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## Broken Waters

Rachel Hillier Pratt

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I followed the sandy trail that led from the beach through the coconut grove to my leaf and stick house at the top of the hill. One more month. In four weeks I would complete my Peace Corps assignment, leave the Solomon Islands, and return home for some turkey dinner with my family. I took a deep breath and noticed that my heart rate had gone back to normal, but the adrenaline letdown had left a metallic taste in my mouth. I'd just finished treating a soccer player who'd lost his toe in a soccer tackle—a soccer player who'd insisted on playing barefooted. While his toe hung on by a shred of skin, I'd cleaned out the sand, taped it together, and sent him on a two-hour boat ride in a ten-foot dinghy with an outboard motor strapped to the back to see the doctor in Kirakira. Maybe. Maybe the doctor would be there. I'd given him my only supply of pain medication, too. Only four weeks, I figured. What could happen in four weeks?

The wind came off the sea and blew my hair forward. Deep-water waves crashed upon the black sand beach behind me. Billowing clouds whizzed across jungle canopy. At the other end of the clearing, the crowd continued cheering for the soccer game. It was the last game of the day, and I rushed to see Larry play.

I hopped up into my leaf house on stilts, but before I could pull off my stinking shirt, I noticed Karina at the back entrance. The sun lingered above the fringe of the inland mountains, and her blond, kinky hair caught the light, lighting up her Melanesian brown face. She didn't smile, and she wore her only T-shirt—the faded words "Solomon Islands" stretched above her pregnant belly. Her legs, in comparison, looked as if two brown saplings poked out from beneath her worn calico skirt. The white chafe marks on her calloused knees meant she'd been working and hadn't showered or smoothed on the coconut oil yet. Unusual. Wrong time of day for a visit,

too. She should have been preparing dinner. Then I noticed the purple crescents below her brown eyes.

"Karecello," she called me in Kahua, "my waters are broken." She turned to squint into the late afternoon sun.

"What?" I said, my chest squeezing. "It's too early." She wasn't due for another five weeks. I should have missed the whole thing. Behind her, palm fronds bent in the ocean breeze.

"I know," she said, placing one hand under her belly to shoo a fly from her face with the other.

"How long?" I asked.

"Since noontime," she said.

"They took the boat." I forced my voice steady. Kirakira was two hours away, and depending on the seas, the boat could return this evening—or next week.

Karina slid her big toe through the sandy dirt, making little swirl patterns. We both peered out to sea and then bent our necks towards the clouds scooting at a swift pace. We moved to the front porch. She sat down beside me.

"Any pains?" I asked. The wind fluttered through the sago-palm leaves on the roof.

"No more, yet," she said in Pidgin English. The sun dipped completely below the canopy of rain trees behind us, bringing on a premature dusk. Karina scooted closer so that our legs touched.

"When the water came," she said after a long sigh, "it was just a little bit." She put her hand over her mouth. "At first I thought the baby pushed down on . . ." She laughed and pointed down.

She wouldn't say pee. "Then a gush." She smiled and swallowed hard. Her lips stretched grimly.

"I'm so happy you will be with me when my baby comes." She put her hand on my knee, a common act of affection for Makiran women. The palm trees down by the shore swirled with the wind change. During the night, cool, damp jungle air would seep out toward the ocean. In the morning, it would switch back and disperse the mist. As the sun inched closer to the horizon, we sat silently on my porch, and dusk pulled down the damp and dark.



Karina grew up in a Makiran "bush" village a few feet from the edge of a cliff. Her people made gardens in the interior of the island at elevations free from malaria. People who lived in the interior region had different cultures

and language than the people who lived along the coast. They ate different food and had different religions; even the way they organized their society was different. Karina's village still had a defensive trench with sharpened sticks around the perimeter, evidence left over from cannibal raids and a history of unfriendly neighbors.

