

Waiting for Spring

By Patricia Crisafulli

In the garden against the red bricks of the house that gathered and radiated the warmth of the sun, yellow-green shoots sprouted two or three inches through the dark mass of last fall's mulching. These tender shoots seemed to be the bravest signs of spring that, according to the calendar at least, was still at least two weeks away. Yet, each day the temperature gained a few more degrees to the point that, on a sunny Saturday afternoon, Denise turned off the heat in the house and cracked the upstairs windows for a couple of hours just to freshen the air.

These days teased, but were not to be trusted, as anyone on the New York-Massachusetts border could have attested. Warm days could give way to bitterly cold nights, followed by a cold front moving out of Canada. But as Denise slid the patio door open and walked outside, feeling a burst of sun on her face, she allowed herself to think that the wait was nearly over; that the yard would green and the garden that she held in her mind all winter would begin to grow.

Easing herself into a lawn chair, Denise rested her hands on the roundness of her abdomen, pressing her fingers against flesh as firm as a basketball, and felt a stir and then

a kick. “Soon,” she whispered, and closed her dark eyes that bore the telltale circles of a poor night’s sleep.

“Mommy!” Six-year-old Abby ran up the driveway, the rubber soles of her shoes smacking hard against the cement. “Look what Daddy got me!”

Opening her eyes, Denise wondered what it was this time. Abby had a way of manipulating Tim into buying things and making them all this idea. Like the time they came back with fishing rods: one that reminded him of the bamboo pole he had as a boy and a miniature one with a red plastic reel for her. That was last fall, and they had yet to go out fishing.

Encircled in a cloud of dark hair that refused to be tamed, and skinny arms and legs clad in purple pull-on pants and a striped shirt that bore the evidence of the tomato soup she’d eaten for lunch, Abby thrust a package at Denise and tried to climb into her lap.

“Careful honey, this chair isn’t strong enough for the two of us.” Denise shifted her weight. “I’ll get you a chair, too, so you can sit next to me.”

“I don’t want to sit with you. I want to sit on you.” Abby rocked back on her heels, and then smacked her toes against the patio bricks.

Tim rounded the corner carrying bags of groceries in each hand. “Get the door for me, will you Abby?” The little girl skipped off to help her father.

Denise examined the package that Abby had given her, groaning silently at the imagined mess of the Easter egg coloring kit: dyes, markers, stickers. Pulling herself upright, she half-walked, half-waddled inside.

Tim emptied the grocery bags on the counter, revealing a jumble of fruits, vegetables, packages of chicken and ground beef, spaghetti, coffee, salad dressing and cereal. As Denise watched, the last bag was emptied of its single item: a dozen eggs.

“I can’t believe you let Abby get this kit. She’ll want to do this now, and it’s not even Easter....”

“I remember making colored eggs as a kid. I’ll do it with her.” Tim opened the refrigerator and made room on the shelves.

Denise heard the defensive tone in his voice and imagined what he was thinking: After her complaint that she needed more help around the house and with Abby she was shooting down one of his attempts. “Sorry,” she sighed. “I’m just tired as all. I forgot how uncomfortable the last stretch is.”

It felt sooner than the one month she had left, a sensation she didn’t recall from her pregnancy for Abby when there had been only anticipation and excitement—or so she recalled.

“When can we do eggs, Mommy?” Abby scrambled on a stool at the kitchen counter and reached for the carton, which she popped open, revealing twelve perfect pure white domes.

“Maybe later, Abby. I’m going to lie down for a while. Why don’t you get a book and we’ll read.”

Making her way to the sofa, Denise tried to ignore the pressure in her lower abdomen as she moved. She took a deep breath and told herself everything was fine, that the baby wasn’t coming early. They didn’t even have the crib set up yet, she argued, as if the furniture had any bearing on the timing.

Abby joined her a few minutes later with a stack of her “I Can Read” storybooks. Denise tried to get Abby to read a little, but today all she wanted to do was snuggle and listen. They finished two of the books before Denise drifted off and Abby slipped away.

A dull pulling sensation awakened Denise from her light sleep. Rising up against the pillows on the sofa, she wondered if she dreamed it, but there it was again. “Tim,” she called out calmly but firmly.

Two hours later they came back from the doctor’s office. Abby was asleep in her seat in the back, and Denise rested her head against the cool window. False alarm, of course, but the contractions had been real. The doctor suggested she may have been a little dehydrated and insisted that she start drinking water right then and there, even thought that meant multiple pit stops before they left the office.

