

ZEPHYR *

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For solitary travelers, Christmas Eve is not an auspicious day to undertake a long journey by train. Doing so practically guarantees they'll spend the holiest of nights among strangers. Still, trains run on that day, and lost souls climb on board when they are too scattered to get home on time or have no home to get to.

Both of these things were true of Morgan. Perhaps that's why she appeared to lag even as she tried to rush. Perhaps that's why she was dragging her bags into the Emeryville station at 9:35 a.m. for a train that was scheduled to depart at 9:36 a.m.

"The *California Zephyr* is running ninety minutes late," the Amtrak agent told Morgan when she belied up to the ticket counter.

"Well, that's not very zephyr-like!" Morgan said.

She had a cup of coffee, and then she went to the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later, she had to go to the bathroom again. The bathroom stalls were small, and Morgan and her suitcases were large, so before her second trip she asked an older woman with an honest-looking face to watch her bags.

The bags were large because Morgan was going to Denver for an extended stay. Morgan was large—and had to pee every few minutes—because she was pregnant.

Back in the waiting room, Morgan studied the other passengers. She noted that the woman who had watched her bags was the perfect choice if one needed a bag-watcher in a train station. She had white hair, rosy cheeks, a portly build, and upright posture. Her expression was pleasant but no-nonsense, and she was knitting a sweater out of red and green yarn. She could, Morgan reflected, be Mrs. Santa.

Other passengers were not so chipper and self-contained. "Get over here and sit the fuck down," a haggard woman barked at her three-year-old twin boys, who had identical red hair and unwiped runny noses. They ignored her and continued to chase each other across the feet of waiting passengers, tipping over suitcases as they ran.

A teenage girl in the seat next to Morgan whined on a cell phone, "It wasn't my idea. I never wanted to in the first place."

Morgan moved over next to the woman who had watched her bags. "Where are you headed?" she asked her.

"Well, I'm headed for Des Moines, but I'll be getting off in Osceola," the woman said. "How about you?"

"Denver," Morgan said.

"Going home for Christmas?" the woman asked.

"Yes, sort of," Morgan said.

"Hope you're ready for some cold weather. We're having quite a winter back there."

Morgan forced a thin smile and shrugged. In spite of all the sweaters in her

suitcase, she knew she wasn't ready for cold weather or the baby or any of the other things that were inexorably coming her way. She hadn't been ready to be deserted on Thanksgiving, had been so pitifully unready, in fact, that she had come to feel she would never be ready for anything again.

Morgan opened a book and read. Mrs. Santa clicked away at her knitting. Finally the public address system crackled, "Attention all passengers headed eastbound to Reno, Salt Lake City, Denver, Chicago, and points in between. The *California Zephyr* is pulling into the station and will be ready for boarding momentarily."

The teenager snapped her phone shut with a pout and joined her parents. Her father was bald, and her mother was wearing a straw sombrero with "Chevy's" stitched on the front in red.

When Morgan stood up, the redheaded twins broadsided her and knocked her back into her seat. Their mother screamed from the door, "Get over here right now or I'm leaving you."

Morgan buttoned her raincoat and towed her suitcases after the crowd. The teenager's father, who had dropped back to smoke a last cigarette, watched her struggle to get her bags up the steps to the train. He took pity on her, ground out his cigarette, carried her bags up the steps, and stashed them for her.

She made her way down the narrow aisle between seats in the coach car. It was a tight squeeze. The only seats that were open were the two directly across from the twins and their mother. The twins were kneeling in the window seat, bouncing up and down and pulverizing graham crackers against the glass.

Morgan slid into the window seat opposite them and put her purse and shoulder bag on the seat next to her. The mother of the twins leaned across and said, "Just so you know, that aisle seat is ours."

Morgan nodded, moved her things to her lap, and stared down at her puffy ankles. She raised her footrest and tried to reach down to rub them, but her big belly blocked the way. She turned her face to the window and waited.

An observer might have thought that Morgan was listing the many ways her child would be different from the little terrors across the aisle, but this was not the case. Her concern extended no lower than her own bruised heart. It was as if the baby inside her, almost full term, was just catching a ride with her, just hitchhiking to Denver in the same body she happened to inhabit.

When the train shrieked and lurched into motion, the twins went wild. Morgan pressed foam plugs into her ears, and watched the backs of houses, rusted swing sets, fenced-in Dobermans, and stacks of old furniture pass by her window.