Over the past two years, Karina had taken me, a complete stranger, from a hopelessly dependent foreigner to a woman who could feed herself. She introduced me to the jungle and explained the difference between food and weeds. She taught me to find coconuts, to knock nut clusters out of trees, and to garden in a rain forest. I relied on her. She had been my mentor and my role model. I had worked hard to earn her respect. Now she worked at the Stuyvenberg Center, a vocational school for boys run by westerners. She lived next door to Peace Corps volunteers (me) who came from the other side of the Pacific Ocean. She had barely begun to show when she first asked me if I would deliver her baby.

"No," I'd said.

"But I don't trust the women around here."

"But I don't know what I'm doing. Besides, I'll be gone by then." I said.

She shook her head. Just in case. "You know more than them," she said with a point of her chin towards the northern edge of the jungle where the local women had a fresh take on "western medicine."

"We'll go to the clinic together," I said. She had been happy with that, but such plans rarely work in the jungle.

Last year, Karina left for nursing school. I wrote the grant. She was supposed to take over when I left. Then, eight months ago, she returned unannounced from the nursing academy in the school canoe. Before I could speak with her, she had walked directly into the bush to pay her family compensation. I was intensely curious. But I knew enough about the culture to wait. I'd need to spend a lot of time in the kitchen scraping coconuts before her cousin Helene would tell me anything.

Finally, as she poked yams in the fire with a stick, she said without turning, "Karina went home because she's *babule* (ba-boo-lay), Karecello."

I didn't respond or look up from my work. It wouldn't be appropriate to scan her expression or shriek, "What?" as I wanted to. Later that day, I heard the rest. We gathered *tutumbu* (edible fern) near the river's edge about a mile from school. Helene, who was usually talkative and bright, remained seriously quiet. "James is the daddy," she said finally.

This piece of news surprised me the most. I didn't believe it right away. I snuck a look at her face to try to read it. Her dark, tattooed face told me

nothing. Normally, Helene was a bundle of energy, always ready to laugh and joke, and it was her usual style to speak boldly. Now, she frowned, concentrating on slicing the ferns and wrapping them in leaves. She *had* waited to tell me this news until we were in the bush, so I was inclined to believe her. But I had never even seen James and Karina talk to each other. Still, I reasoned, in Makira even husbands and wives didn't interact during the daylight hours. I had learned soon after my arrival not to show physical affection to Larry in public. I couldn't touch him or sit too close to him.

The women saved all their secrets for the bush. Helene told me that Karina was in her mountaintop village paying compensation. It meant she didn't intend to marry James. In fact, Helene was furious because Karina had been taking medicine to "out" the baby. I thought I understood Karina's situation. She wanted to be a nurse, not a mother. But I had it all wrong.

Makirans called unmarried sex "creeping," in Pidgin. It described a crawling under the house built on stilts to invite a lover to "lay a leaf" somewhere in the jungle. If the family found out, lovers only had a few options.

The Peace Corps had told us flatly, "Don't creep; it's taboo." But not exactly. People crept. The getting-caught part caused trouble and transpired via a witness or a baby. A Makiran consequence was paying of "compensation." He paid bride price—shell money (a long heirloom string of shells), cash, and pigs. Or she paid red money (a shorter string of red shells and teeth) if she refused the union.

Four months later, Karina was still pregnant. When she was six months pregnant, James announced their marriage intentions. A month later, James paid bride price in a traditional ceremony. He paid with a traditional "bride price" string of shells plus a few hundred dollars. I originally thought the arrangement was like a shotgun wedding. Karina had failed at her attempts to "out" the baby, and now her only option was marriage. But I had that wrong, too. When we climbed up that mountain with James, the string of shell money represented an agreement with her mother, her brothers, and her mother's brothers. He didn't buy Karina. He agreed to take care of Karina and her baby. When he gave them the string of shell money, he paid compensation to Karina's family for the loss not only of their valued daughter, but also her valuable unborn child.

Then, only a few weeks after the wedding, the family discovered that James had been cheating on Karina with a local village girl. Karina's brothers and uncles hiked down from their cliff-top village and threatened violence. Scoundrel, I thought. But Karina's people weren't kidding around.

