

Baby Brew

Pip knew he was adopted. It was something he figured years ago. For starters, he looked nothing like his mother. He had brown hair and brown eyes and was really skinny. She had long blonde-but-graying curly hair, green eyes, and a little extra weight (she said it was just her baby fat). They didn't sound or look at all alike. But all that was okay. Pip knew how much his mother cared about him. She always helped him with his homework when he asked. When he fell off his bike and scraped his knees, she was there to bandage him and tell him it's gonna be okay. At times like these, she had a habit of bursting into some cheery song.

*"Oh, dearie dearie little Pip
When I first saw you, I did a flip,
You brought a smile to this ol' crone
And I knew I had to bring you home!"*

Those songs were silly and embarrassing when they were at the park with other people, but he secretly enjoyed listening to them. They lived in an apartment over a small local diner that they ran together, and whenever he entered the kitchen, she'd be there, cooking food and singing some random tune.

The diner was a really popular spot in town. Mom was famous for her soups, stews, and tea... especially her tea! She had many secret recipes for her food, but the tea was easily her pride and joy. She called it her lucky potion. People came from all over town to have it. She didn't even need to sell different flavors. Mom had a giant pot in the center of the kitchen, big enough for Pip to squat inside, and she filled it up with her special blend of tea. By the end of the day, the pot was nearly always empty.

A lot of people asked about the recipe, but she just smiled, tapped her long nose knowingly, and said, "I'm sorry dearie, but I can't let just anyone learn my secret brew." She wouldn't even tell Pip. Whenever he asked, she'd just giggle and say something like, "Oh, just a normal store-bought flavor, with frog toes and butterfly cocoons thrown in for flavor." Pip knew she had to be kidding and laughed along with her.

On one busy day at the diner while Pip was helping serve tables, this elderly couple came in and sat down. They had pure white hair and faces so wrinkly it looked like they both wore several smiles.

“Oh, aren’t you just the loveliest little thing, helping your mother run a business like this!” said the old lady as she sipped on the tea he just served. “She must be so proud to raise such a fine young man!”

Mom heard this from across the counter and called back, “Oh Pip is just the sweetest little boy. Look at him, you could just gobble him up!”

The old man replied, “Indeed, but he won’t be quite so little for long, ma’am. He’s nearly as tall as I am!” He stood up for a moment to compare heights with Pip. Pip realized what the man said was true - they were nearly the same height, though the old man was rather short and his severely hunched back didn’t help. Still, this worried Pip.

Later, after they had closed up shop for the day, he asked Mom about what the old couple said. How much longer till he grew up? Would he get old, wrinkly, and hunch-backed like that man? His birthday was just next week. Did that mean he had to start acting older too? Mom sat thoughtfully for a moment and said, “Well yes, as people get older, they have to handle greater responsibility. It gets harder, but there’s fun in it too, like caring for little kids like you.”

“What if I don’t want to grow up though?” he asked. “Why can’t I just stay a kid?”

“Well dearie, there’s this saying that goes, ‘Growing old is mandatory; Growing up is optional.’ But that’s just a load of hogwash. There’s a secret to staying young that not many people know.”

Pip’s eyes widened as he asked, “Really? Is there?”

“Well, of course! Look at me, I’m a hundred and seven years old, but I look like I’m only in my forties!” Pip chuckled while she let out a short cackle. Then he asked, “What’s the secret?”

“Oh, I’ll show you in a bit, dearie. It’ll be a birthday surprise!” Pip was a little disappointed that he had to wait another week to learn the big secret, but he could really smile now. Now he had a reason to look forward to his birthday.

Three days later, right after turning over the closing sign at the end of the day, Mom asked Pip if he could handle cleaning up on his own.

“I’ll take the broom and finish sweeping outside, but then I have to fly off for a bit. I’ve got a few errands, and a special delivery to pick up,” she explained.

“Why can’t it be delivered here?” he asked.

“The delivery lady can’t make it here. She’s not feeling her best. Bed-ridden, actually. But it’s not that big a deal, and I don’t mind going for a walk if it means making someone else’s life easier.”

