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A Novel

By William Bowles

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With a nod to Steve Jones who, in part, inspired this story

Installment 10

Month nine and the midwife, Mrs. Evans, a homely bustling woman has just left. She sat Judy and myself down and gave us a thorough lecture and a blow by blow account of the procedure and what to expect and what I'd need to get in. She gave me a complete exam with Judy present and judged me totally fit and ready. She didn't once mention my special circumstances. Whether this was through tact or simply because she thought it irrelevant, I've no idea, I didn't ask her. She asked me if I was doing my breathing and pelvic floor exercises and that I should get as much rest as possible. She impressed this last piece of advice on Judy, tasking her with the job of keeping an eye on me.

Strangely, the closer it got to the time, the calmer I felt. I think Judy was more nervous than I was. But it was my dreams that were the strangest experience of all during that last couple of weeks.

'Mama, wake up.' I opened my eyes and Valentina floated in front of me looking quite serious. She must have seen my expression because she immediately smiled and reached out her arms to me and placed a tiny hand on each side of my face in a strangely adult gesture of assurance. 'Mama. Soon.' Yes Valentina, soon.' 'Sleep Mama. Sleep.' I closed my eyes and slept. It was the first time I'd actually slept after having the dream. Later, after I'd woken up I told Judy about it. She was looked shaken.

'Oh Nova, your baby is something else. Doesn't it scare you?'

'No, it's as if she has it all under control and I'm not to worry about a thing.'

'Will you tell Mrs. Evans?'

'I don't think so. I'm not sure she'll believe me anyway. And in any case, there's no way it will divert her from her mission. She'll play the delivery by the book. I only worry that Valentina is going to upstage her and how this will affect her.'

We laughed at the image of Valentina directing her own birth with the midwife looking on helpless.

The final contractions started the following day and although they were painful, they didn't seem to be as painful as I'd been told they would be. They continued all day and I could feel Valentina moving down. Judy called Mrs. Evans, who arrived about twenty minutes later and efficiently directed Judy to have everything ready.

Propped up in bed, I started my breathing regimen and started pushing. Then my water broke. The pain increased and the delay between the contractions got shorter and shorter with Mrs. Evans urging me on. She needn't have bothered. About two hours later Valentina just popped out. Just like that. Mrs. Evans was gob-smacked.

She lifted her up and Valentina took her first breath and looked around her, her eyes wide open and a questing look on her face. She struggled in the midwife's hands to turn around and face me. I lay there, my mouth wide open in amazement. The second Valentina spotted me, she smiled that smile, lifted her arms toward me and cried out, 'Mama! Mama!' smiling all the time, exactly as she had in my first dream. Mrs. Evans nearly dropped her and Judy gasped. I reached out for her and finally after what seemed an age, Mrs. Evans recovered her senses and handed her to me. I held her slippery and gooey, purple tinged body in front of me and said, 'Hello Valentina,' and smiled back.

Mrs. Evans was having trouble getting back into midwife mode but eventually her training took over and she efficiently snipped and tied the umbilical cord and shouted out directions to Judy for a bowl of warm water, towels and so on, while I continued to hold Valentina, who was still smiling and touching my face.

I handed her back to the midwife, whom gently and expertly lowered her into the bowl and washed her tiny body, checking her all over as she did so. Valentina didn't stop smiling throughout the entire process, trying to twist around to get a view of me and then looking at Judy and then back to me. Mrs. Evans didn't utter a word throughout the entire time. Finally she weighed her in at nine pounds and two ounces. Once finished she wrapped her in a warm towel and handed her back to me. I immediately held her to my breast and she clasped her mouth around my left nipple and suckled for perhaps thirty seconds then let go, as if she was checking the quality or perhaps making sure they worked.

Eventually, Mrs. Evans spoke. 'My, my. Well I never did. What kind of baby do we have here then?' Then she started clearing up. The bed was a bit of a mess of course but I was too weak to move and frankly in a state of shock as was Judy, who still hadn't spoken a word either. Valentina had fallen asleep and was snuggled up to me.

'Mrs. Evans, is this normal? Valentina has fallen asleep.'

'Ms. Bolton, there's nothing normal about your baby, so I can't tell you.'

She came around to the side of the bed and checked her.

'She looks just fine. A beautiful, big girl. I think she's probably exhausted. I have the feeling that she did most of the work.'

Judy and I laughed. Valentina stirred a little at the sound, nestling down closer to me but continued sleeping.

'What's so funny then?'

'Nothing Mrs. Evans, nothing.'

'Cup of tea then?' said Judy. 'Mrs. Evans?'

