

Jonathan Starke

MANATEE

The baby's mouth was open so wide I could see the little pink nub hanging down at the back, vibrating as she screamed. The daycare attendant held her out to me.

"Would you please take her?" she said.

I was talking with a few other broad-shouldered bodybuilders near the daycare at the gym. We all froze. The attendant didn't wait for an answer, only tossed the girl into my arms and took off.

I had never held a baby. The guys watched as I tried to figure out how to place her. I put the baby between my forearm and bicep, laying her along the broad veins in my arm. I held her the only way I knew how, the way I had held a football to secure it from being fumbled.

Her skin was sallow and she had very little hair. She cried wildly with her eyes shut hard. Tiny blue veins traced over her lids, and I saw many more on her skull. I walked to a corner of the nursery and put my back against the wall. There were too many children and not enough attendants. Lots of the babies were crying. I looked down at the one in my arms, at her puffed hands and feet, her opaque coloration, the way I could almost see inside of her skin to the bone and muscle tissue and tiny blinking heart—all things I had myself, but couldn't imagine having ever kept them in such tiny compartments. I said something to her, then reached my free hand out and ran my thumb and forefinger over her ear. It folded like paper. Her crying subsided.

"You're the baby whisperer," one of the women joked.

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A month ago, I found a photograph of my father sitting in a chair at the hospital, holding me as a newborn. He had always been a large man. When I was a young boy, he took me to an aquarium and showed me a manatee floating in a giant tank. The label said they were kind and gentle, despite their tremendous size. I turned from the tank to my father and back, noting their similarities, deciding then that my father was in fact not human, but a special breed all his own. I have called him The Land Manatee ever since.

When I look at this photograph now, I see that my father's face is full of fear and pride and insecurity. He holds me in the same way I had held that little girl, protected between his

thick arm and ribcage. And she must have felt something about me, my presence, my smell, the way I talked into her paper ear and didn't know whether or not I was getting through. Though, sometimes I wonder if it wasn't about such complicated things. Maybe it was just something simple, the pressing of our bodies, one big and one so small.