Junior's girl and other short stories

Kathleen Kirwan
The University of Montana

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Junior's Girl
and other short stories

by
Kathleen Kirwan
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Mama's

I drive from Medford, eighty miles east to Klamath Falls, out to Mama's to do her hair because she's laid up with phlebitis and can't get around to go to the beauty parlor. If my Mama can't make it down to the Hair Shop to have Erlene do her hair, she gets crazy. And Erlene don't do house calls no matter what the emergency is. She don't want to set a precedent. And if Mama can't get Erlene to do her hair, she wants me to do it.

Mama always wanted me to be a beautician. "It's a respectable job for a woman," she says. Instead I work in the warehouse of an auto parts distributing firm in Medford. Mama's still shaking her head over that. She blames Jack, of course. She thinks if it weren't for Jack, I'd still be in Klamath Falls. I think she's right.

Mama looks at me funny from the minute I walk in the house. She sees everything you don't want her to see. It makes me nervous and I look away from her so she can't see my face.
"Where's your glasses?" Mama wants to know.

"They're at home," I tell her. They are on my dresser, held together on one side with a piece of scotch tape. I begin unloading my curlers and things onto the kitchen table.

"Did Jack hit you?" she asks and I wince. That's the thing about Mama, she has a way about her so that her words hurt. I keep pulling things out of my bag, saying nothing.

"Well, did he?" she asks again.

"I knocked them off the table," I say. "They hit the floor and broke. And I'm broke. Can't get a new pair until next month."

"Hmm," Mama says. "Hmm." Mama sits on a kitchen stool with her head in the sink. I lather her hair slowly, using careful strokes, up and down her scalp.

"There's a booth open at the Hair Shop, Sissy," Mama says. "You're good enough. You could work there. Why don't you come back home?"

"You know I never finished my training," I tell her. "And what about Jack? Don't talk now or you'll get shampoo in your mouth." I rinse her hair with the water spray hose Daddy put in the sink a few weeks before he died. Mama had said it would make doing the dishes lighter work. That was two years ago.
I asked Jack to come to the funeral with me. But he was in one of his moods and even if he hadn't been, I couldn't blame him for not wanting to come, so I came alone. After the burial, the church women brought casseroles and deserts to Mama's house and talked low about what a shame it was I'd taken up with a man like Jack and, as if that wasn't grief enough for one family, now Daddy had died. They talked low, but not so low I couldn't hear them.

Carol comes in as I am toweling off Mama's hair. She leaves her two kids in the living room, in front of the TV, and then pulls up a stool in the kitchen with me and Mama.

"You didn't have to have Sissy drive all the way out here, just to do your hair, Mama," she says. I'd have done your hair for you."

"Hmm," Mama says. She never lets Carol touch her hair.

"I really could have done her hair, Sissy," Carol says. I walk to the living room and she has to raise her voice so I can hear her. "I don't know why she's always bothering you, when I ain't but two miles up the road."

Her boys are laying on the floor in front of the couch, their eyes glued to the TV. Mama and Daddy and Carol and I used to sit in this room, night after night, watching Wild Kingdom or Lawrence Welk or The Waltons.

"Hey," I say to the boys. "No hello for your Aunt?"
Billy looks over his shoulder and tells me to shss. I am not their favorite person. They hardly know me. I go back to the kitchen.

"It's been a while since I've been out," I say. "And besides, Jack's havin' to work today."

"My Randy too," Carol says, shaking her head.

"He's been hittin' on her again," Mama says. Carol looks at me, her eyes widening.

"Mama," I say, "that is in your head."

"Then where're your glasses at?" she asks.

"I told you. They're broken."

"Did he knock 'em off you face?" Carol asks. She puts her face up to mine and squints. "I don't see no bruises."

I pull at Mama's hair as I comb it out, not even trying to be gentle.

"I don't know what I'd do if Randy ever hit me," Carol says. "I just don't know what I'd do." As if that's the worst thing he'd ever do to her.

"You are in a different position," Mama tells her. "You and Randy are married, and there's the kids. Sissy ain't married to Jack and she ain't tied to him with no kids. She don't have to stay."

"Why do you stay with him, Sissy?" Carol asks. "I've never understood it. He won't marry you. And if he's hittin' on you, why do you stay?"
"Maybe I love him," I say. "Maybe he loves me."

"Then he should marry you," Mama says. I smooth styling gel into her thin gray hair and divide it into sections. I roll her hair into neat rows of curlers, tight. Carol watches.

"Did Mama tell you there's a booth open at the Hair Shop?" Carol asks. "You know Emogene Walkins works a booth over there. I saw her at the K-Mart the other day. She says she makes a good thirty dollars a day in tips. You could always come back home. Work there."

"She told me." I finish setting Mama's hair. She starts to get up, but Carol jumps up and makes Mama stay in her seat.

"You sit, Mama," she says. "Remember what the doctor said. I'll make the coffee."

"What did the doctor say, Mama?" I ask.

"To take it easy, that's all."

"He said to stay off your feet," Carol says. "You know he did."

"You want me to blow it dry, Mama?"

"No Sissy, I'd rather sit under the dryer." Mama's hair dryer is about forty years old. It's a vinyl cap with a hose attached to it. It has terrible yellow and gold flowers all over it. Still works though. I get it on her head over the curlers and hand her the control switch.
"Okay, Mama, don't let it get too hot. I'm going out back for a smoke."

"When you gonna quit that, Sissy?" Carol makes a face and moves to get three cups from the cupboard. "Hey, you want milk in your coffee?"

I shake my head no and go out into the yard. Mama don't allow cigarette smoking in the house. Mama don't allow a lot of things. I remember how it was when all I knew was Klamath Falls. Before I met Jack. When Mama and Daddy and Carol ran my life and any one of them slapped me hard across the mouth if they didn't like what I said. I never went anywhere if one of them didn't drive me, never listened to music they didn't choose, never ate anything they didn't cook, never bought anything if they didn't give their say so. Once a girl in my class brought me some tampons. Carol found them in my dresser before I even had a chance to try them and she yelled for Mama.

"I'm a married woman," Carol said, "and I can't get 'em in. If you're using 'em you must be..."

Mama hit me every time she saw me for days. She kept saying, "Only cheap girls use tampons." And after that, if we were alone, Randy would try to put his hand between my legs. He always smiled and pretended he was just kidding around, but he'd say, "Probably get my whole hand up you." He knew I'd never tell Mama or Carol.
We used to have a cow. I called her Chloe. Daddy let her run in the field, way back behind the house. He used to say, "I'm gonna butcher her. She ain't no pet." On sunny days her hide would smell dusty and hot and sweet. I'd lean against her and feel good. Sometimes she'd look at me with one soft brown eye and I'd wish my Mama's eyes were brown, gentle like that. Blue can be a cold color. When Daddy finally butchered Chloe, her meat was tough and stringy. I could never bring myself to eat it and plenty of nights Mama made me leave the table and go to bed hungry.

I was nineteen when I met Jack. He was just drifting through town and took a job at the gas station. Daddy and me was getting gas in the pickup. I got out to get a drink and Jack came up to the soda machine and said hello. Daddy saw this and tooted the horn so I had to go back to the truck.

Later Jack started coming around the beauty parlor where I was apprenticed to be a beautician. I was doing shampoos and old lady hair and he'd wait for me to get off work. He was just average looking, still is, but he had a way about him I liked. He'd been through a lot of places and told a lot of stories. When Jack found out I'd never been out of Klamath Falls, he promised to take me somewhere sometime. We talked as much as we could until Mama or Daddy or Carol drove up to get me.
Then whichever one of them it was would let into me about what a bum Jack was and how I should stop talking to him like that on the street, it was going to give me a bad reputation. One Saturday I lied and said I had to work when I didn't. Jack and me went down to Weed, California. We drove all over town listening to Bruce Springsteen tapes and got hamburgers and cokes at a drive-in. Jack parked his car on a back road and pushed me into the seat. He made love to me. We were gone all weekend. I been with him ever since.