People in their backyards stopped what they were doing when the train passed. A woman kneeling in her garden set down her trowel, a boy stopped pedaling his tricycle, two men working on a boat lifted their heads. All of them turned toward the train and waved, and Morgan waved back. She began to feel like they were waving to her personally and wishing her a good trip. She half expected them to yell, "Call me when you get there," and that made her cry because of course they didn't care what kind of trip she was having or when she was going to get there, and

neither did anyone else.

When the train left the suburbs and moved into open countryside, the steady green outside her window and the gentle rocking of the train lulled Morgan to sleep. The next thing she knew, the dining car steward was shouting, "First call for lunch in the dining car. That's through this door and three cars back. First call for lunch!"

She could smell bananas and grease as the twins and their mother broke out their lunch, and she longed to get away from them, but she was too groggy to drag herself to the dining car. She ate dried apricots and raw cashews from a plastic bag in her purse and then fell back into an uncomfortable sleep and dreamed she had to run with a raw egg balanced on a spoon in a race where there was a great deal at stake.

She dozed and read for the rest of the afternoon, depending on the din from across the aisle. When she woke up at five, the twins and their mother were gone. She felt a rush of hope, but then she saw two plastic pistols in the pile of potato chip bags and banana peels on the floor, and she knew they'd be back.

The train was high in the Sierras by then, and snowflakes were blowing against the window. Gradually the dark green pines turned black, and by six, moonlight was sparkling on deep snow.

The twins came screaming down the aisle and collided with the dining car steward, who yelped, "First call for dinner." This time Morgan didn't hesitate. She struggled to her feet and lurched down the aisle before the twins could lift their pistols.

In the dining car, the steward seated her next to the rosy-cheeked woman who had watched her bags in the station back in Emeryville, and for a few moments Morgan felt that things were looking up.

She scanned the menu greedily. She was hungry enough to eat three dinners, but she knew she'd have to settle for one. There wasn't much room in her stomach because of the hitchhiker who was pressing up from below.

"Tired, dear?" the woman beside her asked.

"Yes," Morgan said and waited for the woman to give the details of the final months of her own pregnancies.

"I'm going to have the pork tenderloin," the woman said. "I shouldn't, but we are on vacation, aren't we?" She winked at Morgan.

"I think I'll have that too," Morgan said.

The parents of the teenager entered the dining car, and the steward seated them at Morgan's table. The father nodded at the two women and said, "Skip Mills."

Morgan thought he said, "Skip meals," and she was unsure how to respond. Was he saying she'd gained too much weight with the pregnancy?

She frowned at him, but he continued, "And this is my wife, Nancy. We're headed home to Omaha."

"I'm Esther Robinson," said the rosy-cheeked woman.

"Morgan," Morgan said.

"So when are you due?" Nancy asked Morgan.

"In January," Morgan said.

"I'm surprised your doctor let you travel, this far along," Nancy said.

"Oh, you know how they are these days. Work up until the day you deliver; go home from the hospital the next day," Morgan said. Actually, her obstetrician had refused to give her a note to fly to Colorado, and that's why she was on the train, but she considered this none of Nancy's business.

"What are you knitting?" Morgan asked Esther to prevent Nancy from presenting unappetizing details of her own pregnancies and deliveries.

Esther laughed. "It's a Christmas sweater for our hound dog."

Morgan wanted to put her head on Esther's shoulder and take a nap while they waited for dinner. She wanted Skip and Nancy to disappear until the train arrived in Denver; then Skip could materialize long enough to help her get her suitcases off the train.

A waiter came and took their orders. As soon as he left, Nancy asked, "So where's your husband?"

There was a long silence. Morgan blushed and stared down at the navy blue Amtrak logo on her paper place mat. "I'd rather not talk about it," she said softly.

"The bastard!" Nancy said.

Morgan bit her lip and looked out the window. Warmed by Nancy's sympathy, she was fighting back an impulse to tell her and Skip and Esther the whole story, but she stopped herself. People from Des Moines and Omaha might not be ready to hear that it was a bitch rather than a bastard who did this to her.

Instead she asked Esther, "What kind of dog do you have?"

"A basset hound," Esther said.

