

TEN WITH A FLAG

by Joseph Paul Haines

Joseph Paul Haines is the author of several stories, which have appeared in magazines such as *Interzone*, *Aeon Magazine*, and *Abyss & Apex*. He is also the editor, with Samantha Henderson, of the anthology *From the Trenches*, and his short story collection, *Ten With a Flag and Other Playthings*, came out in November. This story first appeared in *Interzone* and was adapted to audio on the *Transmissions From Beyond* podcast.

Newly pregnant women face a great deal of difficult decisions, and modern medical procedures have only made those decisions more complex. Once, women expected to struggle through forty uncomfortable weeks, drive to the hospital, and go through the rigors of labor with their babies' entire future being a mystery. Boy or girl, no one knew. Healthy or ailing, no one could guess.

But today, a woman is confronted with medical technology almost from her first obstetric appointment. Should she have an ultrasound? What kinds of blood tests should she take? Should she ask for maternal serum screening? Is amniocentesis in order?

These are the questions facing today's pregnant woman. What about the mothers of the future? What kind of tests will be offered to them? What kind of choices will they need to make?

Our next story takes us into that future. Here is a world where it is possible to know too much about your baby's potential—or at least, a place where the *government* knows too much.

Johnnie didn't talk while he was driving. Normally it would drive me a little crazy, sitting there in traffic and not saying a word, but this time it didn't bother me. There was too much on my mind. Truth was, I hoped he wouldn't talk so that I could have some time to think. But when he pulled onto the freeway, I knew I wasn't going to get that lucky.

It only took him a couple of seconds to connect to the traffic web. Johnnie didn't like being out of control, it was one of the things I'd found endearing

in him; quaint even. This time though, he didn't even double check the connection. The steering wheel folded and collapsed into the dash, and he turned to face me. "What does that mean, exactly?" he asked. "Did the doctor say anything else?"

I shook my head. "He said he'd have to check, but he'd never heard of the combination coming up before."

"He'd have to check?"

"Yeah."

"Did he say anything else?"

"I told you, he said he'd have to check." I didn't know what to say. It was still sinking in.

Johnnie leaned back in his seat and stared out his window. I could tell he was getting ready to turn around and go back. We'd only been married three years, but I could read some of his expressions like a book. "How's that even possible?" he asked. "I mean, is the baby okay?"

"The baby is fine."

"Now I wish we didn't know."

I turned away from him. "You agreed we should get the test done."

"I know, but...damn."

"Don't you think it's better knowing?"

"How do you get a ten and a flag?" he asked.

"He said he'd have to check," I repeated.

"But the baby's fine?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure he said ten?"

I nodded. "Ten."

Johnnie crossed his arms and chewed on his bottom lip. I think he mumbled something, but at that point I didn't want to hear it.

We didn't talk for a while after that. I was contented to sit and watch the other transports as we cut in and out of traffic. It was like watching a school of fish swimming together, weaving at the same time. We rushed along at speeds of over two hundred kilometers with no more than a meter separating our vehicles, our safety in the control of the central traffic computer. Sometimes it was easier to let something bigger than yourself take control. It had a plan, and although you couldn't always see it, you knew you'd never wreck.

It wasn't until we sped past our off-ramp that I began to get concerned.

"Where we going?" I asked.

Johnnie didn't answer. He punched up the navigation screen and sighed. "What the hell?"

"What?"

"We've been redirected. We have an appointment with Human Services. Now."

"Now?"

"Yeah, they've even rescheduled my work-shift for this afternoon and noti-

fied the office."

"Do you think it's about the test results?" I had expected some reaction from Human Services, just not this quick. I folded my hands in my lap to keep from tapping my fingers. Johnnie didn't like to see me get nervous.

"It doesn't say."

"Great." There was nothing else to do but sit back and enjoy the ride. We were just passengers.

Central had control.

