



THE BUBBLE

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NOW WHEN Eric was born in Washington, D.C., I was eighteen, and most people thought I was too young to be having a baby.

I went down there two months before it was going to come, to stay at my mother-in-law's house. She was crazy for the baby to be born in Washington, and I was just as glad to get away from New York. My father had been divorced from my mother, and she had gone abroad, and he was getting married to Estrella, so I couldn't go *there*, and I had got so I couldn't stand that first awful little apartment, with the ivory woodwork and a red sateen sofa; I didn't know how to make it look attractive, and it depressed me. Tom, Eric's father, stayed on in it after I went to his mother's; I remember he used to work in a bond house.

It felt strange, staying with my mother-in-law. She had a big house, right opposite to the old British Embassy. That makes you realize how long ago this was, and yet I am still, all these years later, wondering about why it was the way it was. Mrs. Tompkins' house was a real house, with five stories and four servants, and meals at regular times and a gong that the colored butler rang to call you to them. I had never lived in a real house. My father always had apartments with day beds in them, so we could open the whole place up for parties, and we ate any time. My father was an art critic on the *Tribune*. Nobody remembers who he was any more; everybody forgets things so fast.

My room in Washington was in the front, on the top floor, look-

ing out at the rambling, old, mustard-yellow Embassy. Sometimes at night I would lean on the window sill and watch the cars draw up and the people in evening dress get out and walk up the strip of crimson carpet they rolled out across the sidewalk for the Embassy parties. And I would weep, up there on the fourth floor, because I was so big and clumsy, and I felt as if I would never, never go dancing again, or walk along a red carpet, or wear a low-cut dress. The last time I had was one night when I went dancing at the old Montmartre with Tom and Eugene—I was in love with Eugene—and I had seen myself in a long mirror dancing and realized how fat I looked, and that was another reason I wanted to get away from New York and go and have it in Washington. I had two black dresses—one plain wool and the other with an accordion-pleated crêpe skirt—and one velours hat, and I wore them and wore them and wore them all those last weeks, and I swore to myself that when it was born I would burn them in the fireplace in my room there. But I never did.

I used to live in a kind of fever for the future, when the baby would have come and I would look nice again and go back to New York and see Eugene. I took regular walks along the Washington streets—N Street, and Sixteenth Street, and Connecticut Avenue with all the attractive people going into restaurants to lunch—in my shapeless black dress and my velours hat, dreaming of the day when I would be size 12 and my hair would curl again and I would begin to have fun. All those days before Eric was born were aimed forward, hard; I was just getting through them for what it would be like afterward.

My mother-in-law was the one who was really having the baby; she was full of excitement about it, and used to take me to Washington shops to buy baby clothes. Looking back all these years later, I remember those sunny afternoons in late winter, and the little white dresses and embroidered caps and pink sweaters spread out on the counter, and stopping to have tea and cinnamon toast at the

Mayflower, with the small orchestra playing hotel music, and they seem beautiful and tranquil, but in those days I was just doing any old thing she suggested, and I was living to get back to New York and begin having fun again.

I remember she gave a ladies' luncheon for me, to meet some of the young mothers she thought I would like to know. I suppose they were a couple of years older than I, but they seemed middle-aged to me and interested in the stupidest things; I wanted to cry because nobody was anything like me.

But now I remember that the luncheon was really beautiful. The dining room was big and long, and on the sideboard was Mrs. Tompkins' silver *repoussé* tea service. The table was laid with a huge white damask cloth, and the napkins had lace inserts. It was a real ladies' lunch party, with twelve ladies and a five-course luncheon; I had never been to one before in my life, and I seldom have since. I remember the first course was shrimp cocktails in glasses set in bowls filled with crushed ice. And for dessert there was a special confection, which had been ordered from Demonet's, the famous Washington caterer; it was a monument of cake and ice cream and whipped cream and cherries and angelica. But all I could think about was how food bored me and how I wanted to get back and begin living again. I felt in such a hurry.