"We've got a German shepherd," Skip volunteered. "More of a watchdog than a pet. Maybe you ought to knit Butch a sweater, Nance."

"Sure," Nancy said, "and you put it on him."

"He's not really a people dog," Skip explained. "Too bad, too. I got him as a pet for our daughter, Tiffany."

"You did not. You got him to guard your goddamn boat," Nancy said.

"Excuse me," Morgan said, and she left the table, hurried down the aisle, and exited the dining car. She was back in kindergarten, running toward the bathroom, too late, too late.

In a tiny bathroom on the lower level of her coach car, she sat down on the toilet. Her maternity jeans and her stretched-out underpants were soaked, but not with urine. An odor she'd never smelled before filled the air. It smelled like metal rusting in marsh water.

Her heart pounded in her ears. This was it. Her bag of waters had broken, so the baby was going to come soon. But it doesn't happen right away, she told herself, not like in the movies. There's still time. I can make it to Denver. First babies take a long time.

She checked her watch and then pulled a timetable out of her purse. It was 6:30, and the waiter who'd taken their order said they'd be in Reno shortly. The train was running two hours late, so she'd be in Denver by 9:30 the next morning. It

would be soon enough. She didn't feel even a twinge of cramping. She was sure she could make it, in light of the alternatives. She wasn't about to get off and have a baby in a hospital room with slot machines in the corner. Besides, she didn't have insurance, so they probably wouldn't let her through the door. She had to make it to Denver, where her sister knew a midwife who could help her have the baby at home.

Morgan waited till the coast was clear and waddled to the baggage shelves, where she pulled some clean underwear and a fresh pair of maternity jeans out of her suitcase. She stepped into the tiny shower compartment and changed her clothes. She paused, wondering what to do with the soaked pants that she'd removed. They were too smelly to leave in the wastebasket, so although she hated to litter, she flung them off the platform between cars.

The freezing wind snatched them into the darkness. Morgan's white underpants soared off on their own, like an owl on night business, and her maternity jeans flapped through the snow until they were impaled on a fence. The waist caught on the barbs of the upper wire, and the legs snagged on the barbs of the lower. Future passengers on the *Zephyr* would see Morgan's dark blue pants stretched taut against the empty sky and wonder who had hung them there and why.

"Good. You're back," Esther said to Morgan when she got back to the table. "Don't let your dinner get cold."

Morgan ate with gusto. She hoped nobody smelled anything.

"So what's it like?" Nancy asked Esther.

Esther turned to Morgan. "I was just telling them about my roomette. I feel like the Queen of Sheba! My back was so bad this fall that the folks back home took up a collection and got me a private sleeper."

"We should have got one of those," Nancy said, giving Skip a scornful sideways look. He ignored her and kept chewing a large bite of well-done steak. There was a time when he would have paid the extra money to be alone on a swaying train with Nancy, but that time was long past, and besides, his Christmas bonus had already been earmarked to pay Tiffany's orthodontist and re-varnish the cabin on his boat.

"Of course, it's just the standard, not the deluxe, but it's real cozy," Esther said. "I praise the Lord that I've got it. I'm worn out from the big showdown we had at the Corps."

"Are you in the military?" Morgan asked.

Esther smiled. "Yes, I am. I'm a Senior Soldier in the Salvation Army."

Morgan felt a touch of vertigo. The train was taking her back where she had come from, and though she'd been gone for only three years, it felt like she was entering foreign and dangerous territory.

"It's the Army that sent me to San Francisco," Esther said. "To protest. The city government there told our San Francisco Corps they couldn't get any city money unless they gave health benefits to domestic partners."

"To who?" Skip asked.

"The gays," Nancy told him.

"Well," Esther continued, "the head officer was about to give in. All of the

other organizations in San Francisco were going along with it, even churches. But that's when we put our foot down. Grass roots, all over the country, soldiers in the Salvation Army said no."

Morgan felt queasy. Her hands and feet felt cold.

Esther sat straighter and taller, feeling the power of belonging, of being able to stop a wrong thing from coming into the world. It took away the ache of the things she hadn't been able to head off—her husband's stroke, her daughter's unhappy marriage, her grandson's trouble with the law.

"Our waiter at Chevy's was gay," Nancy said. "He was sweet to me when I spilled my margarita, and he gave me a sombrero for free even though it wasn't my birthday."