Mama and Carol talked Jack down all the time and said if I ended up pregnant it was my own fault. They said I better not even think of bringing Jack around the house. They came early and parked on the street to wait for me when I came out of work. Daddy didn't say much. He just didn't look at me anymore.

Jack got restless and drove to Medford. He got a job the same day. Letters came in the mail and I watched Mama tear them up. A few weeks later Jack came back to Klamath Falls. He drove right up to the house and stood in the front yard calling to me, "Come back with me." Mama and Daddy had a fit. They stood by the door and told me if I went I couldn't take nothing with me. They said I better not ever come back. I went with Jack just the same.

That was five years ago. Sometimes, it don't seem that long and sometimes it seems like longer. Jack is a pretty
good man. He don't drink much and I've never seen him do
drugs, but sometimes he just goes crazy. I never know when
it's coming. It happens so quick. One minute he's normal
and the next he's not. Later he tells me how he is sorry
and I like to think it'll never happen again. But it does.

Mama and Carol stop talking when I walk back into the
kitchen, letting me know they were talking about me. The
dryer is off Mama's head, laying on the table. Carol hands
me a cup of lukewarm coffee. "Here, Sissy, with milk, just
the way you like it."

I know if I put the cup to my lips the taste will be
pale and sticky. I like coffee that is strong and dark and
shocks you inside. I leave the cup on the counter and wash
my hands at the sink with dish soap, to get rid of the
cigarette smell. "Your hair dry already?" I ask Mama and
begin to take out the rollers.

"Sissy," Carol says, "a while back there was a program
on the TV about men who beat women. I was just telling Mama
about it while you was out back. There was a psychologist
and she said that there's no way a woman should stay with a
man who hits her, but she says a lot of women do, because
they feel like they ain't got no place else to go. The
thing is Sissy, you do have another place to go. You know
that don't you? You could always come back home. You don't
have to stay with Jack if he's beating you up."
"I never said he was hittin' on me," I tell Carol, brushing Mama's hair and teasing it up on the top, the way she likes it.

"But is he?" Carol asks.

I think of Jack, his face red and wild. His face smooth and smiling. Sometimes he says he loves me. "No, he ain't," I say. "He ain't."

"Hmm," says Mama. "You expect me to believe that? Hmm."

I hand Mama a mirror so she can look at her hair. "Do you want me to spray it?" I ask her. She shakes her head no because she is mad at me. I know she will use spray later, after I am gone.

"I'm gonna feed the kids," Carol says. She spreads peanut butter thick on slices of bread. "You want anything to eat?"

"No, I'm not hungry." I slowly load my stuff back into my bag. "I'd better get going. I don't want to be out driving too late."

"Mama's hair looks real good, Sissy, just like a professional done it."

"You should drive out to Medford one of these days," I tell Carol. "Bring the kids. I could fix Sunday supper." I say it because I know she won't.

"I'll ask Randy," she says. "Maybe we will."
"Goodbye Mama, I'm going."

"He's gonna beat you dead one of these days, Sissy,"

Mama says.

"No he ain't, Mama. I'll come again next week if your legs are still bad. Just call me."

"I can do her hair next week, Sissy," Carol says.

"Hmmp," Mama says. "I'll call Sissy."

I drive my car away from Mama's but I have to pull over. I am crying and I cannot see the road.
When the Sky is Pale

It's just a test. Like in chemistry class in high school. Add A to B. Wait. Check the reaction.

And it probably won't be positive anyway. Miki says nervousness can make you late. Happens all the time. Only it never has before. At least this way is cheaper than going to the doctor to find out. A lot cheaper. And it's probably the same test anyway. Miki said they ask you to bring your pee. First thing in the morning. It's probably the same test. No change, I'm not. Change, I am.

Even if it changes, it might not be true. It says so on the box. It says to go to the doctor to find out for sure. Pay twice for the same answer. But what if I am? What will I do then? Miki doesn't know. She went to the clinic. Miki says it's best that way. No change yet. Because it's not time.

I just want to know. And then what? If it's true what will I do? Why does it take so long? Because the other brand, the faster one, cost too much.

I get off the bus a block early and walk to the clinic. There are no windows on the building, just a sign on the door, Community Health Project. Miki says they won't do it without a test first. They have to know for sure. All they want is the pee in a small jar in my purse. It's crowded inside. People in chairs, waiting, reading magazines, talking. Children on the floor, crying, laughing. A receptionist sits behind a low partition.

"Yes?"

"I... I need a test."

"What kind?"

"Pregnancy."

"We'll need first a.m. urine." She shuffles some papers.

"I brought it."

"Fill this out first." She hands me a pencil and a form on a clipboard.

Name? Address? Home phone number? Work number? A fat woman in the corner talks about her legs. They bother her. First visit to the clinic? Medical? Two men against the wall speaking Spanish. Do they know why I'm here? Date of last menstrual period? First pregnancy?
I hand the clipboard back to the receptionist. She looks at the form. "You said you brought the urine?"

"Yes." Carefully I take the small jar out of my purse. It is still a little bit warm.

She presses a label onto the jar. "It's twenty dollars for the test."

I give her two ten dollar bills.

"Okay," she says. "We'll let you know. We'll call you tomorrow."

Miki wonders what I'm waiting for. Now that I know, why don't I do something? Why don't I go to the clinic? Why don't I tell him? Him? He's gone. A job upstate. In Fremont. Checking radon levels. Why would I tell him anyway? He has angry hands. He would hit the wall. He would hit me. I am nothing to him. Just because I happened to go to a party. Just because he was at the same party. And I got drunk. And he got drunk. That's the only reason we were together. And only for a few weeks. He knew all along about the job. I am nothing to him and I will not tell him. Then the clinic. Miki says it's best that way. If I ask her she'll come with me. Do I want to? Anyway, I don't have two hundred dollars. Not this check, which is for the rent, the utilities. How long can I wait and still get it done? Miki might know. She says it's like a vacuum.
They just suck it out of you before it has a chance to grow.
But how does it feel? Miki never says.

"Sorry about all the paperwork." A woman with little picture frames on her desk. A counselor. "You just found out?"

"Yes."

"And you're considering abortion?"

"Yes. But I want to know what it's like."

She reaches into a drawer in her desk. "Here, look at these."


"It's a simple procedure," the woman says. "The doctor inserts the tubes into the uterus and removes the sac. But this type of abortion can only be done up to the twelfth week."

"What happens after the twelfth week?"

"There are other methods, D and E or Saline, but they're not as simple. You could only be six or seven weeks along, you have time to think about it. Why don't you talk to--"

"There's no one," I say, quickly. "No one to tell."
"It happens," she says. "I had my first boy alone."
She reaches into her desk again. "Why don't you take these pamphlets. Read them over. Take a little time. You need to be sure either way. I could see you again next week. We could set up an appointment."

"Well, my schedule changes," I say.

"Here's my card, then. You can always just stop by, or call."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks."

She follows me to the hall. "Wait. Do you have a place to stay?"

"I have an apartment," I tell her. "I have a job. I'm doing okay."

Miki says she's never read the pamphlets. She doesn't think I should either. She thinks it's better to talk with people you know. Her manager at the IHOP had an abortion. When Miki needed time off the woman told her, "You'll need more than a day. Take three." Nobody at The Broadway talks about things like that. We talk about our employee discounts and what a deal it is on top of sale prices. We talk about what colors look good on who.

One pamphlet about religion. All the different views. One opinion for each religion. I don't go to church anyway. Another about a woman's right to control what happens to her
body. Tell him when he is mad. One about the risks of abortion. So small. Only 10 deaths a year nationwide. Complications. Infection, incomplete procedure, bleeding, problems with future fertility. Rare. One on women's feelings after abortion. I did feel sad, but mostly relieved... It wasn't as bad as I thought... It felt unnatural... Who said these things? One with numbers to call for Welfare, WIC. A hospital brochure. Room rates. Payment schedules. One on options: adoption. In case you don't want to have an abortion but don't want to keep the baby. Loving couples. Financial stability. New families.

