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The Life and Times of Wet Baby Bodner

Wet Baby Bodner had not been a baby for quite some time, and rarely was she wet except when she chose to be. She was twenty-six years old now and it was she herself who sustained the nickname long after it would have been abandoned by others – including her parents who’d achieved a bit of coat-tail fame during that brief time when their daughter had been a baby and been alarmingly wet. Wet Baby Bodner (or Wet Baby, as those close enough ventured to call her) had not left home to go to college or a job after graduating high school; the promise of a whole new phase of life had not had her all aflutter like her classmates. Instead, the prospect of moving on to something new gave an even darker edge to her usual petulance. The fact of the matter, of course, was that Wet Baby Bodner had never moved on from what was practically the first thing she’d ever been: Wet Baby Bodner.

“Wet Baby,” called her mother from the kitchen. “Would you come give me a hand with something?”

Wet Baby Bodner, who was sitting out on the front porch, grimaced. Then she hauled herself up from her favorite rocking chair and stretched her arms, yawning. Wet Baby was a tall one and surprisingly strong given that she avoided most exercise. A few more pounds would have boosted her from ‘strapping’ to ‘stocky.’ Her square face was saved from plainness by intelligent blue eyes and her best feature by far was her profusion of heavy, honey blond hair.

“Wet Baby...?” came her mother’s voice again, this time with a plaintive tone.

“Alright, alright,” grumbled Wet Baby Bodner, raking her hand through that rich colored mane and trudging wearily into the kitchen. Her petite mother, Lilith (having also been known as Mother of Wet Baby Bodner) was hovering beneath one of the kitchen cupboards. She gestured helplessly. “My knee hurts, Wet Baby,” she said. “I just can’t get on that step ladder. Can you get me a can of mushroom soup from up there?”

Wet Baby Bodner sighed and, without need of the step ladder, flipped open the cupboard and plucked out a can of mushroom soup. “Anything else, Ma?”

Lilith Bodner looked around the kitchen, thinking. She didn’t want to pass up the unexpected offer of further help, but didn’t see anything that needed doing. “I’m all set, dear,” she smiled at Wet Baby. “You just go back to what you were doing.”

Wet Baby trudged back out onto the porch and heaved herself into the rocking chair. She stretched her big, long legs out to rest her ankles on the porch railing and stared with an unexpectedly wistful look in her eye out into the distance; from here, across the big yard, a couple of house-lined streets and a strip of second-growth woods, she could glimpse – just barely – a shimmering strip of the river.

“Actually, dear, there *is* one other thing...” Her mother was peeking out the kitchen door at her.

“Aaargh,” growled Wet Baby Bodner softly.

“Would you mind going down to get the mail for me?” Lilith Bodner asked hopefully.

Without a word or glance at her mother, Wet Baby hoisted herself up yet again, clomped down the porch steps and headed down the long driveway to the mailbox.

“It’s this darn *knee!*” her mother called after her.

Wet Baby kept her eyes on that tantalizing ribbon of river, knowing it would slip from sight at the spot where the driveway began to dip down. It was only from her usual station on the porch that she could be assured a view of the river, most times. But during dry spells, when the river was low, even that vantage point failed her.

Wet Baby reached into the mailbox and pulled out a wad of various sized and shaped envelopes. Plodding back up the driveway, she flipped through them. Ads and bills, she thought, same old thing. Some were addressed to Lilith Bodner, some to Wet Baby Bodner. (She'd had surprising success badgering the stodgy world of paper into documenting her as Wet Baby Bodner.) There was nothing addressed to Russell Bodner; her father had died five years ago, rather mundanely – a heart attack while mowing the lawn. He'd served Lilith and Wet Baby well, though, during the last several years of his life. He'd shown a heretofore unsuspected talent for investment games when the money, for a few glorious weeks, had gushed miraculously into their lives. Russell Bodner had wisely recognized this as a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon; he'd parlayed the huge windfall into a respectable fortune that would keep Lilith and Wet Baby financially secure for the rest of their lives, and then he'd gone out to mow the lawn.

“Hmmm,” Wet Baby paused on the walk back up to the house, eyeing an envelope that did not seem to contain either a bill or an ad. It was blue and rectangular and not only addressed in graceful handwriting to her, but addressed correctly: Ms. Wet Baby Bodner. The name in the upper left-hand corner was one she'd never heard of: Lucy Ropple. “Well, murmured Wet Baby, staring at the envelope. She hadn't seen one of these (she acknowledged bitterly) for quite awhile. But she knew what it was. She knew the look, the feel, the *smell* of it. It was a fan letter.

