



“How to be a Father”

By Judith Nolan

“And once the storm is over, you won’t remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won’t even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won’t be the same person who walked in. That’s what this storm is all about...”

~ Haruki Murakami

“Are you sure about that?” Elliot walked a tight circle of agitation. He couldn’t help it. He had to move or go crazy. “How can you be so sure? I know you mean well; you and Cathy having three kids and all. But still...”

“All will be well.” Vincent’s large hand settled firmly on his good friend’s shoulder, stilling his agitation. “You must believe that. Shannon is in the very best of hands. Father and Peter have delivered many babies before this one. They both say this will be an easy birth and it’s already well advanced. It won’t be long now.”

“I wish I could believe you. Shannon insisted on having our baby down here...” Elliot’s frowning gaze moved over the rough stone walls hemming them in, and the myriad of passing pipework, echoing with metallic messages into the shadows. “She said she was happiest here. She wanted our baby to know that same happiness.”

He shook his head, exhaling roughly. “I told her I would pay for the very best care in the world, for her and our child.” He compressed his lips. “She turned me down flat. Said *her* family was here, they would take care of her, and that was that.” His worried eyes lifted to Vincent’s. “Women, right?”

“Can’t always live with them...” Vincent shrugged, knowing the deeply sympathetic smile he was being forced to bite back would be misconstrued right now.

His grip tightened on Elliot’s shoulder, trying to convey what he could not say. He knew all too well what his friend was going through. “But we

most certainly cannot live without them.” His gaze shifted to the curtained entrance behind Elliot’s shoulder. “You should go in there now. Be with her.” He gave him a small shove in the right direction. “She needs you.”

“In there?” Elliot exhaled roughly, sensing the remaining colour draining from his already ashen face. He wanted to throw up. He resisted the insistent urging of his friend, digging his heels into the sandy floor. “No way, I’m not wanted in there. That’s woman’s work. I don’t know the first thing about babies. Besides, I’d only be in the way.”

Or end up passed out flat on the floor, an inner demon mocked him. His stomach tried to revolt again. He wished he smoked and he could surely use a stiff whiskey to steady his nerves right now. What did he know of the mysterious world beyond that curtain?

“You had better keep that thought to yourself,” Vincent remarked wryly. “I can only advise you to think again. It would be the most incredible experience of your life, if you will allow it to be so. Shannon wants you to be there for her.”

“But...” Slipping from Vincent’s grasp, Elliot resumed his pacing, deep uncertainty warring with his desire to be with the woman he loved. He looked back at Vincent’s unruffled calmness. “What kind of father will I be?” He spread his hands wide. “I don’t have any skills in that area. My mother died when I was young and my father hated the sight of me. I have built towers halfway to the stars, faced down mobsters who were determined to cripple my biggest projects, and survived gunmen who did their best to kill me. I came within an inch of dying, remember?”

His hands fell to his sides, fists bunching. “Those things I can handle. But none of that scares me right now, more than the thought of becoming a father. Having someone relying on me for everything. And what does a guy like me know about that?”

“There is no manual, no map to where that road will take us. You can only walk it with care and be open to all the possibilities.” Vincent’s cloak swirled around his heels as he came closer, both hands now settling forcibly onto Elliot’s slumped shoulders. “And do it all with love. There is no other way to travel.”

“Okay, so you’re saying I should get in there...” Elliot wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. “God help me...” He shook his head as he looked up. “Thanks, Vincent. For everything.”

In answer Vincent nodded, using his greater strength to turn the other man around and push him forward. But Elliot had only gone two steps when someone ducked around the curtain into the passage.

“Elliot...?” Catherine raised her eyebrows at him. “Shannon has been asking for you. You can’t help anyone walking up and down out here.” She glanced past him to her husband. “How’s he holding up?”

“I think he will be all right.” The smile Vincent had been containing finally curved his lips. “At least I hope so.” His shoulders shook slightly.

“Good,” Catherine replied briskly, seizing Elliot’s hand before he could think to evade her. “Come on. It’s beyond time to face the music. And

don't you dare pass out on me." She looked back over his shoulder to wink at her husband. "We need you."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Elliot lied bleakly, feeling his knees sag alarmingly.

Catherine's huff of disbelief spoke volumes as she lifted the leather curtain for them to pass beyond and let it fall back behind them. The interior of the extensive rock chamber glowed with flickering candlelight constantly at war with the muted shadows that clung to the darker corners. The tunnel world's chief medical people were clustered around the bed in the centre of the room. Talking quietly, Mary and Peter stood on the far side, while at the foot Father was watching Shannon closely, timing her contractions with a pocket watch perched on a small table beside him. He looked up as Elliot approached. Catherine moved beyond the bed to join the other two.

"I see you finally made it, after all," Father remarked, not unsympathetically, peering over the rims of his glasses. "Not before time. Your wife has been asking to see you. We do things differently, down here. Everyone pitches in at times like this. The husbands are expected to do their bit."

"So Vincent told me outside. He gave me little choice." Elliot's eyes flicked towards Catherine and he shrugged. "But I will admit, this is certainly new territory for me. What do you need me to do?"