“You okay?” Tim shot her a quick glance and then focused intently on the road, even though there was no traffic.

“Yeah, fine. I’m so sorry. I should have known it was nothing, but a few of those contractions were pretty strong...”

“It’s okay. We needed a practice run. It’s been six years since we’ve been through this.”

Denise watched his smile in profile. “Abby was pretty good considering.”

“And when we go to the hospital, she’ll be at her friend’s house. They just weren’t home today.” Tim signaled for a right turn onto their street. “I’m putting that crib together tomorrow afternoon.”

The next day, clouds cloaked the sun and then thickened to a heavy veil. As the temperature dropped, wet sloppy flakes began to fall, coating the bare lawn, the branches with their early buds, and the tiny shoots in the garden. Denise watched the signs of early spring surrender as winter regained its hold.

The basement door swung open, and Tim emerged, carry the headboard of the crib. Abby skipped behind him, waving a screwdriver. "I'm helping!" she called out.

Denise resisted the urge to dive in, knowing that lifting and carrying was the last thing she should be doing. Instead, she contented herself to watch as Tim brought the pieces up and laid them out in the small cream-colored bedroom with a wallpaper border of baby farm animals, where Abby had slept in the crib until she moved to the big girl bedroom across the hall with its bright yellow walls and Dora the Explorer bedspread.

"You were that little once." Denise pulled Abby toward her and pointed to the crib mattress.

"Now it's the baby's turn to sleep there. I have my big bed, which is much too big for the baby. That's because I'm big and the baby is little."

Denise nodded as Abby parroted back all the things they'd told her over the past few months in hopes of heading off sibling rivalry at the start. "That's right. Now you're going to be the big sister."

Abby ran off to get a doll to play with. Denise sat in the glider rocker, remembering all the nights she spent nursing Abby back to sleep.

Tim put the crib together quickly. When he finished, Denise ran her hand over the spindles and longed for her baby, but just not yet. The waiting was good for both of them.

As if reading her thoughts, Tim gave her a cockeyed smile. "What's up?"

“I was just thinking about how much I want the baby to be here, but just not right now.”

Tim stepped in closer and put his arm around her; Denise rested her head against his shoulder. “Pretty soon,” he whispered.

Abby slipped in the other side and put her head against Denise’s stomach. “Go back to sleep, baby. It’s not time for you yet.”

Denise raised her face to receive a light kiss from Tim.

“You feel like an egg, Mommy,” Abby announced. “You are round and hard and pretty soon you’re going to crack and the baby will pop out.”

Abby’s image gave her a sudden inspiration. “Do you want to color eggs for the baby? It’s too soon to make Easter eggs, so we’ll decorate them for the baby. Then every time we eat one of the eggs, we’ll be that much closer to the day the baby arrives.”

Before she finished speaking, Abby was out of the room and headed for the stairs. By the time Denise reached the kitchen, the carton of eggs was on the counter.

The big pot of water was slow to boil, and Abby asked every two minutes if the eggs were done. When the timer finally dinged, Denise reminded her again they had to wait for the eggs to cool. At last they were dipped in the bowls of blue, green, yellow, and red, and laid out to dry. Stickers with flowers and bunnies appeared on some, while squiggly lines and circles decorated others. Denise watched Abby work intently, her little red tongue peeking out of the corner of her mouth. The last four eggs, one of each color, were set aside.

“What are you going to with these?” Denise asked.

“You’ll see,” Abby replied in a sing-song voice. On the yellow she wrote a B, on the blue an A, on the red another B, and on the green a Y. “Baby!” she announced proudly. “We eat these ones last.”

Over the next several days there were hard boiled eggs for breakfast, chopped eggs in their salad, and last the B and the Y became an egg salad sandwich. With every egg peeled and consumed, Abby ran over to Denise’s stomach to announce that one more was done. When the eggs were gone, Abby told the baby it was time.

“It’s still a little too soon,” Denise told her gently.

“I know. I just want the baby to know we’re ready.” Abby patted the round ball of her mother’s stomach just as Denise felt a kick.

“The baby thinks so too,” she laughed, and made her way to the patio doors where the snow had receded yet again, revealing grass that looked a bit greener and shoots of spring flowers that were decidedly taller.