* * *

When Wet Baby Bodner (then simply known as Claire Bodner) had first fallen into the river, she did not immediately think of the fame, fortune and glory that would follow the event. Her first thought was that she was never going to convince her mother that she hadn't gone near the river when she had so noticeably fallen into it. “Oops,” she recalled thinking as she fell into the dark water and began bobbing there.

“A kid fell in the river!” shrieked an adult almost immediately. It was the Fourth of July and a big celebration had been going on all day in the park, past which the river flowed. All children, of course, had been strictly forbidden to go near the river and little six-year old Claire Bodner knew she was in trouble.

“Kid in the river!” other adults took up the cry. Claire Bodner was holding onto a branch that straggled out into the water from the bank and, being an unusually strong and self-possessed child, she could easily have climbed right back up onto land. But the sight of frantic adults dashing towards her was both stunning and mortifying. It was out of sheer embarrassment that Claire Bodner let go of the branch and let the waters carry her away from them.

“Oh, my God!” someone – was it her mother? – screamed. Claire Bodner drifted away and began her damp odyssey. She knew very well that she was in no danger of drowning; she was, as her instructor at the Y proclaimed, a natural born swimmer. She used her sturdy little legs to quietly tread water and she let the current take her. In an oddly detached way she watched the adults tearing along the river bank, trying to keep pace with her, and several times she drifted past clumps of logs or branches that she could have grabbed onto. The adults would yell, “Grab on, Claire! Grab on!” But their yelling would intimidate her further, and she would not grab on.

Up ahead the clear spaces running alongside the river ended abruptly, turning into a dense tangle of scrub brush and briar patches. Claire saw this with some relief. The adults would have to pull up short when they reached those thickets; they’d be slowed down, at least, and then Claire could, with a little bit of dignity, find a place to climb out of the water, find her way back to the park, and put herself into her mother’s care. The adults also saw the impending obstacle to their pursuit of Claire. “Shit!” someone yelled and Claire giggled, titillated to hear an adult use a forbidden word. “She’s grimacing!” another one cried out, “she’s probably scared half to death and freezing!” The adults would not have believed that Claire was bobbing down the river giggling and assumed the fleeting smile was one of anguish.

Claire swirled along at a pleasant speed and shortly she reached that spot where the heavy brush began; as she’d predicted, the tangled growth abruptly slowed down her pursuers and their voices immediately grew fainter. Only now, with no harassing noise in her ear, did she begin looking around for something to catch on to. A moss-covered rock suited her purpose just fine and without much effort, she took hold of it. “Aaah,” she sighed with relief, beginning to pull herself up the bank.

“The firemen are here!” someone announced loudly, and Claire could hear the sound of bodies crashing through the riverside growth.

“Firemen?” thought Claire, and her cheeks flushed with confusion at the huge scene she was causing. She quickly released the slimy branch she was gripping; the current swept her off once more just as a large hand grasped for her.

“Almost had her!” the owner of the hand yelled. “She lost her hold on the branch she was hanging on to!”

“Don’t let her out of your sight!”

“Hang on, Claire! Don’t give up!”

Claire began paddling her feet a little to get some distance between herself and her rescuers. By now she’d left the park far behind her and the sky was darkening. Up ahead she saw a sandy shoal reaching halfway into the river; she grasped immediately that the adults would use this arm of damp land to nab her and she paddled further out into the murky waters in order to remain safely out of reach.

“Damn, she’s drifting out!”

Her strategy worked beautifully. By the time the mob of adults rushed out onto the shoal, Claire had maneuvered herself into the deepest part of the river. She floated past as several of them leaped into the water after her, slipping their nets yet again.

It was a half mile or so down the river that Claire felt she could risk a brief rest period. She found a tiny island (no more than a big rock, really) jutting up through the water. She nestled against its shadows, secure in the knowledge that she could not be seen from shore. She may even have dozed awhile.

A deep rumbling and a blinding light jolted her, causing her eyes to fly open. “Hellercopter,” she stated calmly, staring upward. She did not realize at first that a helicopter carrying searchlights was connected with *her* in any way. Then she did realize. “Oooh,” she murmured. She became aware of other types of rumblings closer by and also bearing violent,

probing beams. Search boats. Little Claire stared wildly around her at all this furor. On shore dozens of people were searching the river banks with flashlights and she could hear voices yelling out her name.

