

No  
*Other*  
Option

*Rochelle Padzensky*



## **No Other Option**

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# ONE

## POST-PARTUM DEPRESSION.

*Is that what this black hole is in the pit of my stomach? The anguish in my heart? The pain in my head? Is this what Dr. Burke told me I might experience?*

Ellen Gordon reflected upon recent events as she sat on the train speeding away from Denver, the only home she had ever known, toward her new home in San Diego. She focused on those few moments spent with her newborn son on July 10, 1954. Four days earlier, an eternity ago. She recalled each detail with perfect clarity, and intuitively she knew the heart wrenching experience would be branded into her brain, where those images would remain forever.

She remembered gazing down at her baby as he opened his eyes. He seemed incredibly solemn. They looked at each other for a few moments, and it suddenly became clear to Ellen that his name should be Daniel, because he was going to have to be very brave. He would have to face the lions alone. Tears trickled from her eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Danny. I want to keep you, but I know I can’t. I just can’t. I’m only seventeen. Too young to take care of a baby. The adoption agency will find you a good home. I know they will, and you’ll have two parents to love and take good care of you, which is how it should be.”

Her baby boy’s deep blue eyes shone when she spoke to him. “It’s going to be all right, isn’t it?”

She got the feeling he agreed. Yes, it would be all right.

From a box beside her, Ellen removed the quilt she had so painstakingly made over the months of confinement. She spread it out on the hospital bed. Lifting Danny ever so carefully, she swaddled him in it. He was so precious it made her cry all the more. *This is not how I want my baby to remember me.* She dabbed her eyes and blew her nose with a tissue. She stroked him and caressed his tiny head.



TOO PAINFUL. THE MEMORIES were still too fresh. She willed herself back to the present, viewing her mother, Pearl, as she slept beside Ellen, her mother’s purse tucked protectively under her arm.

*Protecting her purse. Just like she’s always tried to protect Pop and me. I wish she could have protected me from getting pregnant.*

It was at this moment that the resentment she had suppressed during these last few months rose up in her throat. Yes, she knew her parents had done what they thought best for her. But sending her away and making her give away her baby didn’t feel like what was best. But, what would have been best? She just didn’t know. The anger swirled in the void where her heart and stomach used to be, until it made her ache all over. Ellen stared out the window. She felt as black as the night outside. *Will it always be this way? Will I ever be able to forgive ... and forget?*

Pearl woke up with a snort. It took her a few seconds to orient herself. She studied Ellen's reflection in the glass and felt the familiar hurt in her heart.

*My poor baby. She used to have such beautiful raven hair. Look at it now, like a rag on her head. Her green eyes, "kitten eyes," her dad called them, now glazed and lifeless. No more glow, no more fun in them. She used to smile and laugh all the time. Now her mouth is set in a grim line. Why, she's as flat as day-old champagne. Oh, God, please help Nate and me make her whole again.*

"Ellen."

Startled out of her reverie, Ellen faced her mother. "Yes, Mom."

"I think it's time to go to the dining car and have a little dinner. Ready?"

"Sure, Mom."

*Perhaps during dinner I can get her to talk. I'll tell her more about San Diego and the house. "I'll just give my hair a little comb and we'll go." Pearl took a comb out of her purse and fluffed out her hair. She freshened her lipstick, stood, and gestured for Ellen to follow.*

Pearl tried to make conversation as they walked toward the dining car. "Why is it that food on the train always tastes so wonderful? I had some delicious meals on my way to Denver."

Ellen shrugged. Pearl noticed her apathy, once again hoping she could get her engaged in conversation during their meal. They made their way through several other passenger cars, the club car—which was hot, noisy, and smoky—and the observation car. At last they reached their destination.

It was true. Magic pervaded the dining car with its fresh, snowy white linens, gleaming silver, shiny glassware, and starched napkins standing at attention. Small lamps glowed, and the bud vase on each table with its single flower completed the picture.

The waiter, in his immaculate starched white jacket, approached them. “Table for two, madam?”

“Yes, thank you,” Pearl replied.

The waiter seated them and handed them each a menu. “The specials tonight are the roast beef dinner and the trout almon-dine. I recommend the trout. It’s fresh today from the mountains outside Denver.”

“Thank you,” Pearl responded.

She and Ellen perused their menus. They both decided to have the trout dinner. Pearl ordered for the two of them when the waiter returned.

“Wait till you see the new house, Ellen. And your room. It’s on the second floor, and you can see the ocean from your window. And we’re close to Balboa Park. Walking distance, actually.”

“Sounds great, Mom.”

*Does it? Or are you just trying to make me happy?* “Oh, and the shop. Pop’s done an incredible job. Open just a few weeks and already the darling of the San Diego matrons.”

“I thought when Pop sold Gordon’s after his heart attack, he planned to retire. What made him open another store?” Ellen inquired.