"I understand you must be apprehensive," the agent said. He was a small man, this Mr. White, and the huge, empty desk he sat behind made him look even smaller. "Results like these can cause a great deal of confusion."

Johnnie started to say something. I squeezed his hand before he could. The last thing we needed was to anger a government official, particularly one as high up as Mr. White seemed to be. It was best to remain compliant until he finished.

"The important thing to remember is that your baby rated a ten. Your child will be an asset to the Nation. Only one in fifty thousand couples who go through the procedure come up with these results. It's a credit to the two of you as citizens.

"As such, the state has raised both your rating to eight, effective immediately. Congratulations."

Johnnie and I stared at each other. Eights? That was two levels higher than our current rating. Eight meant ten hours of work as opposed to forty. Eight meant no more scraping by between allowance periods. Eight meant a much bigger apartment. Eight meant no more late nights while Johnnie stayed at work to improve his production numbers.

Eight meant no more looking over our shoulders.

"Thank you, Mr. White." But of course, Johnnie couldn't keep his mouth shut. "I've just one question, though. The flag? How can there be a flag with a rating of ten?"

Mr. White pursed his lips. It was quite an odd gesture, almost feminine and I had to keep myself from giggling.

Eight didn't mean you could just randomly disrespect government officials.

"Well," he said, "there is that question. To be perfectly honest, I've never seen it come up before. But in your case, I don't think it's something to worry about. Your child rated a ten and you are now eights. I don't see how there could be a problem. The government won't, of course, stand in the way if you decide to invoke your option."

"What if we do?" Johnnie asked. I squeezed his hand tighter but he just pulled his away from my grasp and continued, "What would happen to us?"

Mr. White smiled. There was little humor in it. "Happen, sir?"

"If we use the option to terminate the pregnancy, what would happen to us?"

"Why would you do that, sir? Your child is a ten. He or she will be a great

credit to the nation and improve life for all of the citizenry. What citizen would even consider that?"

Johnnie shook his head. "Well, the flag. I'm worried about it."

"Worried about it?" Mr. White picked up his pen and scribbled something on his tablet.

"Yes," Johnnie answered.

"Your child is a ten, sir," Mr. White repeated. "That should be enough to make you forget about the flag."

"Well, it doesn't. It certainly didn't keep Central from issuing the flag. Why would they have issued a flag unless there was some concern?"

Mr. White tapped his pen on his desk a few times, and leaned forward. "How much do you know about the CDP test?"

"Central looks into the future and determines the baby's community viability," Johnnie said. "That's really all there is to it, right?"

Mr. White chuckled. "Well, that's not really accurate. Central can't look into the future. That's impossible," he said, chuckling. "What it does do is predict the future based off of the child's cellular past, the parent's cellular past and other environmental factors. You see, once you can witness the cellular history of an individual, you can predict future activity through sheer computational power. Central has an over ninety-nine percent success rate with this test. We don't question the results."

I knew Johnnie wasn't going to take the hint so I cut him off before he could do more damage. "It's just so confusing, Mr. White," I said, smiling as wide as I could. "Aren't flags usually reserved for children with... well, problems?"

"Actually," he said, "the flag is just an indication that the parents will have to make a sacrifice. Sometimes it means that the child will be handicapped, and the parents will have to work additional hours to make up for the extra burden on the State. All we know is that when a flag comes up, the sacrifice necessary from the parents is sufficient to warrant giving them the option to terminate the pregnancy. It's how we protect your freedoms as individuals."

"The State values that highly." He smiled.

"But our child is a ten," I said. "Tens can't be a burden on the State by definition. They are the ones that make the State better."

"That's true. Which is why I'm not overly concerned with the flag. And neither should you. Your child will be an asset to the State. You'll have to make a sacrifice, but what parent doesn't?"

I knew I had to phrase my next question carefully. "And there's no indication as to what form that sacrifice might take?"