Claire could think of no way to extricate herself from this situation without making herself agonizingly conspicuous. And the fact was, she was cold and hungry by now; and so tentatively she pushed aside the reedy grass that had been her refuge from the adults. With great trepidation she raised one chubby little arm and waved towards one of the search boats. She expected all those harsh lights to instantaneously train upon her but, unbelievably, no one seemed to notice her.

“Here I am!” she squeaked, but could not be heard over the din caused by the boats and helicopter. “Boat!” she called, growing petulant. “Over here, boat!”

“Feel bad for the parents,” she heard a man’s voice cut through the noise. “I think the little tyke’s a goner.”

The voice came from one of the boats, the one closest by. Claire crawled further up onto her rocky little island. “Boat!” she screamed, furious at being ignored after they’d chased her for so long. “Boat!” she shrieked, red-faced with sudden rage, angrily shaking her little fist. “*Boat!*”

“When I saw that sweet little thing waving to us,” Frank Burr later told a reporter, “I just wanted to get down on my knees and thank God. But I knew that had to wait. We had to get that poor wet baby into the boat first.”

That was the moment Claire Bodner became Wet Baby Bodner. When they pulled her into the boat and the people searching the banks realized what had happened, an earsplitting roar of jubilation rose up. Wet Baby Bodner was wrapped in blankets and when one of the search team offered her a Milky Way bar, she bit his finger because she would have preferred a Snickers.

“Wet Baby Bodner,” a newswoman solemnly announced into the camera on the late news, “is an inspiration to all of us. Her courage in the face of life-threatening peril is, in my opinion, as heroic as that of a soldier under enemy fire.”

“I agree with you, Marie,” said her counterpart back at the studio. “It is indeed humbling to witness such valor.”

When they carried Wet Baby Bodner to her weeping mother, several camera crews closed in to record the emotion packed moment. The throng of on-lookers sobbed and moved forward, ready to describe their heartfelt sense of the occasion should the media request them to do so.

“Oh, baby!” wailed Lilith Bodner. “My poor, wet baby!”

“I peed in the river,” Wet Baby confided to her mother, and the press decided not to report this as Wet Baby’s first statement upon being fished from the waters.

“Did I miss the fireworks?” Wet Baby asked Lilith, and the relieved reporters quickly jotted that down.

“Did I miss the fireworks?” repeated the newswoman that night, and paused for her viewers to absorb this.

‘Did I Miss The Fireworks?’ was also the banner headline of the city newspaper the morning following Fourth of July, with the heading under it, ‘Wet Baby Salvaged From River In Dramatic Rescue.’ The popular weekly magazine, Media Circus, opted for the grabber, ‘A Nation Prayed As Wet Baby Rode the Rapids.’

“A whole *nation*, Wet Baby!” cooed Lilith, showing Wet Baby the cover photo, which was of the two of them snuggling their teary faces together moments after the rescue. In fact, that particular picture had been snapped at the precise moment Wet Baby had been informing Lilith that she’d peed in the river.

There was the parade. There was the Today Show appearance. Though Wet Baby hadn’t drowned, many people felt compelled to leave flowers and toys at the spot by the river where they’d brought her ashore. There was, astonishingly, money sent by total strangers across the

country. The money sometimes came unaccompanied by any note, but most times there were instructions to earmark it for Wet Baby's education, wedding, vacations, or toys.

And then, like the silence after a storm has passed, there was nothing. That was twenty years ago.

* * *

Wet Baby Bodner slouched back into her favorite rocking chair on the front porch and looked at the blue envelope almost suspiciously. Lucy Ropple. From Atlanta, Georgia. The handwriting was that of an adult, clearly steered by the complexities of a personality – though what that personality was, Wet Baby had no way of discerning. After an inordinately long pause, Wet Baby slit open the envelope with her fingernail, unfolded the sheet of paper within (which was also blue) and began to read.

