

# Without Number

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*And the Lord God said unto Moses: For mine own purpose have I made these things. . . .*

*And worlds without number have I created; and I also created them for mine own purpose. (Moses 1:30-33)*

Up already?" my father said, here early to fetch my husband. Developers and investors always on the lookout, they were on their way to Idaho for a site check. Late fall, 1978. "Baby keeping you awake?"

"Haven't been to sleep," I said, rueful. I handed him his morning Postum and he nursed it, letting warmth seep into his big workingman's hands, waiting at the counter for Paul to come downstairs. On B Street in Salt Lake City, November in the Carter years, everything spelled *safety*: well-dusted furniture, vacuumed rugs, lint-free drapes, shining stovetop. Remote threats, distant uncertainties—all bided their time. Dad loved Paul, both of them loved me, there was a baby (Christopher) and another one (Katie) on the way, and I, the best-trained technical writer at Thiokol, knew that I would never want for food, shelter, or community. The minute I wanted to quit working outside the home, I could.

"So what's bothering you?"

I shrugged. "This and that. Little things."

"Sometimes little things add up," he said. "Just don't let it go too far. Hey, Paul." My husband stood at the landing. Ready to go. Careful and secure.

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I'd been out with Paul just twice when my father, his boss at Layton Construction, told me confidentially, "Better marry that one. Your mother'd approve. Never seen a better worker." From my father—who raised no hard-driven sons only because his wife died too soon to bear them—there was no higher compliment. Sometimes, during the seventies, I imagined scenarios where my mother bestowed *her* highest compliments—"never heard a funnier storyteller," or "never saw a more talented artist"—well, it was possible. But I didn't check with Dad about this. Enough for him that she'd been a saint, prettiest girl in her class at the U, Lambda Delt pres, stalwart supporter of city and church. Her death was the tragedy of his life.

And I was the light of it. By the time I graduated from their alma mater with an emphasis in technical writing so I'd never be without a job (although secretly I devoured women's lit, so I'd never be without friends)—by the time I graduated, my father, accustomed to Paul's extreme competence, made him head accountant and urged me to join the partnership.

"You let him take you to the temple. He'll take care of you for eternity," Dad said. I was almost twenty-two. Nobody at Thiokol was under thirty-five, and the Mormon engineers were all married with hordes of children. Paul was twenty-four, single, narrow-shouldered, and cosmopolitan (from Boise!). He was a prospect, all right. I lay awake at night, tabulating: on the one hand, Paul. On the other—what?

Nobody was surprised at our announcement. Paul accepted the stocks as a wedding gift; but beyond that, he said he wouldn't take any more than he earned, so my father had to find ways to give us everything he wanted to. When we burst through the bronzed doors of the Manti Temple, my father pulled us aside even before the photographer could snap us kissing in the summer heat.

"Here," he said, cramming the manila envelope into Paul's hands. "Small token of my confidence, son. I know my daughter's never going hungry." Paul was too proud to accept a house or an outright partnership in the company but too smart not to make sure the stocks rose in value. "You," Dad said, quoting Gordon B. Hinckley, "*you two*, are my most precious assets. Never forget it."

Paul took this as a challenge. Within months we had a mortgage on a house in the Avenues, a historic high-ceilinged brick arrangement on half an acre of sloping lawn and stream, with a handful of fruit trees and a

little plot for vegetables. Paul built steppingstones over the creek, a gazebo for shade. Sometimes I strolled out there in the wee hours, wrapped in chenille or silk, counting the stars or the steps. Our neighbors were kind—mostly older, crinkly with pleasure at all that lay ahead for our little family.

"I'm pregnant," I told my father under the autumn leaves one Sunday after dinner. (That was Chris.) Before the weekend, a brand new Voyager sat in the driveway, a bouquet of tiny roses in the front seat. "Car's from me, flowers are from your mother," the card read. Paul bought an infant seat even though Utah wouldn't pass the laws for another three or four years. I drove the van seven months before there was anyone to fill it. By day I wrote up specifications for the minutiae of rocketry and ordnance. I was good at detail, careful with punctuation. On my breaks I read fragments of Alice Munro, segments of Ursula LeGuin, snippets of Doris Lessing and Joanna Russ. At the end of the day, dry-throated from hours of peering silently at 10-point typeface, I drove home through a mysterious landscape, miles and miles in breadth, a bleak marathon of freeway through flat desert, long white lines ahead, in the fall and spring long gray-brown sheets of salt desert to either side, and in the winter, ice, fog particles, the road mined with hidden hazards like wandering stock or drunk hunters. I feared the sudden appearance of deer. One night at dinner I said so, during a lull.

