

This story, "Black-eyed Birth," is an excerpt from my memoir, *Boy of Steel*.

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Black-eyed Birth

by Steve Montgomery

We are at Shakey's eating chicken and pizza and MoJo potatoes. I am thinking that MoJo potatoes are about the closest I've come to food paradise. Perfect little ovals of flavor, crispy and seasoned on the outside, chewy-firm baked potato on the inside. I always love it when we come to Shakey's on all-you-can-eat night. I have one entire red plastic basket piled high with MoJo potatoes, and another one filled with chicken breasts and sausage pizza.

Just above a tired pinball machine with a broken left flipper hangs a torn projector screen, and Dad and I are laughing as the Three Stooges take turns knocking each other silly. Mom's not laughing. She's never liked the Three Stooges. Normally, she would be telling us how un-funny she thinks they are and why, but tonight she's pretty quiet.

When Mom gets up to go to the bathroom, I get up to get another orange soda. As I'm filling up my glass, one of the cooks says "shit!" and I see him flying out from behind the counter. He heads straight for the projector. I spin around just in time to see Curly being consumed by a giant black spot. The film must have taken a wrong path along the sprockets. The cook manages to stop the projector before anything catches on fire, and Dad literally applauds his efforts, embarrassing me in the process. Next month, I will officially be entering junior high, so I have enough to worry about without my father bringing even more unwanted attention my way.

Soon, the film is replaced, and the Stooges are once again cavorting about on screen. I ask Dad why Mom is taking so long in the bathroom. He seems unconcerned.

Until another five minutes pass. He gets up to see if anything's wrong. Even over Mo's obnoxious patter, I can hear my father's voice.

"Dani? Everything OK?"

A few minutes later, Dad returns to the table, and it is clear that something is wrong.

"Your mom's having some female problems and we may have to go get it checked out."

Finally, Mom emerges from the back of the restaurant. She looks pale and she's holding her purse at an odd angle in front of her. Dad immediately puts his arm around her and helps her to the car. My job is opening doors.

I find out in the car that the purse was used to hide the deep red bloodstains that continue to spread across the lap of her white polyester pants. The only thing of any use that Dad can find in the trunk is Mom's bowling towel, which she is now using to blot the blood. In typical Mom fashion, she is concerned about getting any on the front seat of the Impala.

We arrive at St. Anthony, hospital of my birth, and Dad helps Mom into the emergency room. I stay with Mom while Dad parks the car. A nurse tells us she will be right back with a wheelchair.

"I'm sorry, honey. I really ruined your dinner, didn't I?"

My face goes red with embarrassment. It is exactly the kind of thing my mother always says at moments like this. In my head I scream at her: *Dinner?! You think I'm worried about DINNER at a time like this?* But even at eleven, I've learned that this is

my mother's way of asking for reassurance. And that is what I do best at moments like this.

“Mom, of course not! I'm just worried about *you*. Are you OK?”

She smiles and tells me that everything's going to be fine, just as Dad returns from the parking lot and the nurse returns with the wheelchair. The next few minutes go by in a blur. Mom is wheeled away, Dad is filling out paperwork, and I am watching as others watch me. A woman is cradling her coughing infant, shaking her head at me as if to say, *you poor thing, you poor, poor thing*.

The thing is, my mother is seven months pregnant. This, after eleven years of trying. After I was born, the doctors told her there was too much damage—something I'd done to her fallopian tubes—and that she would never conceive again. So this pregnancy was a surprise—a welcome surprise. Welcomed by my parents, and welcomed by me. Finally, some relief from the guilt I'd felt all these years.

Apparently, my birth had been a particularly complicated one. I had managed to position myself in some awkward way that made it difficult for the doctor to deliver me. So he used forceps, and there was nothing gentle about his methods. He ended up getting me out, but not before plunging part of the forceps into my right eye. The story of my black-eyed birth has been told and retold to family members so often that I can repeat it as if I remember it first hand.