Later that day, Mrs. Tompkins gave me a lot of her linens. It was before dinner. We used to sit in the small library and listen to *Amos 'n' Andy* every night at seven. And this night she brought in a great armful of linens to show me, and everything I admired she would give me. There were damask tablecloths with borders of iris and borders of the Greek key, and round embroidered linen tea cloths, and dozens and dozens of lace and net doilies to go under finger bowls, and towels of the finest huck with great padded monograms embroidered on them. "Dear child," she said, "I want for you to have everything nice." I ended up with a whole pile of things. I wonder what ever became of them. I remember imagining

what my father would have thought if he could have seen me with a lot of tablecloths and towels in my lap. "The purchase money of the Philistines," he might have said. But I have no idea what happened to all that linen, and my father is dead long ago and nobody remembers him any more. I remember when I went up to my room to change into my other dress for dinner I wept, because I was so big and ugly and all surrounded with lace doilies and baby clothes and Eugene might fall in love with somebody else before I could get back to New York.

That was the night the baby started to come.

It began about ten o'clock, just before bedtime, and when I told my mother-in-law her face lit up. She went and telephoned to the doctor and to the nurse, and then came back and told me the doctor said I was to rest quietly at home until the pains started to come every fifteen minutes, and that the nurse, Miss Hammond, would be right over. I went up to my room and lay down. It didn't hurt too much. When Miss Hammond arrived, she stood by my bed and smiled at me as if I were wonderful. She was tall and thin with sallow hair, an old-maid type.

About one o'clock, Mrs. Tompkins telephoned the doctor again, and he said to take me to the hospital. Mrs. Tompkins told me she had wired Tom to take the midnight down, but I didn't care; I was having pains regularly, and the difference had begun, the thing I have always wondered about.

We all got in a taxi, Mrs. Tompkins and Miss Hammond and I, there in the middle of the night, and drove through the dark Washington streets to the hospital. It was portentous, that drive, significant; every minute, I mean every present minute, seemed to matter. I had stopped living ahead, the way I had been doing, and was living in right now. That is what I am talking about.

I hadn't worn my wedding ring since I fell in love with Eugene. I'd told my mother-in-law that I didn't like the feeling of a ring,

which was true. But in the taxi, in the darkness, she took off her own wedding ring and put it on my finger. "Dear child," she said, "I just won't have you going to the hospital with no ring." I remember I squeezed her hand.

I was taken at once to my room in the hospital, where they "prepared" me, and then almost immediately to the delivery room, because they thought the baby was coming right away. But then the pains slowed down, and I stayed in the delivery room for a long time, until the sun began to stream through the east window. The doctor, a pleasant old man with a Southern accent, had come, and he sat in the sunshine reading the morning newspaper. As I lay on my back on the high, narrow delivery cot, the pains got steadily harder, but I remember thinking, There's nothing scary about this. It just feels natural. The pains got harder and harder.

There was the doctor, and a nurse, and my own Miss Hammond, whom I felt I had known forever; occasionally she would wipe my forehead with a cool, wet cloth. I felt gay and talkative. I said, "I know what this pain feels like. It feels as if I were in a dark tunnel that was too small for me, and I were trying to squeeze through it to get to the end, where I can see a little light."

The doctor laughed. "That's not what you're doin'," he said. "That's what that baby's doin'."

But that was the way it felt, all the same.

"Let me know when you need a little somethin'," he said.

After a while I said, "This is *bad*." And instantly he was at my side with a hypodermic needle, which he thrust into my arm, and the pain was blunted for a time.

"Let me know when you need a little somethin'," he said again.

But I was feeling very strong and full of power. I was working my way down that long, dark tunnel that was too tight for me, down toward the little light that showed at the far end. Then I had a terrible pain. That's all I'm going to stand, I thought calmly. Deliberately I opened my mouth and screamed.

At once, they put a mask over my face, and the doctor's voice said, "Breathe deeply."

And I was out.

I would come back into the brilliant sunshine of the room and the circle of faces around me, and smile up at them, and they would smile back. And then a fresh pain would approach, and I would say, "Now."

"Bear down," the doctor's voice said as the mask covered my face and I faded away from the room. "Bear down."

So I would bear down, and be gone.

Back into the sunny room and out again, several times, I went. And then, on one of the returns, to my astonishment, I heard a small, high wail that I nevertheless knew all about. Over to one side of me stood a crib on stilts; it had been standing there all along, but now above its edge I could see two tiny blue things waving faintly.

"It's a boy," I heard my darling Miss Hammond's voice saying. "You've got a beautiful boy, Mrs. Tompkins."

And then I felt a fearful pain coming. They put the mask over my face for the last time, and I went completely out.

When I woke up, it was in my own room. Mrs. Tompkins was there, and Miss Hammond, and Tom. They kissed me, and beamed at me, and Tom kept pressing my hand. But I was immune from them all.

