

Bristol Palin Is a Realtor

We got along fine with the couple across the street until they started having children and we couldn't. They were young and tall and blond and beautiful and looked like the parents out of a fairy tale, whereas Maria and I had already begun to gray into midlife. At a species level, it made perfect sense that they, and not us, were able to reproduce. But we found no comfort in such cold reality, and each time our hope faded into another unmournable little ghost, we would grieve, and we would anger.

To make ourselves feel better, I concocted a back-story in which the couple were secretly related to each other by blood. This wasn't too much of a stretch given that they could easily have been mistaken for siblings; people are vain and tend to select partners and pets who look like them. What really drove the narrative home was that before moving to Austin they had lived their entire lives in Tennessee, which, research confirmed, sanctions consanguineous marriage with blitheful indifference. Half cousins! Full cousins! One can even marry an *adopted* relative, which in a way seems even ickier.

It was mean-girlish of us but referring to the couple as "Cousband and wife" was therapeutic. With each new baby, our joking became more vicious, to the point where Maria, upon learning that they were pregnant with their fourth, said, "This one's going to come out with two heads."

From that point on, I tried to minimize Maria's interactions with the couple. Because I worked from home, I already handled the lion's share of greetings, small talk, and requests, but that didn't mean I enjoyed the extra exposure to their happiness. At low points, we would discuss moving, but stubbornness always won out. After all, we were here first.

Maria had to travel to western Ohio for arbitration, and I declined her offer to tag along. Being alone meant that

I could spend my days and nights writing, drinking, and napping as I pleased. The downside was that I was left with a to-do list. Usually, the tasks could be completed at the last minute with a few phone calls or a Phillips-head screwdriver, but this week's list was short and painful: *The swing*.

"Are you getting any sleep?" Maria asked when she called.

"I am." This was a lie.

"Are you getting any work done?"

"I am." This was an outrageous lie. I hadn't written anything all week. Without a deadline, I couldn't maintain focus and kept wandering around the halls of the Internet, opening interesting looking doors. The bulk of today, for instance, had been spent observing a heated debate on the Mother of God message board about who must consume the crumbs that fell to the floor during communion—the priest, or the lunatic who posted to complain about crawling around every Sunday separating Host from carpet fiber. I was about to contribute my two cents when a former colleague texted me a screenshot of a mutual friend at a local title company with her realtor, Bristol Palin, the daughter of the former vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin. This derailed me.

Sure enough, it really was Bristol, here, with her own business, smiling on her own website. *From Alaskan Frontier to Texas Real Estate Maven*. My instincts were scrambled. I never expected to feel sympathy, let alone admiration, for anyone kin to the woman who paved the way for the Babadook becoming president, but I found myself rooting for Bristol, as I imagined she was doing her damndest to avoid the dim fate prescribed by heritage. I mean, you can't get any farther from Alaska than the Peoples' Republic of Austin, and while "realtor" is generally the fourth career of those who don't want to work hard but do want to drive a Range Rover, at least she wasn't hurting anyone. I called the number on her website to see if she wanted to be friends.

"Leave that poor girl alone!" Maria said, then in the same breath asked, "What did she say?"

"I left her a message."

Maria sighed. "I'll fly home tomorrow evening. Did you take care of the swing?"

"Not yet."

“If you’re scared to talk to him, then just talk to And Wife. She was decent about the stork. Be charming and funny. You’re always telling me how people find you charming and funny.”

Our fifth pregnancy had lasted eleven hopeful weeks but ended the same way as the others: with Maria in surgery and me pacing the halls, waiting for her doctor, who had a knack for materializing out of nowhere, like Batman, armed with a stethoscope and jargon. This last time, when he was done talking and I was done pretending to understand what he’d said, I asked him if he had played any music in the operating room. I didn’t really expect him to say that he had, as it seemed like a thing that only happens on television, but I thought it was a nice setup for him to say something uplifting like, “We’ll have a symphony playing when she delivers.” But all he said was, “It’s a quick procedure.”

Maria slept until I turned onto our block. When she saw the stork she began to weep.

The couple announced the arrival of each child by placing an enormous bespoke stork in their front yard. Whether papier-mâché or hand-textured mosaic, each bird was garish in its own expensive way. Spiked into the ground behind the bird, in a font that could be read from passing jets, would be colorful letters spelling out the child’s name, which, like its father’s, invariably sounded less like a name for a person and more like a job opening at a Renaissance festival.

Patiently, politely, I had explained the situation to Cousband.

“Again? I’m sorry, man. That can be tough on the women sometimes.”