My mother never forgave the doctor. The pincer-like imprint remained on my eye for some time, and I think my mother was embarrassed about showing me around all swollen and bruised. It wasn't how she had envisioned those first weeks with her new

baby. In her mind, I have no doubt that I was perfectly pink, sweetly dispositioned, and flawless—an image she would carry with her, and that I would fail to live up to, for the rest of her life.

Dad comes over to tell me that he is going to “find out what’s going on.” He points to a pile of magazines on the table next to me, then digs in his pocket for some change. His face is weary, like he just got home from one of his graveyard shifts.

“You’ll be okay here. Here’s some money.” And then he walks down the hall. Just as he is about to disappear around the corner, he turns his head and glances at me. He is wearing the same expression as the woman with the coughing infant.

I pick up a *Highlights* magazine and focus my attention on trying to find objects that have been cleverly hidden amidst the wild overgrowth of some exotic jungle. By design, everything is out of place. A hammer hidden among the leaves of a plant, a slice of pie barely visible in the mane of a lion, a sailboat stranded in a treetop. A boy in an emergency room waiting for his mother to reappear.

When Mom told me she was pregnant, I was excited and relieved. In a town where repeated procreation seemed mandatory, my only child status stood out. Nearly all of my friends had multiple siblings, and I was looking forward to having one of my own.

There is good news and bad news about being an only child. The good news is that there is no competition for your parents’ attention—you get it all. The bad news is that there is no competition for your parents’ attention—you *get it all*. By age eleven, I was beginning to feel smothered by all that attention, especially my mother’s. It felt like I

alone was responsible for realizing all of her hopes and dreams. And since it was my birth that had prevented other births, I felt a powerful sense of obligation to be whatever my mother needed me to be. It would be a relief to have someone around who could bear some of that burden.

But now there's a problem. Unanticipated bleeding. Female problems serious enough to need checking out.

A nurse comes over to see how I'm doing. She offers to buy me a Coke, but I tell her that my dad has given me money. She offers to show me where the vending machine is. We turn the corner where both my mother and father disappeared, and for some reason I expect to see them both coming down the hall. There are only nurses and orderlies and doctors rushing past us in both directions. I buy a bottle of Coke and a Snickers bar. All the while Nurse Wendy is asking how old I am, what school I attend, how many brothers and sisters I have. As she deposits me back on the waiting room couch, she assures me that everything will be "just fine." She brings me a blanket and tells me that if I get tired it's okay to lie down on the couch.

By the time I finish my Snickers and Coke, an hour has passed and I begin to wonder why Dad hasn't come out to check on me. It's after 9:00 p.m., and although I'm not tired, I try lying down to see if sleep can silence what's in my head. The coughing baby is gone, and the only sounds come from the nurses behind the counter, laughing at stories I cannot hear, and answering telephones that seldom ring.

"Steve?"

I am awakened by my father's voice. He has been crying. I am still in the fog of sleep interrupted as he struggles to tell me the news.

"Your mother has given birth. The baby was still born. It was a boy."

These are the words I hear. There are others, but these are the ones that emerge from the fog. My father is on his knees. He begins to cry and I realize that I have never seen my father cry. It frightens me more than the news he has just delivered. He buries his head in my blanket and I do not know what to do.

Soon there is a Lutheran pastor doing the things that I cannot. He consoles my father and then returns to console me. He tells me that I may not understand it now, but that all of this is in God's Plan. *This was all planned? Doesn't that make it worse? Accidents can be forgiven, but death by design? How am I supposed to forgive that?*

I say none of these things. I bear his false claims and coffee breath with the hope that he will soon leave me alone. He's talking about this baby as if it once had a life, as if a living, breathing human being had died. I know what a miscarriage is. Our neighbor, Mrs. Manning, had one last year. One day she was pregnant, the next time we saw her she was not. That was it. Accidents happen. I heard her tell my mother that she would just try again. Isn't that what Mom will do now? Just try again. Why make such a fuss over a miscarriage?

"They named your brother Jeffrey. It means 'Bringer of Peace.' Isn't that a beautiful name, Steve?"

