

A Cold Dish

by Lisa Tuttle

Throughout my pregnancy I was haunted by an ancient story.

Not so much a story, really, as a scene: the horrific climax to a dark drama of betrayal and revenge. There are only two people in the scene, a man and a woman. They are, or have been, married, and the woman has had two sons by him. Once she loved the man, but now her love has turned to hate. He knows, but is indifferent to her feelings, because he is a powerful and important figure, a force in the land, and she is a mere woman, powerless.

The setting is her house, in her kitchen. Although he has left her, abandoned her for another woman, he has returned to reclaim his sons. They are his heirs, after all; this was in the olden days when children were the property of their father, and women merely conveniences for their begetting.

With typical male vanity, he's not surprised that she is prepared to entertain him, has even cooked a meal for the man who, having ruined her life, has now come to take her children away. Accepting it all as his due, he sits and allows her to serve him. He eats heartily, never wondering why she doesn't join him in the feast.

Finally, replete, he asks for his sons.

She, laughing horribly, tells him he's just had them.

What is this story? Who is she? Who is he? Without names, I couldn't research it, I had no idea where to begin. I looked through books of ancient myths, and Greek tragedies, but could never find it. But I must have read it somewhere, or seen it staged....

"People don't do such things." That's from a more modern play—Ibsen, is it, or Strindberg? Anyway, that's how I feel. Yet even if it never really happened, someone wrote it, someone thought it up and found it plausible. Women have killed their own children, I know, but ... men are the ones who made parenthood all about ownership, inheritance, and staking a claim, giving a name or not, as if love were dependent on genes, or law. It's men, not women, who have always had the option of denying their bastards. It's women who adopt, or even steal babies, just to have someone to love. And it's men who want to believe that they're more important than the children they sire, that a woman spurned would butcher her own children just to spite the man who left her.

Yet what do I know, really, about what people will do in extremis?

And what if the story I think I remember is something I made up myself?

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Carmen was reassuring. Strange dreams, violent fantasies, are not so unusual. They don't mean I'm an awful person. I certainly don't have to act on my fantasies. That I fear I might ... well, it's not surprising if I seem a stranger to myself, if my mind works differently these days: pregnancy is an altered state.

Carmen started out as my guilt counselor but she's become my friend. She was supposed to help me come to terms with my own accountability, to break down the "criminal mind-set" which had put me on the wrong path, and help me with "reintegration" into society. Over the months she's become more of a general advisor, and a good friend. Maybe the only friend I've got, after all that happened.

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I did feel guilty when we first got caught; so did Josh. Actually, we felt guilty even before that, fearful of being caught—office affairs are always a bad idea, but sometimes they're irresistible.

I should have resisted, I know that. We both knew about the legislation specifically outlawing sexual activity on federal property between federal employees. To make matters worse, we weren't equals: I was his boss.

But it wasn't sexual harrassment! It wasn't like that between us. I didn't force him into anything. Everything he said in court was a ruse designed by his lawyer to get him a lighter sentence. It worked, too. He was so convincing even I wondered: was I really a heartless, predatory she-devil who had intimidated poor young Josh into providing sexual gratification?

I know lawyers will say anything. My own lawyer wanted to accuse Josh of rape, but I kept her reined in. I wasn't prepared to do that to him—and, anyway, she admitted that if we weren't believed, it could backfire really badly. I thought I had less to lose than Josh: no partner, money in the bank.... I'd lost my job, of course—we both had—but I figured I'd move into the private sector once the uproar died down.

I knew I'd done wrong, and I accepted that I would be punished. I thought losing my job was punishment enough. When I admitted my guilt, I didn't realize it would go to court.

Legal bills ate up my savings in no time. I didn't know how I'd manage to pay the fine. I didn't know the judge had worse than a fine up his sleeve.

Judge Arnold Jason. A handsome, vigorous man, undeniably attractive. He was married, but I'd bet there were affairs. Maybe not actually in chambers, and maybe not with anyone who worked for him, but a man like that would find plenty of opportunities, have plenty of offers ... I'd be astonished if he turned them all down. And I'd thought it might make him a little more sympathetic to people like me and Josh.