“Oh, okay. Well, be safe!” said Pip as she walked out the door. Pip spent the next hour cleaning all the tables and chairs, doing the dishes, and wiping down the counters. Though she was an amazing cook, Pip had to admit that Mom wasn’t very clean. The countertops were always covered with bits of chopped up ingredients he couldn’t identify. At least twice a week, he had to take a broom to the corners of the ceiling to brush away cobwebs. Spiders just seemed to follow Mom everywhere. His biggest complaint wasn’t the cleanliness though; it was the smoke alarm.

In the center of the hallway, they had a little computer panel sticking out of the wall. It was connected to everything in the building. They used it for locking all the doors, turning off the lights, and most importantly, turning off the smoke detector in the kitchen. When Mom cooked up a new pot of tea, she liked to use a real wood fire to heat up the giant pot. Mom claimed it helped enhance the natural flavor. The fire made a lot of smoke, so Mom popped open the back door and turned on a fan to blow it outside. Pip thought it was really dangerous to keep the smoke alarm off in the kitchen. They practiced fire drills a lot at school, and this just didn’t seem safe. What if the place burned down? Mom didn’t worry about it, but Pip made sure every day, after sweeping out the wood ashes, to turn the alarm back on.

Once done with all the chores, Pip sat down at a booth close to the door and waited for Mom. After a little bit, he slumped over and laid down across the booth seat. What was taking Mom so long, and what was she picking up? Was it a birthday gift for him? Maybe something to do with the big secret of staying young? What could the secret be anyway? Maybe there was a special cream you had to use every day? He once heard a couple of ladies talking about something like that for their faces... Or maybe there was some special thing you had to do, like yoga? His head swam with so many ideas, he almost didn’t hear the front door open.

“Hello, sweetie! Thank you for waiting so long, and for doing all the cleaning. The place looks wonderful!” rang Mom’s voice. Pip sat upright to look at what she brought home. Her left arm was laden with grocery bags that were filled with fresh vegetables and tea blends. Her right arm held a wicker basket loaded with blankets. All in all, she looked like she was getting ready for a big picnic.

“What’s in the basket?” he asked while taking some of the grocery bags.

“Oh, here’s a special little treat. You won’t believe what I found today when I was done with shopping.” Once her left arm was free, she moved the blankets in the basket around so Pip could get a better view of something inside.

“A baby!?” He cried out in surprise.

“That’s right, dearie” replied Mom, “Its parents couldn’t take care of it… Awfully unfortunate. Anyway, I decided that we’ll look after it for a bit while I figure out what to do with it. Oh, I’m so excited to have another little cutie around here! I’m going to be pretty busy though. As you can see, I’m expecting a lot of business in the next week. Would you be able to watch over it while I’m working?” Pip nodded in agreement.

Pip didn’t realize how much work caring for a baby would be. For something that could barely move or do anything, it could make an insane amount of trouble. The baby cried all the time and he had no idea if that meant it was hungry, tired, or whatever. On the first day, Mom showed him how to change a diaper, but after that, he was expected to do it every time. It was gross. His hands were starting to get dry from how often he had to wash them. Mom bought a lot of baby food and though feeding the baby was way better than changing its diapers, it was still very messy. Sometimes the baby ate obediently. Sometimes it spluttered and flailed, letting bits of mushy food fly everywhere. To make matters worse, Pip still had to serve tables and do all his normal chores, too. All day long, he would run from the customers’ tables, to the kitchen, to the baby’s basket in the office, and back to the customers. He was getting exhausted. Meanwhile, Mom spent all day long in the kitchen.

“I’m working on a special order, a really difficult one that’s going to take almost all week,” is all she would offer as an explanation. She wouldn’t let Pip go in the kitchen either. He had to knock several times to get her attention, only for her to open the door, hand him trays of the customer’s food, and close the door again. Sometimes when he passed by, he could hear her singing to herself, but couldn’t make out the words. He didn’t have much time to listen anyways. Usually, the baby would call out for attention. Ooh, these were some long days.

The nights were different too. Once done in the kitchen for a day, Mom locked it up and went straight to bed. Normally, evenings meant reading books together, watching a classic sitcom on TV, or even writing new lyrics for her songs. But this week, she just didn’t have the strength.