But not real families. Like we were never really a family after Mom died. We went to Aunt Emily's because she had no kids. Her husband was shot in Vietnam. Every night after she told us to go to bed she'd get out his pictures and drink a glass of wine. She was my father's sister and had pictures of him too. Pictures of birthday parties, Christmas trees, camping trips.

"Two separate crashes," Aunt Emily always said. "Imagine. A thing like that happening twice. It was a miracle neither of you were in the car. Either time." It was hard on Aunt Emily after she took us in.

My brother David used to say, "Imagine, imagine Aunt Emily got shot in Vietnam." And he would laugh. David was wild. The last time I saw David he had a motorcycle. A
bumpersticker on his helmet, *shit happens*. He couldn't find me now if he tried.

Aunt Emily finally married Del. At the wedding they danced too close for their age. Del has thick arms. He was a meat cutter. Thirty years in the business. Del retired early. They moved to Florida with enough money to live on. They wanted me to come. Attend Medical Assistant school there. "It's a good career," Aunt Emily said. She calls every other Saturday. She did what she could. She was never like a mother. She never touched me. Never.

The pamphlets are like a TV guide. All I have to do is choose one and watch my life go on.

"Personnel. May I help you?"
"Yes. I'd like information on insurance coverage for pregnancy."
"Are you a fulltime employee?"
"Yes."
"Are you pregnant now?"
"I'm... I'm just thinking. Planning ahead actually."
"I see. What is your position?"
"Does it make a difference?"
"Well, warehouse help can only work through the fifth month. CALOSHA regulations."
"Oh. I'm a Sales Associate."
"I see. Sales personnel can work the entire pregnancy with a doctor's okay. We allow six weeks maternity leave, unpaid. Time in excess of that must be approved and you must have a valid medical reason. Of course if you have to resign, you are eligible for rehire."

"And the insurance? How much does it pay?"
"What plan do you have?"
"Valley HMO. But I've never really used it."

"Of course you'd have to use Valley Care providers. Your office visits would be ten dollars each and your prescriptions half price if you used an approved pharmacy. Hospital costs would be covered up to $10,000. You'd have to carry your own premium for any time you weren't working... Let me see, that's about three hundred dollars a month. And, I'm afraid you'd have to wait until you returned to work to add your baby as a dependent."

"Oh. I see."

"Listen, you might want to check your husband's insurance. He might have a more comprehensive plan."

"Okay. Maybe I will. Thank you."

"I can't believe you are actually thinking that you are going to have this baby. Like it's a choice you make like buying a new outfit. You think you have enough money for it
so you buy it. Where is your head? I thought you were smarter than me, but you don't see me having any babies, do you? If something's a mistake, admit it. You just admit it, take care of it and go on with your life. Don't you realize what it'll do to you if you have this baby and keep it? Have you thought about this at all? Do you know of any men looking for women with kids? I sure don't. And that's what you need, a man, not a baby. You need a man and you're sitting here worrying about money. Like money is your biggest problem. Money's nothing. My cousin Adele has a kid. She don't need any money. Medical has to pay for everything. Don't you know that? Have a baby in this state and all you do is quit your job. There's disability for before and welfare for after."

"I don't want to go on welfare, Miki. I think I can pay for everything myself."

"Yeah, right. Even if you can, think about how it's going to be. The baby cries all night and all day and you'd be the only one to take care of it. All night and all day. You and the baby. How are you ever going to meet a man? How will you ever get married? You can't keep working all your life. You need to get married. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"But if I qualify for subsidized daycare--"
"You're going to be too tired to work. My cousin is like a zombie. Big black marks under her eyes. And what is your aunt going to say? She thinks you're a good girl. You're going to break her heart. Make her think she raised you wrong. I know what she'll say. I've listened to my mama enough. What's anyone going to say? There's going to be so much talk behind your back you won't be able to turn around. How's that going to make you feel? And besides, it's not so safe having a baby. I've heard lots of women have a real hard time. End up with a C-section. The doctors cut you to get the baby out. Is that what you want? It's not like you got someone at home to help you out. You don't even have room for a baby. You live in a studio apartment. You can't afford anything bigger. You're going to end up in the projects."

"Miki--"

"I'm not done. Somebody's got to talk sense to you. You're a pretty girl. You'll meet a man. A good man next time. You'll get married. Then you'll have babies. That's the way it works. You can't do it alone. You better stop wasting your time and take a few days off from work and get it over with."

"Miki, I don't think--"
"I know you don't. That's what I'm telling you. You're not thinking straight. You're going to make a terrible mistake."

David on his bike. The engine so loud everything shakes. He says it's okay. He'll help me out. It's okay. And mom never died. And dad never died. It's okay. I never went to the party. And he never went to the party. We never met. We never did it. I never saw his hands. It's okay. Miki with money. She says take it. Take my advice. Just get rid of it and get on with your life. A vacuum so soft you can hardly hear the whir. Who empties it? So full it's going to burst. It's okay. Only a dream.

My breasts are heavy. They ache. The nipples stand out, red and bumpy. Such a small change. Anything pressing against them, a pillow even, hurts.

Nights like this it's too hot to sleep good. Mom used to sit on the old couch in our back yard. Hold my head on her lap. Stroke my hair and hum until I fell asleep. She'd stay up all night looking at the stars. She'd wake me early, when the sky was just turning pale.

"Look," she'd say. "It's morning."

It was her favorite time of day. Before the sky is quite blue, when you can still see the twinkle of the stars. She'd put her arm around my shoulders and we'd go into the
house. There was David to wake. Breakfast to make. Always something to do.

Miki says it's my life. I can ruin it if I want. But maybe I won't. Maybe I won't ruin it at all. She brought me a book. *What To Expect When You're Expecting*. So I'll know what's going on. Inside me, in a few months, the baby will have hands. Tiny hands.
Junior's Girl

Sometimes, in the night, I remember the feel of Junior. His head up next to mine. His chest smooth on my back. His arms wrapped around me. His penis soft in the crack of my butt. His thighs under mine. And the warmth of it. I have never slept as well as I did next to Junior.

That's why I don't have an answer for my mother when she starts in on me about letting Junior see Aurora. How can I tell her about the two of us laying next to each other, how good that made me feel? How no matter what else goes on there is always that between us. And there is always Aurora between us.

I say, "He's her daddy. She knows he's her daddy. How am I gonna tell her she can't see her daddy?"

My mother says, "He's no good. He don't do a thing for that child. Doesn't pay her bills and he doesn't come around asking about her unless he's trying to get back with you. He doesn't deserve to see her. I told you all along
not to take up with him. You should get rid of him once and for all."

My mother only sees things one way. She is convinced I am ruining Aurora's life. She says it's the worst thing for a child, to grow up with only one parent. She says I should know this. She wants me to get married so that Aurora'll have a family. In the same breath she'll say I'll never get married, that no man in his right mind would marry a white girl with an illegitimate black baby. So she's sure Aurora's ruining my life. And she sees the two of us as a problem she has to keep explaining and reexplaining. So in a way we are ruining her life. What she really means is that Junior has ruined everybody's life. She's so afraid I'll let him back in. As if it would make things worse somehow.

But I won't take him back. I know what he's about and I'm through with him. But Aurora's not. She's only three years old and she's just beginning with him and I've got to give her that chance. I know Junior doesn't want to see her very often and I know he doesn't give me one red cent to spend on her, but Aurora don't know that about him yet, all she knows is he's her daddy. And she gets real excited when he comes around.

And Junior's not foolish. He knows how to play Aurora. Last night he came around just as I was getting Aurora in
the bathtub. So he acts real sweet, saying, "Let me give her a bath, Sarah, give you a little break," and of course Aurora's screaming, "Yes, mommy, yeah, yeah, yeah," and so I let Junior give her bath, but I stood just down the hall and listened to him talking to her.