Dear Wet Baby, the letter began. I have been a fan of yours for years. I live in Atlanta, Georgia and was born here, but my daddy is originally from around where you are. He's always telling me about how you fell in the river and how he joined the rescue party, and how he was the one first spotted you yelling to the boat. He said you looked like a little angel out there in the dark river, what with your white sun dress and blond hair. He said the effect was strengthened by the way the search lights were flying all over the place, very dramatic is the word he uses. He says it was the best moment of his life, spotting you rising up out of the gloom like a regular angel beckoning to him and the others. (Those are the exact words he uses.) My mom died last year, the subject was abruptly changed, and daddy's not been taking it well. What we planned was to drive up and down and all around the country for a couple months, just the two of us, talking, and thinking, and I guess healing a little after mom's death. Now if this isn't too much of an imposition, I'd really like to stop by your area and meet you, and I know for a fact daddy would absolutely flip over with joy to see you after all these years. If you don't want us to come, just say so. It won't hurt daddy's feelings if you say No because I didn't tell him I was going to write you. Please let me know what you think about this idea, Wet Baby. Lucy Ropple.

Wet Baby lifted her eyes from the letter and scowled thoughtfully out towards the river. Was Mr. Ropple the guy whose finger she'd bitten? Or was he the one she'd overheard

speculating that she was a ‘goner?’ She supposed it didn’t matter. She looked down at the letter laying in her broad lap, feeling an odd kind of stirring. Wet Baby was not given to introspection, so she did not realize that what she was feeling was mild grief for those few short weeks when everyone had known who ‘Wet Baby Bodner’ was. She’d been, she felt, loved. It had seemed the world had been infatuated with her and it stunned her to this day that she’d been dropped again so casually. If her memory served her, some kid out West had gotten stuck out on a rickety fire escape. The fire trucks had come to get the kid back down and, of course, the damn nation had held its breath for Baby Krystal and that was it for Wet Baby Bodner.

Over the years, the Wet Baby Bodner tale was sporadically resurrected. The year of the river episode, she’d rated a whole page of pictures and text in Media Circus’s special issue of ‘The Year’s Most Fascinating People.’ Ten years ago, when she’d been sixteen, Media Circus had done yet another special issue called ‘Whatever Happened To...?’ and Wet Baby was among the group of characters who had briefly ‘seized the country’s attention’ and then fallen into obscurity once again. She was interviewed for this and, acting upon some strange impulse she could not now remember, she’d told the interviewer, “The way I remember it is that I kept swimming away from my rescuers every time they got close; I was embarrassed about all the fuss I was causing and didn’t want to face the music.” She had also pointed out, again acting upon the same baffling impulse, that the entire river incident from beginning to end had taken somewhat under an hour and that the country had not had time to be informed of it, let alone spend much time holding its breath and praying to God over it until well after the fact, at which point breath-holding and praying weren’t called for.

The reporter had quickly turned off her tape recorder. “Ms. Bodner,” she’d said, “I don’t think you really want to say that. This is for Media Circus, you remember, we’ve got millions of readers...” Wet Baby stared thoughtfully at the reporter a moment, then nodded. “Yeah. Okay, forget that. What happened is, I’m floating down this river and it was the sound of people shouting my name that kept me going.” “That’s better,” smiled the reporter, snapping the tape recorder back on. The picture that accompanied the story was of Wet Baby sitting in her favorite rocking chair with a glass of iced tea and smiling prettily. Lilith Bodner had thought long and hard in preparation for the ‘Whatever Happened To...?’ interview and told the reporter, “She was worried about missing the fireworks, but I’ll tell you, when I saw her being brought back to

shore, there were fireworks in my heart!” The quote was used, of course, and for two weeks straight Lilith and Baby bickered about it: Wet Baby thought the quote was unbearably corny.

Though she acknowledged that it was but a glorified rag, Wet Baby had to admit that for quite a few years it had been Media Circus that breathed life into her story each time it seemed about to die completely. Media Circus had the power to dub you a hero for crossing the street without being hit by a bus; it let the nation know when it was holding its breath, praying, weeping or was stunned. Its standards for courage and all-around nobility of heart were just low enough that almost anyone could get into the club. It simply adored yellow ribbons, emotional roller-coasters, Miracle Babies and One Woman’s Struggle. It reminded the nation that it was not morbidly titillated, it was concerned and compassionate, and the nation was glad to know this.

Yes, Media Circus and Wet Baby Bodner had been a perfect match. But Media Circus had so many loves that it simply couldn’t juggle them all. After Baby Krystal of the fire escape there had been Little Joey and his heart transplant (throughout which, Media Circus reported, the nation had held its breath and after which the nation had wept with relief). After Little Joey there had been Baby Angie for whom the nation had not only prayed while she was lost in the woods but for whose parents it had poured out its heart. Wet Baby had often thought that Media Circus should do a special issue exclusively on the nation and the Emotional Rollercoaster it was perpetually riding.