My father said, "Honey, driving's no different from walking or cooking or breathing. You just do what you have to when the moment comes up, one thing at a time. Pass me that, will you?"

"Hmm," I said, handing over the salt. "I don't have to deal with big game when I cook." They chuckled. "Walking and breathing don't involve rubber on concrete."

"Asphalt," said Paul, handing over the butter.

In the night, I thought, *asphalt?*

Christopher was born in April. Thiokol gave me a forward-looking three-month maternity leave. What impressed my father was the request to return, the offer to pay for child care. His daughter must be good at what she did.

"Now, you know your mother took care of you till the day she died," he told me, bobbling the baby in the Land's End chaise longue as Paul mowed the lawn and I harvested early beans. "You really think you need a nanny?"

"Women have always helped each other raise their babies," I said lightly, snapping beans into a bowl. "Help with little things. Just like you have assistants. Vice presidents. Same thing."

He tried to chuckle.

"If your mother was alive, she'd take the baby for you," Paul said—my father winced—"but she's not. So what *are* you going to do?"

"Good question," Dad said. "What do you want in a nanny? Young and good-looking? Or old and experienced?" He winked at Paul.

"Well read," I said.

Paul grunted. My father said, "I'll have my secretary find somebody to fill the bill," handed me the baby, and headed inside to watch Mary Tyler Moore, his favorite. Sometimes, at night, I sat in the La-Z-Boy he'd brought from his house to ours for his after-dinner comfort—I settled into its Naugahyde sags, in the night, smelling his cologne, wondering about my mother.

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"Chris is teething again," Paul said one morning in October.

"I know," I said, pulling on my Diane von Furstenburg. It wouldn't do for an increasingly-sought-after tech writer to be anything but "chick," said my father. Paul liked to help choose the dresses. This one had a tiny black and white print that could have been letters or puzzle pieces. "Also scooting. Also taking solid foods."

"Nina keeps you informed, then?" he said, referring to the nanny.

"Well, yes," I said, tying the wrap, "but I can see for myself—I feed him dinner. I play with him."

"You're home less and less," he said.

"Look who's talking," I said. "I can't imagine Dad would send you all over the eleven western states if he were worried about me."

"Somebody has to be home for the children, one parent providing the head, the other the heart," he said. His tie was smart, a four-inch Italian silk.

I straightened his collar. "What if both parents have heads?"

"Riva," he said. "I'm making enough for us to add to our family without your working." That night as he lay over me, I made a claw with my free hand above his back, tense. With the rest of my body I breathed "receptive, open," as I'd learned in birthing classes. Afterward I pulled the

extra blanket over him and went to sit in the gazebo with my arms crossed over my chest, watching Orion over the mountains through the trees. *Let him think I'm willing*, I said to myself.

And so I was, because a smooth routine mitigates the rougher parts of a marriage. Any wife knows this.

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Every weekday for nearly a year, at the end of my drive, Nina was waiting there at home with chili or chops and a perfectly contented child. Like me, she had a degree in something from some university. Unlike me, she didn't use it to make her living; for all I knew, Nina's whole business in life was to come to my house, feed my child, clean my sink, make the meals my husband and I ate together. Having cued me in all my lines concerning the baby's progress, his crawling, his walking, his baby speech, she would slip quietly away, leaving us to our scenario of willing compliance.

Paul and my father and I laughed amiably over supper. Most evenings Paul was in town, we waved my father good-bye after "My Three Sons" or "Gunsmoke," then play with Christopher till he fell asleep. We lay on our king-sized waterbed to watch Johnny Carson until after a while Paul reached over absentmindedly and rubbed my feet or other parts, and eventually we ended up asleep tangled around each other. If he was away, doing a site check, settling a stock question, sometimes Nina stayed even after my father left, chatting idly about Christopher, pulling at her long brown braid.