"I'm gonna take you to the carnival, little girl," he says.

"The carnival," she repeats.

"You'll have a good time with daddy, right?"

"Good time with daddy."

"And I'm gonna take you on the merry-go-round and the bumper cars and I'll get you some ice cream, you'll like that."

"I like that."

And he kept talking and talking and Aurora didn't even cry when he washed her hair, which she always does when I wash her hair. So when she's out of the tub and I'm drying her off Aurora tells me that she's going to the carnival with her daddy. And Junior stands leaning against the wall just smiling at me, like he's won something.

And of course I want her to go. I want her to have a good time. Junior could've just asked, that's all. He could've asked. I would've said yes, but just in case it wasn't something I'd want Aurora to do, he should've asked me first so that she wouldn't get hurt when I had to say no.
But he'd never think of that. What does he care, he's not the one who has to tell her no and rock her while she cries and says, "You hurt my feelings."

Uncle Ellis comes by, like he usually does, every other Friday, to bring me money. Uncle Ellis looks just like my daddy. He's got curly red hair and fine blue eyes. He never got married and he never had any kids, so he's looked after me ever since my daddy died. He makes money gambling downtown and then invests in rentals. He lets Aurora and me live in a duplex he owns and he brings enough money for us to get by on. He also owns a pawn shop and when Aurora starts school I'll probably go to work part time for him.

"Your mother called to complain that you're letting Junior take Aurora to the carnival," he says. "She wants me to talk some sense into you."

"She wants you to cut me off if I let Junior see Aurora."

Uncle Ellis winks at me to let me know that he doesn't think nothing's wrong. This man would never cut me off, never leave Aurora out in the cold. When he has good weeks he brings us more money than we'll need and tells me to buy her something special. He likes to lift her high in the air and turn her around and around until he gets so dizzy he starts staggering and I'm sure they'll both fall to the
floor. Sometimes he sits Aurora on his lap and shows her an old photo he carries in his wallet. "That's your granddaddy," he tells her. "Gone up to heaven before you were even born."

Uncle Ellis is a good man. He never forgets that my mother was his brother's wife. He listens to her when she goes off about things and tells her he'll see what he can do. "Why do you even tell her?" he asks me.

I had to tell her this time because she called first thing in the morning to invite Aurora and me to the carnival with her and Bill, her new man, and I had to say sorry not this time because Junior's taking Aurora to the carnival tonight. Other times I tell her just to let her know she's not running my life.

I dressed Aurora up nice, in a little flowered dress and her good shoes and told her about watching her manners and about holding on to her daddy's hand no matter what and then we waited out front until Junior pulled up in his old purple Mustang, with the top down. She ran to the car and I walked behind her and my heart almost broke in two. Aurora's eyes were shining and she was giggling and Junior was smiling and he promised to take good care of her and bring her back by dark and not to drink a drop. This he swore on his life.
I felt like my mother seeing Junior and me off on a date. Junior making the same promises he used to make to her. And I don't want to be like my mother.

Junior and I both used to work at Raley's, bagging groceries. That's how we met. He had a car and he would offer me a ride home at night so I wouldn't have to call my mother. My mother liked him at first. She thought he was a nice boy, and thanks to him she didn't have to come out in the cold at eleven at night to pick me up.

But the first time he came by in the daylight, to take me for a drive, she changed her mind, getting all upset, worrying about what her neighbors'd think seeing a black boy taking out her daughter. She told me over and over that it wasn't a good idea to get mixed up with a black.

"What's wrong with you? This is Sparks. Sparks, Nevada. Not New York. Don't you know trouble when you see it?" No matter how calm she would start out her voice would raise and her cheeks would get red. "I'm glad your daddy's dead, so he don't have to see what you're doing."

Sometimes she'd tell me I could never see Junior again. "How are you gonna stop me?" I'd scream at her.

She'd say, "I'm gonna call your Uncle Ellis, that's what I'm gonna do. He'll talk some sense into you," or "I'm gonna take you out of school, that's what. I'm gonna send
you out of town." Sometimes she threatened she would call the police and get them to arrest Junior. But she calmed down after a while and told everybody on the block that Junior was just a friend from school, not a boyfriend.

Junior was quiet. I liked that about him. He would let me go on and on about things, a fight I'd had with my mother or some customer who'd been rude and he'd listen and sometimes whistle low or say, "Oh Sister!"

He liked to hold my hand, our fingers resting against each other, black and white, black and white, and drive up into the hills where there's nothing but fields of cows. When I was all talked out he'd lean over and kiss me. I'd smell the lotion in his soft black hair and watch his short eyelashes against his cheeks as he closed his eyes. I remember the first time he kissed me, I felt my stomach drop, the way it does when you're driving along and there's a sudden dip in the road. I felt that every time Junior ever kissed me.

It was tough when people found out we were going together. The manager at Raley's made it hard on Junior, making him do all the go-backs and sending him out to the parking lot for carts when there were plenty in the store. He promoted me to cashier. To keep me busy, he said. Girls
at school would come up to me in the hall, girls I didn't even know, asking me if it was true that black guys had bigger dicks than white guys. Once our counselors even called us in together, not to discourage us, they said, but to talk to us about what we were doing.

"Fuck them," Junior'd say: "We're still gonna see each other." He never said much about what his family thought, just that it didn't matter. "Nobody's gonna tell me what to do." Junior quit work at the market and started parking cars downtown at Circus Circus. He said he liked it better. He wore black pants and a pink and black valet's jacket. He made more money. Good tips.

We liked to be alone. We pretended we were grown and on our own, making up things. Like I'd ask Junior about his day and he'd play like he was working in some office. "Designed three buildings today," or, "I had to fire some dumb ass." And then he'd ask me about my day. And I'd go on like something important had happened. Sometimes we'd drive around by the University and whenever we'd see a mixed couple we'd look at each other like it was a sign.

My mother and Bill stop by on their way to the carnival. To make trouble, of course.
"Sarah," she says, "You're just gonna have to get some money from Junior. If he's gonna see Aurora he should give you some money."

She just doesn't get it. How can I make her see that I don't feel right asking him for money? I mean, it hurts me that he doesn't give me anything for Aurora because I'd give everything I had for this little girl, but if Junior is going to start giving me money for Aurora he's got to do it because he feels like he should, not because I tell him he should. Right or wrong, that's the way I feel, and Aurora and me are getting along just fine anyway. But I don't feel like getting into all this in front of Bill. He's okay and I think it's cute the way he covers his bald spot by combing his hair sideways and looks at his shoes and fingernails when my mother and I talk, but I don't think he needs to know everything in my life.

"It's my business," I say, "and I refuse to talk about it."

My mother sighs. You'd think she's the one supporting Aurora and me, not Uncle Ellis, the way she goes on. You'd think she's gonna get rich from it somehow if Junior does give me any money.

"They've gone already, I suppose," she says.

"Yup."
"There's a chill in the air tonight, did you send a jacket for Aurora?" Besides not getting money from Junior for Aurora I don't take care of her right either, just ask my mother. It won't do any good to point out that it really is a warm night, my mother won't let it go until I get Aurora's little red jacket and give it to her to take to the carnival. I know she'll spend all her time and Bill's just walking around looking for Junior and Aurora so she can and give them the jacket. And probably a good piece of her mind, too, if Aurora'll stand still that long.

Junior and I used condoms but Junior wouldn't buy them. We'd drive to a Circle-K on the other side of town and Junior'd wait in the car while I went in and filled a basket with some sodas, some gum, some tampons, some pads, some douches, KY jelly and the condoms. And the clerk would smirk and say "That do it for you?" or "You gonna need anything else?" and I'd just nod or shake my head, trying to act natural, like it didn't bother me.