"You know I can't answer that," Mr. White said. "And you know you shouldn't even be asking. Knowledge of the results can affect their outcome."

"I see. Well, thank you—"

"You didn't answer my question," Johnnie said. "What happens if we take the flag option?"

Mr. White fidgeted in his chair. "Well, your promotion will be cancelled, for

one thing." He grabbed a folder from the stack of papers and flipped it open. "You're a six now, correct?"

Johnnie nodded.

"Hmm," Mr. White said, flipping through pages. "Did you know that your boss had put in for a rate reduction?"

"Excuse me?" Johnnie leaned forward in his seat. I could see his cheeks turning red. "I work harder than—"

"Says here," Mr. White interjected, "that your boss seems to think that although you spend fifty hours a week on the job, your production levels only account for thirty hours worth of work. He recommended you be downgraded to a five so that you can actually accomplish forty hours worth of work in sixty hours time."

"That's not right. I work harder than—"

"But you don't have to worry about that anymore," Mr. White said, smiling wider. "You've been promoted to an eight."

Johnnie's mouth hung open. It was time to get out of there. "Thank you, Mr. White. We both appreciate your time."

Johnnie was still dazed by the time we got back to the transport. It didn't help matters any that it wasn't the same one we had left in the parking garage. It was bigger. Longer. It was a transport belonging to a couple of eights. There was no driver's seat.

Central had control.

"A demotion?" Johnnie said. "I can't believe that—"

"No," I said, nodding toward the speaker panel on the dashboard. "A promotion. What great luck." Doubt gnawed at my insides, but this wasn't the place to discuss it.

We sat quietly while Central directed the car onto the freeway. Once again, we passed our off-ramp without slowing.

"Central," Johnnie said. "List destination."

The soft voice of Central command filled the cabin, "Your new residence, sir."

"New residence, of course."

"You have eighteen voice messages, sir, all offering congratulations on your promotion and the impending boon to the Nation that your son's birth will deliver. Would you like to hear them?"

So it was a boy.

Neither of us felt much like celebrating. "Not now, Central," I said. "Just take us home."

We'd managed to go a full week without appearing in public. The raise meant Johnnie could work from home, so we didn't have to go out if we didn't want but we both knew we'd stayed hidden as long as we could. I'd convinced Johnnie to show our faces at the opera—I'd never been to the opera; it was one of the perks of the promotion and I was looking forward to the evening—but even

that had been a struggle. Since we'd come home from Human Services, he'd spent all his free time in front of the computer. He wouldn't even discuss the test results with me.

My wardrobe had picked out a deep-blue chiffon evening gown for me. I dressed in front of the full length mirror and once I was ready, the lights dimmed while the environmental controls chose the scent of roses to fill the room. It was the first time in weeks I'd felt relaxed. A night out would do us good. I only hoped Johnnie would be in a similar mood.

Instead, I found Johnnie still sitting in front of the computer. He hadn't yet started to get ready. "We'll be late," I said.

He glanced my direction and did a double-take. "You look beautiful."

I crossed one ankle over the other, dipped my chin and looked up at him. "Then get up, get dressed and take me on a date."

He sighed, took a deep breath and said, "I *do* so very love you, you know."

"Then get dressed."

He pushed himself away from the desk and walked toward his dressing room.

"And don't even try," I called after him, "to pick something out yourself. Just wear what your wardrobe chooses. You'd never match this color if you had all night."

"I'm not completely useless."

"Oh honey, I know that," I said, smiling as sweetly as possible. "You're only useless when trying to dress yourself. Now hurry up!"

We made it out the door on time.

Our new transport was no where to be seen. An older model pulled up in front of our building.

"I requested a downgrade for the evening," Johnnie said. "I felt like driving."

I shook my head. "As long as you get us there on time."

He held my door open and closed it behind me. I waited until we left the parking lot and slid my hand onto his leg. It was good to be out again. Even though the new apartment had plenty of room, it just felt great to get out from behind the walls, to get back into the world again.

