

## The Stork

He called himself the Stork. It was not something he shared with anybody else, this name; it was just the way he made sense of his job. He was a middleman. He had contacts and those contacts had contacts, and when it came time he was brought in to do the paperwork. Even in this business that's what it came down to: contracts, negotiations, and commissions. Business was business, and everything was business, and this job, his last, only served to put a very fine point on what was a cold and bloodless truth. But a truth.

His real name was Butch Seibels. He was sixty-four years old. After being a skinny kid and a slim adult, he had, over the last ten years or so, begun to soften, and balloon, and now could play a perfectly respectable Santa Claus at the local mall—which, last Christmas, he did. Not for the money—he had been a frugal man his entire life—but just for something to do, to get through the season. Nobody believed in Santa Claus anymore—even the youngest kids seemed to accept his duplicity with a cynic's wink—but it made the time pass, and before he knew it Christmas and everything that went with it was over, the real world returned, and he was back to work, his dark assignments and clandestine meetings.

He had a job tonight. Tonight he was going to meet a man at an address he had been given just that morning: 234 Cloverdale Ave. Apt. 11. As usual the address had been written on an index card and placed inside an unmarked manila envelope and left in his mailbox. Butch wondered if it was really necessary, this kind of intense secrecy, but he liked it. It was exciting, never knowing when the next job would come until he opened his mailbox in the morning.

This business of selling babies was a complicated one. It took time to procure the appropriate child for the appropriate couple. More often than not, things fell through. He often arrived at his destination to find nobody there. This meant that something had happened to sour the deal, though he was never told what. This wasn't his part of the job. His job was merely to go over the paperwork with the couple and have them sign it. He was a notary. All other aspects of the transaction were handled by somebody else, and this is how he liked it. He didn't want to get too involved. Things were interesting enough as they were.

He started getting ready that afternoon. He shaved, showered and dressed around five. Butch always wore a suit and a tie—not just for this job, but when he went to the supermarket, or left his house for any reason. This was something he picked up in the military. He had one pair of stonewashed jeans which he wore sometimes for a few hours on the weekend, to get that relaxed feeling, but otherwise it was always a suit and tie. That’s one reason he felt so comfortable being Santa at the mall this past Christmas, because even then he was still wearing a suit. A Santa suit. But wearing it made it feel more like a normal job.

He left his house at seven. Cloverdale Avenue was way across town and being late was not an option, so he gave himself more time than he needed. In the last year and a half, since he had started, Butch had been a part of thirteen transactions, and he hadn’t been late for one. He wasn’t sure, but he thought it was his legendary punctuality, among other things, that brought him to the attention of the people he worked for—though who these people were, he wasn’t really sure. He only knew one man associated with the organization. His name was Tony. This is the man he was on his way to see.

It was funny, the way all this had started. Tony and Butch had met at a coffee shop. They had just started talking—about the weather, traffic, congress, the mail. Every day at the same time Butch went to this coffee shop, and gradually noticed that Tony was there too—every day. They chatted. Soon, they shared the same table. Butch looked forward to seeing him there, and he was never disappointed. Tony was a little bit younger than Butch, and Butch liked that—the fact that someone from the younger generation found him interesting enough to join every day for a cup of coffee. Tony was also pretty sharp. There was a lot going on behind his eyes.

Finally, after a couple of months, Tony asked Butch, seeing as how Butch was retired, if he would be interested in joining him in a business proposition. The way he described it, he almost made it sound like a charity—bringing unwanted children together with couples who wanted them. “Fast-track adoption” is how he put it. Where the babies came from he never said exactly, but then Butch never asked. Frankly, he was flattered that Tony thought of him as someone who could be useful in any way, and it was this—this desire to be a part of something bigger than just him, because him was all he had—that made him say yes.

Since then, things had happened just as Tony said they would. Butch would meet with the couples, go over the contract, get them to sign the adoption papers, and go. When the adoption fell through, for any reason, Butch still got paid for his time. And that was it. A pretty easy job. Why Tony couldn’t do this himself was a question Butch frequently entertained, but he didn’t want to ask for fear that Tony might think better of it and decide to. So this was yet another mystery, but Butch didn’t have to know every little thing. He was old enough to have figured out that there were always things you weren’t going to know about. That’s how the game is played—every game. There were things you didn’t

even know about yourself that came to light now and again, and it was surprising when this happened. But it happened.

Butch was a little early. When he found Cloverdale Avenue, he pulled into a space across from the apartment complex where he was going to meet Tony and waited. He left the radio on low, and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel along with the beat of the songs. *The Stork waits*, he thought to himself. He looked around. *The Stork looks around*, he thought. He smiled. Butch loved this part. He was about to do his business.

