

The Tilted Axis

By Sem Megson

It was Autumn, the season of natural deception when the sun continues to smile – but pulls back its warmth.

In the countryside the crops were being mowed down in their proud prime by previous benefactors. In the urban sprawl Mother Nature was giving way to Human Nature and the malcontent were embracing the fall, with its darkness that came faster, its streets that emptied sooner. It was in this urban sprawl on the night when the clocks turned back that Mackville went to Shaina as summoned.

Even in a dim corner of the room it was clear they were both at an age where expectations equaled disappointments. Mackville's body was a thin line taking nothing more than its share of bone and flesh and skin. Shaina's body was a circle encompassing whatever necessary to keep its shape.

"We have to do this quick," she said, "and keep your fingerprints off the wall."

He nodded and said, "I understand."

"You better!"

Mackville didn't touch the wall; he did what was necessary, but when Shaina moved unexpectedly she said, "Don't do that again. A man like you shouldn't know about that."

Knowing things he wasn't supposed to know always elicited scorn from others and Mackville was used to it. He had been self-taught from a young age and never rewarded for it by society; the autodidact often ends up banished and alone.

"Okay, we're done," said Shaina. "Now go."

Mackville stayed where he was and said, "Waste not, want not."

"Go, you damn fool!"

For a while Shaina hid the pearl of her pregnancy in the round oyster shell of her body. Unlike a real pearl, however, it hadn't begun under accidental conditions and it couldn't be kept secret for years before being pulled into the outside world. At four months pregnant she walked into the bedroom where her husband, whose nickname was "Junior", stood undressing.

"I've got some news that's going to knock you over," said Shaina.

"I doubt it," said Junior.

Shaina was a woman who humored her fate, more than accepted it, but she was careful not to take

the joke too far from prevailing precedent. "I'm having a baby," she said. "The doctor told me lots of women get pregnant near the change of life."

This news did indeed knock over her husband and he sat down on the bed and surveyed his own naked body in silence.

"Junior, did you hear me?" said Shaina. "You're going to be a father!"

"I heard you."

Two decades ago Junior had expected to hear those words from his wife. Now they sounded strange to him. He wondered if a man who called himself "Junior" could be a father. Wasn't the father supposed to be called "Senior" and the child called "Junior"?

There was also something else that seemed strange to him: his wife had gotten pregnant out of the blue after twenty years of marriage. Junior rubbed his bald head and asked himself, How did it finally happen?

Ah, suspicion. Nothing bursts the bubble of longed-for happiness faster than suspicion. Luckily for Shaina her husband was the type of man who could be coaxed into letting that bubble rise unfettered.

Junior looked from his body to his wife's and said, "Gee, Shaina, are you sure about this?"

"Yes, and the doctor confirmed it."

"It's hard to believe after so many years," said Junior.

"You'll believe it soon enough!"

"I suppose so."

Shaina had thought a lot about what her husband would believe. She concluded he would believe he had fathered a child before he would believe she had gotten pregnant by someone else, least of all by Mackville who most people in the neighborhood considered an idiot.

"Well," said Junior, "I'm amazed, but it's great news. It's great news!"

"We're going to need extra money," said Shaina.

"Alright, I'll pick up some double shifts at work."

"Good – do whatever you need to do for the child."

Shaina was satisfied that she had done what was needed; moreover she was thankful she had done it without the guilt which had prevented her from doing it years earlier. To her, if reality TV shows could be built around women who had a large number of children then the conceiving of one child with a man who wasn't her husband was, at worst, a forgivable sin.

No one had to tell Mackville about the pregnancy. He knew Shaina hadn't summoned him as an object of lust but as a last resort. He had gone to her because of it; she was also a last resort for him. On the night they were together he had followed as far as he could the part of himself that left his body. Mackville felt it taken up by Shaina and it gave him the unusual luxury of confidence that a part of himself was wanted.