Once we'd turned onto the surface streets, Johnnie engaged the auto-drive and leaned back in his seat. "I thought you said you wanted to drive?"

"I lied. I just wanted to talk to you without a speaker."

My good mood evaporated. "Do we have to do this now?"

"Did you know," he asked without acknowledging my question, "that in the four cases where a mother has died in childbirth over the last ten years, the flag option had been available in every case?"

My stomach turned. "So? That doesn't mean—"

"No, no, it doesn't mean—"

"So why are you bringing this up?" I asked. "Don't you think I'm frightened enough already?"

Johnnie leaned closer to me. "But it doesn't mean it isn't possible, either. We've got to consider it."

"It could also mean that our son will have a learning disability, and we'll have to work particularly hard to get him through it." My cheeks were burning. I understood his concern, but I couldn't believe he was going to ruin our first night out together in ages.

He crossed his arms. "And it could mean you're in danger. How are we supposed to know? Who's to say the child actually needs us to be a ten?"

"We can't know. Knowledge of future events can change the outcome. He's a ten. That's all that's important."

"Bullshit."

My jaw dropped.

"That's not *all* that's important by a long-shot."

"Of course it is." Instinct made me look around to see that no one was in the car with us. "You don't interfere with something like that. It's almost treasonous."

"Of course it isn't treasonous. The State wouldn't have given us the flag otherwise. It's our right."

My eyes filled with tears. "But he's going to be a ten. He's going to be a perfect little boy."

"Yes, he will," Johnnie replied, taking my hand in his. He brushed a tear from my cheek and added, "But perfect for who?"

I knew we weren't going to the opera even before we sped past the turn-off to the Cultural District, but it didn't get any easier once we were sitting inside Dr. Jones' office, waiting for him to finish his examination. "Well," he said, looking down at me from over the edge of his bifocals, "there's no genetic contra indicators, no signs of pre-toxemia, no anemia, nothing that would give me even a moment's hesitation about your health or that of your child." He seemed tired and his thin, grey hair puffed up more on one side of his head than the other.

Johnnie ran his fingers through his hair. "I just don't get it."

"Maybe it's not for us to get," I offered. "But there's nothing wrong with me. I'm not in any danger so we can stop worrying—"

"That doesn't mean that something couldn't show up later though, right?"

"Johnnie, I—"

"Nothing is certain, sir," Dr. Jones replied.

"Johnnie!" I grabbed his wrist and clamped down. He whipped his head around to look at me, and that's when I finally saw it: He was terrified. Sweat beaded his upper lip and he couldn't keep his eyes on any one thing.

"But it's still your choice," Dr. Jones said. "No one is going to stop you from choosing to exercise your option. The flag is there for a purpose."

I stared Johnnie in the eye, hoping he'd notice the slight side-to-side shake I was giving him.

"I think we should use the flag," he said.

My skin froze. "No," I whispered.

"There will be other babies," he said. "Ones without a flag. We don't need the raises. I can't stand the thought of losing you. Tell her she can have other babies, Doctor."

"Of course you can have other babies," Dr. Jones said, "but let's not overlook—"

"Why should we have to make a sacrifice?" Johnnie asked, kneeling down in front of me. "We've been given the option. There wouldn't be a flag if there wasn't a problem. You know that."

I tried to speak, but nothing came out of my mouth. He was right. There was something wrong; some kind of difficulty we'd have to face if we had this baby. Difficulties we most likely wouldn't have to face with another baby. But this one was a ten! He could be a great composer or an artist. He could discover medicine that cured the last remaining diseases. He could do anything! I *knew* that, felt it with every beat of my heart.

The State knew that too.

But what was the cost?

I looked at Johnnie and felt very cold.

"I can't make this decision," I said. I pulled him in close and rested my cheek against his and whispered in his ear. "You make it. Make it for both of us."

