

A PARABLE

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Here's an inspirational story, something you might stumble upon after you've read all the gossipy bits in the tattered *People Magazines* stacked on your dentist's coffee table, and you've sniffed passed the lone *Popular Mechanic*, and what you're left with is *Reader's Digest*. My summation:

A young couple discovers they're about to become parents. They're filled with excitement and joy. She stops drinking caffeinated beverages. She refuses anything remotely alcoholic. She begins taking prenatal vitamins with folic acid and switches to pregnancy yoga. He takes off work so he can accompany her to every obstetrical appointment. He holds her hand in the waiting room. Together, they listen to the baby's heartbeat already chugging like an engine, and they feel like weeping with happiness and hope, right there on the paper-covered exam table. They imagine they've embarked upon a wildly wonderful journey to a captivating destination—a place they've always, always wanted to go—a place like, say, Paris!

On the ceiling in the spare bedroom, which they now call 'The Nursery', they paint puffy white clouds on an otherwise perfectly sky-blue sky. They hang curtains with little yellow ducks marching along the hems, they assemble the crib, install yellow gingham baby bumpers, and attach an obscenely expensive musical mobile they found at the Museum of Modern Art.

The couple is ready.

They're packed for Paris.

And then, finally, the big day arrives. The Day of Departure.

Family and friends crowd around with excitement as the newborn child—that mucous-y little bundle—is towed off, and upon the joyful and congratulatory proceedings an... unexpected... silence... descends.

A part is missing.

Or there are too many parts.

Or certain parts don't work properly. Important parts, like lungs.



Something is wrong. Suddenly, or maybe gradually over a period of weeks or months or even years, it begins to dawn on our shiny young couple that they're not going to Paris after all.

Every other parent they know is still bound for Paris—most of the other Lamaze couples are already there!—but through some confluence of bad luck or bad karma or bad something, Paris is no longer on their itinerary.

At first our couple is disappointed. Who in their situation wouldn't be? But pretty quickly they begin to understand that they, too, are on a journey. They may not be headed for Paris like everyone else but by golly, they are going somewhere, and that somewhere might be every bit as delightful as Paris.

Amsterdam, maybe.

And Amsterdam is no lesser place. As a place to end up, Amsterdam is, in fact, a perfectly agreeable place. There is no shame in going to Amsterdam! Our plucky young couple quickly discovers they need only, in the end, adjust to a minor change in plans! A few degrees northeast of the original target, is all.

And guess what happens? They come to love Amsterdam! They love Amsterdam so much, they don't even think about Paris anymore.

A parable. Stated simply: *make lemonade when you have a surplus of sour citrus.* Here in your dentist's waiting room: a small teaching moment.

As it happens, I have a lot of friends drinking lemonade in Amsterdam, and most of us would like to disembowel the person who came up with this story. And while we're at it—that guy who swims and hauls and runs and drags and cycles and lugs his severely disabled son through every goddamned phase of the Iron Man triathlon competition using various spectacularly clever towing devices he no doubt created in his garage at night after ten hours at the office, not to mention four more hours of training, the guy they made a *film* about, with soaring, inspirational music in the background, and a voice-over narration by an actor with a deep voice who conveys feelings of continuing awe at this triumph of the human spirit, etcetera.? Him, too.

My friends and I in Amsterdam? We think uncharitable things about these triumphant human spirit people. They are far too *buoyant*. They never scream or rail or think surly, self-pitying thoughts. They never tire of suctioning mucous from their babies' underdeveloped lungs, or complain about having to reset the goddamned apnea monitor screeching like an air raid at 2:15 in the morning and again at 3:12 and again at 4:07. They seem not to mind the need to untangle oxygen-tank tubing and check hearing aid batteries every morning. They don't

periodically despise the pediatric respiratory therapists, and pre-school speech pathologists, and the small army of dedicated, well-meaning special ed. personnel lined up on their doorsteps.

You won't catch them buzzing with insomnia at night, or grieving, or worrying about whether, after they die, the kid will be cold and homeless and covered with scabs.

They don't even get *tired*. They never harbor *resentments*. Their faces don't get all red and tear-streaked in the bathroom during the Bat Mitzvah celebrations for daughters whose families all went to *Paris*.

Here in Holland, one of my countrywomen, while filling out an application for an adoption agency two decades ago, came upon this question: *Are you willing to adopt a child with disabilities?*

Her answer: "No."

Imagine her surprise, then, when her plane took that left turn in the sky and over the public address system came the following announcement: "*Bon jour*, ladies and gentlemen! This is your captain speaking. We have a change in destination this evening: your beautiful baby girl whom you already love beyond words? Deaf. The sky over *Amsterdam* is cloudy, the temperature 52°. Thank you for flying, etc."

Before my friend started learning *sign language* so she could communicate with her *deaf baby*? She peered through the tiny double-paned window with increasing disbelief as that damn plane descended into the wrong airport. She kicked the seat in front of her and pounded both fists on the Plexiglas, and screamed, "No! No! No!"

I say she's permitted a moment of inconsolable anguish.

Fuck that parable. Say *that* in French.