Several blocks away from where Shaina and Junior rented a single story home, Mackville lived in a dingy rooming house. There, in his small room and with intentions deeper than logic, he prepared a place for the coming child, a place that he vowed would always be available to them.

At the local factory where Mackville pushed a broom he noticed Shaina's husband was also preparing for the child. The man had a useful skill and he was picking up a lot of extra shifts. Mackville had stood behind a group of employees when Junior announced the pregnancy to those who had to be told. "Hey listen up," Junior had said. "My wife is having a kid. Yeah, yeah, I know, it's a late touchdown for me. Anyway, my wife wants a boy and I want a girl.

A pretty little girl that I can show off!"

This announcement had pleased Mackville because of the joy that had been in Junior's voice and from then on he felt a kind of love for the man as they both prepared for the arrival of a new season of life.

The route of arrival for that new season was proving arduous for Shaina. During the second trimester her blood pressure began shooting upward to dangerous levels. She was advised at the free clinic to quit her job and rest at home, which she did, and that was how Mackville knew something was wrong. Prior to this he had seen Shaina every few days in the variety store where she worked as a cashier and her sudden absence alarmed him.

Shaina's pregnancy was at seven months before Mackville saw her again. She was leaving the factory after bringing food to her husband who was on a double shift. Shaina was unwell and when she spotted Mackville near the plant gate she shouted to him, "Help me!"

As Shaina leaned on Mackville's arm, he leaned on the hope of her pregnancy, and they both leaned on the subject of Junior for conversation. The three of them were bound together along those streets. They had formed a triangle of parents, and while engineering experts say the triangle makes the strongest base, relationship experts disagree.

At the end of May the child was born premature and Shaina gave her the name "Aaralyn". As with many things that bloom early Aaralyn combined fragility and tenacity. Her tiny fists tried to pound the air, her underdeveloped lungs tried to pierce it. Despite her inauspicious beginnings she insisted on taking her place in the world and, after three weeks in hospital, she was allowed to go home.

Home to Shaina and Junior. On that first day they placed her in a crib and sat down to watch over her. Shaina was still recovering from the difficult birth and she slumped in her chair. Exhaustion had affected her thinking and reason had given way to superstition. Family and friends had been denied all contact with Aaralyn in case they brought illness, or worse, brought awareness to Junior that the child was somehow different from him.

Aaralyn kicked off her blanket and Shaina got up to replace it. She stroked the petite face as if it were fresh clay removed from a mold. To Shaina's eyes that mold had come from Mackville. Fearing the likeness would undo what her husband believed about the child she decided to implement a back-up plan.

"There's something special about Aaralyn," said Shaina.

"She's a baby doll," said Junior.

"I'm telling you she's a special gift. You can see it when you look at her."

"What I see is a baby doll who has her Daddy's bald head!"

In fact each time Junior looked at Aaralyn he found a new way that she was like him and it served to bury his former suspicion. He was also relieved she was a girl. A girl would never be called 'Junior' and it allowed him to be a father with that nickname.

"I wanted a daughter and I got one," said Junior.

"Yes, you did," said Shaina, taking her seat again beside the crib, "and now she's home."

For Aaralyn, who was settling down to sleep, there was another room where she would also be welcomed home. In that room Mackville was sitting beside the place he had prepared for her. Every night since Aaralyn had been born Mackville sat beside the empty place and talked to himself about how much he wanted to see her. This effusive emotion was odd for him, a man who knew that wanting was seldom having. Finally, on this evening he became convinced that to visit the child was more than a want. It was his right.

Often in custody battles rights are grenades thrown by one parent at the other with the words "You

won't keep me from seeing my child!" Divorce lawyers shout "Visitation!" and detonate a smart bomb in order to get more time a week for a client without collateral damage to the client's offspring.