“I’m saving up my energy for your birthday, Pip. We’ll have fun then,” she promised before closing her bedroom door one evening. Pip didn’t say a word in response, though his head drooped

down as he trudged over to his room. Once inside, he flopped over on his own bed, but despite his tired arms and feet, he just wasn't ready to sleep. He sighed and rolled over.

From the corner of the room, he heard the baby start to cry again. Since Mom was so worn out, he had to take care of the baby at night as well. Pip groaned, but staggered to his feet. He better calm it down before Mom heard it. The baby refused any of the food he offered, and its diaper didn't need changing either... but it still complained. Not knowing what else to do, Pip picked it up and just held it close. He wasn't a mom, but he didn't think the baby would realize that.

After a minute, the baby started to calm down. It looked up into his eyes, and he didn't have the will to look away. In the still of the evening, without the bustle of the diner, he finally had time to take in the face of this little girl. Her sky-blue eyes were full of innocent wonder and her pudgy hands grasped feebly at the air and Pip's collar, trying to make sense of the world. She didn't really understand anything, did she? Maybe he could relate to that...

They sat there for a while, just staring into the silent room. Pip didn't think he had spent this much quiet time with the baby before. She was a lot more pleasant when not screaming, and yet he felt like there needed to be some noise in the room. So, he thought of what Mom would do and started to quietly sing,

*"Oh little child, little dear,
Oh how I'll watch the coming years
To see you walk, and laugh and grow
-A wondrous sight that won't grow old."*

Pip's voice cracked on the last lines. There it was again. Age. Growing old. He remembered how Mom would sing that to him at night years ago, and how it would make him cry. He liked being small. He saw what happened to old people. The wrinkles on that elderly couple's face, that old man's hunched back... Even Mom's hands were starting to shake when she held the coffee pot. She denied it, but he knew better. One day, would his hands shake too? He looked back down at the baby. One day, her little face will be all wrinkly, leathery, and old. No. That's not true. Mom knew the secret of how to stay young, and she was going to teach him. And then he'll teach it to the baby. They'll escape growing old together.

Pip yawned, and noticed that the baby's eyes had closed. Time for sleep at last. He returned her to the basket, and crept back into his own bed. His body sank into the soft, warm sheets. But yet, as his

eyelids closed, one more haunting thought poked his mind, "What if, after he learned the big secret and became young forever, something happened to Mom? What grownup would look after them then?"

Pip woke up with a groan on the morning of his birthday. "Is this how grownups always feel?" he thought to himself. "Tired and dirty and sore?" The baby woke him up several times across the night -once to change her diaper, once to feed her, and once for what seemed like no reason at all. Not even the song helped that time. He slowly got to his feet, changed into new clothes for the day, and headed to the office to drop off the baby.

When they passed Mom in the hallway, she said, "Good morning, and happy birthday, dearie! How's our little honey bun doing?"

"She got more sleep than I did, I bet," he complained.

Mom laughed, "Oh, yes, babies are funny like that. So much energy and life in such a small package. That's part of what makes them so healthy to have around. You gotta learn to feed off of that energy, Pip, instead of letting it beat you down."

"Wait, that's the big secret?" he asked. "Babysitting makes you stay young?"

"Well, babies are part of it, yes, but they're just one ingredient. I'll explain more tonight when we celebrate your birthday."

Pip perked up at this. He asked, "Will you be done with that special order by then?"

"I most certainly intend to be! Just you wait, I've got something special planned for you. But you have to promise me not to enter the kitchen. You'll spoil the surprise!"

"Okay. But can we name the baby at my party? I feel silly just saying 'the baby' all the time."

Mom frowned at this and said, "I'm sorry, Pip, I don't think that's a good idea. We can't keep it, and naming it will just make it harder to give it up. Now run along, I better get back to the kitchen."

Pip tried to stay cheerful, although it wasn't easy. It was a slow day for the diner, but the baby kept crying. Pip tried everything to make her stop. He gave her a pacifier, fed her, and changed her diapers twice despite them still being clean. Wait a minute, that smell... Pip had just gotten a whiff of something... A terrible smell was wafting down the hall. He stepped out of the office and followed the scent. As he got closer to the kitchen, the scent grew stronger. It was like rancid meat that got marinated

in spoiled milk and sunbaked on top of a dumpster. By the time he knocked on the kitchen door, he was pulling his shirt up over his nose, anything to block the smell.

