



Volume 15
Issue 2
2020

Invasion

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I found out about you the day before the invasion.

I knew I was pregnant, of course. But I'd pictured you as a fetus, slowly taking shape inside me.

Instead, what I saw on the ultrasound monitor was you: a lacework of dark spots, stretched across my uterus.

"I don't see a heartbeat," said the technician quietly. She left the room to get the doctor, while I stared at her last picture of you, frozen on the screen.

I call it "the invasion," but I'm not sure that's the right word. "Invasion" is troops fighting their way into an alien land. This was much quieter. One day you were the only thing on my mind. The next, the invaders were everywhere.

At the coffee shop, an invader glowered at me from the barista's shoulder, its tiny fist clenched on her collar. It was 5:15 in the morning, because you'd woken me up early to vomit, and I wondered if I was seeing things.

The invader was the size of two clenched fists, and the awful purplish color of a stillbirth. Its little chest heaved. Its dark eyes glittered with malice. A pulsing umbilical cord led from its belly to the nape of the barista's neck.

I told the barista she had something on her shoulder. Her head started to turn ... and then the thing on her shoulder *growled*, and she looked at me like I was crazy. I took my coffee and left.

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The doctor had explained: I was, technically, pregnant. But not with a baby.

The doctor had called you a "mole," as though you were something awkward on the sole of my foot. Not a regular mole, though, a "hydatidiform" mole. "Hydatid-i-form," she explained: shaped like a *hydatid*, a tapeworm's larval cyst.

My hydatidiform mole, you are no more tapeworm than baby. You're a placenta gone wrong.

* * *

The city had started stirring when I left the coffee shop. I passed early-morning joggers, polo-shirted store openers, dog walkers. An invader crouched on every shoulder but my own, squatting toad-like on their hosts. Each one turned to glare at me.

I stopped to give a homeless man a dollar.

"Did you wake up with that on your shoulder?" I asked him.

His invader made a foul face, as though I reeked.

"I don't know what you're talking about, lady," the man said.

My hydatidiform mole, the doctor said that you're one in a thousand. Every embryo should become two things: a placenta and a fetus. But one in a thousand never figures out the fetus part, becoming a scrambled, scattered placenta instead.

The lace veil on the ultrasound screen was your network of cysts. Black cysts, little bubbles of failed placenta, clustered in a white net of tissue. You are slowly filling my womb.

I put in a pad, because you bleed from inside me, and went to work. The bus driver had an invader, as did each passenger. Silently, without making eye contact, the other passengers shuffled away from me while their invaders glared and grimaced.

I studied the back of the bus driver's neck, where his invader's umbilical plunged into him. His nape was cankered with growths radiating outward from the cord.

His invader, invading him. An invasion not of troops, but of the flesh.

I was the only one on the bus without an invader growing into me. I couldn't make sense of it. Why they were here, why they were invading everyone's bodies but my own.

The driver's invader bared needle-sharp teeth at me as I left the bus, and the driver scowled.

My hydatidiform mole, the doctor said that you'll grow like a cancer. There's a one-in-ten chance

that you won't be contained by my uterus. That you will keep growing, into me and through me.

The doctor told me to schedule an abortion. But the next day, the invasion happened instead.

The clinic called me at work to arrange your removal. ("Curettage," they said, not "abortion". There's no baby to abort, only you.)

I pictured the medical secretary at his desk: phone on one shoulder, invader on the other, both wincing at the sound of my voice.

I pictured the clinic's kind-voiced doctor, curette in hand to scrape you out of me. I pictured the invader riding on her shoulder, invisible to everyone but me.

I pictured her invader, grimacing with hate for me as it guided her hand.

I put down the phone.

My cubicle-mate didn't smile or greet me when I slid into my chair. Her invader screwed up its face and held its nose. My co-worker turned her back on me and spent the morning pretending I wasn't there. I watched the back of her neck blister with purplish boils that grew and spread, over the hours, like water boiling in slow motion.

After ignoring me all morning, my cube-mate complained to our boss. I smelled wrong, she said. I smelled off.

My boss is usually very nice to me, but today he couldn't stand the sight of me. The invader on

his shoulder gagged and retched while my boss told me to go home.

* * *

I threw up twice on the walk home.

I imagined your cysts inside me, slipping the bounds of my womb. I imagined you, spreading through me like the angry growths radiating down my co-worker's neck.

You will grow like a cancer, as the doctor warned. But you aren't one.

A cancer would be made of me, my own cells gone wrong. But you, you are not-me, your genes only half mine.

You are *you*, you are other. Another life, inside of me, as familiar and foreign as my own child.

* * *

Did they invade us to control us, or to destroy us? Or simply to have a place to call home?

Their purpose is as obscure to me as yours is. I only know that they hate me.

My hydatidiform mole, you are why the invaders hate me. They smell you growing in me, and they know: there's no room for another, not with you spreading through me.

You: you are my invader.

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