

# Unbaby

Marni Appleton

Out of the corner of your eye, you see something move. You whip your head around and stare intently into the blackness for a moment – before the rational part of your brain reminds you that the front door is triple-locked and there is nobody around for at least a mile in every direction. This house makes you uneasy. You carry on with what you were doing: reading in an armchair, making soup, watching rubbish on the television; always with half an eye on the door, just in case. But it's not just the house bothering you these days. It's him too. You search his face nightly for clues, hints, answers, as though working out what is making it all wrong could save it. In the morning, he leaves for work again. He always said he would. You knew this, so you can't get upset about it. Except you do. Oh god, of course you do. You stand in the doorway in your red cardigan, sleeves wrapped around your fists, holding yourself tight together, watching as he reverses down the drive. Sky oyster grey, ground thick with leaf sludge. You hold your breath, smile fixed. Watch his car until it's nothing but a silvery blip in the distance, wiped out by the wind. Close your eyes.

When you moved here, you thought you would get used to it: the silence, the endless trees, the mud. You were both so positive in the rosy aftermath of the wedding, giddy like teenagers. His breath, booze-sour on your cheek: *she doesn't matter anymore*. You believed it. But the house didn't. Six months on and you're still afraid to break the silence. Six months on and everything is different. He's busier now. He faces away from you when he sleeps. And though he says it's not intentional, his back feels like a wall and somehow it hurts even more that he is turning away from you in his dreams. He still wants to make love (which you take as a good sign), but he falls asleep straight after. He knows you well enough now not to need those late night conversations, whispered between the sheets. You're no longer a mystery. So you sit awake, alone, listening to the house spit wordless curses. He says: let's wait another couple of years before starting a family, okay? Work is hectic right now. And you smile and say okay because what

else can you say? You can't say: no baby feels like a prison sentence. No baby means being alone. No baby is the difference between you and her. Though he never talks about what happened with the baby that never was, you know enough.

So you start to think outside the box, don't you? Accidents happen. Oopsy daisy. You flush the pill carefully, one every day so he doesn't suspect anything. A little white dot in the roar of the toilet. Then you start measuring your body temperature and checking your cervical mucus religiously. You keep a diary. Creamy, off-white, pinkish, egg-white ... Who knew there were so many shades? You sneak downstairs after sex, leave him pig-snoring. You lie on the carpet with your feet up on the sofa and your fingers between your legs. Nothing happens. Three months pass and each month the bloom of red in the toilet. And in those months he stays away four nights and is late home six times. He says it is work stuff and he is so tired (of course he is) and you nod and soothe and you want to believe him. It starts to feel like he's not really there anymore. Stuck in his head, without you. Sometimes he sighs and you hold your breath deep inside you until he leaves again. When the door shuts, you scatter across the floor like marbles.

And then you find the book. Ah yes, the book. At first there is hesitation, niggling, the reasons not to do it skulking behind you through the house. But you bite down on it, say nothing. Reach for the book at the back of the wardrobe with guilty hands and begin, in earnest, a new kind of preparation. You make a checklist, decide to do things methodically. Try each thing one by one and if nothing changes, you'll forget it, put it back and pretend you've never seen the book before. Right. So you start on page one, with the rainwater. Get a brand new bucket for the occasion: shiny, lipstick red. You find a clearing in the orchard, not too far from the house but not so close that he might find it, or trip over it and mess it up. It must remain undisturbed. It must catch the raindrops from the sky and absorb every moonbeam. You check the position carefully. When he falls asleep, you check again from the bedroom window. You can just about see the bucket, its blinking colour bright in the near-darkness.

Then he goes away on business. A few days this time. You light candles. Pink, blue, white. Strip off all your clothes and chant the words from the page. Strange words, heavy on your tongue, can't quite get your mouth around them. You catch sight of yourself in the dressing table mirror and stop abruptly.

Blow out the candles and go to bed alone. You lie there and see nothing, think about how he was around so much more at the beginning of your relationship. Sometimes he made you dinner. Sometimes you had baths together, went for long walks and fell asleep in each other's arms. Then, the house didn't seem quite so hostile. You wonder what he was like with his last wife. Usually you stop yourself here, but as you drift off into sleep you think of her face, her long body, her hips, her lips and his, touching.