I wished leprosy upon his testicles. “Yes. On the women. Sometimes.”

He put his giant hand on the back of the stork as if to console it. “I understand, but I gotta get my money’s worth out of this.”

“It’s been up for ten days.”

“Yeah, but if you only knew what that gal charges to make these.”

“And she does custom orders?”

“Starting at a grand.”

“Fantastic, because I’m going to give her my life savings to build a giant curette and install it beneath a neon sign that reads ‘Santa Claus is a Pedophile.’”

I retreated home to cry and research the sentencing guidelines for arson. But when I again looked outside, the stork and the letters had been removed. In our mailbox the next day was a sympathy card, signed by Ashley.

The swing, however, was going to be a tougher ask. Blue seat, red footrest—the trees in our neighborhood were littered with these things, though I could not recall ever actually seeing a child sitting in one, swinging.

“That’s my whole point!” Maria had said. “If they were going to put their kids in it, they wouldn’t have hung it from the shitty little crepe myrtle by the street. It’s just an ornament of a fertile home, their way of giving us the middle finger.”

I knocked on the door a second time and looked back at the swing, hanging motionless from an arthritic limb. It *was* an ugly tree. All week I had been hoping that a speeding teenager or a distracted Amazon driver would plow into it so I could avoid this awkward conversation. I wouldn’t want anyone to be killed or permanently maimed on account of my convenience, but an insurable injury didn’t seem too selfish a thing to hope for.

I didn’t hear the door open.

“Hey there, big guy!”

I turned to find Cousband grinning down at me with his pearly white horse teeth, his forearm resting casually atop the door frame as if his largeness were a burden he could not alone bear. I had walked over during the middle of the morning when he should be at the office not because I was intimidated by him, but because he was utterly exhausting to deal with.

“Good morning, Tanner. I was just—”

“How are you, chief? You been hibernating over there? Staying busy?”

I answered all three questions with a single “Yes.”

“Tell me about it. We’re trying to get Permian-Branum across the finish line before Q3. I know your gal’s probably dealing with the same thing on the upstream end of it. Everyone’s scrambling to make a buck while there’s blood in the patch.” Not a word of this did I comprehend. “Come on in. You want some coffee?”

“No, thanks. I just wanted to—” A nude child sprinted into the

living room, halted at the sight of us, then followed its penis down the hall and disappeared.

“Archer! Put some pants on!”

“If you had a second, I wanted to talk to you about the swing.”

He found this sentence to be hysterical and slapped me on the back. “I *knew* that’s why you came over! Saw the turf being delivered last week, didya?” He steered me into the kitchen. Sitting in high-chairs were the two youngest children, spreading a soupy mixture of food and drool around on their trays. “Is that not the sexiest thing you have ever seen?”

The object of his affection was the backyard, which had been transformed into an artificial golf course, complete with a putting green and two sand bunkers. A waterfall flowed down a retaining wall made to look like a mountainside. Every single one of the trees had been removed. He took my silence as his cue to keep talking.

“That may be my favorite child. Now, neighbor,” and here I realized he had no idea what my name was, “you’re welcome to go back there *any* time. Haven’t got the simulator set up just yet, but we’ll figure out your swing soon enough, not that I’ll be too much help the way—” The smile left his face as he reached in his pocket for his phone. “Gotta take this on the go.” Before he answered, he pointed at me and then outside as he walked out the back door. “I mean it. Any time.”

As soon as he left the room, the boys started grunting. While staring at me, they pinched their hands into claws and began ramming their fingertips together repeatedly. “What are you doing?” I asked, but the grunting just grew louder and more desperate. I no more wanted to stay in the room with these messy inbreds than I wanted their father to teach me golf, but I knew that if I left I would never return. I was about to go and wait in the foyer when Ashley spoke from behind me.

“That’s sign language. They want ‘more, more.’” She made the same fingertip applause as her sons, but slowly, and with a coy smile spread across her lips.

I had sketched out a general approach for asking Ashley to move the swing, even rehearsed a few funny lines, but all of that was gone now. It had probably been about a month since I had seen her up close, and while the woman I knew was still there, at peak pregnancy

she looked both distended and ravishing.

As she passed me, as if slipping me a secret, she whispered, “Good morning, David.” She smelled cruelly wonderful, like a casket spray of roses. “I taught them some basic signs—more, all done—to help them communicate, not knowing how much it would increase the decibel level in the house.” She looked around. “Did Tanner *leave*?”

“Just now.”

“How considerate. Did he at least offer you coffee before putting you in charge of his children?”

“Yes, but I’m fine.”