"Do you read?" I asked sometime in January or February. Christopher was hauling himself along the coffee table, precocious. His father was in Arizona.

"All the time," she said. "You?"

When I told her I read fiction on my breaks, she said. "Sure—to improve your technical style."

"A good tech writer needs acquaintance with multiple worlds." I reached just in time to keep Christopher upright as he came to the end of the sofa.

"You do, that's for sure," she said. "You live on about five that I can see."

This interested me. "Tell," I said.

"Your dad's world," she held up her left thumb, which Christopher grabbed. "Your husband's." The index finger. "Your work—that's a whole world unto itself." Another finger, pointing at me: "This house. And then there's all that literature you read, worlds inside those pages." Christopher swayed, pulling on her splayed hand. "Want to know what I read? Astrology books." She jiggled the baby patiently. "Does that freak you out?"

"Hey, I watch the stars at night," I said.

She stood, scooping up my boy. "Come here," she said, grabbing my hand. We made our way to the gazebo, looked south over the city sprawled across the valley. "That's my world—one world, you'd think. Salt Lake City, nineteen-seventy-seven. Unified. Harmonious."

"Uh-huh," I said, rubbing the baby's back, watching the lights.

"But no." I could see her breath. Her eyes—light blue—were bright in the cold.

"No?" I said, shivering.

"There's one—that's your world, too," she said, pointing west toward Temple Square. "I was born into it as well. But I'll bet you don't even know about Cosmic Aeroplane—that's two—or Mormons for ERA—that's three—" My teeth were beginning to chatter. The baby's cheeks reddened in the chill. "Gilgal. That's a whole thing too. You know Gilgal? A sphinx with the head of Joseph Smith? Right down there in the middle of town. There are worlds in this town—" Fierce, she was. It surprised me.

"Let's get Christopher inside," I said.

"I feed him vitamins. He won't catch cold."

"I might, though," I said. I pulled her inside, turned up the radiator in the living room, rubbed my hands hard so they'd be warm as I put the baby in his pajamas.

"You might," she said, wry. "I think you're catching something already."

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All spring and into the summer she brought astrology books from Cosmic Aeroplane, books about light bodies, vibrations in the universe, the paradigm shifts toward which she believed we were irrevocably streaming. She mentioned the ERA, brought newspaper clippings. At the solstice she lit candles and read from Madame Blavatsky. She be-

lieved, with Madame, that everything was a sign. Everything connected at a deep level. We co-create our reality. None of it contradicted anything I already sensed. Politics, esoteric religion, literature: Women and men are not what conventional wisdom would have us be, but energy and matter. Consciousness and content. Within this one universe lie millions of parallel ones, material or imagined but equally real. We are free agents, choosers, more than we think we are, and different. It all has to do with focus.

When Paul and my father were home, I focused on them.

"They called me to be executive secretary," Paul said one Sunday in September. Tomatoes were on, and once more the leaves were turning. We were eating outside under the sugar maples. Soon there would be frost.

"Of course you said yes." My father cut Christopher's roast into small pieces. "What about you, girl? What's your calling?"

"Mom, I guess," I said. "They haven't called me to anything."

"It's because you work full time," Paul said stiffly. He wiped his mouth hard with his linen napkin. "They told me that this afternoon."

"Well," I said carefully. "That's thoughtful of them, isn't it? I don't have time to be a Relief Society counselor."

"You could quit work," my husband said.

"Your mother was president of the stake Relief Society when she died, you know," Dad said. Christopher stopped eating. I reached over with my fork, put a bite of tomato in his mouth. He wiggled, happy. "Did I ever tell you about the time the policemen came to tell your mother about the Caribbean cruise I won in that drawing at the firemen's fundraiser? She was having a Relief Society meeting and when she saw those men in uniform, she grabbed you and hid in the closet. The other sisters had to answer the door. Afterward your mother said all she could think was that they were coming to tell her I'd died and she just couldn't face it. How about that?"

Paul nodded, approving. "Did you ever go on the cruise?"