OK.

When it was time, Butch got out of his car and walked to Number 11 and knocked. There was no special knock, but Butch wouldn't have been surprised if there were. Tony opened the door.

"Butch," he said.

"How are you, Tony?"

"Fair to middling," Tony said. "Fair to middling. Come on in."

Tony wasn't wearing a jacket or a tie. He was slim the way Butch used to be. He left Butch at the door and walked down the hallway into the apartment, and Butch followed, closing the door behind him.

No one lived here, Butch could tell as he walked into the living room. There were no pictures on the wall, and it was furnished with only two chairs and the coffee table. There was an overflowing ashtray on the table, along with a stack of papers and a Styrofoam cup, half-filled with coffee. Butch wondered if the coffee came with the coffee table, and he smiled a little. *The Stork makes a joke*.

"Take a load off," Tony said.

They both sat down. Tony looked tired. Maybe it was the cigarettes and coffee, but his face looked dark and drawn. He lit another cigarette before Butch could take a breath.

"I got the papers here," Tony said, looking through them. "No different than before. Shouldn't be a problem with the papers at all. So that's good. That's always good."

"Always good," Butch said. "Smooth sailing."

"Well," Tony said, "not quite." He took a deep drag on his cigarette and Butch noticed how when he did this his face contorted, so it looked like it hurt him a little, taking the big drags.

Butch eyed him.

"What's up?"

Tony laughed.

"Shit, Butch," he said, shaking his head. "I don't know. From the get-go this one has been a backbreaker. The couple wanted to meet the girl and then the girl didn't like the couple and that held things up and—I don't want to bore you with the details."

“You’re not boring me,” Butch said. “What girl?”

“The girl having the baby,” Tony said. “You know. A nice girl, we’d worked with her before. But sometimes the second time is harder than the first. She sort of changed her mind.”

“The second time what? The second time having a baby?”

“That’s right.”

Butch frowned.

“She put up one kid for adoption and then had another? That doesn’t sound so bright.”

Tony shook his head and gave Butch a look he’d seen before. He was looking at Butch wondering how much he should tell him. Usually, Tony decided not to tell him much. But not today.

“Some girls, Butch,” he said. “They’re paid to have the babies. They have them and then they sell them to us, and we match them with a couple.”

“Really?” Butch said.

Tony smoked. The room was filled with free-floating clouds of smoke. “Really.”

“And there are more girls doing this than just the one?”

Tony nodded. Now he had the regretful look that maybe he had said more than he should have. Butch had seen that look before too.

“Anyway,” Tony said.

“Sounds like a factory,” Butch said.

“Sorry?”

“A baby factory,” Butch said. “Girls—if I understand it correctly—having babies they don’t want, on purpose, so you—so we—can sell them to somebody who does. One after another. Sounds like a factory.”

Tony smoked and smiled.

“I guess it is a little,” Tony said. “Not completely, though. Some of the babies come from other sources, the kind you might imagine. Accidental pregnancies and whatnot. But we found that from a business standpoint that was too uncertain. So we recruited.”

“And one of your recruits— ”

“Postpartum crap,” Tony said, shaking his head. “Depression. It happens.”

“I see,” Butch said, though in truth he was having trouble containing all of this information. On the one hand it made perfect sense, but on the other it was a stretch. He was having trouble imagining a woman getting paid for having a baby, on purpose, one that she never even intended to keep.

“And there you go,” Tony said.

Butch was still working his way through things, but he had to move on.

“So,” he said. “Why are you telling me all this now?”

Tony took a deep breath and sighed. And it was just then, from another room in the dim apartment, that Butch heard a baby crying. It cried and sucked down air to cry some more, and it only seemed to get louder and louder until it was wailing. Tony looked toward one of the bedrooms.

“Because of that,” Tony said.

Butch grimaced; the sound scared him. “A baby?” Butch said.

“That’s right,” he said. And Tony looked at him, serious. “We’re kind of between a rock and hard place here, Butch. We’re stuck. We need you—I need you—in addition to the paperwork—to take the baby with you to the couple. It’s not far—just two blocks over. That’s why I had you come here. I can’t do it myself. I would, but—it’s a question of exposure. It’s just not a good idea. I’ve got too much of a history, and, all things being equal, you’re the man, Butch.”

“I’m the man,” Butch said, nodding, but he was listening to the baby cry.

“It would mean the world to me, Butch,” Tony said. “Of course, you’d get a raise—a substantial raise. Not that you’re doing this strictly for the money.”

“No,” he said.

“It’s like we talked about back at the coffee shop, remember?”