“Mom!” he called out. “What the heck are you cooking!?” He reached for the doorknob, but retreated as her voice replied,

“Sorry! I’m doing a little bit of improv. Last I tried making this, you were still a baby, and it didn’t turn out too well. My stars, it’s complicated. But, don’t worry! It’ll smell much better in a bit. Run along and take care of customers!”

“But Mom! The baby is-” Pip stepped back in shock as she shouted,

“Go! I can’t be distracted, or it’ll all go to waste!”

Pip backed away from the door. The baby was still crying. Her wailing was sure to break glass soon. He checked her diaper once more and tried again to feed it, but no luck. Certain it was the smell now, he closed the door and brought a standing fan out of the closet. He plugged the fan in the hallway and turned it on max speed. Hopefully, it would blow the scent away from the office. After a minute, the baby started to calm down. Pip breathed a sigh of relief and charged back to the front counter.

The smell wafted to the front room and hung in the air like some foul mouth-gag. Customers complained of the stench and left before he could get them their food. In desperation, he opened the front door, hoping the smell would escape into the open. Over time it did, but it also discouraged anyone from entering. By two in the afternoon, the diner was empty. Pip sat on a stool at the front counter, his head propped up by one arm. He watched people pass by the front windows and wrinkle their noses. After only a few minutes, his head slumped over onto the counter, and he fell asleep.

Pip woke up with the twilight sun streaming through the front windows into his eyes. The sudden light shocked him upright. He rubbed his eyes and checked the clock. It was nearly seven; he had been asleep for hours. His head whipped around to check the room. The tables were all empty, and the “closed” sign was now dangling across the glass front door. Thankfully, the terrible smell was gone, though there was a tiny bit of smoke in the air. Was Mom really still cooking? He popped off the stool and walked into the hallway. Yeah, she was still in the kitchen; he could hear her singing.

“I cannot let my boy grow old

He turned my house into a home.

So, sea salt specks and starfruit seeds

Asphodel and mandrake leaves,”

Her voice floated down the hall with the smoke, no longer having to fight with the voices of so many customers and -wait, the baby! Pip spun around the stand-up fan and crashed the office door open. The basket was gone! Pip's face grew pale. Even if she could crawl around on her own, the baby couldn't possibly have moved the basket. Did somebody kidnap her? He shook his head. No... surely he would've heard someone walk past him, especially since the baby would probably have been crying too. Maybe Mom took her? Pip walked back out of the office and towards the kitchen. His mother's song echoed towards him,

*"Hedgehog quills and bandicoot cheeks
Stew it all in for at least a week
Boil it quick, add wild mushrooms
Hurry, or he'll be too old too soon."*

Pip hesitated at the kitchen door. Mom was pretty upset last time he knocked. So what if she did take the baby's basket? She still wouldn't want him to disturb her... Pip lowered his hand away from the door and took a step back. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea...

*"Puppy dog tails, and snails, and snips,
Just aren't enough for my darling Pip,
To finish a gift from this old lady
Time to add the little -"*

Mom jumped and dropped her wooden cutting board as Pip slammed the door open. The air was filled with smoke billowing out from the giant bubbling pot in the middle of the room. Pip's face was deathly white as he cried out, "What are you doing!?"

Mom leaned back against the counter, one hand over her heart. After taking two heavy breaths, she said, "What did I tell you? Making your birthday surprise. Run along now."

"Do you know where the baby is?" Mom swayed uneasily as Pip said this. What was that behind her on the counter? He took a step to the side to get a better look, but she rebalanced to her right, blocking whatever it was from view.

Finally, she replied, "Why the office, of course."

Pip crossed his arms and said, "I checked, she's not there."

"Hmmm... probably crawled out of the crib."

"I looked everywhere!"

"Oh, just go look again. it must be somewhere. I'm sorry dear, but I'm really busy, can't you see?"

She gestured around the kitchen. Pip noticed how the floor was littered with the shavings of vegetables, how the sink was full of dirty measuring cups that were stained strange colors. She really had been working so hard in here. Could Mom really be lying to him? No... she couldn't be. After all, she had spent all week preparing something special just for him. It must've been hard, working in the kitchen all day with all the smoke and weird smells. Pip walked over to his Mom and hugged her.