After Media Circus’s ‘Whatever Happened To...?’ issue, there wasn’t much else on Wet Baby Bodner. When Russell Bodner died mowing the lawn there were small blurbs in several magazines summing him up as “the father of Wet Baby Bodner, the six-year old who fell into a river one Fourth of July evening, bringing an entire town to her rescue.” Wet Baby was irritated by the tone of these blurbs: They seemed to make the *town* out to be the hero, not her. Reading them you pictured some dumb kid helplessly splashing around while valiant townspeople risked their lives to save her.

It was five years ago that Russell Bodner had died, and his death seemed to have marked the conclusion of Wet Baby’s press. Probably when Lilith went there’d be a bit more, but Lilith (except for her ‘darn knee’) was still going strong.

Wet Baby sighed and re-read the blue letter. Was Mr. Ropple the one who put blankets around her? The one who'd babbled something to the media about wanting to get down on his knees to thank God?

"Hey, Ma!" Wet Baby called, and a moment later Lilith Bodner's head poked out the kitchen door.

"What is it, Wet Baby?"

"You remember a Ropple?"

"Ropple..." mused Mrs. Bodner, frowning.

"This would have been way back around Fourth of July." When Wet Baby or Lilith said 'Fourth of July' they always meant *that* Fourth of July.

"Ropple," Lilith repeated. "You know, I don't remember anyone by that name."

"Do you remember the names of the people in the rescue team?"

"Oh, sure," confirmed Lilith. "Frank Burr, Bob Aronson, Martin D'Orsi, Ricky Sklar, Henny Macaulay... Let's see... Peter Lewald..."

"But no Ropple?"

"I'm pretty sure I'd remember, dear. Why are you asking?"

Wet Baby handed her the blue letter and Lilith sat down in the porch swing to read it. When she was done she handed it back. "Well, I guess my memory isn't as good as I thought," she admitted "Sounds like he was here, all right."

"Yeah."

"I think that's a sweet idea that girl's got," said Lilith. "Poor man, losing his wife. I hope you're going to write back and tell them to come visit...?"

Wet Baby grunted in a noncommittal kind of way then jerked her chin up, hit with a sudden thought. Wouldn't Media Circus adore the idea of Wet Baby Bodner being reunited, twenty years later, with one of the men who rescued her? My God, she thought: The nation would weep, pour out its heart and maybe even find itself on an Emotional Rollercoaster!

"Watch your language, Ma," she said, heaving herself out of her rocking chair. "We're gonna have company."

* * *

Lilith was just about in a frenzy getting the house looking nice. She polished every stick of furniture, washed the curtains, and used some vile-smelling kind of carpet cleanser that drove Wet Baby out to the porch for two hours. She put vases of fresh cut flowers in every room. She splurged at the store on an array of gourmet snacks and resolved to decide at the last minute whether or not to claim she'd made them herself.

The pending visit of Mr. Ropple (Edwin, they'd been told was his name), Lucy Ropple *and* Media Circus was an event that had Lilith in a state of excitement the likes of which she had not experienced since her and Wet Baby's appearance on the Today Show twenty years ago. "How did you feel as you saw your child being swept down the river?" the interviewer had asked her, leaning forward with fascination. "I was afraid she would drown," Lilith had answered. "A baby in a river is a terrible thing." "Especially when it's your *own* baby, I imagine," the interviewer ventured. "Lord, yes," agreed Lilith.

All too soon, the interview was over. Wet Baby and Lilith's spot was followed by a segment on One Woman's Battle Against Ovarian Cysts. Lilith was sure that people would find this anticlimactic after she and Wet Baby.

Lilith was thrilled about Media Circus coming back into their lives, but not so much for herself. It was Wet Baby she was excited for. Lilith knew how bitter Wet Baby was about having dropped from the public eye. That little trip down the river and the hubbub following it had been the biggest thing to ever happen in either of their lives and it had been a rude awakening indeed to discover that their celebrity was not permanent. Lilith recalled the day this had actually hit home. She had been knitting, Russell was reading the paper and Wet Baby was

playing with dolls on the rug. The television was on and a newsman announced gravely, “I’m here at the scene where rescuers are just now – as we speak – bringing Baby Krystal down from the fire escape where she has been trapped for a solid hour.”

“I understand the fire escape was rusty and practically falling off the building, Jim,” remarked the newswoman back at the studio.