But he lectured us like some Old Testament prophet, like some patriarch bearing the word of God down to the miserable sinners.... Yes, he used the word "sin," without irony. We had sinned against society, and we must make amends.

When he first said the words "community service" I relaxed a little. It wasn't going to be jail or bankruptcy. I imagined myself working with the handicapped or the very old; maybe cleaning out bedpans—well, somebody had to do it. It was honest work, and I swore to myself I would not complain.

With his faintly lecherous smile, Judge Arnold Jason said that the punishment should fit the crime. Back in the good old days, he went on—as if he were old enough to

remember!—immoral sex had *consequences*. Women kept themselves in check from fear of getting pregnant. Society had gone to hell when contraception had become readily available to anyone who wanted it.

The last election had shown that the great American public was sick of immorality. Many laws had recently been passed to define and ban unacceptable activities. Deviant behavior was to be discouraged—so the great Judge Jason decided to make an example of me.

I wasn't the first woman to receive a sentence of pregnancy, but the ones before me had all been prostitutes. As an alternative to time in jail, with the added bonus of a year's free health care, as far as most law-abiding, tax-paying citizens were concerned, such "punishment" was more like a holiday! And it had the longer-lasting effect of helping to reintegrate these "fallen women" into normal society. Although most of them gave the babies up for adoption, a few opted for motherhood, and the new responsibility kept them on the straight and narrow—at least, that's what I read in an article which presented this enlightened new approach to vice in a wholly approving way. It seemed, when I read about it, like a great compromise between punishment and rehabilitation.

Somehow it seemed very different when I was on the receiving end.

Compromise! We're all suckers for it. The ideal of the magical middle way which is good for everyone.

For so long it seemed there could be no compromise between those who promoted "the right to choose" and those who proclaimed an irrefutable "right to life." Then cryogenics and medical technology created a compromise. Legislation followed. Conflict was eradicated. No more abortions; women had the right to choose; *and* the right to life was upheld. Instead of "termination" we had "removal." Tiny lives were frozen in stasis until a more willing womb, a welcoming home, could be found for them.

It seemed so simple. Everyone knew there were more people eager to adopt than there were healthy, adoptable newborns—but somehow this demand didn't transfer to all the new unborns. Usually people who were willing and able to hire a surrogate mother wanted a child with some of their own genetic material. Otherwise, they'd shop around for premium eggs and sperm—those who could afford them wanted designer babies, not something removed from careless or immoral women.

Yet homes could always be found for newborn babies. It was a psychological thing. People who wouldn't adopt an unknown embryo responded differently to babies. I was assured of this even before the fetus was implanted in my womb.

"Don't worry that you'll have to keep the baby—there's already a loving home just waiting for the little one to be born," said a bright-eyed, curly-haired social worker. "If it would make you feel better, you can sign the adoption-release papers at any time during your pregnancy. Would you like to do that now?"

But I wasn't willing to do or sign anything which might imply that I accepted what was being done to me. Even though I didn't want a baby, and couldn't see how keeping it could possibly benefit me, I resisted, almost instinctively.

I sometimes felt like a rat in a cage, but I was a clever rat. My mind never stopped working furiously to find a way out. And if I couldn't get myself out, then—clever,

nasty rat that I was—I would make someone else suffer.

Not just anyone, though. I wanted revenge. Revenge would be my solace. I was going to get the people who had done this to me. Josh? No. He'd been hurt enough. My poor Abelard. He was a coward, that was all, desperate to save his own skin. I'd loved him once, and couldn't forget that.

But I'd like the chance to do something to his lawyer. And the prudish gossip who'd turned us in. And my useless lawyer, who had let this happen. And the judge. Yes, above all, Judge Arnold Jason was the one I really wanted to see suffer. I had lots of cruel and childish fantasies about what I'd do to him if I ever got the chance....