This catches me completely off guard. They *named* him? I don't understand any of this. Maybe this pastor, a man I've never seen at our church, is just making this up. Maybe he thinks it will make me feel better to have some name to hold on to. He's

wrong. It just confuses me. Since when do people name failed pregnancies? I begin to cry and I don't stop until long after Dad tucks me into bed.

In the decades since that night, I have clung to the language of misfortune rather than the language of loss. When I tell people, which I seldom do, I say: "My mother had a miscarriage when I was in junior high." Miscarriage is easy. Clinical. A concept, not a person. Until recently, it had never even occurred to me to say: "I had a brother who died when I was eleven."

In my version of events, there has never been an entity called "brother." How could there be? I had seen no wrinkled red face, no heavy-lidded eyes. Nothing visual that I could take away from that night—apart from bloodstained pants, half-eaten pizza and the look in my father's eyes when he told me. Whatever I had not held in my hands, whatever had not puffed baby breath against my cheek, was never truly a brother.

It was always my mother's loss. It was never my loss.

Whatever sadness my mother felt, she kept mostly to herself. After a short period of recovery, she was back at work, I was starting junior high, and it became clear that what had happened that night was not to be discussed. Like Mrs. Manning, my mother turned her attention to trying again. There were numerous visits to the doctor, followed by a surgery that my mother referred to as her "last hope." Fallopian tubes were mentioned, leading me to believe, once again, that all of my mother's pregnancy woes could be traced to my injurious entry into the world.

The doctor told my parents that if Mom didn't get pregnant within two years of the miscarriage, she would never again be able to conceive. I didn't understand all the reasons, but I knew it had something to do with scar tissue building up, placing too great an obstacle in the way of whatever it was that required clear passage. By the end of 1973, more than a year after her miscarriage, my mother once again seemed filled with hope.

Another year passed. Then another. As hope turned to resignation, my mother poured all of her affection into me. I had given up on trying to please my father—it was clear that I couldn't even pretend to be the son he desired me to be—but my need for my mother's approval was equal in strength to her need for me to be her perfect little boy. My fear of disappointing her began to overwhelm me.

In larger families, there is room for individuality. Sally is the smart one. Brian is the funny one. Fran has excellent manners. Jonathan will make a great father. I began to feel that I was expected to be all of those things. There was no room for screw-ups. When there is a black sheep in a large family, at least there are others to compensate for the parents' misery. An only child can't be the black sheep without the white one ceasing to exist.

From an early age I learned not just to separate black from white, but to radiate white and bury the black among the shadows of secrets I could never expose. Like Dorian Gray, I live in constant fear that others will discover I am not who I pretend to be. Those who come close to uncovering my corrupted self-portrait soon lose their way inside the shifting labyrinth of protection I have been fabricating since birth. I watch from above, stranded in a treetop, perfecting the chameleon art of blending in with my surroundings, hidden in plain sight.

And then, miraculously, along came Marni. Mom must have discovered she was pregnant around Valentine's Day, 1976. Through her sheer force of will, my mother proved the doctor's wrong. And on November 3rd, one day after my sixteenth birthday, my sister was born. Healthy, beautiful, and full of life. The name on her birth certificate is Marna, formed from the names of my parents, Marvin and Dana. But just as everyone called my mother Dani, everyone calls my sister Marni. At last, I was no longer an only child. At last, my parents had another child on whom they could lavish their affection. At last, the guilt I felt about the harm I'd inflicted upon my mother—that particular harm, anyway—could slowly fade to black.

It is only now that I have begun to confront the fraternal mythology I've been repeating to myself and others all these years. The questions are many. What would my life have been like if I'd had a brother? Does my father ask what his life would have been like if he'd had a real son? One who loved fishing and cars, baseball and girls. What happened when I was in junior high was, after all, more than a miscarriage, more than an accident of biology. My sister's life is a consequence of my mother's loss—our loss—and it is that life which brings me joy, even in times of great sorrow.

I had a brother who died when I was eleven. His name was Jeffrey, Bringer of Peace.