

A photograph of a woman with long brown hair, wearing a light-colored sweater, smiling down at a man lying in a wooden crib. The man is wearing blue pajamas and has a pacifier in his mouth. He is lying on his side, facing left. The crib is in a nursery with light green walls. In the background, there is a window with a white frame, a shelf with books and a teddy bear, and a white dresser. The scene is brightly lit by natural light from the window.

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

Melinda and Ben:

mother and baby

ROSALIE BENT

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by
Rosalie Bent

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Title: Melinda and Ben: Mother and baby

Author: Rosalie Bent

Editor: Michael Bent

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Chapter 1

It had taken just three months, in the beginning, for Ben to disappear into the baby he was, and three months for Melinda to stop being surprised by any of the ways he had stayed there. What had started as an experiment, a long, indulgent break from work, a decision to let the role-play they'd both enjoyed for years run further than it ever had before, just to see how it went, had simply never found its way back. She could still, if she tried, locate the exact week it had tipped from game into fact. The week his bladder gave out entirely. The week the baby food stopped being a joke between them and became the only thing he'd reliably keep down. The week he crawled the length of the hallway rather than walked it, and neither of them thought to comment on it, because by then commenting on it would have meant acknowledging what was actually happening, and neither of them had been ready for that yet.

By the end of the three months there had been nothing left to acknowledge that hadn't already announced itself. Ben, thirty-one years old, an actuary with nine years at a respected firm, had become, in every functional sense, a twelve-month-old infant, and the strange, undeniable truth underneath the strangeness of it was that they had both been happier for it than had they been in years of adult life. Ben quit his job within the month. There had been no real decision to make. In the end, only a resignation letter Melinda had typed for him because his hands could no longer manage a keyboard, and a manager on the other end of the phone who assumed, kindly, that it was some sort of breakdown, and wished him well. Not a breakdown as normally described, but Ben had reverted to a baby again in every way but physical size.

The adult crib went into the main bedroom that same month. It was, Melinda had thought at the time, arranging his soft toys along the headboard, the single strangest piece of furniture assembly of her life, and also, somehow, the one that had felt most like coming

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home. It made perfect sense and, oddly, looked completely appropriate for a woman with a young infant.

The alarm went off at six, and Melinda lay still for a moment before she reached over and silenced it. Beside the bed, in the crib that had replaced the armchair and the reading lamp and eighteen years' worth of a marriage's furniture logic, Ben was already awake. She could hear the particular rustle of him shifting inside his nappy, the creak of the crib rail as he pulled himself up to standing and looked at her over the bars.

"Mama," he said. It came out soft and thick, more breath than consonant.

"Morning, baby." She sat up, pushed her hair back, and went to him before she did anything else. Before coffee, before her phone, before the version of herself that in three hours would be sitting in a glass-walled office reviewing quarterly projections. For now, there was only this - Ben's arms lifting toward her, the weight of him as she hoisted him onto her hip the way she'd learned to, knees bent, back straight, because he was not a small child and never would be, not in the ways that mattered for lifting. He was a smallish adult, but was a large baby.

He nuzzled into her neck. His nappy was heavy, sodden through the night the way it always was now, and she could smell it, the mild ammonia tang she no longer flinched from.

"Let's get you changed and fed, and then Mummy has to go to a place for a little while." She said it lightly, the way you'd tell a baby something a baby couldn't really understand, because in every way that counted, he couldn't. But some older thing in him, some remnant, seemed to catch the inference of the sentence, and his face folded toward tears before she'd finished it.

"No go. Mama no go."

"I have to, sweetheart. Just for today." She carried him to the changing table by the window. It was real oak, from a speciality

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maker who built adult-sized nursery furniture and asked no questions: upholstered pad, raised sides, the mobile of soft felt stars turning overhead because he liked to watch it while she worked. She laid him down. He was compliant in the way he always was for this, legs lifting automatically when her hand touched the backs of his knees, a reflex worn smooth by three years of repetition in their roleplay. But now it was real, and the nappy was soiled because he was a very real baby now.

She peeled back the tapes. The nappy beneath was heavy with wet and, this morning, with the softer weight of a bowel movement too, and she cleaned him without comment, wipe after wipe, powder, the fresh nappy pulled up snug between his legs and taped at the hips. He watched her face the whole time, the way he always did, his thumb finding its way to his mouth until she gently drew it out and gave him his dummy instead, because his teeth were an adult's teeth and thumb-sucking wore grooves into his gums that made the dentist's assistant, one of only two people outside the house who knew the truth of him, purse her lips.

"There," she said. "All clean."

He gurgled around the dummy, pleased, and reached up to pat her cheek, a gesture that had once, three years ago, been a joke between them, something they did in bed on a Sunday morning for an hour at a time before getting up and going back to being Ben and Melinda, colleagues' dinner parties, a mortgage, a life. Now it was simply Tuesday.

She fed him in the highchair in the kitchen, a jar of pureed vegetable and a bottle of formula to follow, because solids alone unsettled his stomach these days, his body having narrowed its own tolerances the way a child's does, the way his had, over just three months, come to resemble a child's in every particular that could be measured. He ate eagerly, opening his mouth for the spoon the second it came near, making the small, pleased sounds he made for

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food he liked, and fussing, turning his head, when she tried the carrot instead of the sweet potato.

"I know," she said. "I know, carrot's not your favourite. Two more bites."

By seven-fifteen he was fed, changed again after the vegetables went through him faster than either of them expected, dressed in a soft blue onesie with snaps at the crotch, and settled on the playmat in the lounge room with the toys that had, over time, become genuinely his. Soft blocks, a stacking ring, a plush rabbit worn thin at one ear from three years of teeth and hands, most of it as roleplay but now, as part of a real infant's life. He would be fine for an hour, she told herself. He had always been fine for an hour, in the old days, when this had still been something they did on weekends for fun, before weekends became weeks, and then became... this.

She dressed for work in the bathroom with the door shut, because some fracture in her still needed that separation, the ritual of putting on the blouse and the blazer without an audience, without Ben's eyes following the transformation of his mother into a stranger in business wear. She looked at herself in the mirror for a moment. Thirty-eight years old. A senior analyst with fourteen years at the firm and a promotion under review. A mother, in every way but the biological one, to a fully grown man who could no longer feed or clean or dress himself.

She had not expected, three months ago, to be either of these women at once. She had expected, at most, an adult baby who wore nappies on weekends and called her Mummy in bed, often as prelude to enthusiastic intercourse. She had not expected the whole architecture of him to give way the way it had, floor by floor, until there was nothing underneath but the baby, entire and irreversible.

She came out of the bathroom, and Ben, from the playmat, made a high sound of distress at the sight of her in her work clothes. Some old wiring in him still recognised the costume of departure and