

MARLÉNE ZADIG

Soldier's Joy

The light was especially kind that morning. It charged the threads of spider silk adorning the hundred-year-old magnolia branches—bare and antlered from drought—reaching just outside the second-story window. The gilded strands swayed and glinted in the breeze, seeming almost harmonic, like the strings of a wild and rustic instrument awaiting their woodland maestro. A fog rolled in and they were gone; it passed by and they shone brightly once more. Helga's mood plummeted and rose accordingly, and she spent the duration of the morning alone in a rocking chair waiting to be shot down by a cloud.

The child eventually woke from his morning nap and crawled up into Helga's lap. She kissed him beside the mounded rough patch bulging through his forehead up near his hairline. It was round like a coin at its base and jutted out with a small domed top like a nascent mushroom, but the nub of it was hard and calcified, like a horn. It was in fact a horn, according to x-rays, though whether it would eventually curve up and out like a rhinoceros, grow straight and spiraled like a unicorn, or perhaps emerge in some other pattern entirely remained unknown. As far as anyone could tell her, there was no verifiable precedent for a human child born with a bony spur fused to the skull that defied any and all attempts at inhibition. It grew and grew.

At first, Helga billed the rough patch as merely a birthmark when they were out together at playgroups or the park, but recently it had begun to elongate and take shape. Despite the boy's bowl cut with thick black hair fringed down to his eyebrows, the prong now poked through most of Helga's efforts at disguise. The other parents had been almost gleefully indulgent of the growth when it had been small and localized, employing that syrupy, self-congratulatory approach commonly reserved for the mentally disabled, but now they avoided the mother-son pair as if they were contagious.

"Marshmallow mix?" her son Jamie asked while nestled into her bosom on the rocking chair as they gazed out the window together.

"Only if you promise not to tell anyone I gave you marshmallows," she replied, to a solemn nod from Jamie. The snack in question was comprised of dry Cheerios with pretzels, raisins, and very few miniature marshmallows tossed in as a small treat. Though it pleased Helga to provide Jamie with such tiny indulgences, she feared the repercussions if anyone at the clinic or the county knew she was feeding her two-year-old even miniscule amounts of marshmallows. Though she knew there was no law against feeding young children reasonably small quantities of candy, she also knew that children had been removed from their parents in this country for far less. It gave her little comfort that she was doing everything by the book. The book they used seemed to be updated continuously and composed in invisible ink.

The pregnancy had been unintended. Helga was a war widow who'd taken frequent lovers—many of them strangers—in the months following the sudden death of her beloved husband. The doctors had requested a DNA sample from the father of her son, but she couldn't provide one, and this led them to view her with greater suspicion than they'd already had to begin with. They interrogated her repeatedly regarding any potential behaviors that could have been associated with birth-defects, specifically drug and alcohol abuse, none of which she'd touched while pregnant. She understood they were only doing it to try to figure out what was happening in the absence of clear explanations. Still, ever since those probing questions, she'd instinctually fashioned a cloak of enhanced probity that she felt would've never been required of just your average single mother: no alcohol for her (even in

moderation), only organic foods for Jamie, no babysitters. Now she was the single mother of a child with an unusual mutation, and she sensed that the two of them would need to proactively assuage others' concerns as a matter of survival.

Though she'd drifted on a current of unease ever since the growth was identified, Helga knew definitively that they were truly in jeopardy when she received the eviction notice two weeks before. Their landlord was a Polish woman named Agnieszka who'd once boasted to acquaintances about renting the upstairs apartment in her split-level duplex to the wife of a war hero. Agnieszka was a conservative Catholic and now a naturalized American citizen, and she knew that close proximity to decorated military veterans brought with it a certain social cachet, especially in patriotic Suisun City so near to the air force base. Her own husband had been a veteran back in their home country, but he'd since died of alcoholism, and it was felt that Helga's tenancy would help exalt the woman's status out of her base substrate of sustained shame.

Agnieszka had turned a blind eye to the obvious signs of Helga's fornication (as evidenced by her frequent overnight male guests) and warmly welcomed the arrival of the baby even though he would be born out of wedlock. She had been unable to produce children of her own as a result of an early, necessary hysterectomy, and she'd declared herself little Jamie's surrogate grandmother well in advance of his birth.