I knew it was unlikely. I knew my fantasies of revenge would have to stay just that, fantasies. And even they started to fade, as my pregnancy progressed, under the softening effects of hormones and—might as well give her the benefit of the doubt—Carmen's professional counselling skills.

New fantasies crept in and took their place. Daydreams about motherhood. The baby, instead of an unknown "unborn," became, in my dreams, Josh's son or daughter. Although we couldn't be together, I would always have his baby....

Sometimes I horrified myself.

And yet, on the other hand, why shouldn't I have a child—this child? So what if I hadn't chosen it—the idea of choice was such a modern thing; maternal instinct (if that's what I was feeling) was far more primitive. This baby was inside me, and that made it mine. I began to hate the idea of losing it. The thought of handing my baby over to strangers came to seem more of a punishment than even the pregnancy itself. Like it or not, I was becoming a mother.

If I was going to do this, I knew I had to go in with my eyes open. My new job—entry-level data processing, if you please!—left me with too much time to fantasize. I decided to put that time to better use. I set out to research my baby's background. I promised myself that if the baby inside me had come from someone too obviously horrible and unfit, I would give it up, rather than raise a ticking genetic time-bomb.

I was sure that background details of the heritage of all the unborn must be kept on file somewhere. Their mothers at least would be identified, in case they wanted to return to reclaim their unborn babies when their situations improved (this did sometimes happen).

Of course, I had no right to any of this information. It could only be accessed illegally.

It's just not true that punishment is a deterrent to further crime. All my previous experience of the law did was make me much more careful not to be caught this time.

It didn't take me long to find the name of my baby's genetic mother. She was called Chelsea Mott. No information on the father.

I ran a search on the name Chelsea Mott. I was astonished at the number of links that came up, but even more astonished by the connections they made.

I sat and stared at my computer screen, feeling as if all the breath in my body had

gone sighing out.

Chelsea Mott was a law student. Two years ago she had worked as a summer intern for Judge Arnold Jason. She'd worked for him from June through August. In October she'd gone in for a pregnancy removal. Significantly, although she was at law school in another state, she'd come back *here*—the home State of Judge Arnold Jason—for the removal.

My revenge had just been handed me on a plate.

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When I arrived at the hospital, in the early stages of labor, a lawyer was waiting with papers for me to sign.

Carmen—I'd asked her to come along as my doula, to help me through the pain, and to run interference—told her to get lost.

"It's only to make things easier," the lawyer explained with a kindly smile. "So they can take the baby away as soon as—"

"Nobody's taking my baby," I objected. "I'm keeping her—or him."

"But you can't! It's all arranged—the parents are *here*."

Someone at the hospital must have called them as soon as I'd phoned to say I was on my way. Before I could respond, another contraction made me gasp and double over.

"Get out," Carmen told the lawyer. "Or I'll have somebody throw you out."

"I'll be back," the lawyer promised.

And, of course, she was. But she couldn't make me sign her papers—nobody could. And without my agreement, no one could adopt my baby. I had given birth to him, and he was mine, according to both natural justice and the law. At least he was more mine than anyone else's, besides Chelsea Mott, and it wasn't Ms. Mott who was trying to take him away from me.

Carmen saw Judge Arnold Jason and his wife conferring with the lawyer on the very steps of the hospital. That was the deciding moment for her. Up until then, I think she'd thought I was paranoid about Judge Jason, and that it was my "criminal mind-set" keeping me from accepting the fairness of the punishment he'd disinterestedly inflicted.

But if he wanted the baby I carried, how disinterested could he be?

Most women go home with their babies within twenty-four hours of giving birth, if there are no complications. In my case, the hospital wasn't willing to let my baby go. I knew there must be pressure on them from behind the scenes, because there was absolutely nothing wrong with him. They were eager enough for *me* to get out; but I wouldn't let them separate me from my baby. I could see perfectly well that possession, which had worked in my favor until now, could be made to work for someone else.

These early days were crucial, especially if the adoptive parents wanted their name

on the birth certificate.