In their matrilineal society, the affair was more than adultery. Karina's unborn child was considered a member of her clan. Therefore, it was their duty to defend the family. When James had an affair, he had entered into a contract with the village girl's family. This offended Karina's mother, her brothers, her mother's brothers. To correct the social infraction, the brothers demanded compensation from James. If he didn't pay, they would give back his shell-money offering and annul the marriage. James and his family paid. When the brothers requested equal compensation from the village girl's matrilineal family, they didn't pay.

I didn't understand this situation at the time. I knew that the girl's father had pleaded for mercy when he didn't pay. Karina said, "Lazarus got down on his knees. He cried, 'I'm too poor to have a pig.' What a liar." She seemed unusually frantic when she told me, but I shrugged it off. I thought the whole thing was interesting. I would have never thought of demanding compensation from my husband's lover. At the time, I figured: they lied, hid their pigs—it sucks, but so what?

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While Karina slept in her house next door, I got everything ready for the birth. I sterilized cloths, a razor blade, and string for the umbilical cord. I warmed Karina's swaddling clothes on the wood oven in my kitchen. I wrapped utensils.

"Are you really going to deliver Karina's baby, Rach?" my husband asked from the table. His words made my stomach clench. I reminded myself that babies were born every day. My panic was unnecessary; everything would be fine, right?

"Looks like it," I said casually, hiding my fear. I didn't want him to know that his 25-year-old wife was afraid. Perhaps it seems foolish, but I didn't want him to know that the thought of slicing through an umbilical cord made me sick. Besides, he could do nothing to help me. A white man in attendance at a Makiran delivery would be wildly inappropriate.

"What's your plan, then?"

My plan? Allow Karina's uterus to push her baby out. Cut the cord with a sterile razorblade, tie it up, and swaddle the baby in warm towels.

"I told Karina to have James wake me when the contractions come close together," I said with feigned confidence.

"Did you tell her you don't know what you're doing?"

"Yes," I said. It was all I could think about. She was in labor. I wasn't a doctor, and I didn't know how to deliver a baby. We lived in bush houses

without electricity or running water. Without a boat, we were stranded. It was a two-day hike to a proper clinic. I only had what I'd read in my book *Where There Is No Doctor*, and my instincts. Over my two years as a Peace Corps volunteer, I'd become the school's health-care worker by default. She'd seen me stop bleeding, pull out embedded thorns, and clean pus out of skin ulcers. She said once that it was in my nature. I was flattered. Now, it had to be sufficient.

I tried to sleep until James came. My heart thumped in my ears, and each jungle screech sounded like a woman crying out in labor. When Karina's husband scratched on the side of our leaf house, I leapt out of bed.

Next door, Karina rested on her bed. She had taken a shower and combed her hair out. A woman, a midwife perhaps, stroked her hair. This is more like it, I thought. I inhaled their clean scent of soap and coconut oil. In the candlelit room, the puffing sounds Karina made seemed downright cozy. The stranger, Mara, greeted me in local language. She was a student's mother, she said, here for the soccer match.

When she said, "Lucky I came today," I was certain she'd take over the birth. Relief flooded the tips of my ears. Then she explained, happily, how all her babies, all her sisters' babies, and all her cousins' babies had been born in a clinic. My heart sank. I needed her to help Karina give birth.

Karina fell into a contraction that repelled me. I couldn't imagine the sensation that went along with her furrowed brow, grunts, and heavy breathing. Why did it have to hurt so much? I imagined the pain came from the baby's head and the stretching vagina. Mara asked me to check between Karina's legs for any sign of the head. Of course, the head—why didn't I think of that?

Karina spread her legs, sat up, and tried to peer over her immense belly. I'd never seen a woman's vulva before.

"Is there any blood?" she asked. I didn't see any blood, and I certainly didn't see any baby head. Then I contemplated logistics: baby head, vagina length. How long should it take to move down from the cervix to the opening of the vagina? The distance was only four inches or so.

That night, I didn't know any more about labor than the woman who was about to give birth. I'm glad for that. I wouldn't have been able to do what I had to do next.