‘Yes, please. I need to calm my nerves. I’m ever so sorry. I was so shocked I nearly dropped her. I’ve never been so embarrassed in my life. I’ve never, ever dropped one or even come close to it before. They told me that your birth might be a little different but they never told me she’d pop out like that and ask for her mother. Well I never. Nobody’ll believe me when I tell them.’

‘I’d rather you didn’t say a word about any of this, if you don’t mind.’

‘Oh yes, of course, I forgot. Yes, you can rely on my absolute discretion, I swear.’

Poor Mrs. Evans, I felt for her. If I were her I’d want to tell the world what I’d just experienced. She can probably sell her story for a fortune. I hoped she didn’t need the money.

‘Not to worry, you didn’t drop her and everything’s fine. None of us were prepared for little Valentina, believe me.’

Judy returned with the tray of tea and I realised just how thirsty I was. Then the phone went and Judy went downstairs to answer it.

‘It was Doctor Singh. She’ll come by in the morning.’

‘Maybe you should phone Victoria as well?’

‘Yes, I’ll do that shortly.’

Then I fell asleep. Baby woke me, only this time it was because she was firmly clamped onto my left breast and sucking like she was starving, making contented, normal baby noises. I opened my eyes and Judy was dozing in the chair in the corner of the room. I looked at the clock. It was gone three in the morning. Mrs. Evans must have left, or maybe she was downstairs. Valentina stopped feeding and I gazed down at her gorgeous face and wiped the milk from her lips. She smiled at me and reached for my fingers and held on to them. ‘Mama.’ ‘Valentina. You frightened the living daylights out of the midwife.’ She gurgled contentedly and went back to feeding, closing her eyes.

I felt high, like I was buzzing on some kind of celestial marijuana. Better even. There was simply nothing to compare my feelings with. The joy I felt made up for everything I’d been through. If I did nothing else with my life from now on, I would die happy.

Judy woke up.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘High as a kite. Higher even.’

‘Mrs. Evans will be back in morning. You were dead to the world.’

‘Why don’t you go to bed Judy. We can clear up in the morning.’

‘Okay.’

She came over to me and held my hand and checked on the baby, still happily guzzling away. As Judy looked she opened one eye and checked Judy out. Apparently satisfied, she closed it again.

‘You need to put a nappy on her you know.’

‘I completely forgot. Thanks for reminding me.’

She handed me one from a pack and as soon as Valentina finished feeding I put it on her with some difficulty. She didn’t like it though.

‘Sorry sweetheart I can’t have you crapping all over me.’ She smiled, apparently every time I spoke to her. I felt really funky but what the hell. We both snuggled down and went to sleep.

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It was around seven when Valentina woke me. I switched her to my right breast, just like my class taught me to. An April baby. I needed a pee badly but didn’t want to move until she finished. What the hell, she can come with me, so I got out of bed and staggered to the bathroom, trying to keep her positioned over my breast at the same time. God I was weak, my legs wobbled but I made it to the toilet and somehow hiked my nightie up with one hand whilst balancing baby with the other. After I’d finished I decided not get back into bed but sat in the chair by the window instead. The birds were chirping like crazy and Valentina stopped feeding and looked up at the window, so I lifted her up so she could see outside.

‘Birds Valentina.’ ‘Birds Mama.’ Was she going to repeat every word I said I wondered? Then she tried to copy the sound of the birds. Christ what’s she up to now?

There was a knock at the door and Judy peeked in.

‘Morning.’

‘Morning.’

Valentina predictably said, ‘Mornin.’

‘This is Judy Valentina.’

‘Judy,’ she chirped.

‘Christ Nova, what kind of baby have you got?’

‘Be careful what you say, she repeats everything.’

‘Sorry.’

‘She heard the birds outside and tried to copy them too.’

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Stunned.’

‘Want anything?’

‘A bath.’

‘I’ll run one.’

She disappeared into the bathroom and at the sound of the water running Valentina looked in the direction of the noise.

‘Water. We’re going to have a bath darling, that is, after I’ve taken off your nappy.’

Judy came in and got a towel for me and offered to change her. I handed Valentina over and then got up and went into the bathroom to check that the water wasn’t too hot. I undressed and sank slowly into the water. Judy came in and handed her to me and turned to leave.

‘No, please stay if you want to.’

I lowered her slowly into the water, not sure how she would react. I needn’t have worried. She splashed around and laughed at the sound it made and tried to grab hold of the water as it sprayed everywhere and then to my amazement she tried to stand up but didn’t quite make it as the water put up resistance and she nearly fell over backwards.

