. My sister-in-law says to my brother: why are you talking about that? You're making them upset. No, no, I say, you're not making me upset, but I lay my hand on my husband's forearm and ask him: just go take a look. And then the sentence, in English: Kristien, get an ambulance, quick. My husband is a Brit, everything gets done in English. And I, standing up and walking toward the house and seeing myself reflected in the window, see myself walking and I know: it is finished.

I am thankful for the reprieve granted me. My husband found him. He has never said anything about that shock. I tell it solely from my point of view.

You had really screamed that afternoon and if we hadn't been visiting, I would have surely gone to get you out of your crib. But you had had your feeding and had gotten a dry pampers and you had been burped, well, what more could I do.

You had crawled all the way up to the front of your crib. Your baby blanket was wet from your tears and vomit.

Naturally I felt guilty. Naturally I was convinced I had killed you. I had left you alone in your crib. I sat soaking in the sun barbecuing, laughing, chatting, while you were all alone busy dying.

Later, lying in bed in the room where his empty crib stands. Whispering his name. Ben, Ben, where are you, your mama is here.

A cold body. Purple-brown spots on his eyelids and on his throat. It goes so fast.

The sweater he was wearing when he died was the sweater my mother had saved for after he was born. She had already knit it but wanted to embroider his name on it too. Kathy opened it up in the hospital. "For little brother Ben," she said. She could barely talk back then; the three words cost her an enormous effort. She wore a white dress. Sweat beads on her forehead.

We get a shock when we go to see him at the funeral home. Now that he's dead he looks unsettlingly like his sister. As though she were lying there.

Sunday 28 August, five o'clock

We come home without a baby. There's a cake on the doorstep. Friends brought it and have written on the cake box: lots of good wishes for your fifth wedding anniversary! We pick up the cake and take it inside. We set the box on the table. We think: we will never eat cake again. We will never eat anything again. But then we get hungry. And there are visitors. We cut into the cake.

We each had a story.

My mother talked about hubris, about fate, gods, and that we're nothing more than flies they play with.

My father saw the will of a wise God whose plans we couldn't nor shouldn't be able to fathom.

My husband talked about guilt and repentance, the sacrifice that had to be made to restore our karma.

Kathy said that Ben was sitting in an airplane and that the airplane had flown into a long tunnel.

I talked about a tree that hadn't grown, about cats that had died, about children's graves.

We each had our story, but there was no story.

Kathy said: I did that once too. I was died too.

There is war in the heart of the woman who walks in the night with a child at her breast. No longer her child, but the child of the night.

There is a war in the heart of the woman whose child lies in a plastic bucket, blue, wrinkled, stinking slime. Soon she will be sewn together. Soon the bucket will be taken away.

I am the woman in black clothes.

I am the woman with pulled out hair.

I am the woman with carved up breasts.

I am the woman in black.

February 1984

Just act like Ben were still alive and I were not the stricken mother.

The staff wear gray uniforms and matching caps. Since the weather is so warm, most of them have taken off their jackets and rolled up their sleeves. Some have drops of sweat on their foreheads. Every time they address us, they first hit their heels against each other and greet us with a powerful swing of the arms up to the top edge of their caps. Not one of them speaks Dutch. They drone on continuously in the same French phrases: "La cérémonie va commencer. La cérémonie est terminée." The service is about to begin. The service has ended. But there isn't much of a service. We do this without a Mass. Not wanting any

god nor priest nor unctuous words. We go inside a small building, stand in a half circle before the coffin on which there are flowers. We look on, tense, curious, because none of us has ever been to something like this. Two minutes of music, not Handel as promised, but something else, who cares. And then two small doors slide open and the coffin starts moving. Completely of its own accord, so it seems, it glides noiselessly into a dark hole. Disneyland, is what I think. Such things also happen at Disneyland. I wave goodbye to you. The doors close, the next family is already waiting. “La cérémonie est terminée.” The service has ended. We have to go outside. There is a café, La Silence; we can have a drink there while you are incinerated. Black smoke comes out of the chimney. We have coffee, talk about the weather and about how crazy the staff is. A grown-up adult takes one and a half hours, but babies go much faster. Yet after three cups of coffee, it is still not over. We go outside to wait in the sun. To look at the graves in the cemetery.

It is really hot; tears mix with sweat. Because we’ve paid a thousand extra francs, we’re allowed to see how they scatter your ashes across the field. “La cérémonie va commencer.” The service is about to start. We may go first since we’re the parents. The employee carries a little box. It looks a bit like a church collection box.

He greets us once again, steps resolutely onto the lawn, walks over to a plaque—“A nos morts bien aimés.” To our dear departed friends. He salutes, stands still. We hold our breath. The bottom of the box comes open and the ashes slide out. The man doesn’t move his arm. Later on he will apologize to my brother that there were so few ashes. One of the most important topics of conversation during the funeral dinner will be: how can they know the ashes were Ben’s and does it matter? The little box is empty and the bottom is folded shut. The man salutes. “La cérémonie est terminée.” The service has ended. But it’s not over yet. “Would you like the identity plaque?” he asks me in French and he rummages around in the box. All of us think the same thing: now he will pull Ben out, a second birth, the rabbit out of the magician’s hat. But we get a white stone with a number. The proof that it was you that was burned up and strewn about. Later, everyone who missed the cremation will say: I wish I could have been there.