"No more ba'bee, yet-ee," I sang out in Pidgin English to make Karina laugh.

"How long, Karecello?" That's what she called me; it meant "little sweet." She smiled, anticipating my answer. I didn't have any idea. I wouldn't check

her dilation and risk infection, because her water had broken. Even if I had sterile gloves, I wouldn't know what I was feeling for if I'd tried. The Australian nurse stationed in Kirakira, when she visited and checked Karina a few weeks ago, had only taught me to find the baby's position in the uterus. I knew the head would move when I pressed and the butt wouldn't. I put my hands on her belly and searched around until I found the head on the left and the butt on the right.

"Donna said the baby was head down," I protested. The leaves on the roof stirred. When I felt the baby again, I was certain: it was in a transverse position. No matter how long Karina's uterus contracted, she could never push this baby out. *This can't be happening to me, to us—not now.* I cursed the moon-filled night. The ocean's waves rumbled along the shore. Karina made little puffs. I had to move the baby.

I didn't know then that the baby could suffocate, that the placenta could detach, or that she could bleed to death. I only knew that a cesarean section was where the nearest doctor was located, and that was a boat ride and a plane trip away in Honiara. The last time Larry and I tried to get to the capital city for a Peace Corps meeting, there were no planes. It took us two weeks—one week to wait for a boat, another week to ride on the boat. I swallowed a sob.

The muscles in Karina's oiled brown legs reflected the candlelight. I placed my hands over the top of her two bare feet. I felt her belly again, and this time the terror crept up my neck. I told Karina to get up, walk around. I hoped the movement would shift the baby into position. Karina laughed. Mara helped me launch her off the woven mat bed. They stepped off the porch together and walked around back. They laughed softly. I understood some of their local language: "chew betel nut," and "don't worry." When they came back, Mara had a large nut in her cheek.

Karina lay back down, and I rechecked the position of the baby. It hadn't moved. I found the head and butt, gently pushed down on the head and up on the butt. "I'm going to move the baby," I explained. "It's sideways."

Karina's eyebrows came together. "Bad luck," she said.

"A little bitty," I said. The full moon sat near two o'clock. Sunrise wouldn't come for another five hours.

And so, we began. Karina contracted. I pressed. I kept my hands on her belly through each contraction. In the minutes between contractions, I pushed down on the baby's head and up on the butt. I was absorbed in this task. I felt nothing but the task. Each time, I mentally willed the next contraction to right the baby. A hint of breeze carried the damp scent of jungle.

A nocturnal bird screamed into the night. The moon cast the shadows of clouds along the ground. I gathered what I could from out there. I sucked the cool breeze into my lungs. Karina's muscles became rigid under my palms. Progress was slow, and I had less time between contractions. Hours passed.

When I stood up to stretch through Karina's next contraction, blood prickled back into my limbs. Mara had left, unnoticed. Gone too was the easy joking, the anticipation of a baby. The squawking birds, night bugs, bat cries, and the crashing sea were our only company now. I thought again about the unseen baby's butt and head, and Karina told me that my hands hurt her almost as much as the contractions.

No rest from the pain.

Karina's baby kicked. "The baby is moving into position, Karina," I said. Hope flushed my face. But Karina didn't respond. She hated me. She winced, sucked air in between her teeth, and squeezed her eyes shut. I pushed harder on her belly. The alternative was too bad. It felt like chewing on tinfoil.

Our fear smelled like an electric charge. She began calling out.

"*Wao Co'momo!*" She called her maternal uncles. I had begun using this phrase by accident. Then I began saying, "Wow," to make my Makiran friends laugh. "Wow, Ko Momo," they'd say. I used it often. Now I realized that they thought I invoked the power and authority of my maternal clan whenever I uttered the meaningless *wow*.

There certainly wasn't anything funny now, though, and I didn't have time to pause and ponder this miscommunication between cultures and languages.

Karina's cry brought Mara back. She climbed behind Karina, who leaned back between her legs. I continued my fevered devotion to the baby's position.

