

## In the Bed

Elisabeth Dahl

(published in *Post Road Magazine*, issue 30, spring/summer 2016)

From the first night home, the baby slept in the bed. It was how the mother could rest.

The father did not say no. After all, he didn't have the breasts. He looked out the window and formed opinions about the garden instead.

The mother made a poster with a blocky design, the kind the books said the baby could see. The father saw to the carseat's anchoring.

The baby slept between them, on his back, beneath the white sheet. He was a warm sliver of a thing. It was June and balmy outside. They loved the baby's hands and the gang signs he'd flash as he slept. They loved the baby's breath, which smelled like weak, milky tea.

The baby was smiling now. He could lie on his stomach and push up like a wrestler. The baby could squeeze a toy shaped like a Labrador and laugh when it barked.

When the mother worked, the father was with the baby. When the father worked, the mother was with the baby.

The baby was still in the bed.

When they went to change a diaper, they'd see the crib, its lime green sheet bright, unwrinkled. The mother fretted. The father wondered aloud, *Were they hurting the baby?*

The mother and father read Ferber. They asked friends for advice. They took the baby to the crib and let the timed crying happen. But the baby's eyes hung dark with bags, and fatigue lodged in the mother's throat like a piece of stuck apple.

The baby came back to the bed.

The baby pushed Cheerios around his highchair's plastic tray. His first hair fell out, and his new hair came in like chick fluff. The baby made sounds that meant "dog" and "cat" and learned to crawl, pulling books off low shelves.

The baby still slept in the bed.

The mother read the Dr. Sears books. Their children had all grown up in the bed and left of their own accord. A teenager in the bed? It would never happen. The mother could hear them, William and Martha Sears, laughing through the page at the thought. The mother told the father. They tried to believe it.

The baby went to Gymboree. He learned the alphabet. He lost his first tooth and married the girl from math class during recess.

He started every night in his own bed. The mother and father consoled themselves with that. But after a few hours alone, he would still drift in with the mother and father.

Whenever she thought about it, the mother felt her neck muscles turn steely. She stopped talking to others about the sleeping arrangement, mentioning it only when another parent hinted at something similar. She thought again of the Searses, snug inside the pages of their book. How could they be so sure?

The baby read *Harry Potter* and learned the multiplication tables. He developed a *Spongebob* habit and visited the orthodontist. He dressed as a Jedi for Halloween. But every night, while the parents slept, he would still drift into the bed. He was far more than a sliver now, and the bed was a crowded place. Charts were created, bribes offered. But they were paper and hollow and no match for the bed.

The baby would soon be learning long division. Ahead lay—what? Protractors? Mixers? Babies could not come home from senior proms and climb into their parents' beds.

Finally, the parents had an idea. The baby loved Legos and wanted every last set, especially the biggest: the Death Star. The Death Star was extravagant—far more than any one baby should have, said the mother. But if the promise of a Death Star could help end the baby's bed days, it would be worth it.

The baby listened to the offer. He liked it.

Soon, the baby was visiting the bed only to watch movies or play with the dogs—never to sleep. When the boxed Death Star thudded onto the porch one day, the baby set to work, flooding his bedroom rug with the blocks, then working page by page through the instructions. Block upon block, layer upon layer, the gray sphere took shape.

The bed was a new place now, with a space in the center that felt surprisingly large—larger, even, than the baby himself.

The mother and father looked at each other. Was there a manual for this?

The father looked out the window and formed opinions about the garden instead.