We state out loud our intention of going one night next spring to scatter the sweet pea seeds on the field. We will not do this.

We had burned with you: your little baby blanket my mother had knit for you, your teddy bear, your cutest bonnet.

You were laughing already.

You laughed selectively.

You laughed for me only.

La cérémonie va commencer. La cérémonie est terminée.

The day after Ben was cremated, we went to the zoo with his sister. Life must go on. There was a busload of children with Down's Syndrome dropped off there. They laughed a lot.

While they tried to reanimate Ben: anxious he would make it and would have to continue living with serious brain damage. Like a cauliflower.

Now I see you as a wise, old bitty baby. Wrinkled little man, a too-big head on a body that will never grow up. You are a mini astronaut twirling around in space.

You know that joke about the people who had lost a baby? They went and lost another one.

Rob was a time bomb. Nobody dared have him out of the fear that he, just like his brother, would suddenly die. I firmly believed he would live, we just had to make it through the first difficult year when cot death was a risk. He ticked like a time bomb too, or, better said, the machine that registered his respiration ticked like one. It was a small contraption attached to his body with blue wires and electrodes. With each inhalation, the contraption ticked and if he didn't breathe for ten seconds, an alarm went off. The ticking was irregular because, just like any other person, he breathed irregularly. Consciously or unconsciously, I was always listening for the tick. I didn't sleep, I dozed. After his death, I thought: now I can finally sleep. The following day I went to the movies.

In my diary, there is: "That I didn't say goodbye to you. That you lay there, cold, pale, gray on the too big hospital bed and that I didn't have the courage to say goodbye. To take you in my arms, to warm you against my heart, to hug you."

I didn't even have the courage left to cry. I stopped doing that because it began to hurt so badly. Tear glands, exhausted, wear out at a certain moment. If you, nevertheless, want to cry, you get a splitting headache. But I became afraid Rob would find no rest because he wasn't accompanied lovingly to the "other side." That he would be doomed to roam about, to circle about the earth like a stray space capsule. With his brother we had sat a long time, taking turns with him in my arms and in the arms of his father. We had wrapped him in a baby blanket so he wouldn't catch cold.

After Ben's death I saw signs everywhere, was convinced that what had happened that Sunday afternoon had been preordained much earlier. We—my husband, Ben, my brother, his wife, myself—had carried out what had to happen. We were actors in an inevitable drama. I even had a *déjà vu* experience: what happened that afternoon was a film I had seen once before. After Rob, the world was empty and meaningless. A practical joke. I wrote in my diary: there is no way, no truth and no light. The key is lost and the cards were burned long ago.

I found it dreadful to have to tell my parents again: the baby is dead. I stayed in

the car, let my husband tell them. I didn't want to see my mother cry. I couldn't take having failed again.

I thought: I must be a really bad person for this to have happened twice. I was amazed people still wanted to talk to me. It was obvious how bad I was, right?

I thought: washed-out and branded.

I thought: soon I'll be made to wear a huge letter E on my jacket. E for evil.

I got my hair cut even shorter.

Rob died on Wednesday, October 17, 1984, around seven o'clock in the evening. That afternoon I was with my mother to go buy clothes that Kathy would wear Saturday for the family party celebrating Rob's birth. After shopping, Kathy stayed with my mother and the next day my father brought her straight to school. They prayed for her brother there, but Kathy didn't know yet that her little brother was dead. I learned from the girl next door that the village pastor had gone to talk to the older school children. Rob would go to heaven, he assured them, even though he wasn't baptized. I don't remember how Kathy reacted when we told her. I only remember that her father forbade me to cry or sob. That would traumatize her, he said. Saturday morning, as planned, my mother-in-law came over from Wales for the party.

A misunderstanding: there wasn't anything wrong with his breathing. With his heart, however, there was. He craftily kept breathing after his heart had given up such that, when the alarm finally went off, he could not be resuscitated.

His father didn't want to accompany me to the mortuary so I went alone.

They had made a cap out of cotton wool and placed it over his skull. That was because they had taken cells from his brain in order to analyze them.

Rob was cremated just like his brother, except that day it was bleak autumn weather. There were more people present than there had been for Ben. For most of them, it was their first cremation. Two of them said that, in our place, they would eat the ashes. They would walk onto the field, fall to their knees, take ash in the palm of their hand, and lick it up.

I wore the same black blouse but a different skirt, a black one with a thin white stripe. Besides that, I wore a black jacket, black stockings, and black shoes. A classmate said I bore a dreadful likeness to a nun and how in God's name was that possible.

We laughed.

30 July 1987

It's my husband's birthday. He's turning thirty-one. I pick him up from work. I tell him I've rented a flat in the city. He'll tell Kathy: mama has a lot of work. That's why she's staying in the city.

This happened. That happened.

It happened that you died and that I died,
it happened that you died and that I didn't die.
Did not die yet.

—translated from the Dutch by Margie Franzen and Sandra Boersma