"The baby is getting into the right position." I pushed down, more determined—the baby a stubborn object under my palms. My teeth clenched.

I scolded silently, "Get your head down; come out."

I pleaded, "Come on, baby, tuck your little chin, slip in between the pubic bone."

I repeated this like a mantra. I used every bit of mental energy I had left to direct the unseen person. It appeared to be working. I felt the head in the southwestern quadrant, but a contraction interrupted my pushing. When it ended, the baby's head had moved up.

"No." I held the baby's head in my hand, a hard lump in a soft belly, and tried not to cry. Karina's muscles clenched. She called out. I let my hands off. I felt impatient. My right hand hovered at two o'clock and my left hand at seven o'clock. I wanted her contraction to end so I could start again. Come on, baby, we're almost there.

I pushed the child down again, and he stayed in position through the next contraction. I held my shaking arms in place; Karina screamed. At my back, I felt the slow turning of the Earth to meet the sun. Intermittent chirps of birds began, and the ocean hushed. It was still dark, but light inched forward.

"I'm going to be sick," Karina said. She pushed my hands off her belly and struggled to get up. I pulled her up to her feet. She waddled out to the grass. She coughed—a splattering.

"What did you eat?" I asked when she came back.

"Pineapples . . . I think I ate ten pineapples last night." Her contractions stopped, and she slept heavily for 15 minutes. I thought about pineapples.

When the next contraction came, I hesitated. Doubt seeped between the synapses of my mind. We weren't going to make it, I told myself. I couldn't lift my arms, my hands heavy on Karina's belly. I wanted to put my cheek down, rest my head on her taut belly, and go to sleep.

Before I pressed again, I said, "It's gonna be worth it, Karina. The baby will come out head first. Everything will be fine."

She nodded with her eyes closed. In the early light, her hair seemed red.

Karina's baby shifted. I felt around, but the head was gone, engaged under the pubic bone.

"Great news!" I said. The words erupted from my throat. We'd done it. I couldn't believe it.

"The baby's coming," I said. Karina got up on her elbows to look me in the eye.

But then a new panic hit me. The baby would come out, and I'd lost my focus. I'd been pushing on the head and butt for so long, I'd forgotten about a live baby. Fresh fear coursed through my body. I'd forgotten about my package of string and sterile razorblades.

"I can't," I whispered to myself.

Just then, James whistled outside. He wanted to know the news. I went out and explained the baby's position. His smile turned to a frown. He asked if he should get the boat ready.

"Yes," I said before really thinking about it. "When did the boat get back?"

"They came back under the full moon, last night."

"Yes, get the boat ready," I said. "There is a clinic a half an hour from here."

"Will a nurse be there?"

"I don't know. But we have to see."

When I went back inside, Karina's face told me that I'd said the wrong thing.

"Why should we go to the clinic now?" she asked.

I didn't know how to answer. I knew they wouldn't have oxygen for the baby or be able to give her a blood transfusion if Karina hemorrhaged. But we needed to go. Just cuz. Actually, we needed to go for me. I needed someone else to help if things went wrong, someone else to catch the child that I'd cranked on all night.

The morning dew twisted into mist, and Karina walked the one-mile trail to the beach. She was in transition—the time when the uterus switches from opening up to pushing out. Her labor paused long enough to allow her to put one foot in front of the other.

When we were halfway to the beach, Karina's cousin Helene ran up from the bush trail. "Oh yes," I thought. "Helene, thank God." Her fresh smile and enthusiasm brought relief. She was ready to see a new baby. She carried Karina on one shoulder and my emotional exhaustion on the other. She joked. She talked. She replaced the terrified silence that had occupied the night.

Karina shuddered. Helene wanted to know how long, and I told her the story of the night.

"Oh, Karina, we will see that baby soon," she said cheerfully, but Karina focused on the turmoil in her belly.

James drove the dinghy straight through the waves. Our butts slammed against the metal seats. Karina vomited. More pineapple. Waves splashed into her face. I held onto the back of her shirt and the other side of the boat. I leaned my face into the spray for balance. The reflection made my eyes water. Why had I made her get into this boat?

