



Real Fatherhood

Chapter One: A Name and a Promise

Stacey and I sat opposite each other on a granite shelf at six thousand feet in California's Sierra Mountains. Even in the deep shade of ponderosa pines, her eyes were blinding blue suns, framed by her small round face and a cloud of strawberry blond. "If it's a boy...and I think it is," she said calmly, "I want to name him Benjamin... after my father."

No deliberation was needed. "Benjamin," I uttered. The name changed forever in my mouth and ear. As it resonated, a red-tailed hawk glided by, caught an updraft and circled above the nearby canyon. I watched it for several seconds then returned my gaze to Stacey's and said, "Benjamin—youngest and most beloved of Jacob in the Bible. I've always loved that name. Do you know it means "son of my right hand"? What better name could there be? Such love. Such strength." I pointed to the hawk. She smiled and nodded.

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After more than thirty hours of labor, Stacey rose from the table with her teeth and fists clenched. Two nurses, the doctor and I chanted, "Push! Push! Push!" Our voices rocked the tile walls. I was so exhausted and giddy, we sounded like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Then, in a suddenly casual tone, the doctor said, "It's a boy." I turned to see Benjamin's face for the first time. Though I had tried hard during the pregnancy to imagine him as a particular individual with particular features, he was still basically "the baby." But this was no baby come to join us. This was a person...of me...of my family...of Stacey...thoroughly recognizable...and blue, astonishingly creamy blue. The room tilted and twirled. My eyes were fixed on him but I was falling away slowly, slowly. At the last second I felt his tiny spirit lasso and haul me back. I tumbled forward off the cliff of my own breath as he took his first. Our souls collided.

The doctor placed him gently on Stacey's tummy. We covered him with caresses. The biblical phrase, "a laying on of hands," came to mind. I thought, "This must be what that writer meant thousands of years ago. A sacred moment repeating itself through generations. Love's first touch, wet with weeping and kisses."

The mechanics took over. Clipped the chord. Put drops in the eyes. Jammed his arms through the sleeves of a tiny t-shirt. Oh, he didn't like that! How must that feel to his new skin? An empathetic wildfire raced up my arms, extinguished only by the determined efficiency of the nurse. But we're not done. He must have his little knit cap. He must be placed in the warmer under an eye-stabbing light.

The doctor became a shoemaker's elf with needle and thread. In no time, Stacey was stitched up and ushered from the room. The din of delivery dissipated. Alone, I hovered over Benjamin and bent the light away. He lay on his back, eyes tightly closed, hands resting beside his ears—the first newborn hands I'd ever seen up close. Perfect miniatures. Perfect! I placed one of my pinkies in each. His fingers closed firmly around them, sending a shiver through me.

"You've had quite a journey," I whispered, "but it's okay now, Benjamin." I kissed his cheek. "Papa is here with you now." My voice made itself still smaller. "The worst is over. It's gonna be fine from now on 'cause your daddy is here...my Benjamin...my tiny boy...my Benji...my Ben." Even smaller, my voice, for no one else on earth to hear. No one. "We're gonna have a fine life together. Benjamin and Papa... Papa and Benjamin. A fine, fine life."