“Sure,” Butch said. They used to talk about what Tony called “the web of life,” how all of us were in this web, and how even the smallest movement by one affected the others, and how we needed to help each other out with every move we made. Because there was a spider in the web, too. “You’re not down at the coffee shop so much anymore.”

Tony shrugged his shoulders.

“Fucking business,” he said. “Believe me, I’d rather be there, talking to you. Three o’clock, right?”

Butch nodded. “Three o’clock, on the button.”

Tony smiled.

“So what do you say, Butch?”

“About the baby?”

“About the baby.”

Butch smiled at Tony. “It’s not a problem, Tony,” he said.

“Great,” Tony said, and for the first time since Butch had been there he seemed at ease. Obviously, this had been weighing on him. “That’s great.”

The baby was still crying when they walked into the bedroom, where it lay in a cheap blue stroller, a little blanket around its body. Its face was almost purple from the crying, and its hands were curled into the tiniest of fists, each the size of a hermit crab out of its shell. Butch and Tony stared at it for a second.

“That’s the smallest baby I’ve ever seen,” Butch said.

“Have you seen that many babies?”

Butch shook his head. “A few,” he said. “My nephews, I saw them.”

“Well, in fact, this one’s about average,” Tony said. “Seven pounds when she was born. It’s in the paperwork.”

They continued to stare at the wailing thing, arms at their sides.

“She,” Butch said.

“She.”

“What’s her name?”

Tony looked at Butch then a little like he was an idiot. “She doesn’t have one yet,” he said. “The couple, they’ll name her.”

Butch sort of laughed at himself, for Tony’s benefit, so Tony would know he thought of himself as an idiot too.

“Of course,” he said. “What am I thinking? It’s just, you always think a person has a name. I know for a fact this is the first one I met who didn’t.”

“Well, she doesn’t.”

“And you don’t call her anything? Just, you know, some name?”

Tony was tired. He sighed, shook his head.

“I don’t, Butch.” He looked at his watch.

“I see,” Butch said.

“Yeah. Well. You better get going—I mean, if you think you’re still up for it.”

Butch kneeled down in front of the stroller. His big face was half the size of her entire body. There was something horrific about it—something horrific about the size of his face. At least the baby thought so. She let out a terrible screech. But maybe it was just a coincidence.

“I’m up for it,” Butch said.

*The Stork is ready to go.*

When he was Santa Claus this past Christmas, Butch didn’t exactly follow the script. There was a short—very short—training session, in which he and the other Santas were briefed on Santa etiquette by this really skinny guy named Perry. “Basically, you just have to be the way we’ve always imagined Santa being: jolly, interested in every kid who sits in his lap, and giving. Whatever they want, you tell them you’ll see what you can do. Don’t make an outright promise—that can backfire. We’ve had some angry parents in here, believe me. Just give them the *impression* that you’re listening and taking all their requests to heart.”

Butch listened. But he was openly critical of the sorts of things the kids asked him for. “You don’t want a Nintendo,” he said, more than once. “What you want is a nice round ball and a stick. Even when the electricity is out, the ball and stick still work. And they last longer. Really. Believe Santa.”

The kids didn't want to hear this. But when Butch was a kid and it was summer, he could spend a week with a ball and a stick. You could toss a ball, throw it. You could hit it with the stick. You could kick the stick. You could kick the ball. You could poke at things with the stick. The list went on and on. It was sad that kids didn't realize this today.

He thought about this as Tony drove away and he wheeled the crying baby out to his car. Television and Nintendo is the sort of thing she would have to look forward to as well. Computers. The kind of couple who adopted these babies, they weren't the ball and stick type. Butch felt a little bit sorry for the kid as he mapped out her future in his mind. Not that she wouldn't have the best of everything; she would. It was just that sometimes the best of everything wasn't very good.

The baby had fallen asleep, worn out from crying. Maybe it was the movement, the rolling of the stroller. He didn't know how he was going to get her in the car. It looked as if the stroller somehow converted into a car seat, but Butch wasn't sure how to do that, and he knew that if he tried he would wake the baby up again, and she would start crying. He looked at the address in his hand, and decided to walk it, to push the baby there in the stroller. Tony said it was only a couple of blocks away. And Butch could use the exercise.

It was a beautiful evening to walk. The summer light held the sky up like a tent. There was an edge of coolness in the air—not a breeze, but more of an echo, as if it were truly cool somewhere else. Butch walked slowly, avoiding the sidewalk's bumps and cracks, maneuvering the stroller toward the smooth patches. He didn't want to take any chances.