I gestured to James, *Slow down*, but he shook his head and smiled. He was the father of this child. He would get Karina to the clinic. Then he attached his eyes to the horizon, the clinic, yonder.

The cinder-block clinic sat on top of a sandy hill. A Solomon Islands development grant provided a clinic every ten miles along the shore of Makira, even though the population clustered in the middle and the western edge of the island. I waved to get James's attention and pointed towards the building. "Almost there," he mouthed, ignoring my frantic pointing.

When he slowed the engine and pulled into shore, we had overshot the clinic by a half mile. On the beach, he sat down on a rock, letting Helene and I push Karina's limping form up the path. When we arrived, we found a nurse.

"How long?" he asked.

"Water broke at noon yesterday. Seven hours of heavy contractions." I explained that the baby was transverse. I showed him how I'd manipulated the baby with gestures.

"He's on his way down now, I think," I said, but the nurse shook his head. He crossed his arms. He told Karina to lie down. He pointed to a metal table.

"No more, yet," he said in Pidgin English. Then he said, "Bye-bye when hemi ready, bye bye mi call-em you." He turned his back on us and walked out of the room. *No, she's ready now*, I thought. But I decided that he must know better than I.

I turned to Karina. She shivered on the cold metal table. Yeah, good idea bringing her to the clinic. Helene turned to leave the room, following the nurse's instructions. I grabbed her wrist.

"She's close," I said into her ear. "The baby's head dropped down before we got in the boat." Helene nodded.

Karina blew a sound out her nose—a new sound. I held her right hand, and Helene held her left. She pulled our hands and hauled her body up, her eyes wide, her neck tendons strained. Blood vessels poked out of her forehead. *Oh my god*. "She's pushing," I said.

"Nurse!" I called. He came around the corner, hesitated at the door, then moved to wash his hands. He put on gloves, too slowly. I worried. I was sick. I needed him to come help her now. I knew what to do. No, I didn't know what to do. I'd given up my role as bush doctor. I was Karina's friend. I was here to hold her hand, yes? No. I willed him to get over here and attend to my poor laboring friend.

I couldn't really blame him for taking his time. He hadn't spent the night with us. He didn't feel like he might have killed the baby with all his pushing. It could be that simple. Perhaps every "white skinny" he had ever known had been a doctor or a nurse.

Before I could call him again, Karina pushed. Her vulva spread apart to show the head and curly baby hairs. It swelled—a vessel full of someone else.

Karina screamed. The nurse stood at the sink. "Bring a towel with hot water," I said. To my surprise, he did what I told him. He brought a warm towel to the table. "Let's put it under here," I said, showing him the perineum.

He held the towel on her bulging flesh to keep her from tearing. Karina squeezed my hand.

With the next push, the baby crowned into a perfect hair-filled circle. Karina vanished into the background. Her cries faded into the distance. Her next push brought the water-wrinkled face, covered in white goop with streaks of blood. The baby squeezed his eyes shut; his mouth opened in a silent wail. *Come on, come on. I knew you could do it.*

But something was wrong. Flesh-colored tubes surrounded his neck tightly. I pointed. The nurse took a step backwards. His hands fell to his sides. Was this the first baby he'd ever seen, too? Could be. It was all I needed.

I moved to the table. I slipped my fingers under the cord, searching for a weakness, like finding the loose part of a knot. It was wrapped twice—or three times? I pulled hard because I didn't know then that I could be pulling the placenta, too. I hadn't even thought about a placenta. The baby's face turned blue, his mouth open. His tongue formed a crescent in a silent cry. He didn't breathe. I sensed that the next push might strangle him. I slipped the cord over the back of his head: one, two, three. The nurse stood next to me. I felt him against my arm.

"He's not breathing," I shrieked after I had removed the last loop. No oxygen, no shots at this clinic. The next contraction pushed the baby onto the table. I held his head in my left hand and rubbed his chest with my right. He grimaced. He held his arms open with his fingers spread. He reached for me.