“You know I always said, ‘You can take the man out of retail, but you can’t take the retail out of the man.’ He became so energized after we moved that he soon began to prowl the beach towns. You know how Pop always likes to explore every bit of any place we go. Besides, it gave him something to do and a way to meet new people. It wasn’t long before he became buddies with several of the shop owners on Mission Beach. He *kibbitzed* with them almost every day. When his buddy, Jack, decided to go out of business, he hatched his plan. Zippity do dah, one, two, three, he’s got a store. I’ll let him tell you all about it. Since you have a little time before you start your senior year, he wants you to work there until school starts.” Pearl paused, hoping for a response.

“Sounds great, Mom. I’m looking forward to seeing the store. But where did he get that name, Titillations?”

Pearl grinned. “When you see the store, you’ll understand.”

*She seems to be genuinely interested, but is she really?* Pearl couldn’t help but notice how Ellen picked at her dinner. She made a mental note to make some of Ellen’s favorite foods when they got home.

Having finished dinner, Pearl paid the bill, and they made their way back to their compartment. The porter already had their beds made up, so they prepared to get some rest.



AS ELLEN LAY IN the darkness, she recalled the last time she had seen her dad. It was during winter break, when Mom and Pop drove her to Colorado Springs to stay with their good friends, Tom and Ginny, during the rest of her pregnancy. Ginny had prepared a lovely lunch, and both she and Tom had done their best to make it a pleasant day. The only thing Ellen remembered was feeling cold and numb and praying that Mom and Pop wouldn’t really abandon her. After they left, she went to the room Ginny had fixed up for her and wept silently, hating everything and everyone.

A couple of weeks later, right after the holidays, they had received the call from Mom. Pop had had a heart attack, and his recovery at the time seemed uncertain. Ellen remembered how she had bawled. It was all her fault. She knew it had to be her fault. How much she had wanted to see him, to touch him.

Pop was strong, and luckily he had gotten better. As soon as he recovered, he made the decision to sell Gordon’s—the department store he had founded more than twenty years before—and move to San Diego. This surprised Ellen. Denver had always been their home as a family, and he had loved that store. She

recalled how he would stand on the balcony and listen. If the hum from below sounded calm and smooth, all was well. If the air was charged with friction, it was not, and he knew he needed to get into the action. The store was his life.

Her parents sold the business and their home and moved in a matter of just a few weeks, without ever coming to say goodbye to her. She did not see either Mom or Pop even once after they moved. That's when the anger really set in.

When Mom called her to let her know about the move, she promised Ellen she would be back in time for the delivery. But Ellen hadn't talked to Pop, not once since the day he had abandoned her in Colorado Springs. *Will he be glad to see me? Does he still love me? Am I still his princess? And how will I feel when I see him? Will he still be the same loving Pop he was before?*

Eventually, overcome by fatigue, Ellen fell into a troubled sleep.



NATE ARRIVED MORE THAN an hour early at the station. It was small compared to the cavern that was Union Station in Denver. Due to the early hour, there were few people around.

Nervous, he paced, checked his watch for the third time in five minutes, and continued pacing. He had flowers for Pearl and chocolates for Ellen. He realized he hadn't seen his daughter since they had taken her to Tom and Ginny.

On the one hand he felt guilty, but on the other, he was relieved he hadn't seen her. As long as he lived, he would never forget that terrible night when they found out Ellen was pregnant. He relived how he had covered her up in a blanket and rocked her until she fell asleep. He had never in his life heard such a keening sound from a human being. All he could think about was who had done this terrible thing to his princess. Nate was so

enraged, he probably would have harmed the boy. Actually, he probably could have killed him.

Nate wondered how Ellen felt about him now. *Will I still be her “lovable Pop”?* *Or has she hardened her heart against me for neglecting her?* He continued to measure time by his footsteps. *Will that train never come?*



THE TRAIN PULLED INTO the station five minutes early. Perspiration trickled from Pearl’s armpits and into the waistband of her girdle. Butterflies jitterbugged in her stomach. *Will the relationship between Nate and Ellen still be the same?*

As they waited to get off of the train, Pearl and Ellen saw Pop standing on the platform. The tension that hung in the air evaporated immediately when Nate opened his arms to Ellen and she flew into them. Pearl realized she had been holding her breath. She exhaled and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that Nate’s love for Ellen had not changed, and neither had hers for him.

Nate kept his arm draped around Ellen as his eyes met his wife’s. “These flowers are for you, darling. I missed you so much. And these chocolates are for my princess.”

After Nate picked up their luggage, he told Pearl, “Now it’s time to take Ellen to her new home and her new life.”

They departed the station as a family, but with a cloud hanging over each of them. For Ellen, it was the shame of having had an illegitimate baby. For Nate and Pearl, it was the knowledge that somewhere out there they had a grandson they would never know.