"We don't have anything against the gays," Esther said. "It's the principle of the thing. We don't give health benefits to any partners except married partners. Gay or not gay."

"The difference is," Morgan said in a squeaky voice, "the not gays can get married." She reached for her water glass, but her hands were shaking, and she knocked it over.

"There, there, dear," Esther said and handed over her napkin for the spill. "God will look after the gays, just like he's going to look after you. He hates the sin but loves the sinner." She patted Morgan's shoulder. "The Lord works in mysterious ways, and he's standing right behind you. I can feel him there."

"Reno!" The conductor announced, and the train stopped in the middle of downtown. Morgan felt a mild contraction. It occurred to her that maybe she should get off after all, take whatever Reno had to offer in the way of hospitals, and put it on her credit card. Then she looked at the faces of the people on the sidewalks, their skin tinted garish colors by the neon as they scuttled from casino to casino on Christmas Eve, and she decided to stay on the train. At least she'd shared a meal with these strangers, and if she really started having contractions, she could get off in Winnemucca in a few hours.

As the train pulled out of Reno, the waiter brought dessert, and Morgan lost herself in a wedge of hot apple pie a la mode. She took tiny bites, trying to make it last a long time so she wouldn't have to go back to her seat, but other passengers were lined up, waiting impatiently for tables.

"Let's retire to the observation car," Esther said, and they all stood up and followed her there. They sat in a row on swivel chairs, watching Reno thin out and fade away. Johnny Mathis sang a barely audible *White Christmas* over the PA system.

After they passed through Sparks, Nevada, Morgan went downstairs to pee. The ladies' bathroom had a lounge area with a well-lit mirror over a stainless steel vanity counter. When Morgan came out of the bathroom, she found Nancy sitting at the vanity pouring a can of mai tai mix into a plastic cup with ice in it.

"I'm afraid to drink in front of Esther," she said.

"I'm afraid to exist in front of Esther," Morgan said. She sat down at the vanity and winced at her blotchy skin and the dark circles under her eyes. She ran

her palm across her half-inch-long hair and turned away from the mirror.

"Excuse me for asking this, but are you gay?" Nancy said.

"Yes," Morgan said.

"I thought so. Your hair, and that conversation at dinner."

"Since I've gotten pregnant, nobody thinks I'm a lesbian. It's awful. Before, I was a big butch."

"That's our dog's name," Nancy said.

"I know," Morgan said.

"I hate that dog," Nancy said.

"People used to be afraid of me," Morgan said. "Now they come up and rub my belly."

"Yeah, it changes you. Skip says I turned into my mother the second I got pregnant."

"Shot full of estrogen," Morgan said. "It's made me soft. I let strangers rub my belly."

Nancy finished her mai tai and took another canned mai tai out of her bag and poured it into her glass. "Too bad you can't drink," she said.

"You can say that again. Can I smell it?"

"Sure," Nancy said and handed it over with a grin. Nancy was coming to life, hiding out in the ladies' room in pursuit of forbidden pleasure.

The scent of rum in Nancy's drink took Morgan back to college football games, rum and Coke in a thermos, frozen fingers on the red plastic thermos lid, the burn of the rum as it went down. And later, in bars, other rum drinks, all kinds of drinks in women's bars, drinking a lot to get up the nerve to ask for phone numbers, borrowing pens from bartenders and writing numbers on matchbook covers in the dark. And later still, drinking hot buttered rum in front of a huge fireplace after skiing with Judith, feeling the sweet heat of it all the way to her toes and fingertips, reaching over to interlace her fingers with Judith's.

Morgan handed the mai tai back to Nancy. The smell of rum and the rocking of the train had created a certain coziness, and Morgan began to feel close to Nancy, secure in the intimacy that can spring up between travelers anywhere, but most especially on a train in the middle of nowhere at night.

"On Halloween," Morgan told Nancy, "I didn't go to the Castro with Judith because it's too crazy there when you're sober. Judith went with our friend Marcie instead. They're both phlebotomists, so they wore their hospital scrubs and vampire teeth and went around tying surgical tubing around people's necks and pretending to suck their blood. They were a big hit. At least that's what Judith told me when she came roaring in at three a.m. I got mad at her for waking me up, but she didn't apologize. She said, 'I'm sick of reading baby books and refinishing antique baby furniture. I want to have a little fun.'"