"No," my father said, sad now. "She was the one who died."

Paul and I didn't say anything.

"You two, you better hang on to each other. That old calling, that's nothing. They're just not inspired to call Riva yet."

"Apparently not," Paul said, pushing back his chair. "However, I'm

now the exec sec, and I intend to be fully involved." He snatched up his empty plate.

"That's the way to talk, young man," my father said. He handed Paul his own plate and Christopher's. "Did I hear you say there's strawberries for dessert?" While Paul was inside he scowled at me. "Do I need to be worried about you two?"

"I hope not," I said. "Not unless he's having an affair with Nina or something."

That got a laugh. "Yeah, she's a looker," Dad said.

Nina took me to the garden of Gilgal, with its strange symbols. When I took Paul there later, while we walked with Christopher in the stroller, I pretended accidental discovery. He shook his head, incredulous. At home, by day, Christopher scrabbled in the yard in miniature corduroys, threw crayons with enthusiasm, lisped, "Mama, Nini, Papa, WANT!" After work I made tomato sauce. Raked leaves. Paul did not have an affair with Nina. That was never my worry. But then I missed two periods.

Summer deflated into autumn. The wind blew in a warm winter. No one at Thiokol noticed that sometimes, on my breaks, I cried over the news, over the workload, over my books. What my father noticed was that no matter how early he came to pick up Paul, I was already up. And not because of the baby.

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On the afternoon of the day my father went with Paul to Idaho, a dark twilight two weeks before Thanksgiving, I made my way to the parking lot, gnawing a cracker, holding off nausea. A storm was coming. The sky bled black behind the plant, an opacity on the horizon west and north, racing me home. I hunched over the steering wheel, tensing myself for the onslaught of that darkness, that hard wall of thunderhead stripping the sky of light.

It seemed a sign: I must tell Paul that I was pregnant and take the consequences. If he and my father said that with two children I must stop working, I would. (Would what?) The wind flung dust and debris against the van, pattering, jittering, setting records a little further north. You can look it up still and find the reports, roofs blown off, damage from limbs

and litter. It wasn't rain, but it soon would be. At one point not a deer but a vision of my mother spun out at me from the maelstrom.

At home, "Bad night?" said Nina as she took my coat. I shook my hair out, stretching my neck left and then right.

"Pretty bad," I said. "But this place looks great." It always did, clean but not too clean, traces of the baby's dinner in the sink, a skillet of something on the stove. Good jazz on KUER, soft light in the big room holding the wind at bay.

"Both your dad and your husband called," she said, holding the baby out to me.

I raised an eyebrow.

"They won't be back tonight. Your dad's in Ogden. Paul's in Pocatello. *He'll* call later."

"Okay," I said. Then, "Will you stay?" It came out like that, unpredictable.

"All night?"

I didn't say no. We bathed Christopher together, laughing at his babbling. I read him *Goodnight Moon* till he dozed on the floor and then, sleepily, we watched television late into the night, full of sarcasm at Carson's Carnac silliness. When the phone rang at almost midnight we both jumped. Nina said, out of a half sleep like mine, splayed across the waterbed, "It's for you."

"I'll be here two nights," Paul said. "Anything I need to know?"

"Everything's fine. Take your time," I told him. Christopher stirred at my voice. I got up to rock him. Nina lay back, stretching.

"That baby," she said. "He has a great horoscope, did you know? I drew it up one day when he was sleeping. Moon in his seventh house, Jupiter in his first. Lucky. Just like his mom."

She rolled off the waterbed and took him from me. I watched her dark shape as she left our room, laid Christopher in his bed, and wandered back, graceful, strong. *Surely my mother's was a presence like that . . .* She put her hands on my shoulders and kneaded, deep into my neck and up behind my ears. Her hands—I reached up to them, held them. She bent down, kissed my cheek.

"Everything's just fine," she said.

"Is it?" I said.

"Believe it," she said, lifting me by the hand. "Now come on. Come to bed."

“Thank you,” I said, and went with her. There was comfort in her arms. I slept, oblivious to the hurtling storm, the starless heavy skies to the west, to the north, the cover in all directions black, massive, dangerous.