

The Real Sarah

This story originally appeared in LEON Literary Review

The wail comes at the exact wrong moment. Sarah hasn't yet gotten the onions into the pan and, any moment now, the garlic—already fringed with brown—will burn and taint the whole sauce. There isn't time to check on the baby and save dinner, so Sarah spins off another Sarah. That Sarah, the copy, goes and gets on the floor with the baby in the living room while the real Sarah rescues the garlic, sliding a small mountain of diced onions into the pan and swirling them around to redistribute the heat.

It was a trick she had figured out sometime during those first soggy postpartum months. Though she'd never admit it, the process was a little bit like when she figured out how to make herself climax long ago. Just like discovering a little snag in a sweater, and following it and following it, and boom—something happens. Your body explodes with pleasure. Or, in this case, your very own lifelike form spins out from you and does whatever needs to be done.

Of course, Sarah hadn't told Mikhail about this new skill she discovered. She worried that her husband would haul her back to the OB and demand a psychiatric referral. Everyone is always watching new mothers like a hawk for the slightest hint of mental break. There are these surveys they make you fill out at every postnatal appointment, screening you for postpartum depression. She had only squeaked by the last time.

Besides, making the copies, it felt like cheating. She only copied herself in the most dire of circumstances. If she needed to sign for a package for Mikhail, for example, but the baby needed nursing, she would send a copy of herself upstairs to do it.

She pours the red sauce into Tupperware in great, glopping gulps to use later with dinner. Then she goes to find them in the living room. Her own flesh and blood playing happily with her own flesh and blood. The baby looks at her standing in the doorway, then she looks at the other, identical mother, stacking blocks with her on the floor, blinks once, and then resumes bashing two cubes together.

Sarah quietly walks up behind the copy and prepares to reabsorb her.

Up to this point, Sarah had copied herself once or twice a week for an hour, two at most. It had taken some time before she mastered absorbing the copies back into herself, that was trickier. Her first copy complied with hiding in the basement for a few days until Sarah could figure it out. She had to get very close to the copy to do it, which was a bit awkward and mind-bending, to get so close to your own living, breathing form. It was easier from behind. The process, as it turned out, was like the spinning out, but in reverse. A spinning in. It was a bit like déjà vu, and a bit like saying something at the exact moment as someone else. You merely suspended your sense of yourself as a single, unified ball of energy for just one moment, and pop, she was back in.

In time she discovered that the longer her copy lived outside her, the harder it became to reabsorb her, to spin the pieces of herself back together. Or perhaps the more copies she made, the more intelligent they had become. Lately she was beginning to sense a trace of resistance, right at the moment of contact, small at first, but growing, as if the copies were getting accustomed to their independence. Of course, Sarah had fantasized about simply letting a copy stay out. Wouldn't that be so helpful, to have a double? What was the harm, she wondered, so long as she could get her husband to accept it.

Her phone buzzes as she's nursing the baby to sleep. From Mikhail. *Coming home early*, smiley face with two hands. She watches from the driveway cam on her phone as he pulls onto their property. He gets out to check the mail, his fit figure moving fuzzily around her screen. She's always found him most attractive from afar. The baby's just gone down for her afternoon nap. From the bedroom Sarah sees Mikhail step out of his car, shiny and black, hears it chirp as he double pumps the lock button. That's when she spins off a new copy. She does it on a whim, something of an experiment. Let's just see what happens, she tells herself.

§

The copy goes down to meet Mikhail, something the real Sarah almost never does anymore. Then again Mikhail usually comes in around nine at night, when she's already putting on lotion in bed. Her husband is a lawyer and almost never home. They make a lot of money, but Sarah refuses any help. She wasn't raised that way and can't envision it—having a housekeeper, a live-in nanny. You can farm out your whole life to other people, if you want, but then what are you supposed to do all day? She felt lost anytime Mikhail brought these things up. It was as if he wanted to fashion her into a certain kind of wife, like the ones the other partners in the firm had. She had been to the occasional partner dinners at their respective houses. She had met those women.

Sarah doesn't dare step out into the hall to hear the conversation better, but she can tell Mikhail is surprised to see "her" waiting there for him. Surprised, and happy. And then, he realizes the baby is asleep. They have a free hour. And then, oh. Of course.

Mikhail would have balked at two Sarahs. He'd say he had enough trouble managing the one Sarah as it was. One Sarah who never wanted to get a babysitter, who never wanted to plan a weekend away, who rarely felt up for anything. That Sarah was difficult. That was not the Sarah

he had married; it was the Sarah she had become, especially after the baby. He had gone and bought her this fancy house, and now he blamed her for wanting to enjoy it. He blamed her too for not trying harder in bed. Of course, he never said so, but she could tell.

She hides in the walk-in closet as they come in. Her copy is leading him by his tie. Real Sarah looks on as her copy does things to her husband she never dreamed of. Mikhail appears to be enjoying himself greatly. Watching herself, the arch of her back, the fluid movement of her hips, Sarah feels herself becoming mildly aroused. It isn't right, she thinks. And yet, is it really wrong?

Afterwards, as usual, Mikhail wants to hold her. Wants to be held, really. Sarah likes to get right up and use the bathroom, but her copy stays in bed, holds Mikhail and strokes his cheek.

From the monitor, a wail. Mikhail surprises both Sarahs by leaping up and saying he's got it. This is her chance. Sarah opens the closet door, but the copy sees her. The copy stands and backs toward the bathroom door. "Hey!" Sarah says. "Stop!" The copy spins herself into the bathroom and immediately the lock clicks.

"Look who's up!" Mikhail says, beaming, holding the baby at the threshold. Then, "that was fast," eyeing the fully dressed Real Sarah standing by the closed bathroom door. Sarah looks down at herself and shrugs. She crosses to them. She kisses the baby, who spins away from her. Real Sarah suggests Mikhail bring the baby downstairs for a snack.

She imagines undressing, laying out her exact outfit down to the underwear on the bed. Hiding, stark naked, she would watch as the copy hesitantly emerged from the bathroom, found the outfit and put it on. She could wait for them to go on a walk and steal out on foot, making her

way across the backyard, picking along the damp, reedy area by the woods. She could take out a large sum of cash. She could start over somewhere new. No one would ever know.

When the copy, still naked, does peek her head out, Sarah is pressed up beside the door. She rises up behind her, preparing to reabsorb her, but it's too late. At the moment of spinning in, she can feel it. A hard wall has formed; she can't be reabsorbed. From downstairs, she hears a dull thump, then a peal of laughter. Without a moment to waste, Sarah—not recognizing herself—takes the copy's chin in hand and jerks it powerfully to the right. She slumps into her own arms. She drags herself to the closet, pushes herself into a ball, covers herself with hanging clothes. She knows she will never again attempt this trick of hers.

Later she goes to dispose of the body and finds it missing, gone, finds herself curling into that selfsame spot, and weeping for all she's lost.