He kissed my temple, then my cheek, then my ear. His warm breath caught in his throat. He pulled away, turned to Dr. Jones and said, "We'll take the option."

What little air remained in my chest rushed out of me. The room spun.

"Very well," Dr. Jones said. He removed a gown from a drawer beneath the examination table and handed it me. "I'll give you a moment to get ready," he said, and left the room.

We didn't talk. I changed into the dressing gown and sat back up on the table. The longer we sat, waiting, the smaller the room seemed to get. I wanted Johnnie to say something; anything, but he just sat there, trying his best to smile when I looked at him.

After a few minutes, Dr. Jones re-joined us. He wasn't alone.

Mr. White from Human Services stood in the doorway, flanked by a half dozen Constables. "That will be all, Doctor."

Johnnie stepped in front of me. "What are you doing? This is our decision."

"And you made it," Mr. White said. He appeared even smaller out from behind his desk.

Johnnie shook his head and held his arms to the side, trying in vain to shield me from the Constables. "You said you wouldn't interfere."

Mr. White smiled. "We didn't. We allowed you to make your decision of your own free will." He stepped inside the door and removed a stun-gun from behind his back. "No one ever said we'd let you go through with it, though. The flag is an option, not a right. Arrest him."

The Constables fell on him then. Johnnie tried to resist, but one kick in the

stomach was all it took to end that. Within ten seconds they had him out of the room, leaving only myself and Mr. White. "Go ahead and get changed," he said. "I'll wait for you outside."

I dressed slowly. It was as if every memory I had of Johnnie came back to me right then. The dates, our wedding, the fights, the make-ups; all of it. I'd just stood there and let them take him. I wanted to cry, but held it back. Whatever happened to us, I'd be strong. I pulled my shoulders back and opened the door.

Mr. White was waiting for me. He was still alone. "We understand this wasn't your choice. That's correct, isn't it?"

My flesh raised with a sudden chill. "That's right."

"Good," he said, lips drawn tight and thin with his smile.

"What's going to happen to Johnnie?"

Mr. White offered me his hand and helped me step down from the examination table. "He'll be reduced to a one or two, of course. Put to manual labor. If he keeps himself clean, he could even work back up to a four or five."

I knew Johnnie wouldn't want me to live that way.

"Of course your marriage is annulled. You're free to choose whomever you'd like to replace him from the other eights or nines."

"Replace him?"

Mr. White grimaced. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I'm not terribly good with certain social graces. Please forgive me. Of course you'll want to take some time to yourself. But when you're ready, choose who you will."

By the time we walked outside, the Constables had Johnnie packed into a separate transport and were pulling out into traffic. I watched them drive away, wondering if I'd ever see him again. Either way, I knew he'd want me to take care of our baby. "Mr. White?" I asked, my senses beginning to return. "Can you tell me anything about the flag? It seems like I deserve to know something."

"What flag, dear?"

"The flag on my baby, of course."

"There is no flag on your baby. You made your sacrifice, just as Central predicted you would."

"You mean..."

Mr. White chuckled. "Of course we knew what your husband would do. Central is over ninety-nine percent accurate, remember. We don't question its results." My transport pulled up to the curb and Mr. White helped me inside. "Central," he said, "take the lady home. She's had a hard night."

"Mr. White?" I asked. "One last thing?"

He folded his hands in front of him. "Yes?"

"My baby? Can you give me any hint about what makes him so important?"

Mr. White glanced over his shoulder, then leaned into the car. "I can't be specific, you know that, right?"

"Of course."

"Let's just say that I wouldn't be surprised to see him in Human Services."

That I *hadn't* expected. "Human Services?"

"Well, look at it this way, dear. He's already uncovered one traitor to the State, and he hasn't even been born yet." He then leaned back, with that tight, thin smile still stretched across his face, and slammed shut the door.

The transport sped away, whisking me home.

There was no driver.

Central was in control.