

Perfectly Normal

7lbs. 3
20 inches
1969



Our mother had a dark heart feeling. It was as big as the sky kept inside a thimble. That's how dark heart feelings are. They have great volume but can hide in small places. You can swallow them with a blink and carry them inside you so no one will know.

"Something's not right," she said, when she brought baby Davey home from the hospital.

She rubbed her fingers over her chest and looked at him sleeping in the crook of her arm.

"I have a feeling," she said.

She was good at knowing the wrongness of things, sadnesses and sicknesses, and, in the park, she could always find the pigeon with one leg. She knew when Mrs. Gaspar was coming down with a wheeze before she wheezed. She knew my thin hair was caused by some undiagnosed malady. Some days were more wrong than others. Whole days. From the moment she opened her eyes, "Something's not right," she said.

"Does it hurt?" I asked her. I looked at my new baby brother and he was perfect as a walnut in its shell.

"No, it doesn't hurt," she said and she took my three-year-old hand and put it to her heart. I could feel her ribs through her

nightdress. “It’s not a hurting kind of feeling. Just a something-will-happen feeling.”

“A good thing or a bad thing?” I asked.

“It might be good or bad or somewhere in between,” she said. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

Davey was born six days after Neil Armstrong took his famous step and everyone was still crazy with moon walk fever. Mother liked to tell the story if she was in a lying-on-the-sofa mood. An untying-her-hair mood. A tickle-my-feet-and-I’ll-tell-you mood. We knew all her stories by heart, word for word, so that we could have told them ourselves if we needed to. The story of the day her father died from a heart attack after blowing out his birthday candles. The story of her friend, Louis Martin, who was struck by lightning when he walked home from school in the rain. The story of the river and how she nearly drowned in it when she was seven, of the first dress she ever made, which her mother forbade her to wear because it was cherry red. The tale of the UFO she saw beside the highway when she ran away with Peter Lenard Spink.

“It was a perfect summer day when you were born,” was always how the Davey story started.

She must have noticed all the perfectness from the bus window because she couldn’t afford the cab fare: Second Street, glinting and shimmering in the heat, and ponderous summer clouds sweeping their shadows over the sunbaking cars, the marigolds growing in the park, children eating ice-creams.

I was left behind with Mrs. Gaspar in number seventeen. She had two Pomeranians with marmalade-coloured coats named Karl and Karla. The apartment smelled of them, and also

ashtrays, filled with white cigarette filters, each decorated with a ring of peach lipstick. Her apartment was a kaleidoscope of tan crocheted doilies and pumpkin-coloured throw rugs; even Mrs. Gaspar's orange beehive, which sat a little askew on her head, matched the decor. Her hand-knitted clothes were unravelling and her pom-pom slippers had the dishevelled look of something she had fished out of a trash can. She liked to bless me when my mother wasn't looking. She drew crosses on my tiny forehead and whispered in Hungarian.

"Yes, it was a perfect summer day," said Mother. "And I knew you were coming. I knew it and I hadn't had a single contraction. Not one. But something told me I had to go to the hospital. Something said, *Cynthia Spink, get to that hospital this instant.*"

"What was the something?" I asked.

"Hush now," she said.

But I wanted to know. She was thin with worrying, our mother. She combed out her long fair hair with her fingers, closed her eyes. She was made almost entirely out of worries and magic.

"Was it a voice?" If it was a voice, it would sound like dry leaves.

"I said hush, Lenny, it's my story. I took you across the hall to Mrs. Gaspar's and then I caught the number twenty-four. The voice said, *Get on that number twenty-four, Cynthia, because it doesn't do the loop to Safeway. It goes all the way down Second with only five stops.*"

I tried to imagine a voice like whispering leaves saying all that. I rolled my eyes at Davey but he ignored me because he loved his sudden-arrival story.

“You were a week late already. I sweated on that bus. I must have sweated a gallon. Then I stepped off that bus, down onto the sidewalk near that hospital and wouldn’t you know it, I get a contraction that bends me in half and then another one just a minute later. And I get two more and I haven’t even made it to the hospital front door, Davey. And there were people running from everywhere but I had you right there on the doorstep with everyone walking past.”

“Holy Batman,” said Davey.

But it wasn’t like we hadn’t heard the story before. He knew there was more to come.

“But the thing was,” she said, “when you were born, they told me you had a true knot in your cord. A true knot, pulled tight, and that’s why you came out so quick, because my body and your body knew you’d run out of air and blood if you didn’t.”

Air and blood. I always repeated that part in my head. *Air and Blood.*

“Gee,” said Davey.

“You almost might have never been,” said Mother.

“I’m glad you got the number twenty-four,” said Davey.

“You were a beautiful baby,” said Mother.

“Was I?” asked Davey.

“So beautiful,” said Mother.

But she didn’t mention the dark heart feeling to him, not ever, not once. That was always our secret. That was never in the story. She never told him how she asked Dr. Leopold if everything was fine.

“Why, he’s a perfect bouncing baby boy,” said Dr. Leopold.

“Are you sure?”

“Why, he’s perfectly normal,” said Dr. Leopold on the perfect summer day.

