dead baby

The present was on my desk when I got home, a white box with a red velvet ribbon. I opened the box and inside was one of those Russian dolls, repainted so that instead of a rosycheeked matron it was a dead baby, puckered and blue as if freshly smothered. I pulled apart the halves of the doll and inside was another dead baby, its body perforated by dozens of red sores. Inside that was another dead baby, with a cleft palate so severe there was just an open seam where a nose should have been. Inside that was a wooden heart painted to look like one of those sweetheart candies. It said "Be mine."

This is the woman I married. When she came home later I told her, "You understand, a normal person would look at this and think it was the most disturbing Valentine's Day gift in the history of humankind."

"I know," she said, wrinkling her nose with delight. "Awesome, huh?"

Four days later we were making sushi and I said, "We need to talk about the dead babies."

She glared. "You barely thanked me. Do you have any idea how many hours I spent on those dolls?"

"I don't understand why it has to be dead babies," I said, gently.

"Because, as perhaps you've noticed, dead babies are what I do now." She is always up before me, and the first thing she does is start drawing her dead baby for the day. She is currently working on a series of 101 drawings based on the stories in *Chicken Soup for the Woman's Soul*, only with a dead baby inserted somehow into every one. Before that was a series of drawings of naked women and octopi that would have been erotic if not for the dead babies everywhere.

"I think I don't understand why you keep doing dead babies."

She shook her head like I was being intentionally dense and said impatiently, "I do dead babies because dead babies are the saddest thing. Except for maybe genocide, and genocide—"

"—is too political and overdone," I finished for her, since I had come up with this line in the first place. "Seriously, the dead babies don't make sense to me anymore."

"Seriously, you are pissing me off. As if you don't remember all our conversations after your writing classes, where students would think they could just stick in a dead baby and suddenly their characters would be all deep and complex."

"I know, and it was absolutely brilliant and subversive and Fifth Wave Feminist when you started. But now it seems more like you do it because you've become the dead baby artist."

She pointed the rice paddle at me. "You buy me Calvin Klein perfume and lingerie that isn't even black for Valentine's Day, and you want to pretend like I'm the one here changing for the worse?"

I hadn't wanted this to turn into a fight. "You're better than just dead babies. No one can draw the way you can."

"Just like no one can write the way you write." She said this partly with tenderness, and partly not.

"We would lay in bed in college and talk about how we were the same person. Remember?

Except I wrote, you drew. And I was better at funny, you were better at sad."

"I spent all that time drawing dockworkers and nobody cared. You can think of what I'm doing now as making much better use of my gift for sad."

That was not the point. "We were different shades of the same misfit person. Now we're going to be turning thirty, and all you seem to want to do for the foreseeable future is draw dead babies."

She slammed the rice paddle down on the counter. "Why don't we stop pretending that this is about the dead babies and just discuss what this is really about?"

"Because this is really about the dead babies."

"No. This is really about you resenting my success."

I knew she was going to say that. I knew it. And I should not have replied: "I do worry that your 'success' is increasingly due to the admiration of some very sick individuals."

"Sick people do not select for the Whitney Biennial."

"The Whitney Biennial selected your story as much as your drawings." The story being that she had two younger sisters who died as babies, and that her mother went crazy after the second. The story is not true. I let her start using it after I wasted a year trying to make it into a hilarious-yet-horribly-sad first novel, which ran aground against the insuperable shoal of there being nothing at all funny about dead babies.

"You've been sulking ever since I started making enough money to draw full-time."

"Three men account for over half the pieces you've sold. Creepy, European men. I still cannot believe the photos of that flat in Stuttgart with your dead babies everywhere."

"It's not my fault that you stopped writing and that you can't get any standup gigs. It's not my fault you're an assistant manager at Radio Shack."

"This isn't about that." She did not know that I had my semi-annual performance review the previous week and was told to stop making jokes with customers. I was told there was no room for "weird" or "edgy" humor at Radio Shack. "This is about me looking at where my life is going and wondering if maybe I want to be more normal."

"You don't want to be normal. You are having normal forced upon you, and you are taking it out on me."

Two weeks later she moved out. Of course, she took the dolls. She sold them to a Belgian man for eleven thousand dollars. I am now working at Circuit City. I am dating the woman who runs the Chili's next door. She spent her twenties wanting to be a cabaret singer.