“That’s right, Linda,” Jim nodded. “As a witness put it, that fire escape was death trap. Baby Krystal’s courage is astonishing. I feel a sense of awe.”

“As do all of us, Jim,” said Linda. “As do all of us.”

Lilith became aware that Wet Baby had stopped playing with her dolls and was staring raptly at the television screen; her intensity was almost alarming and Lilith started to get up to approach her. But before she could, Wet Baby suddenly broke out of her trance and hurled her doll violently at the t.v. set. “Stupid baby!” she shrieked. “Stupid rotten baby, I hate you!”

Even at six years old, Wet Baby knew when she’d been upstaged.

Lilith thought surely that Wet Baby would grow up and forget all about being Wet Baby. But she clung to the name, growing furious if anyone dared to call her Claire. She grew angry too, if someone was not familiar with her famous evening in the river. Lilith remembered going out to dinner, she, Russell and Wet Baby, and being told by the maitre d’ that there would be a twenty minute wait for a table. Wet Baby (who was twelve by then) had elbowed bullishly past she and Russell and hissed at the maitre d’, “Do you know who I *am*?”

A few years ago Lilith had gotten a call she’d never told Wet Baby about. It was from a psychologist doing research for a book he planned to write. The psychologist, a Dr. Moriarty, wanted to know if he could interview both Lilith and her daughter about the ins and outs of brief childhood fame. “Wet Baby’s just fine,” said Lilith defensively. “You still call her ‘Wet Baby?’” asked Dr. Moriarty eagerly. “She actually goes by the name ‘Wet Baby?’” “So what if she does?” fumed Lilith. “Hey, hey, that’s cool,” Dr. Moriarty assured her, afraid she’d hang up. “Listen,” he said temptingly, “you wouldn’t mind being in a book, would you?” “What do I care about being in a book?” sniffed Lilith. “This book’s going to be great,” the doctor told her. “I’m

going to come up with some new pop psychology expressions and buzzwords. I'm coming up with a whole new syndrome." "What do you mean?" Lilith was intrigued, despite herself. "I haven't thought of a name for it yet," admitted Moriarty. "Maybe something like 'Infant Competitive Disorder.' Anyhow, it's sweeping the country, and I spotted it first. I've got to write the book on it before anyone else notices it." "Well, what *is* it?" Lilith asked impatiently.

The doctor was eager to explain. "Have you noticed how many kids – babies – get in trouble these days?" he asked her, and went on without waiting for an answer, "Babies on roofs, babies in runaway cars, babies being stalked by mad dogs. Well, I don't think they get in trouble by accident, if you know what I mean." "No, Dr. Moriarty," said Lilith, "I don't know what you mean." "What I mean," he explained, excitement in his voice, "is that the babies know exactly what they're doing." "Oh, come on!" "I'm convinced of it," he insisted. "Couple weeks ago there was a baby stranded in the polar bear pit at the city zoo. They had to shoot the bears full of tranquilizers then got the baby out. It was tricky. But the thing is," his voice grew confidential, "in the pictures they showed on the news, you could see the baby's face. And you know how that baby looked?" "How?" Lilith asked. "Smug," said Dr. Moriarty. "That baby looked smug as hell because he'd outdone the *last* baby." "The last baby?" repeated Lilith. "Yeah, the one a month before that. She somehow got onto a ski lift and the ski lift broke down leaving her stranded up there. And don't tell me she didn't do a little tampering to *get* it to break down." "Dr. Moriarty," said Lilith evenly, "You are insane." She hung up on him. She never heard from him again and neither did she ever see or hear of a book about a new syndrome affecting the nation's babies.

Lilith did not tell Wet Baby about this phone call because she was very sure that Wet Baby would be furious at her for turning down a chance to be in a book.

Wet Baby dominated the Bodner household, and so powerful was her will that both Russell and Lilith became tentative and obsequious around her. Lilith thought constantly about how she could make Wet Baby happy and was appalled one day to find herself plotting ways she could put Wet Baby in grave (and public) danger so that Media Circus and all the others would come back.

And now, years and years later, it had happened. They were coming back.