The baby was breathing rhythmically now. When its head fell to one side, Butch stopped, and kneeled in front of the stroller, and gently pushed her head level. He had never touched a baby's head like this before—which, when he thought about it, made him sad. He had held babies before; his brother fathered three, and Butch was a good uncle. But he had never been in the position where he was the one in charge of a life. He had never been the one who righted its little head. How could a human live so long and not do this? And how lucky he was to have this chance now. Still, all in all, it made him sad, and it was a feeling he couldn't shake for a long time.

He took his spot behind the stroller and started pushing again. There was a woman walking toward him down the street. He hoped she wouldn't stop and look at the baby. If she did, she would probably ask what her name was, and he would have to come up with one. In case this happened, he decided to make one up before she got there—which, since they were both walking in opposite directions toward each other, would be very soon. He felt a surge of pressure in his heart. What could he name her? He couldn't think of a woman's name—any woman's name. It was as if his mind had been suddenly washed blank. Then he thought, *Ella*. He could name her Ella. Why that name instead of some other wasn't clear to him immediately. But he looked at the baby and said the name and it all seemed to fit. If asked, her name would be Ella.

The woman was almost upon them. He edged the stroller a little bit to the right, to give the woman more room to pass, but as he did she moved a bit to her left. She was directly in front of them again, so much so that as their paths met, he had to stop dead right there, and so did she. Then neither of them moved. She looked at the baby for a moment and then leveled her gaze at Butch.

“Who are you?” she said.

He hadn’t expected this. He had expected her to ask *Who is she? What’s this little girl’s name?* He was caught off guard, and it took him a second to remember who he was. Still, he didn’t tell her.

“I’m sorry?”

“Who *are* you?” she said again. “I know you’re part of that whole thing, but I never saw you before.”

She was a young woman, plain. Her hair was brown and a little thin, a little bit stringy. Her left arm was thin and it had a sunburn on it, from where she rested it on her car door when she drove. Her clothes, Butch thought, probably belonged to a few other people before she got a hold of them: a black skirt, white T-shirt, and a brown vest. The vest had the words WILD WEST SHOW embroidered on it.

“I mean, I always figured it was mostly just Tony and that other man,” she said. “Mr. Eckles.”

Butch looked at her. He knew who she was. Even though it was nearly inconceivable to him, he knew.

“Tony,” he said.

“That’s right. Tony,” she said. “The man you just had your little meeting with. No reason to pretend any different. I saw him go in with her and you go in right after. Tony thinks he’s a goddamn secret agent, but a blind man could follow him. He might as well have dropped bread crumbs.”

She shifted her weight from foot to foot, and brushed her hair back on one side behind her ear. Butch had always liked it when women did that, he didn’t know why. It was such a natural, beautiful motion. And something he imagined that only a woman could do. He could see every bone in her hand. “I don’t know a Mr. Eckles,” he said finally.

“But you do know Tony,” she said.

Butch nodded. “I know Tony,” he said. “I’ve known him for a while.”

“Uh huh,” she said, jerking her head to one side nervously. Butch could tell she didn’t much care about the nature of his relationship with Tony. “Do you know who I am?”

Butch looked at her. “Yes,” he said. “I know.”

She nodded. “I’ve been following Tony around for a while now. I knew I didn’t stand a chance with him. I didn’t know what I was going to do. He’s scary. I almost gave up. But



then I saw you come, and I watched you to see if I thought—to see if you looked like a nice man.” She smiled at Butch once. “I thought you did. I don’t know, but I think I might have seen you before. Somewhere.”

“I used to sell cars,” he said. “Jordan Toyota? Before that, I was over at the Plymouth dealership in midtown.”

She shook her head and kind of laughed. “I haven’t been buying any new cars lately,” she said.

Butch said, “Maybe it was at the mall then. I was Santa there this past Christmas.”

When he mentioned Santa, the conversation seemed to take on a new and different life. She really smiled this time, and Butch did too. They became just two people talking about this and that. The baby, asleep in the stroller between them, seemed to disappear.

“I might have seen you there,” she said. “I’m down there all the time. But you would have had the beard on, wouldn’t you? You would have been all dressed up in the Santa suit.”

Butch laughed.

“Right,” he said. “I guess I wasn’t thinking. I look a little different now.”

“Not like Santa,” she said.

“No,” he said. “Not so much, except for around the waist. Maybe you did see me, though.”

“Maybe,” she said, and stuck her fingers in the tiny pockets of her skirt. They both laughed a little again. Then they stopped. “So. Where are you going?”

She looked down at the baby. Butch did, too. In the quiet time between cars driving past, Butch could hear her breathing.

“The couple,” he said. “The couple adopting her. I’m taking her to them.”