We mostly did it in Junior's car, parked somewhere in the dark. It was our secret. And nice. It was very nice. Junior never said so, but I'm sure I was the first girl he ever did it with. He was so shy about things I had to be. I liked that. He was the first boy for me.
He'd come over to my house sometimes when he knew my mother would be gone and we'd start watching TV but he would kiss me hard and I would tug his tongue into my mouth. He liked to lift me up on the kitchen counter. He could unzip his pants and slide his penis into me and I would hold onto his neck and try to get him to look me in the eye.

How I got Aurora was one time we drove out to Pyramid Lake to look at the stars and we went for a walk in the dark. Junior was busy then. He had a lot of new friends at work and he'd go to University parties. Keggers he called them. He even filled out an application for school. I thought that was fine but I was getting tired of hearing about waitresses and drunk sorority girls. We walked together without talking and pretty soon Junior was rubbing my arm and stopping every few steps to kiss me and he whispered, "Let's do it." And my purse was back in the car, and I'd been wondering what it would feel like without the condom, and Junior said he'd pull out before he came and so we did it, laying on the ground without even a blanket.

Of course I told everybody, even the doctor at the clinic, that we'd been using condoms, that one of them must have leaked or something, or else what would they think of me? Junior said if it was him he'd have an abortion but it was my business if I wanted to keep the baby. "Do what you
want," he said. "But I'm not getting married. I've got other plans."

When I saw Junior after that he acted like he was doing me a favor. I'd want him to put his arms around me and he would, but only if I asked.

I was in my fifth month before I started to show and my mother found out I was pregnant. She said, "Goddamn it! Goddamn that Junior. Why didn't you tell me sooner? There's nothing we can do now. Or maybe we can go to the doctor, maybe it's not too late."

I said, "I've been to a doctor. I've already heard the baby's heartbeat."

"You don't know what you're doing," my mother said. 
"You're just a kid. What are people going to think. What are they going to think about me?"

Finally my mother wanted Junior to marry me, black or not. It made sense to her that way. Then I wasn't just some girl who'd slept around with a black guy and been dumb enough to get pregnant. I was a girl who had a mind of her own. If anyone asked my mother what was going on she could shrug and say she'd tried her best to keep us apart, but we were just two kids in love. "What can you do?" she'd say. I heard her practicing it.

I told her I wasn't going to marry Junior, no matter what she said, making it sound like it was my idea. My
mother cried and carried on for days and finally, her eyes red and her face a little bit older, she told me I was breaking her heart. Every time she looked at me, her eyes would water and she'd tell me I was breaking her heart.

I stopped going to school. Uncle Ellis got the duplex ready for me. His tenant in the other half, a woman he called Old Lady Hanson, promised to keep an eye on me. He kept saying, "It'll be all right. Don't you worry about a thing. Your mother'll get over it. She'll come around when she sees the baby. It'll be all right."

Uncle Ellis took me shopping for a crib and for some baby clothes. He came around to drive me to my doctor's appointments and brought me boxes of food. He let me choose a TV from his pawn shop so I wouldn't get bored during the day.

Junior didn't move in but he used to stay with me sometimes at night. He liked it that I had my own place. He'd come in the door and ask, "So how was your day?" and for a while things between us were like they used to be. When we had each other and shut everyone else out. Junior liked to come in me from behind, both of us on our knees, his hands spread across my belly. He liked the hardness of it and he'd go in and out of me so long I'd be ready to stop and still he'd go in and out and say, "Just a little more, now, just a little more."
One night, feeling his butt, slipping my hands down and into his pants I found out he kept condoms in his pockets. Condoms he'd never offered to use with me. And I wondered if he'd bought them himself, dropping quarters into a machine in a men's bathroom at a casino, or if he'd sent someone into a store for them. I started crying and didn't have to ask. Junior just let go of me and left.

Mrs. Hanson drove me to the hospital when my pains started and I guess I expected Junior to show up. Maybe all along I hoped that Junior would come through for me, show up, come home with the baby and me. Instead it was my Uncle Ellis, coming only as far as the doorway, pushing my mother into the room. She tried to be helpful, spooning me ice chips and dabbing at my forehead with a towel while Uncle Ellis waited outside. She said, "Sarah, are you sure you want to keep this baby?"

And I said, "Yes. I'm sure." I wanted a little part of Junior.

Aurora had curly black hair and light brown skin and all the nurses kept ooh'n and ah'n over her. Even my mother who'd been so worried about having a black grandchild had to say what a pretty baby she was. Uncle Ellis brought flowers and a teddy bear from the gift shop and held Aurora for the
longest time, looking like he knew what he was doing and whispering, "How's my pretty girl?".

I liked how Aurora looked in my arms, her dark head against my breast, and how she would struggle with her face when she had to yawn. Junior never did come around to see her until about two months after she was born. I made him hold Aurora even though he kept insisting he didn't want to.

"She's your baby," I told him. I didn't want to have to tell my daughter someday that her own father wouldn't hold her. She looked so different in his arms and I stood right next to him, my arms ready in case he let go of her.

Junior was scared at first, but then he smiled and said, "So that's my baby girl." Like she was something he'd done all by himself.

Junior stayed even when I told him I had to feed Aurora. He came into the bedroom and lay behind me on the bed and watched me nurse her. He reached over and stroked my breasts. He ran his hand over my hips and back up my legs underneath my nightgown. He unzipped his pants and said, "Let me slip inside you."

I said no. I wanted to make him feel alone, the way I felt day after day staying home taking care of Aurora with nobody coming by but Mrs. Hanson, my mother and Uncle Ellis.
I wait for Junior and Aurora on the porch. I wonder if Junior ever thinks about things. Like the wet soapy smell of Aurora after her bath. Her tender little arms around my neck. Aurora lost at the carnival, her small face streaked with tears because her daddy let go of her hand. Once Junior bragged to me that Aurora'd told him she loved him. He had his chest all puffed out and he was feeling tall, like she'd thought of it all by herself instead of me teaching her how to say it.

The moon is so bright it's like day and the night's so quiet I hear the car coming from a long way off. Junior's not driving, a woman is. She moves the Mustang in careful and slow, close to the curb, and leaves the engine on while she asks, "This your kid?"

Aurora is asleep in the front seat and the woman looks pretty. Mixed or maybe Mexican. People might see her and Aurora together and think they're mother and daughter, they look that much alike. And she looks nice. Like someone I might invite into my kitchen for a coke. Someone I might talk to. Someone who might understand about me and Junior. She looks like a friend.

Junior is sprawled across the back seat, snoring through an open mouth. "He passed out," the woman says, her shoulders almost shrugging.
This is what my mother worries about. That there'll be plenty of times Junior takes Aurora out and a woman I don't know brings her home. I worry too. But I know how it feels to look at Junior the way Aurora does, with shining eyes. How can I take that away from her?

The woman and I look at each other for a long time, just staring. I want to tell her I appreciate her looking out for my girl. I want to tell her to look our for her heart. I want to be her. I want to leave Sarah and Aurora behind. Drive away with Junior and park somewhere in the dark. Wait for him to wake up. Wait for his touch.

But I am Sarah. And this woman is waiting for me to take my little girl so she can get on with things. I pick Aurora up off the car seat and carry her to the porch. The mustang drives off. Without waking up Aurora cuddles against me and whispers, "Daddy," and smiles. Dreaming a memory. Even if Junior never comes back she will have this. If he keeps coming back she will have more. It is a difficult thing, to harden my heart toward Junior, with Aurora's just opening up to him.

When I was with Junior I used to like us in the moonlight. I'd lay beside him and look at our bodies together in the soft night. The dark and the light. Both of us shining. Someday I'll tell Aurora, her daddy and I used to be beautiful together.
Everybody says it's Roman's baby. With Roman and Jo like brother and sister, I don't think so. I say it would be wrong. They say where have I been anyway, to think that incest isn't going on all the time. Which isn't fair because didn't I grow up on Second Street just like Mireya and Angie? Didn't we all used to spend our Sundays listening to the nuns at St. Joseph's? Just because I live in Claremont now instead of Pomona, they're going to make it sound like I'm someone who doesn't know anything.

