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Who's afraid?

by Sue Hitchcock

She watched as Tim took his first wobbly ride on his bicycle, with the trainer wheels newly removed. The slight anxiety she felt was a mere reflection of what Tim was feeling, but every preparation had been made. Like a knight prepared for battle he was wearing a cycle helmet, gloves and padded knee guards and besides, if he fell, she was there to wipe away his tears and encourage him to try again.

She knew now why a lioness was so fearless, putting the protection of her cubs above all and preparing them little by little for the dangers ahead, never prioritizing her own safety.

She had known fear and trepidation before she had Tim, but don't assume it was anything to do with childbirth. Labour pains are strangely forgettable, perhaps because an end is in sight. Toothache is far more memorable. Still the fear she remembered was other.

It started three days after her period was due, but was still absent. There were frequent trips to the lavatory to check, and each time the tightening ache of fear in her throat intensified. Each morning she woke with a feeling of doom. After two weeks it seemed conclusive, her breasts now tender to touch. Her parents would probably disown her and abortion was illegal at that time. Maybe she should kill herself, she knew no back-street abortionist and anyway she had no money.

Long walks gave her time to think and she looked for omens in the birds, who were busy nesting. Finding a dead crow made her feel sick. Death was not the solution.

If the baby's father had been the boy she had been in love with, it wouldn't have been so bad, but he wasn't. After he had dumped her, she had had a one-night stand with a Ghanaian boy after a party. When she phoned and told him, he surprised her by suggesting they marry.

"My mother would love it. You could live in Ghana and I can have four wives because I am Muslim, so you would have lots of company."

She considered it for the shortest time. It was unthinkable. Better to be disgraced at home than to try to fit in with a world completely alien to her, with a man whom she hardly knew.

Now the future was even more of a dilemma. She didn't want any of it. She felt sick and then started to be sick every morning, which was marginally better than the feeling of dread. Three months of increasing hormones and suddenly she was reconciled with the swelling in her belly. She stopped feeling scared. She started to talk to whoever was in there and soon he answered, first tickling like a spider inside her, then gradually all elbows and knees bulging around her belly.

So here he was, Tim, her lovely brown boy, and never again would she fear for herself. Here he comes, pedalling straight towards her, jubilant.