So she smiled and agreed.

“Father’s name?” the doctor asked. He was filling out the birth certificate.

“Peter Lenard Spink,” said Mother. “L. E. N. A.R.D.”

“Will Mr. Spink be in tomorrow to see his boy?” asked the doctor.

“Yes,” said Mother. “Yes, he will be.”



When I was older I liked to say his name in bed. *Peter Lenard Spink. Peter Lenard Spink. Peter Lenard Spink.* His name rolled off my tongue like a punctured wheel. I said it until, in the darkness, Davey told me to be quiet. But it was a name that needed saying.

He did not come that day or the next. Whole weeks passed. Davey slept and my mother worried and fussed over his sleepiness. She worried and fussed over his poor appetite. She worried and fussed over his boy-ness. She worried over the bills and how she would pay them and who would look after us when she went back to work.

The weeks were sunshiny but sorrowful. Mrs. Gaspar came daily and tended to Davey and sang him mournful lullabies. Each afternoon thunderstorms came and washed the streets clean but they could not wash Peter Lenard Spink from our mother.

Until one night the key turned in the lock and Peter Lenard Spink appeared. He stood very still, as though he wasn't sure he was in the right place. He smiled his small whiskery smile. He'd been working. He'd had to take the work. He'd had to work construction a long way south. The reasons were offered up in various ways but Mother shook her head at all of them. She nodded to us.

"Little Lenny," he said, dipping his head to me.

"And baby David," said Mother.

Still we waited for the thing to happen. Mother's dark heart feeling did not go away. It found a tiny crack and climbed inside her. It took up residence. She carried it around with her, alongside Davey on her hip.

"Something's not right," she said. Sometimes when she fed Davey his cereal. Once when she watched him crawling behind me squealing through the small nest of rooms that was our home, crawling so fast he skinned his baby knees. When he took his first perfectly normal steps.

Sometimes it wasn't mentioned for months.

Sometimes ten times in one day.


"Something isn't right," she said quietly.

"What is it?" I asked. I put my hand on her heart the way she liked me to do. I knew it soothed her. I felt its beat beneath my fingertips.

"I just don't know," she said.

Peter Lenard Spink sat at the kitchen table turning the pages of the paper slowly.

"You worry too much, has always been your problem," he said. "There's work in Pensacola. What about this? Immediate start. Meals provided."



He read out the newspaper advertisement. That's the way his goodbyes began. I kept my hand on my mother's chest. She smiled at me but beneath my fingertips her heartbeat quickened.

Davey pulled himself up beside us using fistfuls of Mother's skirt. He smiled and it made us smile in return, it couldn't be helped. Baby Davey had the happiest smile in the world.



Peter Lenard Spink went to Pensacola. He went to Tuscaloosa. He went to St. Louis. He went to St. Marks and St. Cloud. He went north and south. He went east and west. Sometimes we were allowed to look from our bedroom window down at the Greyhound bus station when he went. He would wave up at us, just a small raise of his hand.

But other times Mother said, "No."

She said, "Don't you dare look from that window."

Peter Lenard Spink left and the door clicked and Mother went and lay very still on her bed like a stone princess on top of a tomb.

Peter Lenard Spink was a tan figure hunched over shoelaces. He was sideburns and a nervous smile. He was leaving sounds: rusty suitcase clasps and zippers. He was the belt-buckle jangle. He went to Marietta and Blacksburg and as far away as Buffalo, Wyoming. He gave me a sticker from there. I didn't stick it anywhere. I kept it pristine and unstuck in my jewellery box and Davey coveted it for many years.

Davey grew up. He tottered. He walked. He said his first word which was *Dada* and it made Peter Lenard Spink's small whiskery

smile quiver. First birthday, second birthday, third birthday, fourth. Nearly his fifth . . . Mother got dressed each day in her pink uniform. She tied up her fair hair in a fountain on her head. She went to work at the Golden Living Retirement Home. She deposited us with Mrs. Gaspar and Karl and Karla. Mrs. Gaspar said, "My little dumplings," and took us in. My mother wore her happy Cindy Spink smile but we both still waited for the thing to happen.

"He'll come back," Mother said each time Peter Lenard Spink left.

"He'll come back," she pleaded with no one.

The last time was no different from the others. The sound of him peeing, the faucet, a match strike, keys. A suitcase sound. A small cough. A belt-buckle tinkle. He whispered out of our lives at dawn, unlatched the door and clicked it behind him, and never came back again.

Davey turned five the very next day. There was a small cake and a cowboy shirt and a blue toy tractor that he adored. At the end of the day he had a tantrum. He bellowed and stamped his feet and threw himself to the ground over nothing. Mother said everyone always cried on their birthday when they were small, but it was a lie because I never did, not once. Davey bellowed for no reason and wore himself out to sleep and it was while he was sleeping that the thing happened. The thing we'd been waiting for. When Mother saw it in the morning, she made a noise like she had seen a ghost.

"Davey," she whispered.

But then she sat down, plonk, on the sofa, as though she was glad it had finally arrived. She let out one long breath.

"What's happened to you?" she said.