‘Whoops.’ I caught her before she fell, laughing. She seemed to have no fear whatsoever. Everything was fun.

‘What an absolute delight,’ Judy cried.

‘And a menace too. Valentina, do you want to walk already?’

‘Walk,’ she said and tried to take a step toward me but fell into my arms instead.

Judy sat on the toilet totally engrossed in Valentina’s performance. I lay back and she lay on top of me, moving her legs up and down in the water while I washed her down from head to toe. She loved it and tried to copy me and wash me down too.

‘Thank you darling.’

Eventually, I handed her to Judy who wrapped her in a towel and took her in the bedroom while I finished washing myself. I got out of the bath and found a fresh nightie and robe to put on. Valentina was fighting with Judy over the nappy and losing. I brushed my hair out and looked around me. The bed was a real mess and the room smelled.

‘Let’s introduce Valentina to the kitchen.’

Valentina seemed quite happy to let Judy carry her downstairs and into the kitchen, where she handed her back to me. We sat around the table and within seconds Valentina was into all the stuff on the table trying to pick things up regardless of their size. She smelt stuff and anything she could get hold of she handed them to me as if wanting me to tell her what it was.

‘Bottle. Jar. Jam. Onions,’ and so on. The girl was insatiable, so I got up and took her on a tour of the kitchen and its contents.

‘Sink. Stove. Kettle. Coffee. Pan. Orange. Banana,’ on and on until I’d identified almost everything. Judy made me a pot off coffee.

Valentina reached out and touched the mug of coffee before I could stop her but she quickly retracted her finger after briefest touch. ‘No, hot Valentina!’ and I put her tiny hand in my mouth and gently sucked it. She frowned and repeated the words, ‘No. Hot.’

‘I’m not going to be able to let her out of my sight.’

‘Not until she’s got a handle on things. Although did you see how she approached the mug? She didn’t just grab at it, she gently touched it.’

The experience of the mug seemed to temper her approach from that point on. She now handled objects with more care, looking to me or to Judy before making a grab for them.

‘And a fast learner.’

Then quite suddenly she yawned, snuggled up to me and went straight to sleep. I felt overloaded and wondered for how long I would be able to keep up with her.

‘We need a little crib for her I think.’

There was a knock at the door. Judy let Mrs. Evans and Amina in.

‘Well, Mrs. Evans has told me a tale.’

‘You’ve not heard the half of it Amina.’

‘Can I hold her?’

‘Sure. She’s not fussy.’

Valentina opened one eye and looked at Amina and immediately came fully alert.

‘Say hello to Amina, Valentina,’ and as soon as she heard my voice, she smiled, snuggled up to Amina and closed her eyes.

‘My god Jane, what have we got here?’

‘We’ve spent the last hour or so giving her a guided tour of the kitchen and think it exhausted her, it did us anyway.’

‘How are you feeling otherwise?’

‘Fine. It’s been difficult to take in the last few hours, so much has happened that I’m in a bit of a spin.’

‘I can understand that from what I’ve been told. Do think all the babies will be the same?’

‘I’m assuming so.’

‘I just find it hard to believe that within seconds of being born she called you Mama.’

‘When she wakes up you can ask her yourself.’

‘Doctor Singh, I was there. I was so shocked, I nearly dropped her.’

‘She sings too.’

‘Sings?’

‘Yes, she heard the birds singing when I woke up this morning and tried to imitate them. I’m having trouble keeping up with her.’

‘I can see why.’

I then had a long lecture from Mrs. Evans on my motherly duties toward my child, including washing her, changing her nappies, talking to her, playing with her, touching her and so on and so forth. Was I going to breast feed her (yes I am). Take her for regular checkups (yes I will). Get her birth registered. It went on with Amina smiling and nodding a lot of the time. After all this, I asked Mrs. Evans if it was okay to take her outside.

‘What now?’

‘Yes, now. Well when she wakes up.’

‘Well I don’t know about that. Well maybe if you wrap her up well and not for too long mind. Why do you want to take her outside now for?’

‘So she can see her new world and it’s spring and flowers are blooming and the trees are turning green.’

‘Oh, well she’s got plenty of time to do that you know, she’s got her whole life ahead of her.’

‘No time like now.’

‘I think the pair of you deserve each other.’

‘You’re absolutely right about that Mrs. Evans. And I want to thank you for last night, you were wonderful.’

‘What even if I nearly dropped your baby? And anyway, it was the easiest birth I’ve ever attended to, I can tell you that. If only they were all that easy.’

‘I forgive you, honestly.’ I lied to her and said, ‘I really had no idea that she’d do that.’