“What you’re good at,” Father returned evenly. “Take care of your wife. Sit by the bed, hold her hand and tell her everything will be fine. Make her believe it. It won’t be long now.”

“Okay...” Elliot sank onto the chair set beside the bed, grateful for the distraction from what was about to happen at the other end of the sheets. He reached closer to lay the back of his fingers against his wife’s moist brow, smoothing back the damp curls clinging to her skin. “Hi, there...” he whispered, looking into her eyes and smiling. His concentration on her became total and the need to throw up receded.

“Catherine said she would fetch you,” Shannon assessed him closely. “Are you sure you can do this? I mean, I will understand if you--”

“This is where I belong,” Elliot interrupted her quickly. “Though I will admit to being more scared right now, than at any time in my entire life.”

“My poor Stosh...” Shannon sighed, taking his hand and pressing it to her lips. “You are not ready for any of this, are you?” She tried to smile, but her lips suddenly compressed and she cried out, a long, low keening sound, as if she was in the most terrible pain.

“Shannon...?” Elliot tried not to protest as the gentle grip she kept on his fingers suddenly tightened to agonising. Agony seared up his arm to his shoulder.

Put to the test, he failed to suppress a groan as his wife’s whole body clenched and strove once more to give birth to their child. Elliot looked around the room, seeking guidance and help, but no one else seemed

overly concerned as they moved once more into their appointed positions. Elliot wanted to say something, anything to assuage the agony his love was going through, but apart from the crushing grip she maintained on his hand, even Shannon seemed to have forgotten him in the ongoing struggle to breathe through the pain.

“It will be all right...” he managed to say, more for himself than anyone else. “I love you...” He clamped his free hand over the numbness of his own fingers, gripping and holding on as Shannon’s body continued to ride the storm of the contraction up and over the crest.

“Welcome to impending fatherhood,” Father finally commented, looking up at Elliot, as Shannon began to relax once more, falling back against the pillows with a long, shuddering sigh. “The next contraction should do the trick. We will need you to support her then. Keep her totally focussed on what she needs to do. We’ll do the rest.”

“Whatever you need me to do...” Elliot managed to extract his numbed fingers, trying not to be obvious as he attempted to restore some circulation. “I certainly have a new respect for what women go through.”

He steeled himself as Shannon began to move again, a slow writhe of her whole body as she strained and bent upwards, indicating that her child was about to enter this hidden world. Father encouraged as Peter hovered close by, both watched closely by the two women.

Time telescoped and became meaningless as Shannon rose once more into the pain and, under Father’s curt direction, Elliot moved onto the bed behind her, supporting her back as she curled into the ascending

waves of pain. Forgetting all about himself, Elliot watched in wonder as the age-old tableau quickly unfolded. In a matter of moments a small, dark haired child slid swiftly into the candle-lit world, lying on the bloodied sheets and blinking dark eyes at the close circle of attendants. A soft cry of discontent broke the sudden stillness of the adults and the baby waved a tiny fist at them.

Stunned into immobility, Elliot sat behind his wife, his arms around her as he gazed over her shoulder and down at the baby. Boy or girl, he didn't think to ask the obvious question. In that suspended moment, his eyes locked with those of the child of his creation, and the tiny mite seemed to be looking right into his soul, with a wisdom and love far beyond all knowledge. And saw into the very heart of his turmoil and confusion.

He felt as if the baby's spirit has travelled a million miles across space and time just to be here with him, right now, in this moment. To make him believe in the possibility of miracles. Elliot sat and stared in wonderment as Catherine expertly swaddled the tiny body, leaving Father and Peter to work on the attached cord with the efficiency of long practice, quietly discussing their success and the new addition.

A soft, care-worn hand settled on Elliot's shoulder. "Congratulations, Dad..." Mary said softly. "It's a little girl. In case you were wondering." She smiled wisely.

"A girl...?" Elliot tore his gaze away from his new-born daughter, blinking against the sharp sting of tears. He almost blurted out, *what do I know about raising a girl? A boy, maybe I might have some idea, but a girl...!*

wouldn't know where to begin...I was imagining baseballs and hard hats, not dresses and dolls...

“You’re not disappointed, are you?” Shannon asked, looking back at him over her shoulder, her hands tightening over his, where they rested against her abdomen. “I mean, next time there could be a boy...”

“Next time...?” Elliot echoed blankly, his heart rate taking off like a runaway horse. “No, but I...” His throat dried. He cleared it and said roughly, “She is beautiful, like you.” He kissed her forehead. “Of course I’m not disappointed. How could I be?”

“Do you have a name already picked out?” Mary asked, as she fluffed and rearranged the pillows behind them.

“Rebecca...after my mother.” Shannon replied, leaning her head back against her husband’s shoulder as her body began to contract again. She arched as the pain took her once more and her tight grip on Elliot’s fingers threatened to cut off all circulation as they moved through the final stages of birth.

But this time Elliot didn’t notice the pain of his fingers. *Rebecca...*the soft, sweet name echoed through him. *My daughter, Rebecca.*

I guess I’m going to learn about being a Dad. Suddenly he couldn’t wait to start...

~THE END~



“The heart of a father is the masterpiece of nature...”

~ Abbé Prévost