"What about our baby?" I asked, and she said, "Whose baby?"

"Well," Nancy said, "whose baby is it?"

"I thought it was mine and Judith's. We got the sperm from Eddie, a gay guy at the bookstore where I worked, but he was never going to be the father. Just the

donor.”

“Skip always wanted to be a father. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to have kids. Maybe like your girlfriend. I had two miscarriages before we had Tiffany, and it nearly killed him. He’s spoiled her for her whole life, it was so hard to get her.”

Morgan put her hands on her stomach. “I talked to this baby all day long from Easter until Thanksgiving. Maybe too much. I know Judith felt left out sometimes.

“She had to work on Thanksgiving, so I went to Eddie’s house for dinner. He was doing a huge production for eight guys and me, and he got hysterical when he found out he didn’t have any nutmeg for the pumpkin pies. I went over to our place to get some. While I was in the kitchen, I heard giggling coming from the bedroom. I tiptoed down the hall, and there was Judith lying on top of Marcie in our bed.”

“Shit,” Nancy said. “What did you do?”

“I screamed, ‘You call this *working*?’ Marcie flew out of bed and cowered in the corner, and Judith got up on her knees and clasped her hands and whimpered, ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.’ If I hadn’t been in shock and chock-full of hormones, I probably would have hit her, but as it was, I burst into tears and ran out of the bedroom. At the front door, I remembered the nutmeg, and I went back and got it and took it to Eddie’s.

“That night I felt like I was going to die. I didn’t, but the baby and I sort of stopped speaking to each other.”

“I shut myself into Eddie’s back bedroom and cried for a week and a half. Then Judith called from Tahoe, where she’d gone skiing with Marcie, and she said she hoped we could all be friends. When she tried to give me Marcie’s therapist’s phone number, I ripped the telephone out of the wall and threw it across the room. Unfortunately, it hit Eddie’s framed photo of his boyfriend as second runner-up in the Mr. Leather contest at the End Up, and it broke the glass. I took it to Cliff’s Variety and had them cut new glass for it, but the picture was a little torn, and Eddie was beside himself.

“Of course I paid to fix the phone, too, but then I cried for another couple of weeks, and finally Eddie couldn’t take it anymore, so I called my sister in Denver. She said I could go there, even though her husband can’t stand me, but by then they wouldn’t let me fly, so here I am.”

An industrial-strength contraction seized Morgan, and she let out a moan. “I feel like I need to lie down,” she told Nancy.

Nancy helped her up the stairs to the observation car, where Skip and Esther were sitting side by side watching snow whirl in the yard lights of lonely ranch houses along the track.

“Quite a storm,” Esther said. “I’m glad I’m not out there driving in it.”

“Morgan needs to lie down,” Nancy said to Esther.

“I’ll bet she does, poor dear. Now that you mention it, I do to,” Esther said and stood up. “Well, goodnight all. Maybe we’ll meet at breakfast.” She gave them a brisk smile and left.

“I was hoping she’d offer that roomette she was bragging about,” Nancy

said.

"Thanks," Morgan said. "Winnemucca's only a couple of hours away. I'll get off there."

"I thought you were going to Denver," Skip said.

"She's having contractions," Nancy said.

"Holy Toledo," Skip said and jumped up. "Here, let us help you back to your seat. The coach seats aren't too bad when you recline them all the way. Do you have a blanket and pillow?"

Morgan shook her head.

"We'll get them for you," Skip said and led the way toward the coach cars.

Morgan sat down with Nancy while Skip looked for an attendant. Across the aisle, Tiffany was asleep with her headphones on, and Nancy reached across and took them out of her ears and turned off her CD player. She brushed a strand of hair out of Tiffany's face and tucked it behind her ear. Then she pulled the blanket on her lap up around her shoulders. The tenderness stirred something in Morgan and made her feel she could make it to Winnemucca.

Skip finally returned with two blankets and three pillows. Before Morgan could get to her feet, the train screeched to a sudden stop. Skip lost his footing and sprawled out in the aisle. Other passengers cried out as they were catapulted against the seats in front of them. Skip crawled over to check that Tiffany and Nancy and Morgan were all right, and then he went up the aisle to see if anyone needed help.

"He was a medic in the Navy," Nancy said. "He feels like he owes the whole world first aid."