‘Hmm, well okay and you promise won’t tell anyone.’

‘As long as you promise not to tell anyone.’

Then Valentina woke up and yowled at me, but she didn’t wait for me to pick her up. Instead she turned round and climbed up to my breast for a meal. I timed her. Exactly five minutes of full on feeding then a smile followed by a burp and throwing up a little and then back to sleep. Judy handed me a towel to wipe up the mess.

‘Well if there’s nothing else, I must get going,’ and with that Mrs. Evans left.

‘I’d like to wait for Doctor Grayson if that’s okay as long as she gets here soon.’

‘Of course Doctor Singh. Would you like some breakfast?’

‘Please call me Amina, and a cup of tea would be wonderful if that’s no trouble, thank you.’

Judy put the kettle on and started clearing up the mess left from last night.

We sat around the table sipping tea.

‘What no coffee Jane?’

‘Yes, I seem to have lost my craving for it.’

‘Maybe Valentina doesn’t like the taste.’

‘I wouldn’t be surprised.’

‘Jane, what are your plans now that she’s been born?’

‘Plans? Well I have no plans other than raising her. I assume your question refers to the other babies on the way? Why do you ask?’

Amina looked decidedly uncomfortable.

‘Well I received a circular this morning and it requires me to draw up a complete report on Valentina’s birth and subsequent development.’

‘Which means what?’

‘Look, I’m not happy with this. If it was up to me, any decision regarding collecting information on Valentina would be entirely up to you but unfortunately it’s not my decision.’

‘What will this entail?’

‘Well a weekly medical check, various kinds of tests?’

‘Tests? What kinds of tests?’

‘Psychological, physical and, well an entire range actually.’

‘And if I refuse?’

‘The circular doesn’t mention anything about what would happen if you refuse to cooperate. Look, I can’t force you to put Valentina through these tests, but surely you must be concerned about the health of your baby. After all, we’ve got no idea about, well...’

‘Whether she’s a freak or not.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

An uncomfortable silence descended. I felt sorry for Amina, she was caught between a rock and a hard place.

‘I’m sorry Amina, I didn’t mean that...’

‘Oh this is awful! I feel like a monster. It goes against everything I believe in.’

‘So assuming I refuse, what are you required to do?’

‘Well I’m meant to report it. Then I suppose it’s out of my hands.’

‘Can they take her away from me if I refuse to let them, test her?’

‘Oh Jane, I’ve no idea.’

‘They’re afraid, that’s what it is.’

‘Afraid? Why are they afraid of a tiny baby? It’s ridiculous! What kind of threat can a baby be?’

I looked at Judy, who sat there, her face ashen. Finally, Judy said, ‘It’s the men who are afraid Amina.’

A look of comprehension descended on Amina’s face. ‘I see, yes of course. They want to know if Valentina is like you don’t they? They want to know if she doesn’t need men to...have babies.’

There was nothing I could say to that, she’d said it all.

‘You have to get away, that’s the only solution.’

‘Get away Amina? Where to?’

‘I don’t know but it’s the only answer.’

‘I can’t hide from them. How will I live? How will I look after Valentina?’

Suddenly it all seemed completely hopeless. The elation of giving birth was gone, replaced by a terrible fear for her life. I looked down at her and gritted my teeth, trying to hold back my tears. The last thing I wanted was for her to see me crying.

‘I don’t know but we’ll work something out. Maybe you can go abroad?’

‘What, to the land of women?’

There was a knock at the door and my heart leapt.

‘It’s only Victoria.’ Judy got up and went to let her in.

The kitchen was silent when she entered and the happy look on her face was instantly replaced by one of concern.

‘What’s wrong? Is it the baby?’

She rushed to my side.

‘Not exactly Victoria.’

‘Amina? Judy? For Christ’s sake, somebody tell me what’s going on?’

I didn’t have the energy but Amina did, quickly filling her in on everything. That the baby was wonderful and healthy as far as we knew and then about the circular she’d received and the implications.

‘Yes I know about it but I think you’re overreacting.’

‘And if we’re not?’

‘We’ll deal with it if and when it becomes an issue. They’re not omnipotent you know. You have rights Nova.’

‘Rights that they can just as easily take away.’

The reality of my condition forced me, for the first time, to face what it was really like to be a woman in a man’s world. All the talk of equality and liberation meant nothing when it came down to it. Men made the rules and men enforced them, no matter how many women ministers we had or commissions on women’s rights. Just as I knew that racism was institutionalised, so was sexism, especially if the stakes were high enough. And you couldn’t get any higher than the future of the male of the species.