“I would do just about anything for a cup of coffee. Or a margarita.”

“How much longer do you have?”

“Harper will be here on the twenty-third, whether we’re ready or not.”

“A girl.”

“We chose the name before we learned the gender. I was hopeful, but, alas, more snails and puppy dog tails.” She unsnapped the trays and helped the boys to the ground. “Go find your brother and tell him to put on some pants.” The boys wobbled away, chanting, *Pantz! Pantz!*

“Well, there’s always next time,” I said.

“Next time, the name will be Hilda, and she will be my wife. And she will raise my children with an iron fist and listen to my troubles with a sympathetic ear.”

“And make frozen margaritas.”

“From your lips.” She smiled again, this time with a slight blush. As I stood there, staring, it occurred to me that if there were an arcade game where the victor was rewarded with Pregnant Ashley’s blushing smile, forty-three-year-old men would line up for miles, their life savings jingling in their pockets, and not by bankruptcy nor the pleas of loved ones would they be persuaded to leave. “I’m glad you stopped by. I have been meaning to tell you how much I enjoyed your last story.”

And now I was putty.

“I’m flattered. That one isn’t easy to find, though just about everyone who did wrote to say how much they hated both it and me.”

“That’s awful. Well, I’m not very political, and the ending was

hardly the point, though it *was* gruesome. It was just rare to see a man describe the horror of it."

"Well, write what you know."

"We lost our first pregnancy, *very* suddenly. I didn't know what was happening. It was terrible. Such a lonely experience, miscarrying. Even the word itself seems to assign fault, frightening everyone away."

As I mentally abandoned my plan to ask her to remove the swing, she walked over to me. "Can I pray for you?"

"Oh, I don't think that would do much good, I'm a devout irreverent."

Ashley moved closer, her belly pressing against me. She held me with her eyes and took my hands, turning them in hers so that her thumbs rested in my palms. "Won't hurt either." She bowed her head. "Father God..."

Though I chose to watch Ashley instead of listening to what she was saying, I could still tell she was a true believer, praying sincerely and fluently. In my youth, I had wondered whether faith was a practiced skill or if it was instead something that just arrived at a certain stage of life, like pubic hair, and, if so, whether both traits were not in their own ways vestigial. But eventually, I came to understand that it was simply a pre-determined matter of wiring, and that I was never going to see anything other than smoke and mirrors, cheap wine and stale brioche. No matter how eloquently Ashley petitioned, there would be no holy intervention. But I allowed myself to appreciate having a beautiful, kind woman hold my hands and lift my name up to her heaven full of heedful angels. And then, because her eyes were closed and because they were right there in front of me, I looked at her breasts.

I felt a little guilty at first, but, as I surveyed the fearsome curves and the vellus hairs and mapped the delicate veins coursing beneath her skin, I decided that not looking would be wasteful, even disrespectful, like going to the Louvre just to use *le petit coin*. Or perhaps it was not prurience that led me to her tremendous landscape, but the Will of God. And then, with me as my witness, a small, still voice saideth unto to me:

Drink and be healed.

Of course! The *years* we'd wasted pushing the limits of fertility science, while the cure was right across the street. With Ashley as the

steward, body, and blood, Maria and I would kneel and receive communion, suckling until eggs ripened and flagella whipped with the fervor of Tennessee hounds tracking a wounded democrat. Hallelujah!

"In your Son's name we pray," she said, "Amen."

"Amen," I agreed. We looked at each other. She was still holding my hands. "I don't know how God could ever say no to you."

"I just let my heart speak."

"Well, if you preach on Sundays, I may have to start attending."

She rolled her eyes. "That's a men-only thing in our church."

"Catholic?" I asked, and as I did, Ashley dropped my hands and took a step back. She looked repulsed.

"Maybe it's different here, but back home only wetbacks are Catholic."

"She did *not* say that!" Maria said through an exaggerated laugh. "Nice try, but there's no way she read that disgusting story of yours."

Reactions like this were why I so madly loved Maria. Not only did she not waste any time asking how I had responded in the moment, but she had also found a way to belittle me. So many of my friends' wives publicly celebrated their husbands' every little achievement, from getting a promotion to finishing a 5K. I don't know how they stomach it. I could never imagine sharing so much as a meal with someone who fawned over me, much less a marriage. And as far as the spontaneous racism went, Maria knew better than most that those aren't teaching opportunities. It's like getting sucker punched. You're concussed and in survival mode. You either make a cowardly and hasty retreat across the street or you Billy Bush it in the hopes you won't get hit again.

"Hey, I need the fans."