* * *

Edwin Ropple turned out to be a rather handsome man of about forty-five (young to have lost his wife, thought Lilith sadly) and Lucy Ropple was a pretty, shy-mannered young woman of about Wet Baby's own age. Lilith fluttered about, watching her daughter preen under the admiring attention of the Ropples. When the Media Circus people arrived, the glossy, competent woman who was one of the magazine's reporters contrived a number of shots for the photographer. First she had Wet Baby pose at the front door greeting Mr. Ropple; both looked delirious with joy and had their arms flung out to convey rapture. Next was a shot of them huddled close together, a photo album (presumably of Wet Baby's press clippings) between them. They posed in the kitchen together with Wet Baby chopping up vegetables for a salad and playfully throwing a slice of tomato at a laughing Mr. Ropple. (This baffled Lilith no end, but her smile never wavered.) They got in the Media Circus van, drove down to the river, and got several shots of Wet Baby and Mr. Ropple standing on the banks together; so as to catch every possible mood the reporter, Ms. Curtin, got shots of them looking thoughtful, sad, happy, troubled and wistful. She got one of Wet Baby acting like she was about to dive into the water and Mr. Ropple restraining her. They were about to leave, but at the last minute Ms. Curtin decided to have Wet Baby pointing out at something in the river with Mr. Ropple shielding his eyes and gazing in the direction she indicated. When Lucy Ropple asked what the shot was supposed to be suggesting, Ms. Curtin explained, "We'll come up with something." They all got back in the van again and drove back to the Bodner's place.

"Now, just pretend we're having a regular conversation," Dorothy Curtin advised them. She got everyone seated, as confident and relaxed as though this were her own home. "Mr. Ropple," she began, turning to the nervously smiling man. "I understand from your daughter that the memory of that fateful Fourth of July and the tragedy that might have been, has lived on vividly in your mind all these years."

Mr. Ropple squirmed, feeling pressured to equal Ms. Curtin's eloquence. "It surely has," he finally answered. "I'll never forget the sight of that wet baby rising up out of the gloom just as we were all thinking the same thing: That it could be too late to save her."

"What a moment that must have been," stated Ms. Curtin.

“A moment I’ll never forget,” nodded Mr. Ropple. “She looked like a little angel with her white dress and her blond hair.”

“Ms. Bodner,” said Ms. Curtin, turning to Wet Baby. Wet Baby chafed at not being addressed as ‘Wet Baby’ but let it go. “Ms. Bodner, how did you feel when you set eyes on Mr. Ropple twenty years after he helped rescue you from the river?”

Wet Baby looked over at Mr. Ropple, trying to subtract twenty years from his face in an effort to remember him. “I was overwhelmed,” she told Ms. Curtin. “I still recall seeing him reach for me that night, and knowing that I’d been saved at last. When I saw him today, it was like I went flying back in time. I expected to look down and see that I was wearing that same white dress that I had on in the river.”

Ms. Curtin nodded her approval, one pro to another, then turned briskly back to Mr. Ropple. “Would you share other memories of that evening with us? For instance, what was the mood of the men in the rescue boats while you combed the river, searching for Wet Baby?”

“I’d say the mood was pretty glum,” Mr. Ropple recalled. “I was praying the whole time and I’ll tell you, my heart went out to Wet Baby’s parents. When we found her, a nation wept with relief. The only way I can describe it is as an emotional rollercoaster.”

“Hmmm.” For the first time, Dorothy Curtin’s smile seemed a little glassy. “Anything else that particularly sticks in your mind?”

“Well,” mused Mr. Ropple. “I do recall that while we were all weeping for joy and praying... Now wait a minute,” he broke off, confused. “I guess the praying came first, then the weeping, I’m not completely sure. But they might have happened simultaneously a couple times. Anyway,” he said, having forgotten the question, “a nation held its breath as Wet Baby defied the dark waters that tried to claim her.”

Dorothy Curtin frowned slightly. She dug into her briefcase and pulled out a copy of American People (Media Circus’s arch rival), which she’d gotten hold of for background research. Wet Baby saw it was the issue published twenty years ago with the cover picture of

her being held aloft by a fireman. The caption was identical to Mr. Ropple's last remark: *A Nation Held Its Breath As Wet Baby Defied The Dark Waters That Tried To Claim Her!*

Dorothy Curtin cleared her throat. "Mr. Ropple," she said. "You have portrayed that evening as an emotional rollercoaster. Could you describe the highs and the lows of that ride?"

Mr. Ropple was pushing several hors d'oeuvres into his mouth at that moment and everyone waited patiently for him to finish chewing and swallowing them. At last he said, "Yep, an emotional rollercoaster, it was. Highs, lows. Everything."

