

MERCY

By Molly Ritvo

The mother, Louisa Marquez, is resting on a narrow hospital bed in room 203b. Her arms lay softly at her sides, her face angelic and calm on the hospital pillow. She is coming out of anesthesia and is drifting somewhere between a sweet drug induced coma and the peaceful remembering of the birth of her new daughter, Mercedes in Spanish, Mercy in English. Louisa remembers running her fingers over her daughter's face seconds after she came into the world, watching her little hands scrunch up, as she clutched her daughter's tiny, reddish, wet body that was trembling a little in her arms as if she wasn't ready

to face the world yet. Louisa couldn't take her dark eyes off her baby's fingernails. They seemed to be made of paper, as if they could float right off her little hands and feet. Louisa remembers cupping her infant's head, her little head that seemed a little pointy, and she recalls the nurse leaning over her saying "She's perfect, just perfect." Louisa looks at her stomach that feels achy and empty under the flimsy blanket. She then feels anger wash over her, anger at the nurse with red hair and a fat face who took Mercy away.

The nurse with red hair and a fat face had taken Mercy away to administer a few tests in the NICU, since Mercy was almost a month early. "Just routine tests, nothing serious," she said before whisking little Mercy away from her mother who was drifting away into sleep. After the nurse gently places Mercy in a crib for the attending physician to examine, she looks at the infant and touches her tiny forehead, above her dark wide eyes, before walking away to attend to the next baby. Two minutes later, while the nurse is bathing another newborn, and while Louisa has already drifted into a hazy, ignorant sleep, Mercy closes

her eyes and doesn't open them. Her little scrunched body stops breathing, her heart too weak to stand living without her mother's womb protecting her. "SIDS," was all the attending physician could say as he covers Mercy with a sheet.

Louisa, after hearing the news from the same fat-faced nurse, grows pale. Her eyes cloud over and she hobbles to the bathroom before collapsing on the floor, letting sour vomit boil out of her and land on to the tiled floor next to her. The nurse straightens Louisa's bed, fluffs her pillow, and waits in the uncomfortable chair by the bed for Louisa to come out. It is the nurse's first day as a nurse. She, at twenty three, had graduated from nursing school only one week prior.

Later that night, the nurse sits on a couch in her apartment, staring blankly at the TV that isn't even on. Her young husband comes home a few hours later and finds his wife still in her nurse's coat with her name tag on

sitting in the same spot. "My first baby died," was all she says to her husband as he slips out of his shoes and hangs up his wool coat on a wire hanger. In bed, the nurse looks at the ceiling in her room as she lies rigid, exactly like she had done as a little girl when she played "Stiff as a board, light as a feather" with her friends in grade school, as their hands rested firmly underneath her before picking her up. This time though, the nurse feels as though the bed is falling under her. Her husband rolls on top of her and tries to kiss her neck, like she once liked. She brushes him off and rolls over and faces the empty wall. The husband also rolls over with an exasperated sigh. The space between him and his wife feels larger and larger to him every night. They haven't made love in weeks. Her womb continues to remain empty.

The next morning at the law firm, the husband stands in front of his older colleague's desk with a pained expression on his face. The colleague looks up from his computer. "What's up Steve?" he asks. The colleague watches the husband's eyes drift to a picture in a silver frame on the colleague's desk. It is a picture of his colleague with

his pretty blonde wife and a little boy at the beach. The little boy is sitting on his father's, the colleague, shoulders. They are all laughing, their eyes wide.

"I don't think Michelle and I are going to have kids," the husband says slowly. His colleague knows that Michelle is trying to conceive, unsuccessfully. "Now she thinks it's a waste of time to even try."

"I'm sorry, man," the colleague says, tilting his head sympathetically to the left. "I know it's rough." There is a pause, a loaded pause, where both men understand that sometimes comforting words fail, that sometimes words can't express certain things or even help. "It takes time," the colleague offers softly. "My housekeeper Louisa waited three years to get pregnant. And she is due next month. She says her baby will be named Mercy, in honor of God's mercy for giving her a daughter after all the waiting. It does happen."

"She's lucky," the husband says. He walks over to his desk and sits at his computer, looking at a blank screen.

THE END