However for those whose paternity is smudged, what weapon asserts their right? Mackville chose a teddy bear. Then he waited until he heard Junior telling others at work that Aaralyn was putting on weight and doing fine. On the following Sunday he loaded the stuffed animal under his arm and went to visit the child.

Shaina and Junior had just brought Aaralyn onto the porch in an old carriage when they saw Mackville. He was standing on the walkway and all three parents looked at each other. Shaina searched her mind for ready-made answers to the questions she feared most. Junior felt his earlier suspicion resurface at the sight of a teddy bear under another man's arm. None of the three parents had spoken. It was the child who squared their triangle that opened the conversation with a brief cry.

"Now she's awake," said Shaina.

"Nah," said Junior. "She's dreaming."

Shaina and Junior bent over the carriage to check on Aaralyn and when they finished they were surprised that Mackville had stepped onto their porch.

Junior took a closer look at Mackville and said, "You're the last guy I figured to show up here."

"I came to see the child," said Mackville.

"You mean you came over just to see my daughter?"

"Yes, that's what he means," said Shaina. "You know he doesn't make sense when he talks."

"I hadn't noticed that about him. Seriously, what are you doing here, Mackville?"

"I came to see the child."

Junior glanced at Shaina. "He said it again – what gives?"

"Nothing. Ignore him. You never know what's going to come out of his mouth."

Aaralyn then gave another quick cry and Junior leaned into the carriage and said, "Shh, baby doll. Go back to sleep or Daddy will sing you a song. You don't want to hear that, do you? Daddy can't sing very well but he loves you, baby doll. He loves you."

When Junior straightened up from the carriage he felt more assured of his fatherhood and he turned to Mackville and said, "Oh I get what you're doing here. The folks at work sent you, didn't they? It's Sunday and they're all chilling out so they sent you over here with a present for my daughter. Ain't that hilarious!"

"I could've told you that," said Shaina. "He's got the present under his arm."

"Alright, Mackville, you give that teddy bear to my daughter," said Junior.

Mackville kneeled beside the carriage and for the first time he saw Aaralyn. Within a moment her sound, her smell surrounded him and he felt homed. He touched her arm and it made him want to shout, Your flesh and blood is my flesh and blood! Yet he knew he couldn't say that out loud so he set the teddy bear in the carriage, got to his feet and whispered, "She's beautiful."

Just then a stray dog came along the street and stopped in front of the house. The dog began to bark, loud and vicious. Aaralyn cried out at the noise and Junior picked her up and said, "Don't worry, baby doll, Daddy's got you!" Mackville's instinct, too, was to protect the child and he shoed away the dog.

Aaralyn was soon quiet again and Shaina took her from Junior and kissed her on the forehead. From the beginning Shaina had done whatever she needed to do for the child and she would continue to do it. "I'm taking Aaralyn inside before that dog comes back," she said. "Say bye to her, Mackville."

"Goodbye for now," he said.

Mackville went along the walkway already thinking about his next visit with the child; Shaina was thinking about the same thing.

"That wild dog was barking like it had rabies," said Junior, bringing the carriage into the house. "This neighborhood ain't safe for kids."

"Not anymore," said Shaina.

It was now Summer and the posture of that season is supine, intended for floating on waves, lying in grass. Those with the audacity to stand up to the sun are humbled by stunted shadows. Effort goes on vacation unless the price of inaction is too high.

In the days after Mackville's visit Junior and Shaina made separate estimations that the cost of doing nothing could be their total fortune: Aaralyn, so they packed up and moved away from the risk of wild dogs and truths.

When Mackville heard they had left the city he went and stood in front of their house to be where he had once found hope in a part of himself. Aaralyn had disappeared from his life but to disappear is not always to be gone forever. There is a natural return, like the seasons. The world rotates on its tilted axis and life comes round again. A child grows into an adult and might learn a closed secret that opens a journey to another home, to a place that is always available to them. In his own way, Mackville understood

this and he picked up a new hope and carried it with him.

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