"Ruthie," Mireya says, rolling her eyes. "Joanna Turner is not Mona's daughter, you know that, she's her adopted daughter and not even legally. Mona just took her in."

"You see how they're always together," Angie says. "It has to be Roman's baby."

"I just don't think it is," I say. "Even if Mona thinks it is and Jo is going to let her think it is, I still don't think so."
"Well, Roman isn't actin' like it isn't his, is he?"
Mireya says, her mouth getting tight. "They're still goin' around together everyday, aren't they?"

I say, "I don't think Roman ever even did it yet, he's only 19 and I've never seen him around any girls--"

"Except Jo."

"Jo is not a girl, she's grown, much older than Roman. I just can't see them together."

"Just because you didn't do it before you were nineteen doesn't mean people don't," Mireya says. Her body is tense and her hands are fists. "And you are the last person who ought to be talkin' about people who shouldn't be together. Nobody thinks you and Obi from Africa belong together, but you're together, you're livin' up there by the colleges, you're havin' his baby. At least Roman and Joanna come from the same town. At least they're both..."

"Black?" I hate this about Mireya. She cannot get past the fact that I'm with a black man. She's Mexican and I'm white and we can be friends, I could even date her brother, Guillermo, in high school, but I'm not supposed to love Obi because he's black.

"I was gonna say they're from the same country." She gives me one of her so-there looks and shakes a bottle of nail polish, recoats her long nails, red on red. Angie looks uncomfortably from my face to Mireya's to the pages of
I eat my careful lunch, peanut butter on brown bread, peeled apple and milk. Nobody says anything for a long time. We have the lounge to ourselves, we usually do. Most of the librarians and secretaries take their lunch an hour earlier, and go over to the courthouse, or to Buffum's Tea Room, but we like to eat in and use the time to catch up on what's going on.

The three of us started working at the library when we were in high school, CETA jobs, summers. Then we all passed the page test and worked after school and on weekends, shelving books. Now Mireya and I work behind the front desk, checking out books and collecting fine money, and Angie works downstairs in the cataloging department. We've all had good luck, job wise, for Pomona.

Angie still lives with her mama in the house on Second Street. It was a good place when we were children. The houses strong and safe, the lawns green, the trees cool. The neighborhood's gotten really bad. The houses are faded and the yards weedy. Last year there was a murder right there, on the corner of Second and Park. Just three doors down from Angie's. Angie and her mama are the only old neighbors left.

My parents sold their house four years ago when my father retired from the city yards. They moved up to Oregon. Mireya's parents sold out two years ago, after
Mireya got married. They moved into a condo in Chino Hills, in a locked gate community with a security guard. Angie says it's mostly Chinese and wetbacks now. "We don't know anybody on the street," she complains. "None of 'em speak English." It doesn't do any good to remind her that both she and her mama know Spanish.

It's all going to be torn down anyway. The City's exercising eminent domain. They want to build smooth parking lots and three-story stucco section eight apartments, or a wide cinderblock business if one agrees to come in. Angie and her mother will have to move.

Mireya and her husband live off of San Antonio, just this side of Montclair, where it used to be pretty classy, a lot of landscaped apartment buildings, but now there are a lot of shots in the night. Mireya wants to get out. On weekends she drives up around Phillips Ranch and looks at houses. But her husband would rather spend their money drinking with his buddies. She has more ambition than he does and that's the way it is. At least if she does ever move up there she'll have to stop razzing me about living in Claremont.

Angie breaks the silence. She can never go for long without saying something. "It's not just us that think it's Roman's. Even Janelle thinks it's Roman's."
Janelle is Mona's best friend. They both work in documents, stapling and taping. She's known Roman all his life. That's how long she and Mona have both been working at the library. More than twenty years. If I don't watch out that'll be Mireya and Angie and me someday.

"Well, I don't. Can't I have my own opinion?"

"If you want to be wrong," Mireya says.

* * *

"If it is Roman, why won't Jo just say so? Why is she trying to keep it a big secret and refusing to tell anyone, even Mona who's like her own mother?" I ask.

"Maybe she doesn't know who it is," Angie says.

"Maybe--"

"Angie, Joanna is so fat and ugly she don't get it enough not to remember who did it," Mireya says.

Angie says, "Maybe she's afraid of Mona."

One time Mona said she was having a party. Angie picked me up because Mona lives up near Ganesha Park, practically under the 57 interchange that connects the 210 and the 10 and the 60, and she was afraid to drive around there by herself after dark. Only it wasn't really a party.

Angie and I were the only ones who showed up. And there weren't any snacks or drinks or music or anything like
you'd expect at a party. Mona was home all alone. At first we felt glad we'd come, so she wouldn't feel bad about having a party that nobody'd come to. Mona gave us a tour of her place.

She'd painted pictures on the walls of her house. Pictures of rivers and snakes and trees and parrots and naked men and women, whatever she'd felt like painting, she said. Angie looked embarrassed. Roman and Jo came after we'd been there for a while, with little Jamal, in his school uniform, and they cooked dinner like it was any other night. Angie and I sat at the kitchen table talking to Mona. She told us about her strength.

She said there were spells to protect homes, spells to harm people, spells to get you what you wanted. She said she knew them all. There were potions to add to food, potions to spread around your space. Mona said that's why she'd never been robbed.

Angie said her grandmother used voodoo. It was the first I'd heard of it. Angie's grandmother lives in a small village in the mountains in Mexico, just below Texas. "She set a spell to get my father to leave my mama."

I remember when it looked like her parent's marriage had gone so wrong her father might kill her mother. My parents used to talk low about calling the police whenever there'd be a loud fight at Angie's house but then one day
her father was just gone and he never came back. Only sent checks for Angie and her brother. In fact he still sent them even though Angie was 25 now and Raul 21, in the Navy, in Oakland. "I guess it worked," I said.

"Of course it worked," Mona said. She slapped her hands flat on the table. Her fingers stayed there, round and brown against the flowered tablecloth. "Voodoo's power. I feel it around me everyday."

I know that's what Angie's thinking about now. But nobody is thinking of killing anyone. "What's Mona going to do, anyway, if she finds out Roman and Jo had sex? She's not going to care," I say. "She'd be happy to know if it was Roman's baby. You see how she is with Jamal, she treats him like he was her real grandson. Don't you think she'd be thrilled if Jo's new baby was really her grandchild?"

"Maybe Jo's afraid for Roman," Angie says. She hates to give up on things. "Afraid of what Mona might do to Roman. I mean he don't work and maybe she'd take after him for makin' a baby he can't take care of."

"Roman's been doing nothing for years. He never even finished high school. If Mona was going to get after him for anything she'd have already done it, before this."

"Well, Jo's only gone a month or so. She may tell who the father is one of these days. You didn't tell your family until you were already showin'."
"Ai," Mireya says, "Ruthie had a good reason to keep her baby a secret! If her parents knew any sooner they'd have sure told her to get an abortion, Catholic or not."

"Shut up, Mireya," Angie says. This is tough talk for her.

"Okay, okay, but you know that baby's gonna have a hard time when Ruthie's own parents aren't excited about bein' its grandparents."

"My kid's not going to have a harder time than any other kid." This is something I've been telling myself for months. Something I've been wondering about for months. I can give my baby all the love I have. Obi can give all of his love. We can say we are a special family. But what other people say counts too. I know you can learn one thing in the home and another at school, or at the grocery store, or on the streets. Obi says I make problems where there are none. But he also says location is all. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Leave her alone, Mireya," Angie says. She tries to sound like she can settle things once and for all. "You know what? I'll just ask Roman next time I see him. Ask him if it is his baby."

"He won't tell you," Mireya says. "They're trying to keep it quiet for a reason."
"I had a dream about you," Mona says, her dark ringed eyes glowing above her brown cheeks. "I dreamt you had your baby."

"Yeah? Was it a girl or a boy?"

"It was white," she says. "You had a white baby, Ruthie. A white baby with green eyes."