I was inwardly enthroned. Seated on a chair of silver, sword in hand, I was Joan of Arc. I smiled at them all, because I might as well, but I needed nobody, nothing. I was the meaning of achievement, here, now, in the moment, and the afternoon sun shone proudly in from the west.

A nurse entered bearing a pale-blue bundle and put it in my arms. It was Eric, of course, and I looked down into his minute face with a feeling of old familiarity. Here he was. Here we were. We were everything.

"Your father's come," Mrs. Tompkins said.

My father's head appeared round the door, and then he came in, looking wry, as he did when people not his kind were around. He leaned down to kiss me.

"Brave girl," he whispered. "You fooled 'em."

That was right. I had fooled them, fooled everybody. I had the victory, and it was here and now.

Then the nurse took the baby away, and Miss Hammond brought a big tray of food and cranked my bed up for me to eat it. I ate an enormous dinner, and then fell asleep and did not wake up for fifteen hours.

When I woke, it was the middle of the night, and the hospital was silent around me. Then, faintly, from somewhere down the corridor, although the month was February, someone began to sing "Silent Night." It was eerie, in my closed room, to hear singing in the darkness. I looked at where the window showed pale gray and oblong. Then I realized what the tune was that was being sung, and felt horribly embarrassed. I could hear my father saying, "These good folk with their sentimental religiosity." Then the sound of the singing disappeared, and I was never sure where it had come from, or, indeed, whether I had really heard it or not.

Next morning, bright and early, a short, thin man with gray curly hair walked into my hospital room and said, "What's all this nonsense about your not wanting to nurse your baby? I won't have it. You *must* nurse your child." He was the pediatrician, Dr. Lawford.

Nobody had ever given me an order before. My father believed in treating me as if I were grown-up. I stared at the strange man seating himself by the window, and burst into tears.

"I tell you what, my dear little girl," he said after a few moments. "I'll make a bargain with you. I believe you have to go back to New York and take up your life in six weeks. Nurse your baby until you have to go, and then you can wean him."

I nodded. I didn't know anything about any of it—only what

older women had said to me, about nursing ruining your figure—and all of that seemed in another life now.

Flowers began to arrive, great baskets of them from all Mrs. Tompkins' friends, and they filled up my room until it looked like a bower. Telegrams arrived. A wire came, late one day, from Eugene. It read, "AREN'T YOU SOMETHING." But Eugene no longer seemed quite real, either.

I would lie in that hospital bed with the baby within my arm, nursing him. I remember it with Dr. Lawford sitting in the chair by the window and tall, old-maidish Miss Hammond standing beside my bed, both of them watching me with indulgent faces. I felt as though they were my father and my mother, and I their good child. But that was absurd, because if they were taking care of anybody, it was Eric.

I stayed in the hospital ten days. When we went home to Mrs. Tompkins', it was spring in Washington, and along every curb were barrows of spring flowers—daffodils and hyacinths and white tulips.

Miss Hammond and Eric had the room next to mine on the fourth floor. Miss Hammond did what was called in those days eighteen-hour duty, which meant she slept there with the baby and went off for a few hours every afternoon. It was Mrs. Tompkins' delight, she said, to look after the baby while Miss Hammond was out. Those afternoons, I would take a long nap, and then we would go out and push the baby in his father's old perambulator along the flower-lined streets, to join the other rosy babies in Dupont Circle, where the little children ran about in their matching coats and hats of wool—pink, lavender, yellow, and pale green.

It was an orderly, bountiful life. Breakfast was at eight, and Mrs. Tompkins dispensed the coffee from the silver *repoussé* service before her, and herself broke the eggs into their cups to be handed by the butler to Miss Hammond and me. We had little pancakes with crisp edges, and the cook sent up rich, thick hot chocolate

for me to drink, because I had not yet learned to like coffee. In those days, a thing like that did nothing to my figure. When we had gone upstairs, I would stand in front of the mahogany mirror in my bedroom, sidewise, looking at my new, thin shape, flat as a board again, and then I would go in to watch Miss Hammond perform the daily ceremony of the baby's bath—an elaborate ritual involving a rubber tub, toothpicks with a cotton swab on the end of them, oil, powder, and specially soft towels—and the whole room was filled with the smell of baby. Then it would be time for me to nurse Eric.