Now that it was impossible to conceal that the child possessed a bizarre, vaguely heretical deformity, and that Helga was refusing to follow the advice of medical and psychological clinicians to have the horn surgically removed, Agnieszka had expressed in person (in advance of the formal notice) that the duo would need to vacate the apartment within thirty days or else she would fabricate some evidence of neglect and report Helga to child protective services.

"I'm not saying he can't have the surgery," Helga insisted to everyone with an opinion on the matter—which was indeed everyone, including Agnieszka, "just that we need to wait until Jamie is old enough to decide for himself. What if we put him through this traumatic operation and it grows back anyway? What if it causes him excruciating chronic pain? What if he likes having a horn? Who are we to choose?"

Maybe I'm being naïve, but no one can make the case that it's actually hurting anything."

Agnieska had taken the stance, however, that the horn was emblematic of grave sin. "The only human figures with horns are satyrs and Satan," she decried.

"But those are both two-horned creatures," Helga pointed out, reluctantly condescending to the debate. "Isn't this more in the vein of a unicorn? Is that not a noble creature of antiquity?"

The woman snorted. "If this were a unicorn situation, he wouldn't have found his way to the likes of you, child. No, I'll not be associated with evil, and I'll certainly not live under the same roof as its spawn. You must go away."

Helga had been a runaway herself in her youth and had no home to go back to. She'd been conceived as cheap labor and born into a family of six other children on a sheep farm outside of Dixon. At sixteen she hopped a train west to Oakland, procuring work with a fake ID as a live-in nanny to a family of middling academics in the hills above UC Berkeley. After a few years, she'd saved enough to pay for Early Childhood Education units at the city college in order to obtain a steady job working as a preschool aide so she could afford her own place and move out from under the groaning body of the history professor who paid her to be his mistress when she wasn't caring for his three cherubic children.

Helga met her husband while still living in Berkeley. He was on an ROTC scholarship to Cal; she was regularly venturing out with her preschool charges on walking fieldtrips to campus in the hopes that the great importance of higher educational institutions would seep into their collective developing subconscious and leave a permanent mark. Their first encounter was a calamity: he crashed into her while navigating a sharp turn on his scooter around some overgrown boxwoods, and though she was only mildly scuffed up and bruised by the impact, he'd insisted on missing his calculus class to escort Helga and her flock all the way back to preschool to be sure she hadn't sprained anything vital in the collision. Love came easily after all that.

* * *

Helga examined Jamie's ruddy features in the kitchen as she compiled the ingredients for his snack mix. Though she knew the child couldn't be the offspring of her late husband, she nevertheless reveled in their uncanny resemblance.

"Juice?" Jamie asked. Same chestnut eyes.

"No juice with marshmallow mix, but I'll get you some water, okay?"

Same mop of hair. Same plucky spirit. It was as if her son's conception had transcended the grave.

Her husband's name was Juan but he went by Johnny, and they'd eloped after six weeks of passionate petting. She fell in love with his dignity and chivalry, both of which somehow remained intact even when he drank heavily, which wasn't especially often. Helga followed him to various flight training posts around the country, and eventually back to the greater Bay Area to Travis Air Force Base, from which he was subsequently deployed in support of Operation Inherent Resolve against Islamic State ground forces. Johnny—Johnny Quest among his squadron—flew Apache helicopters that rained down Hellfire missiles until the IS eventually stung back with an RPG and he crashed down somewhere in the bowels of Mesopotamia, exploding on impact. He'd missed reaching the end of his tour by less than a week.

Helga succumbed to the news with a deep, silent grief and then proceeded to sleep with nearly all of the members of her late husband's squadron once they returned from war. It became a sort of ritual for each of them to rotate checking in on Johnny's widow to pay their respects and then lie with her before they went home. She would cook them dinner and would later initiate the lovemaking by saying, "Johnny would've wanted us to do this in his memory." It made no sense to any of them, including Helga, but everyone was terribly sad and this felt better than not having sex while still being terribly sad. In that way, the ritual became a kind of sacrament.

When she'd worked her way through all the men in the squadron and they stopped coming by as often—many of them had wives and girlfriends of their own—she took up pole dancing at a local strip club. She did this not for the money (she had a widow's pension),

but because it gave her an outlet to perform her grief in a way that she wasn't able to do in her normal life.

“Helga the Horrible” was her dance persona, complete with Viking-inspired lingerie and realistically artificial blond braids. When Helga danced, she often wept, and she would use the braids to wipe away the tears. She was the most heartbreaking Viking stripper there ever was, and the regulars adored her.