"Fine, she found it while browsing the Klan's collection of low-circulation literary reviews. You know what—I bet she was trying to recruit you. Massage your ego, maybe flirt a little. Was her pregnancy cleavage on display?"

"Uh, I mean, I didn't—"

"Dammit, David. I don't want to move, but I also don't want to wake up to a burning cross on our lawn."

"I say we wait them out. They're going to breed themselves out of square footage before long."

"I'm serious."

"It'll be fine."

“Is that what Jesus told you?”

“We’ve got each other. What else do we need?”

Maria was quiet for a moment, then said, “Maybe a change of scenery.”

I drank a bottle of wine with dinner and checked in on the message board. The debate had veered into a parsing of Article Three of the Code of Canon Law. Bishops had been tweeted. At the end of the day, the original poster had decided to just donate a paten and suggest to the priest that they switch to wafers.

The second bottle of wine was savored over the course of an hour while I sat in the dark observing the silhouettes across the street merrily wind down their day. I watched as Archer led Cobbler and Jester upstairs to rooms that would remain dimly lit all night. When the television in the master bedroom went off, I made myself a margarita, toasted to Hilda, and decided it was time to burn down a crepe myrtle.

My plan was to douse the swing and tree in gasoline and light them on fire, but I could not for the life of me locate the gasoline in the garage. The reason for this, I would realize as I tiptoed across the street holding a handsaw with a pair of Maria’s pantyhose stretched over my head, was that I didn’t own a lawn mower or anything else which would require me to possess a canister of gasoline. I was somewhat surprised I owned a saw.

The pantyhose were extremely uncomfortable, but I kept them on so that, if anyone reviewed the doorbell camera footage, they would think they were watching a pudgy eighth grader clumsily fulfilling a dare. I began to saw at the trunk but found it impossible to keep the blade in the groove. Plus, punishing the whole tree for the sins of its accessory seemed excessive. I started from scratch on the base of the offending branch, but stopped after a few strokes. “What did you do wrong?” I asked the branch, which had no answer. “Exactly! You did nothing wrong. I’m sorry, buddy.” At this point I petted the tree for what must have been a full minute before finally slashing at the yellow rope with the saw. I watched as the rope unfurled itself from the branch, and the swing fell to the ground. And then I vomited through my wife’s lingerie.

I awoke in the morning sick, sweaty, and cuddling the swing, which I had apparently taken to bed with me. A room temperature margarita was on my nightstand.

After a shower and four aspirin, I set about undoing a week's worth of not picking up after myself. The swing I tossed into the pink fiberglass abyss at the back of the attic. After another shower, I made a tequila sunrise and went to sleep.

Based on the brightness of the room, I decided it was afternoon. I was drifting back to sleep when the phone rang. This would be the FBI, I thought.

"This is Brooklyn with Austin Home Seekers."

"You're where?"

"Brooklyn McMillan. You left a message for Bristol yesterday and she wanted me to return your call. I'm *so* sorry we could not get back to you sooner. We've just been crazy busy this week."

"Yes!"

"Is this a good time to talk?"

"Yes!" I made myself stand up. "So, is Bristol, um, actively involved, or is that more of a publicity deal?"

"Oh, no, she is *very* involved. She is *so* inspiring. I've learned everything from her. And all of us work as a team, on *every* transaction. That's how we distinguish ourselves from other firms, with crazy availability."

"That's crazy."

"I know! Well, we can't wait to work with you. Now, your message didn't say if you were buying or selling."

I rested my forehead against the window and looked at the swingless tree across the street. I was relieved to find no squad cars parked outside. As if summoned by my voyeurism, Ashley opened the front door and retrieved a package from the porch. She looked ordinary and bloated.

"David?"

"Selling."

"Excellent. We're going to get you top dollar. Tell me about your house."

"It's haunted."

"That is *so* funny you say that. First of all, I *totally* believe you. We actually sold a haunted house in Bee Cave last spring—you couldn't even show this thing in the wintertime it was so creepy. Killer views, though. Anyway, what we learned is that under Texas law, you do not

have to disclose any paranormal activity *unless* it affects the physical condition of the property. So, the only question is: do your ghosts cause any damage?"

This was the end of it. We would move to one of the new luxury towers downtown where Maria could walk to work and I could people watch, and we would be surrounded by live music and restaurants. There would be no more tests, no more labs, no more appointments; gone was my excuse for masturbating at the doctor's office. We would enjoy our new lives, dining and traveling and working, never mentioning the futures of our other selves.

"They do," I said, "but I'm sure we'll end up taking them with us."