I used to hold him in my arm, lying on my bed, and it was as though he and I were alone inside a transparent bubble, an iridescent film that shut everything else in the world out. We were a whole, curled together within the tough and fragile skin of that round bubble, while outside, unnoticed, time passed, plans proceeded, and the days went by in comfortable procession. Inside the bubble, there was no time.

Luncheon was at one-thirty, *Amos 'n' Andy* was at seven, dinner was at seven-thirty, bedtime was at ten-thirty, in that house. The servants made excuses to come up to the fourth floor and look at the baby, and lent unnecessary helping hands when the butler lifted the perambulator down the steps to the street for our afternoon walk among the flowers. The young mothers I had met came to see the baby, and Mrs. Tompkins ordered tea with cinnamon toast served to us in the drawing room afterward; they talked of two-o'clock feedings, and the triangular versus square folding of diapers, and of formulas, and asked me to lunch at the Mayflower, early, so that I could get home for the early-afternoon feeding. But the young mothers were still strangers to me—older women. I did not feel anything in common with their busy domestic efficiency.

The spring days passed, and plans matured relentlessly, and soon it was time for me to go home to New York with the baby, to the new apartment Tom had taken and the new nurse he had engaged that Mrs. Tompkins was going to pay for. That was simply the way

it was, and it never occurred to me that I could change the plans. I wonder what would have happened if a Dr. Lawford had marched in and given me an order. . . . But after all, I did have to go back; New York was where I lived; so it's not that I mean. I really don't understand what I do mean. I couldn't have stayed at my mother-in-law's indefinitely.

I don't remember starting to wean Eric. I remember an afternoon when I had missed several feedings, and the physical ache was hard, and Mrs. Tompkins brought the baby in for me to play with.

I held him in my arms, that other occupant of the fractured bubble, and suddenly I knew that he and I were divided, never to be together again, and I began to cry.

Mrs. Tompkins came and took the baby away from me, but I could not stop crying, and I have never again cried so hard. It never occurred to me that anything could be done about it, but we were separated, and it was cruel, and I cried for something. I wish I could remember exactly what it was I did cry for. It wasn't for my baby, because I still had my baby, and he's grown up now and works in the Bank of New York.

After that, time changed again for me. It flowed backward, to the memory of the bubble and to the first high moment in the hospital when I was Joan of Arc. We left Washington on a morning with the sun shining and barrows of flowers blooming along the curb as we went out the front door and the servants lined up on the steps to say goodbye. Eric was in a pink coat and a pink cap to match, with lace edging. But he didn't really belong to me any more—not the old way. I remember Mrs. Tompkins had tears in her eyes when she kissed us goodbye in the Union Station. But I felt dry-eyed and unmoved, while time flowed backward to that night we drove to the hospital in the middle of the night and she put her ring on my finger.

Of course, when we got back, New York looked marvellous.

But even while I was beginning to feel all its possibilities again, time still flowed backward for me. I remember when it was that it stopped flowing backward. I was in someone's room in the St. Regis, where a lot of people were having a drink before going on to dance. I sat on the bed. A young man I had never seen before sat beside me. He said, "Where have you been all my life?"

And I said, "I've been having a baby."

He looked at me with the shine gone out of his eyes, and I realized that there were no possibilities in a remark like mine. I laughed, and reached out my glass to whoever the host was, and said something else that made the young man laugh, too. And then time stopped flowing backward and began once more, and for always, to hurry forward again.

So that is what I wonder about, all these years later. What is it that makes time hurry forward so fast? And what is it that can make it stop, so that you can live in now, in here? Or even go backward? Because it has never stopped or gone backward for me again.

It isn't having a baby, because I've had four, God help me—two by Tom, counting Eric, and two by Harold, not to mention that miscarriage, and although I hoped it would, time never did anything different again, just hurried on, hurried on.

It isn't, as it occurred to me once that it might be, getting free of men in your life as I was free of them long ago with Mrs. Tompkins. Here I am, rid of my husbands, and the younger children off to school now, in this apartment. It isn't big, but I have day beds in the bedrooms so that every room looks like a sitting room for when I have a party. I'm free, if you want to call it that, and my face isn't what it was, so that I'm not troubled with *that* kind of thing, and yet, when you might think life would slow down, be still, time nevertheless hurries on, hurries on. What do I care about dinner with the Deans tonight? But I have to hurry, just the same. And I'm

tired. Sometimes I imagine that if Mrs. Tompkins were still alive, or my father, even . . . But they're dead and nobody remembers them any more, nobody *I* see.

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