I toyed with the lawyer, who was eager to believe I could be bought. When I told her that I wanted to meet the potential adoptive parents first, before I made up my mind, we both knew her protest was just for show.

He wouldn't come, and *she* didn't want me to know her name. But I knew. Mrs.-Judge was not a publicity hound, but there were photos of her to be found on the web, anyway: on her husband's arm at a charity ball, or snapped, face bleached and startled by the flashbulb, in a restaurant. In life, she looked older than I'd expected, maybe because her husband looked so young.

"Did you want to ask me questions?" she asked, getting straight down to business as she came in. "We'll give the baby a good home, a wonderful life, so much love...." she darted a longing glance at my little baby—still unnamed, except in my head—in his clear plastic hospital bed.

"Why do you want *this* baby?" I asked.

She looked startled by my question, but her halting reply seemed utterly innocent. This was the baby they'd been told they could have, that was all. And they'd been waiting for months, ever since they'd been told.... It was just too hard to be let down now.

"So there's nothing special about *my* baby?"

"Well, all babies are special." She stared at him so hungrily.... Did she know or not? I couldn't tell.

"Get yourself another baby, then," I said. When she looked at me I went on, "You don't have to wait for some poor sucker like me to mess up. I'm sure you've got plenty of money. Go hire somebody to carry one of the unborn for you. Plenty of women would do it if the price was right. Draw up a contract right at the start, everything spelled out, nice and legal, with most of the money to come on delivery, and then you won't get let down."

Her expression changed. "Oh, I see."

"What do you see?"

"The dollar signs in your eyes. Don't you know that buying and selling babies is *illegal*?"

I almost laughed. "Yeah, right. But *forcing* somebody to have a baby and then taking it away from her is perfectly okay. Just as long as you've got the law on your side." I shook my head. "It's a false economy, Mrs. Jason. You and your husband should have hired a surrogate mother, instead of trying to get it for free."

She backed away from me, towards the door. "It's a lost cause, trying to help people like you," she said, icily furious. "We would have given that little boy a good home, and you could have gotten on with your life. But you had to ruin it for everyone. Well, enjoy your motherhood."

"I won't blame *you* if I don't," I promised her.

Twenty minutes later, my baby and I were home.

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That might have been the end of the story—or the beginning, anyway, of a different one—if the Judge had let go.

If simple adoption had been their aim, they should have looked elsewhere. Taken my advice and hired a surrogate, or just waited until another newborn needed the home they could provide. I don't know if his wife knew the truth or not, but the Judge wanted his own son, and he wouldn't accept that his clever plan had failed.

I don't deny what I did. I know I have to take responsibility for that.

All the same, it wouldn't have happened if Judge Arnold Jason had just let us go. Had let me win. Hadn't been so determined to claim ownership of the child he'd forced me to bear.

A strange shadow-dance began. He sent his representatives to meet with me—meetings which he could later claim had never happened. We had unofficial discussions about hypothetical funding for work which I might do. To buy a human being is against the law. But gifts are not illegal, nor are loans. I could start my own business. Money need not be a problem, but it would be difficult for a single mother to devote enough time to this job or that.... If I felt I would be better off without this child—which, after all, was not really biologically or genetically mine—a good home could be found for it.

I never intended to say yes. But I didn't say no. Out of perversity or curiosity, I let them continue. Finally, when pushed to make a decision, to name my price (as it were), I said that I would need to meet with my child's father face to face. Alone, on my own ground. I would hand him over personally, or not at all.

What sort of vanity made him agree, I wonder?

The same, I suppose, which had driven him all along, making him think he was so much better than me, that he could use me, and ruin my life, and profit by it.

He came to my apartment for dinner.

I had the big pot simmering on the stove when he arrived. A rich, spicy, meaty aroma filled the air. Music was playing from the classical station—some opera; a wronged woman warbling away in the background. I poured him a glass of wine, red as blood.