You make an apple pie for when he comes home. Maybe it's guilt. You wait at the door in your little apron, lipstick on, waving as he pulls up the drive. You smile so hard your cheeks ache. He loves your apple pie. Always did. Afterwards, he carries you upstairs and spreads your legs on the bed, fucks you hard and pulls your hair a little too tight but you don't complain. Your focus is on the black velvet pouch of crystals hidden in your fist and making sure he doesn't see.

The next morning: blood. The toilet bowl seems full of it, screaming red, its heavy smell. It's early, too early. You lean against the sink and start to cry. You in there? he says. I need a piss. Yes, you say. Yes, I'm here.

You're running out of time. You set alarms for the middle of the night, though you don't need them. You're hardly sleeping. Then down into the kitchen, you take out the sharpest knife. Cut up the fruit. Apple sliced quickly, clean in half. Rub it on your belly until your skin is pink and sticky and sweet. The lemons cut into segments to make the task seem less awful. Your stomach aches in anticipation. Teeth tear into thick flesh. Chew. Swallow. Juice drips down your chin. Another piece, then another, then another. You eat it all. It is like static shrieking in your head. Your throat bursts into flame. He wakes in the morning to hear you chucking your guts up in the toilet. You can hear the worry in his voice: you're not ... pregnant, are you? You laugh between heaves, eyes burning, mouth heavy and sour. No.

He stays away more. You can't remember the last time you woke without this nauseating dread, but you won't stop. Not until you have tried everything. That's what you promised yourself. Twenty-eight days have passed so you can finally use the rainwater. You do it outside in the cold. Why not! Upturn the bucket over your head through a sieve; enjoy the icy flash like panic as it hits your skin. Rub it in. Try to make it do something, anything. You light candles in every room of the house. When you walk away from it towards the sea, it looks like it's on fire.

Nothing seems to be working. You find a section in the book about un-toward spirits. Of course. The book says they can take the form of toads. You shudder; catch every toad you can find, teeth clenched. You lay traps, lie in wait: grab them with bare hands so hard you're surprised they don't burst. You toss them into the bucket, repurposed. They slide around on top of each other, stepping gluey feet into eyes, stomachs, backs. Do toads have bones? You don't know. The sight of them repulses you. You had no idea there were so many lurking in the grounds of the house, but it makes sense now. You feel nothing as you walk up the cliff, barefoot into the night, lips pressed tight. You feel nothing as you take each clammy creature into your hand and throw it, soundlessly, off the cliff and onto the rocks below. The waves seem to sing all around you, enveloping you. You breathe in deep, a lungful of salt and stars. It's so dark but the moon is full and bright like a hole, full of nothingness, full of white.

In the morning, you wake beside him and everything feels different. Sun breaks through the treetops, warms your skin. What happened the night before and the past month, it was a nightmare, a panic. But no damage was done. You try to laugh it off, reassure yourself, close up. Throw the book away. Go back to being someone who is not capable of thinking those sorts of things, much less acting on them. You focus your energies on other things. Cooking, cleaning. Think, maybe in a strange way, what you did has worked. You didn't get what you wanted, what you thought you needed. But you are less desperate now. He is around more. And you're less frightened. Less afraid of the wolves you are sure you can hear scratching at the door.

But then (oh wily spirits!) you feel a growling deep inside you. You keep telling yourself you don't know what is happening, but you do. Of course you do. Hadn't you made the checklist? Carried out the plans yourself? The wind laughs through the trees, louder and louder. You realise something is growing. Heavy as a stone, hard and inhuman. It bucks against you, sending pain pulsing through you, tearing up your spine. A surprise? How lovely! When it comes out you think you will die. You look at it and cry because you realise how little you want it, this thing you sacrificed everything for. The days stretch before you like a chasm that would swallow you whole. He cries too, of course. For different reasons. Holds you and

tells you how much he loves you. This should be enough. Isn't this what you wanted? Shouldn't this make you happy? You would have bet your life on it.