When Helga became pregnant with Jamie, she didn't question it at all; it had seemed to her a foretold thing. She quit working at the club and reenrolled in community college, hoping to earn enough credits to become a lead preschool teacher, eager to eventually teach with her son by her side. She devoted her gestation to preparing her nest and her life for the arrival of her unborn child.

Jamie emerged a pink and healthy seven-and-a-half pounds and passed the neonatal checkup with flying colors except for the peculiar button on his forehead. To the naked eye, the patch was pocked with fissures like a pumice stone and looked almost porous. Under a magnifying glass, the blemish revealed such wonderful divots and craters and reminded Helga of the surface of the moon. Later x-rays revealed that it was in fact bone protruding through the skin, but it seemed only minorly anomalous and eventually fixable until it became clear after many more months that the stub was steadily growing outward—that it was active and alive.

The doctors then began characterizing the growth almost as a cancer, though there was no evidence of malignancy, and psychologists warned of the boy becoming an outcast if nothing was done. The child seemed perfectly healthy by all other measures, but the fact that Helga refused aggressive treatment spurred whispers of the potential for her to be ruled unfit as his mother, for the state to remove the child from her care and treat him against her wishes. She abruptly stopped taking him to doctors and was contemplating moving someplace more remote and more open-minded to difference—perhaps the Santa Cruz mountains—when she received a second eviction notice from her landlord Agnieska earlier that morning under her door.

“Just five marshmallows, today, okay?” Helga said, loading up a melamine bowl with the snack mix. “Let’s count them together as I put them in—”

“1,” “1,”

“2,” “2,”

“3,” “3,”

“4,” “4,”

“5!” “5!”

“Good counting!” she said, reaching over to ruffle his hair, which defied all attempts at being mussed. It was broom-straight and always collapsed right back into place on its own.

The child munched on his snack, leaving the marshmallows for last, while Helga washed dishes at the sink. A sudden loud knock at the door interrupted them both. Helga stepped away from the sink but left the water running to mask the sound of their movements in the apartment.

The knocking continued and rose in impertinence as Helga held a finger to her lips and refused to answer. She took Jamie’s hand and helped him off the dining chair to retreat to the bedroom at the front of the apartment. She closed and locked the bedroom door and hauled her wardrobe in front of it, then tied some sheets together and improvised a baby carrier around her shoulders from a long wrap skirt in case it became necessary to leave through the window. Though Jamie seemed unperturbed, Helga hummed a jaunty tune—“Soldier’s Joy” was the first to come to mind—to help keep him (or perhaps just her) calm while the knocking persisted with still no announcement to identify the knocker. If it had been Agnieszka or someone from the county, they would have said so, but whoever it was wasn’t interested in making their intentions known.

“Let’s play a quiet game, shall we?” Helga said and Jamie nodded. “We’ll play a quiet game of hide-and-seek where we hide and no one finds us, and then we win.”

They lingered on the bed together for a long ten minutes while the knocking reverberated through the flat and ten more minutes after it had subsided, Helga continuing to hum softly while Jamie traced his tiny fingers over the wooden buttons of her oversized sweater. The

buttons had been crafted from the sanded cross-sections of thin branches and he'd once referred to them as tree-cookies. Helga and Jamie looked out on the denuded canopy of the old magnolia but the light had changed by then, aimed now from more directly overhead, and they could no longer see those strands of spider silk incandescing in the warm sun. The filaments had all but disappeared.

"Is this because of my pointer?" Jamie asked of the knocking at the door once the apartment fell silent. This was the neutral term Helga had invented to render the growth more benign in her son's imagination in contrast to others' barely concealed alarm.

"No, sweetie, it's just someone being naughty."

They passed the remainder of the day inside the apartment and only prepared to venture out to the park late into the following morning once Helga decided there was enough foot traffic on the street. She wanted to be assured of the presence of witnesses.

She went to check the weather on her phone and noticed an email from one of the men in Johnny's former squadron, Nathaniel, the one she'd spent the most time with in the months following Johnny's death. She almost never received emails that weren't promotional in nature, so she opened it right away.