"Oh, I'm sorry, dear. I know I've left you alone for most of your birthday. Just give me a few more minutes, and I'll finally be done. Can you wait just a little longer?" Pip nodded... but as he moved his arms from around Mom's waist, the back of his hand brushed against the woven strands of a wicker basket. His body recoiled in shock. Mom looked at him, one eyebrow raised in concern.

"Pip, sweetie? What's wrong?" she asked.

"N-nothing. I... I just -" Pip jumped back, nearly brushing against the giant pot.

"I forgot! There's something I gotta go fix!" he exclaimed. Pip ran out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

He had to act fast! Mom had gone crazy! He rushed down the hallway towards the front counter. He could grab the phone. Maybe the police would know what to do? In his haste, he ran into the standup fan. The cord pulled out from the wall, and the fan fell over. Pip would've fallen on top of it if he hadn't braced himself against the control panel stuck to the wall. He hopped on one foot, clutching his stinging toes. It was a stupid idea anyway, calling the police... they'd never believe him. But what else could he do? Wait, the smoke alarm!

A few seconds later, Mom burst out of the kitchen with her hands clutched to her ears. The smoke alarm was shrieking to high heaven.

"Pip!" she cried out. "I've told you to keep that blasted thing off!" Mom coughed and hustled down the hallway to the control panel. Once she was down the hall, Pip sprang from his hiding place behind the kitchen door and dashed around the pot. He was nearly out the kitchen's back door, basket in hand, when he realized the basket was empty! There, back on the counter! The baby was laying next to the newly-washed cutting board. He went back for it, but as he reached to pick it up, he heard,

“Pip! Stop!!!” He froze, his hand inches away from the counter. Mom was breathing heavily in the kitchen doorway, one arm braced against the frame. Her hair was frizzly and disheveled from her rush.

“Leave it where it is, and go to your room. Forget about it, please. I’ll take care of it!” she said.

“No! You were going to cook her! Why would you cook a baby?!” he shouted back.

Mom’s face dropped slightly, and she replied in a quieter voice, “...It’s for you. Your birthday.”

“You thought I wanted to eat a baby!? What’s wrong with you?!”

“Pip, please! You wanted to stay a kid, right? Well, you are what you eat. Being a grown-up is about making hard choices, sacrifices. You wouldn’t understa-”

“Stop it!” Pip shouted. “Liar!”

“I’m telling the truth! Why do you think I tried to hide it from you!?” Tears were streaming down her face now. “I didn’t want you to see the ugly truth... that’s how you grow up. Please, before it’s too late. Leave the baby here. I can fix all this. I can make the pain and confusion go away. You’ll forget about it. I promise. Please... don’t grow up. Don’t leave Mom.” She held out a hand for him.

In later years, Pip would quietly hate himself for hesitating at this moment. But, in the end, what matters is that he was willing to make the hard choice.

You’re not my mom anymore!” He screamed. The old lady cried out as Pip grabbed the cutting board off the counter, braced it against his shoulder, and rammed the giant cauldron. It tipped, and the contents sloshed out all around the room as a murky green deluge. The old lady recoiled as great splashes of boiling potion stung her. Pip had to jump back in order to avoid both the frothing liquid and the cooking flames that leaped out from beneath the cauldron. In his haste, the cutting board dropped from his hands. Hungry tendrils of flame danced toward it, desperate to spread out and consume everything within reach. Before they spread too far, Pip picked up the baby, grabbed the basket, and ran out the back door. Streams of tears poured down his face while the witch wailed in pain, begging him to return. But Pip never looked back. The young man escaped into the night, clutching his child safely in his arms.

Some time later that night, after the firemen arrived to rescue some hysterical old woman from a burning building, Pip was nestled beneath a park tree with his baby in his arms. It was a warm night, but they were still lucky to have the basket full of blankets. Pip's thoughts were scattered to the very edges of his shell-shocked mind. What were they going to do now? He was too tired and worn out to think... but the baby was starting to cry again, and he needed to be strong for her. Pip hugged the baby close and, instinctively, started to sing,

*"Oh little child, little dear,
Oh how I'll watch the coming years
To see you walk, and laugh and grow
-A sight that's worth my growing old."*