"Would you describe some of those highs and lows," requested Ms. Curtin tensely.

"Sure, I remember it like it was yesterday," Mr. Ropple obliged. "We searched through those woods for hours. It started snowing, but we didn't give up. The mood was grim and we prayed and wept. 'Baby Angie!' we cried out, praying for an answer. All through the woods you could hear people calling out to Baby Angie. And I'll tell you, when I saw that little girl suddenly standing there, she looked just like an angel beckoning to us... It was *me* who first spotted her, I'm not sure people realize that. We all wept, needless to say. The whole damn *nation* wept."

Wet Baby stared stoically into space. Lucy Ropple busied herself with selecting an hors d'oeuvre and Dorothy Curtin stared at the tape recorder as though it had become her enemy.

"Could I get anyone coffee?" Lilith asked and everyone quickly murmured acceptance except for Mr. Ropple who seemed unwilling to begin chewing and swallowing hors d'oeuvres until he'd gotten as many as possible into his mouth. Lucy, Wet Baby and Dorothy Curtin avoided eye contact with one another until Lilith returned with the tray of coffee things.

"My heart went out to that little boy," Mr. Ropple's voice shattered the silence. "I prayed all night. I said to my wife, who was still livin' at the time, I said, 'Honey, there ain't nothing more tragic than one child's battle against a congenital heart defect.' She agreed. I can't describe my feeling of joy when I wheeled that kid out of surgery and told his parents he'd be okay."

Ms. Curtin sat back, leaving the tape recorder on. She gazed at Mr. Ropple and Mr. Ropple alone, her face unreadable. “Go on,” she nodded to him.

“The stories I can tell you,” said Mr. Ropple, shaking his head in wonder. “The one that stands out the most would have to be Baby Flanders. We barely had time to pray and weep with that one, it all happened so fast. Flames shooting out of the windows and that cute Baby Flanders teetering on the window sill. He looked like a little angel hurtling down from that building, and I can’t even describe the joy when I caught him in my arms.”

Ms. Curtin let Mr. Ropple reminisce for a good twenty minutes straight until he abruptly fell asleep in mid-sentence. Then she switched off her machine and glanced at her watch. “Well,” she said. “Won’t my supervisors at Media Circus be pleased. Apparently Mr. Ropple has been involved in every baby rescue since the beginning of time.”

Lucy Ropple met Ms. Curtin’s stare and fidgeted with embarrassment. “I’m sorry,” she finally said meekly. “I didn’t think it would do any harm for him to meet Wet Baby – she was always one of his favorites. I didn’t know he’d start going on and on about the others.”

She glanced helplessly at Wet Baby but Wet Baby just continued glaring silently into space. “He just loves those baby stories,” Lucy stammered, her cheeks deeply flushed. “He reads about them over and over and after awhile it’s like he really *knows* the babies. It’s like he was really *there*.”

Lilith cleared her throat nervously. “I *knew* there wasn’t a Ropple there that night.”

“And *I* knew I’d never seen him before,” Wet Baby finally broke her silence.

Lucy Ropple looked miserably at her dozing father. She gestured as though struggling to say something more, then simply slumped back in her seat.

It was after a full minute of silent tension that Dorothy Curtin shrugged her shoulders and plucked up a stuffed mushroom from the tray. “What the hell,” she said, popping the mushroom into her mouth. “It’s still a good story and we’ve got some great pix.”

“You mean you’re still going to run it?” Lucy asked. She seemed to brighten very slightly though doubt still played across her face.

“I didn’t come out to the sticks for nothing,” snorted Ms. Curtin. “I dragged my ass here for a Rescued Baby Reunion-type story and I’m not leaving without it.” She called to the photographer who was lounging around near the van just outside, smoking.

“Earl,” she said, standing up and smoothing down her skirt. “How about one more. Wet Baby and Mrs. Bodner on either side of Mr. Ropple, each kissing a cheek.”

Earl looked at Mr. Ropple. “He’s asleep,” he pointed out.

“It’s all right,” Ms. Curtin said. And it was. In the picture that graced the cover of Media Circus a couple of weeks later, Mr. Ropple looked like his eyes were closed in pure bliss as mother and daughter kissed him – the hero who had pulled Wet Baby from the river twenty years ago. The headline read: Wet Baby and Savior Reunited. ‘There’s A Bond Between Us That Can Never Be Severed,’ Wet Baby Proclaims.