"Mrs. JQ—have you seen this?" went the subject line. The text of the message read simply, "Call if you need anything, -N." Below that was a forwarded link to an article in a local newsletter which masqueraded as a newspaper and was run by a notorious peddler of government conspiracies: "Horned Toddler Found Living Outside of Fairfield. Sources Suspect Drugs, the Occult." There under the headline was a candid photograph of little Jamie riding his tricycle in front of Helga. His hair was parted by the breeze of his forward motion on their way to the park, and there it was. He couldn't wear a helmet because of the growth, and she could just barely decipher it germinating up out of his forehead in the photograph. She recognized their clothes from Tuesday of the previous week but couldn't recall anyone taking their picture. Still, with everyone walking around with their phones out in front of them these days, she realized that it could've been anyone.

She didn't read the article. She didn't need to; the headline said it all.

Helga told Jamie then that the park would have to wait. She turned on PBS for the boy and went about stuffing their suitcases and duffle bags with food, clothing, and essential belongings—medicines, toiletries, passports. The grating voice of Caillou whined from the TV in the living room as Helga emptied their closets.

“Mama, why Caillou has no hair?” Jamie had asked once early into his time watching the cartoon show chronicling the exploits of a four-year-old Canadian boy. Helga looked it up for him and learned that the show’s creators couldn’t decide what kind of hair he should have and had somehow come to the conclusion that making him bald would appeal more universally to all children. This, despite the fact that he was obviously both a boy-child and white, and that baldness was perhaps the least common hairstyle of children anywhere.

“He was just born special without hair,” Helga finally told Jamie, “like you and your pointer. Some people are born missing things; some people have extra.” Jamie had accepted this explanation just fine.

When Helga finished gathering their most crucial items, she told Jamie she’d be out packing the car and would be back in just a minute. When she’d climbed the stairs again after the first load, however, the door to the apartment was ajar. She had only been gone a minute, no more than two.

She flung open the door only to be grabbed from behind by a man who covered her mouth with a gloved hand and immobilized her in some kind of excruciating hold. Another man was duct taping Jamie to a kitchen chair. The boy’s mouth had already been taped shut and he looked up at his mother with furious eyes, though the precise mixture of fear and anger made him seem preternaturally more concerned with his mother’s circumstances than his own. There had always been a temerity to the child that had unnerved her, and never before had she been more aware of this trait than in his expression right then.

“We won’t hurt him, but if you scream we break both your necks,” said the man holding her from behind, whom she still couldn’t see. The accent was difficult to place, something Slavic maybe. He’d bent her arm back in such a way that she’d have to snap it in two in order to move.

The other man finished taping the child to the chair, and it was then she saw the hacksaw on the kitchen table. An unnatural moan bellowed up from her gut and could be felt throughout the room despite being muffled by the man with the gloved hands.

“We’re not gonna hurt him; there’s no nerve endings in bone. But this will do for us much more than it’s doing for you. Do you know how much the horn of a baby rhino goes for on the black market? More than diamonds. More than gold.”

She watched as the shadows of tree branches seemed to grasp at the man from the wall behind him, but the image soon blurred with her tears into a visual soup. The boy made no sound as the man lifted the hacksaw to his forehead, though Helga remembered feeling herself involuntarily regurgitate her morning oatmeal into the hand of the gloved man just before everything went black.

* * *

Helga could open her eyes before she could move, and for a few terrified moments she thought that Jamie was gone. She awoke expecting to see Jamie on the floor with blood trailing down his face, but there was only the puddle of her own breakfast blooming out from under her head. Then she saw him scamper around the corner from the bathroom with a towel, and all her breath and life returned to her at the same time.

“Mama, I help! You’re sick.” He handed her the towel, which she accepted and self-consciously used to wipe herself down as sobs overtook her in shuddering waves. She took Jamie in her arms and checked him over the way she’d done when he was just born. A few raised bands of red marked his arms and face from the duct tape, but that appeared to be all.

“Did you get out of the chair all by yourself?” she asked, incredulous. When she was a child, Helga wouldn’t have even ripped off her own Band-aids; she’d have waited weeks until it was all gummed up and grimy, hanging by a few gooey threads, to peel it off gingerly under water in the bath.

Jamie nodded. She swept away the hair on his forehead to find that the nub of his protruding bone, formerly the length of a grown person's thumb, was now shorn flat into a jagged stump.

"Oh, baby," she said, obscuring most of her face with the towel to hide her reaction.

"It's okay. Okay? Don't cry." He touched his forehead and sighed, "Oh."

It occurred to Helga that they should leave right then. She felt an immediate and overwhelming impulse for them to completely disappear.

