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## WORRIED FATHER-TO-BE

By Norbert Kovacs

The doctor had disliked how the medical student had cleaned a wound during operation and wanted to talk about it during his break. The doctor was off in twenty minutes but the student was not waiting for him. He went seeking a place to hide in the hospital and came to the waiting area of the maternity ward. There was only one man waiting there. The student sank into a seat near him and picked up a magazine. He was sure his mentor would not dream of coming for him here.

From the first room up the wing, the med student heard the sounds of a woman in labor. She did not sound in much pain; her cries were breathy and controlled the several times she called out. He figured she was making some effort at contraction and would keep at it. The man beside him, here it seemed because of her, kept unusually still. The med student lifted his eyes from his magazine and noted him. He was short, stocky, and about thirty years old. He appeared Mexican with his dark, black hair and worn, pockmarked face cut by creases. He wore a tired, red and grey plaid shirt and old blue jeans. His tan boots however were new. He was hunched over quietly in his seat. The med student saw the man's eyes weave over the floor as if searching for something. When a cry came from the woman delivering, the man's eyes froze. He raised his forehead and waited. Then he dropped his face again scanning the floor.

The student put aside his magazine, now more interested in the man than in reading. "I take it that's your wife in there," he said.

The man's eyes stopped. He looked toward the student. "Girlfriend," he said.

"She been in labor long?"

"Five hours."

"You're worried about her being ok, aren't you?"

"She'll be all right, I guess." The worried man faced forward again moping.

"You okay?"

"I'm thinking about the baby. And my girlfriend too."

The student stared at the ground as if thinking like the man. "It's worrying you."

The man considered awhile. "I'm thinking how things will change with the new child, with her, and with me."

"Lots of new fathers get that way."

The man sat up. "I don't know if I'm as thoughtful as all that. I'm Diego by the way."

"I'm John."

"Good to know you, John. Let me show you my Carmen." Diego drew a photo from his pocket and handed it to the student. The photo showed a smiling young woman with a beautiful, tan face and luster in her dark eyes. Her hair was dyed blonde but she had kept a few streaks of the original black. Her face and cheeks were rounded but she was not heavy. Her face looked like it would be soft and warm to touch.

"She's pretty good looking."

"Carmen's looks were the first thing that attracted me to her. I could tell you about Carmen and me if you like." Diego looked at the student, seeming as if he wished to speak on.

"I'd be interested." the student said and leaned forward. He hoped to show some kindness to the

...over-anxious man. Diego appeared glad for it and began to give his account.

"All of it between us was pretty good at first. We liked being together. We did stuff couples do. Go out. Be with friends. When she told me I had got her pregnant, things were different however. I didn't like it. I thought I could get her not to have the child. Up to then, I had not been tied down. But Carmen said she wanted the child though she hadn't planned it. She told me it would be a good thing for her to be a mother. She loves children and had hoped some day for her own. The idea made her happy so I said nothing.

In the first months, loving a child sounded nice. The baby was only a word. I didn't think of it as a big deal. After a while, I agreed I'd marry Carmen. She told her friends and family, and they said it was the best thing we could do. And all the while, I hardly gave a thought to being married. I was not serious like that, but I was happy in the idea of the baby. Of course, I felt it was important to be a father when I talked about it with her. I believed we'd be a family and that I'd stay with her once the baby was born. If you asked me then, I would have said I would stay."

The student lifted his brow. "And why wouldn't you now?"

"Because I saw her become big with the child. I knew pregnant women get big, but when she did, I saw with my eyes this child would be a real thing. I pictured the child then. I knew Carmen expected me to teach him, as his father, everything that went into being a person. He was to model off me. He'd get ideas of how to be around people and hundreds of other things watching me. The idea hit me hard. I didn't feel ready for it. I asked myself: how I could raise a boy or girl? What if I do wrong and screw up? I thought. 'What if I don't do enough for the boy?'"

A loud cry came from the room up the ward. Diego went on nervously. "I want a normal life for Carmen's child. But I don't know all the answers to provide him that."

The med student shook his head. "You're making too much of this. Think of how many people raise children. Do you really think it impossible when so many do it?"

"I wish I thought like you. But someone will be raising the child and I can't figure how unless it's by worrying over and watching out for problems always about to happen."

The med student stared at Diego, unable to understand.

"Soon enough," Diego continued, "I thought how I would have to help provide for the child; I might be the only one who did if Carmen thought to stay home and raise him. I would be working for them both for the long term. But I never have committed to anything for long in my life. My parents, my brothers have, but not me. I thought I shouldn't have to now—not when I felt I couldn't manage it.

All the time I worried over these things, the baby was swelling her; it would be born in a couple of months. I worried over it until I thought I had to escape Carmen. So, I quit my job at the quarry and made plans to move out of state. But I got to worrying that if I did the child wouldn't have his chance to grow up normal. Carmen couldn't be with the child always if she worked to support him without me. I worried about it for months once I stopped working. I couldn't leave the child to hardship and I didn't want any work holding me down if I thought to go again."

"Didn't your girlfriend ever ask why you weren't working?"

"Yes, she became suspicious. 'You should support us if we're your family,' she said. 'You love us, right?' She meant her and the baby. Well, I didn't want to see her unhappy; it would just add to everything else worrying me. So, I told her I'm likely to get work on a construction starting this month, though I haven't any such thing. Now the baby will be born and I will have to tell her I lied about the job. Soon I'll have to tell her I can't stay and be her husband."

"Oh?"

"I don't know how to raise a child, John. If I tried to commit to Carmen, I know I'd give up. How would a person like me who cannot keep his mind straight for a day ever raise a son or daughter?"

The med student stared at Diego as he lowered his head, depressed. He believes all he said, the med student thought.

A sound of wailing came from Carmen's room. The med student heard several voices speak and people walk about up there. A nurse emerged from the room and came to Diego.

"Mr. Lopez, you can see your child now," she said.

Diego rose from his seat slowly and followed the nurse into Carmen's room. From where he sat, the med student heard the child wail and cry. John heard in the sound both Diego's worries and the pain that awaited the new mother. The student came to a decision then. He left the waiting room to seek his mentor and own up to his mistake with the patient earlier that day. He would not wait for the doctor to correct him over it. After Diego, John imagined only trouble if he let his missteps come tracking him down.



**About the Author**

Norbert Kovacs lives and writes in Hartford, Connecticut. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in