‘So what do you suggest we do Victoria?’

‘I think we should proceed on the basis of treating Valentina as a normal baby girl, no more, no less.’

‘Does that include vaccinations?’

‘Why shouldn’t it?’

‘Well we’ve no idea how she’ll react to them. Do you see my point Victoria? We really know nothing about her except she seems to be much more developed at birth, so I’m assuming that there are other things about her, for example her immune system, that’s different.’

‘All the more reason for us to know as much as we can about her, and you for that matter.’

‘In an ideal world Victoria, I would agree with you but I don’t trust the government one inch. I’m petrified Victoria. I’m afraid for the life of my baby first and foremost and I told you before that I’ll do anything to protect her. And given what’s happened to us already, I think I have every reason to feel afraid.’

Then Valentina woke up. She looked around her and frowned at Victoria. A new face. ‘This is Victoria Valentina. Say hello.’

‘Wictoria.’

‘No teeth for the vee I think.’

‘Hello Valentina. Can I?’ I handed Valentina to her and she held her up in front of her. Valentina looked at me for what? A sign? I smiled at her and she visibly relaxed and then returned my smile.

‘She’s absolutely amazing. Now I believe in your dreams Nova.’

‘Dreams?’ asked Amina, ‘What dreams?’

‘Nova believes that Valentina communicated with her through her dreams almost from the moment of conception.’

‘And you didn’t?’

‘No I didn’t I’m ashamed to say.’

As I watched Valentina taking in every word, I knew somehow that I had needed to be alone with her. I reached out for her and she reached for me.

‘Judy, can you find a blanket for her please.’

‘Sure.’

I cradled her to me and she cooed and gurgled as I gently rocked her. I wrapped her in the blanket and headed for the front door.

‘Let’s take a look outside Valentina.’

We stood out on the small lawn in front of the cottage and I turned around so she could take in her surroundings. Her eyes opened wide and she looked at me and then back at the trees and then up at the sky. I walked over to the nearest tree and pulled a small leaf from a branch and gave it to her. She sniffed it and then touched it with her tiny pink tongue and made a face.

‘Not food baby. Not nice.’

Then she reached out for a flower, a lily I think, and I bent down and let her smell it. She smiled and looked up at me.

‘Nice smell sweetheart. Flower.’

‘ice lower,’ she said and then, ‘Sell.’ I walked around the garden and let her touch and smell everything in it that we could reach. I turned round and they were all standing in the doorway watching Valentina’s performance.

‘I don’t believe what I’m seeing Jane. Pinch me somebody.’ Amina walked over and asked if she could hold her.

I’m amazed at Valentina’s ability to relate to anybody once she gets the nod of approval from me. Amina carried her around the garden naming more things and Valentina did her best to repeat the words, every now and then looking for me as if checking to see that I was close by and keeping an eye on things. Eventually, we went back into the house and into the kitchen. Valentina yowled. Feeding time, then changing time, then sleep.

I decided I better try and do something about my bedroom but Judy insisted I go and nap in the front room where Victoria was getting the fire going. So I settled down with baby and went to sleep almost instantly.

I was woken by the noise of Valentina whooping with joy. Judy was sitting with her while she clapped her tiny hands and looked up at Judy for an explanation of the fire, which obviously fascinated her. And then seeing that I was awake, called out to me, 'Mama, ire,' and pointed to the roaring logs and then looking at Judy who grinned and nodded.

'Yes sweetie, fire. Hot.'

She frowned, 'Ire hot,' and held her hands out to it and then pulled them back. It was obvious that she was showing me that she understood that fire was dangerous just like the mug of coffee had been that morning.

Victoria was sitting there watching the performance.

'Where's Amina?'

'She had to leave but she'll try and come back later.'

'Can she walk?'

'Let's find out. Judy, put her on the floor.'

'Come here Valentina.' I held out my arms to her.

She put her down gently on her bum, making sure to hold her from behind in case she tipped backward. Valentina leaned forward and crawled toward me and reaching my legs used them to lever herself up onto her feet, where she wobbled for a while before they gave way underneath her. I caught her as she fell back on her rear but instead of letting me pick her up, she leaned forward again and repeated the process and again, although wobbling, managed to stand for a while before sitting down again. She clapped her hands and laughed and started all over again. Eventually, she tired of the game and let me pick her up. She buried into my robe, making herself comfortable, closed her eyes and went to sleep, obviously exhausted by her effort.

After observing Valentina's heroic struggle to stand up, Victoria said, 'Well if we wanted any evidence of the theory of punctuated evolution, Valentina is it.'