"Breathe, breathe, breathe," I chanted. His form blurred behind my tears. I recalled a photographic image of words from my book, "flick the bottom of the feet," so I flicked, flick, flick. Harder flicks. "Breathe!" I shouted at him. I clenched my jaw so tight that my teeth creaked. I flicked the bottom of his foot harder. He held his face in a silent scream. Then he inhaled deeply. He cried hearty baby cries. Then the nurse stepped in, suctioned his mouth and nose. Only then did I turn to Karina.

"Oh, Karina, he's beautiful!" I sobbed. I wanted to collapse onto her chest, have her hold me in her arms.

James stood right outside the door when I went out.

"Good thing we made it to the clinic on time, eh?" he grinned, huge and toothy. He meant, "How about that speeding, bumping motorboat ride?"

I lied, "Yes," but I was thinking about what a chicken shit I'd been. I told him he had a son.

"Little James," he said. I felt my lips sneer at his recent adultery.

Inside, Helene handed me the baby. Babies experience a rush of adrenaline when they are born, a natural high, and it gives them this uncanny ability to pay attention.

"Yes, I'm that mean lady who pushed on your head for hours," I said in English. Then I gibbered goo-gah nonsense for a while.

I can still picture the depth of his pupils, so dark and clear. They seemed to stretch through time.

Karina reclined limply on the metal table. The nurse told me that she didn't tear during the delivery, and he would use the hot towel again. While I'd been talking to James and the baby, the nurse had delivered the placenta whole and had taken it away. Karina had a warm blanket.

"Karina, look at your baby—a boy," I said. I tipped his face toward her, but she turned away.

"Don't you want to hold your baby?" I asked, confused. She kept her head turned away. The tendon in her neck stretched. She shook her head, no. She cried. I handed the baby to Helene and took her hand. I thought she was angry with me. Why wouldn't she be? Still, she held my hand tightly and closed her eyes. Tears streamed down her nose and dripped onto the floor. I guessed she was exhausted. Helene shrugged.

A few days later, she told me about the ancestors. Since the baby didn't die, she was convinced he must have been deformed. It took her a whole day before she was able to examine him, count his fingers and toes. Unbeknownst to me, she'd been worried about supernatural events beyond my imagination. She'd been certain that James's betrayal had triggered a cosmic chain of retribution. She said that her ancestors, spirits that remained among the living after they passed, would "punish" her and James by making "bad luck."

My culture had ghosts, goblins, fairies, guardian angels, and poltergeists that wreaked havoc. Yet as far as I knew, none of them would punish the unborn for adultery. Karina assumed the ancestors knew when compensation was owed and paid—even when people didn't.

"The only way to know," she said, "was a run of Bad Luck." The baby would come early . . . that was bad luck. The canoe was gone. That was bad luck. The baby was sideways. That was bad luck. I was the only one around to deliver her baby. That was bad luck.

"But James paid compensation," I said when she explained.

"Not the girl," she said. I hadn't thought about the girl. Karina figured the ancestors would punish the family for that unpaid-pig problem.

Karina said, "Even *you* knew they had a pig."

We had both worried for her unborn child—for very different reasons.

During my last days in the Solomon Islands, I visited Karina and baby James each afternoon. He kicked his feet under a mosquito net on Karina's bed. He was in great shape for being a month early, five and a half pounds at birth; he gained weight quickly on Karina's breast milk. After she nursed him, she would let me hold him.

I have a photo of myself from one of those days. I seem so young, my face narrow, my hair pulled back. I had zits on my forehead and a silly grin on my face. My underfed body wore a red and black calico dress that I'd sewn on a hand-crank machine.

My curly blond hair fell into my eyes when I peered into the face of baby James. I imagined my future children. Karina knelt next to me with her hand cupped an inch under her baby's head. She thought I might drop him. She constantly reminded me to support his head when it wobbled. She scolded me when the wind blew his blankets off. "But he's so squirmy," I said. Eventually, she took him away from me.

"You have a lot to learn about babies, Karecello," she said. She tipped her head back and laughed. ■