“They’re around here, then?” she said.

“A couple of blocks that way,” he said, indicating the direction with his head. “Not far. They’re waiting.”

Butch looked up at her, but she had not stopped looking at the baby. When she raised her head again there were tears in her eyes. She looked destroyed.

“You must think I’m the worst person in the world,” she said. “Selling my own baby.”

“No,” Butch said. “I don’t think that.”

“Well I am,” she said. “I am, just about. There may be some worse than me but they better look over their shoulders, because I’m right behind them.” She laughed a pitiful kind of laugh. “I’m gaining pretty quick.”

Butch wanted to touch her. He wanted to put a hand on her shoulder. This seemed to make people feel better, a hand, holding them to the earth.

He said, “People do things they don’t want to do, because they don’t see any other way to get out of a certain situation. That doesn’t make you bad.”

“What, then? If not bad, what does that make me?”

“Brave,” he said.

She looked at Butch now, as if she had never heard that word before. She fixed him with a stare. She had blue eyes just like her girl.

“Brave,” she said. “I don’t know. Brave feels different than this, I thought. Good—I thought brave felt good.”

Butch shook his head. “A lot of people think that,” he said. “But they’re wrong. Brave doesn’t always feel good. Sometimes it’s the worst possible feeling. That’s why being brave, it’s a rare thing.”

She shook her head and smiled, and a tear made its way down one side of her face. She wasn’t buying it. But she didn’t have to; Butch hadn’t really been talking to her. For a long time now it seemed that he had been talking out loud to himself, trying to convince himself that what he was about to do was the right thing. There would be consequences—possibly serious ones—but if he was brave, if he was going to be brave, he couldn’t consider them now.

“Man, I’m beat,” he said.

She looked at him. Maybe she hadn’t heard him. “What?”

“Tired,” he said. “Summer makes me tired. The long days. The heat. And since I’ve put on all this weight, it’s like dragging a 50-pound bag of rice around with me.”

She was skinny. She was one of the skinniest women Butch had ever seen. She didn’t know what it was like to be so large in the world, to take up so much space. But she seemed nice. She seemed like a good person.

“Do me a favor?” he said. “I’m going to sit down on that park bench over there for a minute or two. Get a load off. But I don’t want the baby to wake up. Pushing her in the stroller seems to help that—keeps her asleep. Would you mind?”

She didn’t get it at first. She didn’t understand the offer. But after a moment, she did.

“You want me to—sure,” she said. “Sure. We’ll go for a walk.”

“And if she wakes up—”

“I’ll know what to do,” she said.

“Yeah, I thought so,” he said.

For the first time, he let go of the handles on the stroller, and stepped back. She paused, then grabbed the handles before he could change his mind, pulling the stroller around so that the baby was facing Butch now; asleep, she looked like an angel.

“And take your time,” he said. “Enjoy.”

“I will,” she said. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“No,” he said. “Don’t thank me.”

She stopped, turned. “But—your name. I didn’t get your name.”

“It’s not important,” Butch said. *The Stork has no name.* “My name isn’t important. But hers. I was wondering. Does she have a name?”

“Of course she does,” the woman said. She looked down at her baby and smiled. “This is Jessie.”

“Jessie,” Butch said. He looked at the baby. “Well, goodbye, Jessie.”

And the woman turned, and, pushing the stroller in front of her, walked away. She went left at the end of the block and disappeared. Now the street was just a street and there were cars and buildings and nothing seemed to have happened here at all.

He turned, and started walking to the bench. He was tired. His feet could use a break. And halfway there it came to him, why he had named the little girl Ella. Of course: Ella was the name of the girl who was his helper at the mall. She was the one who brought the children to him. She’d say, “Santa, this is Jimmy. Jimmy wants to talk to you about Christmas.” Things like that. He liked her a lot. She had a red hat on like his and a red dress with white edging and black boots. “Jimmy tells me he’s got his mind set on a horse this Christmas.”

“A horse!” Santa would say, giving a big, hearty Santa laugh. “My, my. A horse is a mighty big animal there, Jimmy. Eats a lot of oats, you know . . .”

That was a good time. He had always wanted to talk more to Ella—as Butch, though, and not as Santa. As just a regular man. But he never got a chance. Before he knew it, Christmas was over and so was that job, and he never saw her again. That’s the way things happened sometimes. People came into your life, and just as quickly passed out of it. Tony was right: it was like this big web. And Butch was in it, he was a part of it—this enterprise, this whole business. Life. He liked that. It wasn’t nothing. Maybe he would be Santa again next Christmas. Santa, yes. He took a seat on the bench, and began to wait for winter.