I don't like that she's dreamed about my baby. Mona is known for her dreams. They have a way of coming true. "How could that be?" I say. "You've never met Obi, but he's really black. And I'm really white. You have to know the baby will be dark. And have brown eyes."

"I'm tellin' you I had a dream." Mona leans close to me, her face in mine. "And that baby was white. White with green eyes. You sure there ain't any white in your boy? Most of us have white inside."

"Obi says no." His family line has been recorded for centuries. They're royalty. Our baby will be the first mixed blood. When he finishes his PhD. Obi wants us all to go back to Nigeria. He wants to visit all his relatives and show me his land. And I wonder how I will do that, holding my child's light brown hand.

"Things are different there," he tells me. "Very different." He doesn't make me promise him anything, just
lets me know that's where he plans to live his life. Lets me know I can see it and make a choice.

Mona looks at me hard. "I always believed you were a good girl, Ruthie. Are you tellin' that boy the truth about your baby?"

"I don't need to lie about anything."

Mona narrows her eyes and leans even closer. "Ruthie, my dreams are signs. I tell you somethin' is about."

I remember the time she dreamed about the windows. The library windows, facing Garey, from floor to ceiling were broken. Huge pieces of glass out of frames and lying about, like someone had torn paper and thrown it. Three days later there was an earthquake. A 6.4.

It went on forever. At the circulation desk only Mireya acted, covering her head and squeezing her small body into the space below the cash register. The rest of us held onto the counter, watching the ceiling tiles and chunks of plaster fall. When the shaking finally stopped Mireya was the first one out the door. I went back into the stacks, stepping over piles of books, looking for patrons and telling them to get out of the building. I stopped when I saw the windows, torn and hanging, just like in Mona's dream. But this dream is wrong.

"My baby's not white," I tell her.
She backs away from me, slowly. "We'll see," she says. "We'll see."

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Obi says, "That woman's dream can't hurt our baby." He shakes his head. "You let yourself get upset about nothing."

I know I do. But I didn't always. I'm sure it's pregnancy. I bet that even women with babies by husbands or by boyfriends their own color get upset. Since I've been pregnant my body's taken charge of me, thinking in a way my mind doesn't. It must be the same for all women. I'm not sure Obi understands. But he tries.

He wouldn't leave my apartment and held me all night when I heard my brother was so upset about me being pregnant by a black he threatened to come to my place and take a swing at me with a baseball bat so I'd lose the baby. I tried to tell Obi that Bobby was just talking, he wasn't really going to come and beat me up. He lives in El Cajon and I haven't seen him for nearly a year. He can't be bothered to drive up. But I couldn't get the words out around the tears and Obi wouldn't leave and I felt my body saying stay, curling up against his.
It was after that we moved in together. My body urged me to, urged me to lay beside him every night, wanting to feel his hands on my tightening belly, wanting to bring his voice deep inside where little ears were becoming. My parents thought he was only using me to get citizenship.

"Let them know I don't wish to become an American," he'd said. "I will not deny my country and my people. Let them know my visas are in order, that I am legally in this country with the right to go to school and to work. Let them know I do not need you for that. Let them know I love you."

He cooks marrow soup once a week, boiling bones, cutting up tomatoes and onions, tossing in palmfuls of red pepper. He puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me close to him so I can watch what he does and learn to cook what he likes to eat. When he smiles his white teeth flash in his dark face. "It's full of calcium," he says. "Good for the baby."

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"If we talk about this all the time until Jo has her baby I'll go crazy," I say.

"Don't worry, you'll be out on maternity leave soon, so you won't have to hear it," Mireya says.
Angie says, "I'm just saying, she's further along than everybody thought. You couldn't notice because Jo's heavy anyway, but now she says she's due just a month after you Ruthie."

Mireya counts back on her fingers, her slick nails shining in the light. "May, April, March, February, January, December, November, October, August. Joanna got pregnant the end of last summer. Hot weather gets to everybody. July. Ruthie, I didn't even know you were goin' out with Obi last July, let alone makin' it with him. I guess nobody knew anything until you were pregnant."

"Nobody's business but hers anyway," Angie says. One leg bounces up and down making her whole body shake slightly. Mireya elbows Angie to get her to stop.

"Wasn't Roman in Arkansas last summer?" I say. "Didn't he go to an uncle's to try to get some construction work? Roman can't be the father. Jo got pregnant by somebody else."

"Maybe she got pregnant the first night Roman got back," Mireya says.

"There's no way."

"You don't know," Mireya says. She is tired of this game too. "Maybe it happened that way."

"But I remember Mona was working the day Roman got back, he had to take a bus all the way in from LAX."
"That's right, Mona was working and Jo and Jamal were gone somewhere, on vacation," Angie says.

"Ai, I remember," Mireya says. "I couldn't figure out how Jo could be on a vacation. She doesn't even work."

"You were going on and on about her being on welfare and going out of town when you and Mando were stuck here all summer with no money to go anywhere," Angie says.

"Ruthie," Mireya says, "I hate it when you're right about somethin'."

***

Mona was the first person to ask me if I was having a baby. I'd only just found out myself, but she lowered her voice and asked me if I was carrying.

"It's in your face," she said. "What you gonna do, have it?"

"Yes, I am," I told her. "Nobody here knows yet."

She laughed. "You think so. Girl, any of us that's been gone ourselves can see it. Just nobody said anythin' to you yet."

"Except you."

"Except me. You pregnant by that boy?"

"What boy?"
"Miss Janelle Johnson said she seen you with a black boy, up in Claremont, and more than once. What you doin' with him anyway?"

Janelle lives on the northern edge of Pomona. Just across the street from Claremont, just below the Arrow Highway. She always says, the good ends there, the bad starts here, drawing a line in the air with her finger. Of course she might have seen Obi and me together, it's not like we've been hiding.

"You know how people are," Mona went on. "They don't like to see mixed couples. Your white friends gonna walk away from you, Mexican too. Your black friends gonna be jealous you got one was meant for them. You seen how it's been for Pete and me."

"Who's jealous you got Pete?" I asked her. The man has been around forever. He is tall and awkward with a pale face and thin grey-blond hair. If anyone ever wanted him before Mona took up with him I never heard about it.

"Girl I'm serious," Mona said. "You don't know what it's like yet."

I told Mona, "I don't care."

"Does he want the baby?"

"Yeah, why?"

"When I was gone with my first baby, my own husband didn't. He wanted me to go to some woman he knew of, get
"rid of it. Men are like that, when they're young," she said. "Then they get too old to be thinkin' about bein' a daddy and they get an urge to be one. They go around askin' old ladies they know to have 'em a kid. Men are like that."

She stared at me. "You love this boy?"

"Yes."

"You see a man when you look at him and not his color?"

"Yes."

Mona sighed. "Then you doin' the right thing. Have his baby now, while you still young. There'll come a day you won't wanna do nothin' for him no matter how much you love him."

***

"Listen," Angie says, "remember last summer when Mona was gone for a few days? Nobody knew where? Did you know she was in jail?"

"No she wasn't," I say. "She was just out sick or something."

"I'm tellin' you she was in jail," Angie says.

"What for?" Mireya asks.

"She was shootin' at Pete. He pressed charges against her. Said she was tryin' to kill him."

"Pete? Her man?" Mireya shakes her head.
Angie says, "They must have been havin' it out about somethin'.'"

"Ruthie," Mireya says, "Mona talks to you all the time. Do you know what they were fightin' about?"

"What do you mean Mona talks to me all the time? Is there something wrong with that?"

"You've been a real bitch since you been pregnant."

"Leave her alone, Mireya," Angie says. Her face is stern. She's looking more and more like her mama. "You know Hector Ramos? He lives down the street from Mona and he says Pete was runnin' down the street callin' for help and Mona was just standin' in front of her house aimin' her gun and shootin' at Pete's feet. Said she didn't try to hide the gun and when the police came to get her. She didn't try to get out of it, just stuck out her arms and let them handcuff her. And Pete was sittin' in one of the police cars holdin' his boots out the window and yellin' that she'd shot the heels right off."