"Those were bad men. We're gonna go someplace nice where there's no bad men, okay? Someplace pretty and safe."

Helga changed her soiled shirt and dressed Jamie in his warmest fleece sweater.

"Let's go down to the marina and feed the ducks and drink hot cocoa with all the marshmallows you can eat." She boiled water for instant cocoa which she poured into a thermos and grabbed two mugs, extra sugar, and the entire remaining bag of marshmallows for the road.

They could walk to the marina from the apartment, so she carried down their red wagon to the sidewalk under one arm as she held Jamie's hand. The thermos of cocoa and other provisions knocked around on her back in a knapsack. She donned a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses and made Jamie wear a sunhat as well. The autumn sun hovered low in the sky and seemed to aim directly into their eyes despite the hats and no matter which way they turned.

Helga made a point of changing direction to avoid crossing paths with other people on the street, so it was a twenty-minute walk to the water's edge. There, they reclined on a blanket from the wagon and proceeded to feed the ducks an entire loaf of marbled rye bread.

When the bread was gone and the ducks lost interest, Helga poured Jamie his mug of hot cocoa with two heaping spoonfuls of extra sugar and a fistful of marshmallows. They gulped their cocoa down as the sun dipped down toward the coastal mountain ridges to the west. When Jamie was full, she drank the rest of his as well.

"Let's go ride out on the water," she said. The boy quietly regarded the slough, which rippled in the late afternoon breeze and lit

up like the scales of a fish. The whole serpentine waterway gleamed as one throbbing, pulsating beast.

“We’ll grab us a rowboat and get going.” He nodded in agreement at the idea, too young to comprehend that one generally needed to rent or own a rowboat in order to take one out, so the fact that they merely walked down to the water and unmoored one from the dock was unremarkable to the child. For all he knew, a dinghy was a public resource, as available to everyone as your average drinking fountain or city bikeshare.

“I’m hot,” Jamie announced as Helga lifted him into the boat. “I’m sleepy.”

“I know, buddy, I’m tired too,” Helga replied. “It’ll cool off once we get to the bay.”

They abandoned the wagon and the still-spread blanket by the marina, and the two items together seemed to Helga to be waiting for something, perched there side-by-side at the edge of the marsh, as though some kids had merely dashed off to play a game of Frisbee and would soon return. The wagon in particular seemed watchful, its handle taut and tilted up like the rifle of a sentry.

“I’m sleepy,” the boy said once again.

“Let’s hunt for shorebirds,” Helga suggested, already rowing in a rhythm down Suisun Slough away from town in the direction of Grizzly Bay. Tule reeds bordered the marsh and fingered up to the sky en masse reaching well above their heads, which made it so they could only see what was directly in front or behind them.

“Geese—honk-honk.” Jamie pointed to several of them swimming behind the boat.

“There goes a coot!” cried Helga.

Jamie yawned. “Seagulls.” Along with ducks, this was the limit of shorebirds that he could identify by name.

“Shall we count them?” He nodded ponderously.

“1,” “1,”

A pelican swoops in beside them for an aquatic landing. Blue dragonflies stalk mosquitoes just above the surface.

“2,” “2,”

An egret probes regally among the cattails. The sun sinks below the ridgeline, bleeding out a voltaic orange.

“3,” “3,”

Over on a sandbar, a tawny killdeer scampers for bugs.

“4,” “.”

A common kestrel hoists a vole overhead, navigating back to her young.

“5,” “.”

A double-crested cormorant devours the hatchling of a snapping turtle as the rowboat coasts into the mouth of the bay.

“.” “.”

A pair of great blue herons soars in tandem, beaks lanced forward into the wind, heads held high, wings blazing.

MARLÉNE ZADIG is a lifelong Californian currently based in Berkeley with an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland. Her stories have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Bennington Review*, *Joyland*, *Cimarron Review*, *Necessary Fiction*, and elsewhere. Her work made Longform's top 5 list for Best of 2015 in Fiction, and she's been a runner-up for the 2017 Literary Awards at *The Pinch*, the 2016 *StoryQuarterly* Fiction Prize, the 2015 Fulton Prize for Short Fiction, and a winner of *Carve Magazine's* First Annual Blog Contest. Her story collection manuscript, *Everybody Dies*, was recently named a finalist for the 2018 New American Fiction Prize, and she's now finishing up a novel about wildfire in the West.