Although he'd arrived looking wary, expecting hostility, he soon relaxed under the influence of the wine, the atmosphere, my own, slightly hectic, sexiness. My breasts were much bigger than they'd been when he saw me in court, and I was wearing an abbreviated top to show them off. He found it easier to look at them than at my face. The baby was nowhere to be seen or heard, but he never asked.

"Dinner's ready," I said, and sat him down at the table. I leaned over him—giving him a good look—and ladled the ragout into his bowl.

"What is it?" he asked, frowning down at the little bones, the odd-shaped chunks of meat floating in the thick red sauce with tiny onions, potatoes and carrots.

"My own recipe," I told him. "Try it!" I pressed my breasts against his back before moving away. "Tell me what you think."

He took a bite, chewed thoughtfully, and nodded as he swallowed. "It's good!"

"I'm glad you like it." I leaned against the wall and watched him.

He paused, mid-chew, to give me a puzzled look. "Aren't you eating?"

"Oh, in a minute. I want to finish my wine."

"Well, you'd better hurry up, before I eat it all!" When he grinned, I could see a piece of meat stuck between his front teeth. It made me feel quite ill.

"What's wrong?" He made as if to get up from the table.

"Nothing. I forgot the bread." I hurried over to the oven and took out the rolls I'd been warming, put them in a basket and brought them to the table. By then, I was able to smile again.

"Sit down, you're making me nervous, hanging around like a servant or something."

"Isn't that what I am to you?"

Something of my true feeling must have cut through his self-absorption. He spoke carefully. "No, not at all."

"I've done you a service—but of course, I've never been paid for it," I pointed out.

His eyes cut around the room at the mention of payment. I knew he would be thinking the place was bugged, that I'd brought him here to trap him, convict him out of his own mouth.

"Oh, never mind," I said, and sat down.

"Have some of this ... what is it, exactly?" He gestured at the pot in the center of the table.

"Ragout," I said. "A fancy word for stew."

From the radio, the singers were reaching some sort of climax.

"You're not eating?" Now, too late, he was suspicious.

I smiled and shook my head. "I'm on a diet. Have to lose some of that weight I gained while I was pregnant, or no man will ever want me."

He pushed his plate roughly aside. "What *is* this? If you've poisoned me, I'll—"

"Don't be ridiculous."

But the fear had infected him; the wrongness of this whole setup had finally penetrated. He stood up. "I'll put you away forever, I swear! Where's my son? I'm taking him now."

I began to laugh. It wasn't funny, but I couldn't help myself. And once I'd started, I couldn't stop.

His eyes got bigger as he stared at me. He took a step towards me, and I thought he was going to hit me. But he didn't.

Instead, he charged away, shouting, "Where is he? Where's my son?"

I heard him in the bedroom, knocking over things. He broke a lamp.

It was a small apartment, with few hiding places. It didn't take him long to figure out that the baby wasn't there. He came back into the living room then, glaring at me.

"What have you done with him?"

I didn't say anything. I just looked at the stewpot, laughter still welling up, painful now, like hiccoughs.

He turned pale. He made a sort of grunting noise and swayed on his feet. For a minute I thought he would faint. He closed his eyes and shook his head, and then—

Carmen tells me I'm lucky he didn't kill me, knock me out, strangle me—he could have, so easily, and I had no kind of weapon to stop him. But he didn't. I think he was too horrified by what he thought he'd done to think of anything else.

He ran for the door, desperate to escape. I could hear him retching as he hurried away.

As soon as he was gone, I grabbed my coat and the bag I'd packed earlier, and headed for the airport. Carmen was waiting for me there with the baby, who was getting fractious, ready for his feed. We caught our plane with minutes to spare, my breasts leaking milk.

"Closure," I told Carmen as we buckled up. "I did the crime, I served the time, and I got my revenge—and my reward." Looking down at the little one on my breast, it was hard to imagine that I—or anyone—could ever have thought of him as a punishment. I felt like the hero with the golden fleece or something.

I still don't know what character I was playing at dinner with the Judge, what story we were acting out, but it must be a famous one, since he recognized it. I almost wish I'd asked him.

The End