"That's great," Morgan said.

Nancy raised her eyebrows. "It is? I always thought it was a sort of hero-to-the-rescue, pain-in-the-butt thing."

"No," Morgan said. "It's a beautiful thing."

Nancy looked up the aisle at Skip, who was putting a rolled-up sweatshirt behind the neck of an old man who had a nosebleed. Skip felt her looking at him and looked up. She smiled at him, a smile that lit up her face and made him remember times when he'd have spent any amount of money to get her alone.

Morgan doubled over in pain. Finally she couldn't keep from letting out a loud groan.

"Are you all right?" Nancy asked. "Did you hit your stomach?"

"I don't think I hit my stomach," Morgan said, "but I'm having whopping big contractions now."

Nancy said, "Tiffany, go get your father."

When Tiffany and Skip came back, Nancy told Skip, "That old biddy in the roomette has to let Morgan lie down. Let's go."

Nancy got up and helped Skip pull Morgan to her feet.

"Bring your purse and your CD player," she told Tiffany, and the four of them fought their way back through the aisles of three coaches, through the dining car, and through the observation car. Rumors were flying all around them. Derailment.

Hit a truck. Drunk engineer pulled the wrong handle.

An attendant stopped them inside the door of the sleeping car.

"We're here to see Esther Robinson," Nancy told him.

"She didn't say anything about visitors to me," he said, but he led them to the end of the car and stopped in front of a sliding glass door with a curtain drawn across it.

Nancy tapped on the glass and called out, "Esther! Are you all right?"

Esther pulled back the curtain. She was wearing a flannel nightgown, and she had a brown net over her hair. When she saw who they were, she slid the door open. "My, that was some bump," she said. "What happened?"

"Snowdrift derailed the freight train in front of us," the attendant said. "We're not going anywhere tonight. They'll have to dig us out in the morning."

"Where are we?" Morgan asked him.

"I'd say we're just about exactly halfway between a rock and a hard place," he said and laughed at his own joke. "No, actually, we're about halfway between Sparks and Winnemucca. They'll probably send a crew out from Sparks."

"Well, I'm about to have a baby, and it feels like it's going to happen before they can dig us out."

"Holy shit. We can't get an ambulance or even a helicopter out here in a storm like this. Who let you on the train in this condition? Where did you get on anyway?"

"I don't think that really matters now, does it?" Skip said. "Why don't you just bring us a first aid kit?"

Esther sat on her bed with her pursed lips and folded arms.

"Esther," Nancy said, "the people up there in the coach cars are really shaken up. They could use your help. Otherwise they're going to be heading for the bar car, and we all know what that could turn into."

Esther closed the curtain of her compartment. Tiffany listened to her CD player and popped her gum in time to a song that nobody else could hear. Morgan leaned against the wall and grimaced with each new wave of pain. Nancy slipped her arm around Skip's waist, and he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in close. They listened for rustling in the compartment, and they were not disappointed. Something was happening.

Esther threw back the curtain and emerged through the sliding glass door in full uniform. She had on a navy blue skirted suit with red epaulets on the shoulders of the jacket and a red S on each lapel. She was wearing navy pumps and a perky blue cap.

"Cool," Tiffany said, and the adults nodded in agreement.

"Use my room," Esther told Morgan. "I won't be needing it." She marched toward the front of the train, and the others cheered.

Thus it was that Esther took on the most difficult mission of her life. She calmed three coaches full of weary travelers who were gradually realizing they were going to spend Christmas on a train without heat. She led them in singing *Hark! The Herald, Angels Sing*, and *Joy To The World*. She organized the kitchen crew to

hand out free, healthy snacks. Most important, she single-handedly prevented a vigilante group from flinging a single mother and her redheaded twins off the train.

And thus it was that in Room 6 on the stalled *Zephyr* on Christmas Eve, Nancy and Skip labored with Morgan and drew closer to each other than they had been for sixteen years, and Tiffany saw with her own eyes where babies come from and swore she would never have one.

And thus it was that Morgan spoke to her baby after a month of silence, and she said, "You can come out now—we're safe," and then, "Come out now," and then "Come out! Now!"

And thus it was that many hours later, just as the sun rose over the icy desert, the baby forgave his mother for deserting him and slid out into this world somewhere between a rock and a hard place.

And thus the world is born anew.

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