"Hector Ramos?" Mireya says, pausing just long enough before she goes on. "I don't know Hector Ramos, and if he's anythin' like the guys you usually hook up with I don't want to know him." She never misses a chance to jump on Angie's case about men.

Angie drops her eyes and her cheeks get red. Three years ago she met a man nobody knew and married him. They
got an apartment on the corner of Towne and Mission and went on a honeymoon to Hawaii but when they came back Angie went straight to her mama's house and they went to St. Joseph's to see a priest about an annulment. Angie didn't like to talk about it. She never mentioned her marriage, her divorce, her ex-husband. The only thing she would say, would whisper to Mireya and me was that he was strange. Mireya told everyone the man had been into kinky sex and scared Angie off. She brings it up whenever she can. And she does know Hector. He plays softball with her brother.

"But why didn't they break up?" Angie asks softly. "I wouldn't stay with anybody who shot a gun at me."

"Ai, who cares?" Mireya says. "My mother never would buy any fish at Pete's market."

"Whatever was going on they must have worked it out," I say. "As far as I know he practically lives at her house. Has for a while."

"Where's everybody gonna sleep when Joanna's baby comes?" Mireya asks. She doesn't like Jo. She never liked her. They both went to Ganesha High while Mireya and I went to Pomona Catholic. Mireya's always said that Jo should get a job.

"She just never tried," she says. "Look at the rest of us, we're out workin'. We pay for the food we eat, the clothes we wear. That bitch got pregnant as soon as she
found a man who'd screw her. I swear she went and filed for welfare as soon as they were done fuckin'. She's that lazy. Livin' off other people's money. You don't know her like I do. And neither does Mona. You see how Joanna drives around in the car Mona's makin' payments on and Mona has to get to work on the bus. And Mona pays for Jamal's school. Joanna takes her for whatever she can get."

***

For years I've watched the librarians. I knew I could do their job. Why shouldn't it be me sitting behind the reference desk helping people find the books they wanted? Why shouldn't I make enough money to dress in nice clothes and live in a house in Lincoln Park, the only good neighborhood in Pomona? I knew the only difference between them and me was college. I tried to take one class at Mount Sac Junior College every semester.

Mireya used to shake her head. "Go ahead and try," she said. "You won't make it."

But my parents had hope. My mother used to slip me money she'd saved from her household expenses. "For books," she'd say. "I stretched the meat this week."

I had a catalog from UCLA and knew all about the Library School. I would need sixty credits from Mt. Sac and
then a bachelor's degree from Cal State Fullerton. After that, with recommendations from teachers and my boss I could get into library school.

I was taking my fourth semester of French when I met Obi. He was the teacher. He always wore a white shirt and a tie, even with jeans. He liked to be called professor. "We are a bit more formal where I come from," he said.

Obi'd been to France. He'd gone to college there. "For my baccalaureate," he said. Obi said that the worst thing about learning a language in school in America was that even the teachers didn't know how to pronounce the words. "Here it is just a requirement. Nobody wants to learn to speak a language. Nobody remembers what they have learned after they pass their two years." He offered to host a conversation club at his apartment one night a week.

"Bonsoir Mademoiselle," he said at the door, bending over to kiss me on each cheek.

My face flushed red and hot. "Bonsoir," I said. "Ca va?" I was the only one who came that first night. Obi and I walked through his apartment, naming everything in French.

He told me I had a good accent. "Your words have a sharp edge. You sound like you come from the countryside. Maybe someday you will go to Paris and the shopkeepers will not recognize you right away as an American."

"I'll never go to Paris," I said.
"Then why study French?"

"So I can read library journals," I told him.

"Ah," he said. "You are different."

***

"Jo had her baby," I say. "Janelle told me. Another boy. It's not fair. I was supposed to have my baby first. I'm so big I can't even reach across the desk to get books."

"Put you feet up, Ruthie," Angie says. "You'll feel better. You guys want to go by the hospital after work?"

"Not me," Mireya says. "I don't want to see her baby any sooner than I have to. You know she'll be bringin' it around here soon enough, lookin' hopeful, like we'll give her baby presents. Shit."

"Janelle said Mona'll probably go after work, and I bet Roman and Jamal'll be there too," I say. "Jo will be tired."

"Let's just peek at the baby then," Angie says. She loves babies, any babies. Sometimes she and her mama eat dinner at the hospital cafeteria, just so they can look at the babies in the nursery. Angie's life would be so different right now if only she'd met a better man.

"Okay," I say. "I'll go."
Baby Turner lies tiny in his hospital bassinet, but not that tiny. He is not in an incubator. He waves his fists in the air and yawns without opening his eyes. Angie and I look at each other.

"Maybe there are two Baby Turner's," she says. "I'll get a nurse."

I press my face to the glass. I know everybody says all babies look alike, but it's not true. Baby Turner has Jamal's fine chin. Joanna's broad forehead. Somebody else's cheeks. Somebody else's mouth. Somebody else's skin. Baby Turner is light. Lighter even than Baby Chavez in the next bassinet.

Angie comes back, her eyes wide, her mouth almost smiling and says, "The nurse says that's the one." She stares at the baby. "You think he'll darken up later?"

"No."

She laughs. "I guess this definitely isn't Roman's baby. Who do you think... Listen Ruthie, the nurse says Jo's alone. And feelin' down. Post partum depression or somethin'. You want to say hello to her?"

"Mona's not here?"

"The nurse says she came by but didn't stay."

"You go and see her. I don't want to." I smooth my hands across my stomach and think of Mona's dreams, the torn glass, the green eyes. And of Obi, so calm during Lamaze
class, the warmth of his breath on my cheek when we practice breathing exercises. "Focus," he whispers. "Focus."

***

"So the great Mr. Watson's gonna give you a break today, Ruthie?" Let you go downstairs and help out in documents," Mireya says.

"At least she'll be able to sit with her feet up," Angie says. "You know Janelle could handle it if Mona's only gone a day or two. He's just being nice. Because Ruthie's so big."

"He's givin' her a break," Mireya says. "I'd like to go down to documents, get away from all those stupid patrons and their stupid questions. You don't know what it's like upstairs Angie. You could never work up there. Watson's givin' Ruthie a break 'cause she's havin' a black baby. A little brother or sister. She's gonna be connected now, you know?"

"Mireya, shut up. Pete is dead. Mona is probably at home cryin' her eyes out. At least Jo is home with the baby. Maybe that'll take Mona's mind off things. Isn't it strange, First Jo's baby comes early, then Pete dies?"

"Shit happens," Mireya says. And she laughs. "A bad fish too! I guess my mother was right all along."
"That fish market's been in Pomona as long as anybody can remember. Everybody but your mother shopped there," I say. "Before Pete ran it his father ran it. My mother used to walk to Saturday matinees at The Fox, before it started showing Mexican films. She said you could smell your way there. First Wong's Chung King Restaurant, then the First Street Fish Market, then the Pomona Bakery."

"Your mother is full of stories about Pomona when the whole valley was nothin' but orange groves and whites," Mireya says. "It don't prove nothin'."

Angie says, "A bone I could understand. He was alone in his apartment, he choking on a bone, no one around to do the Heimlich... But a bad fish. He should've noticed. The color should've warned him. Or the smell. It don't seem right. Do you think we should send flowers?"

"And what has Mona ever done for you?" Mireya asks. "I'm not puttin' out any money for flowers. Ruthie get up and walk around this room. You better have your kid tonight. If Mona is out the rest of the week maybe I'll get a chance to go to documents, put my feet up."

I think of Mona, shut up in her house, curtains drawn, eyes red from crying. That is not the Mona I know, not the Mona who is solid and brown and strong. Who sees so well she can put bullets through the shoes of a man running down the street. Who knows when things are about. Mona should
have dreamed Pete's death. Seen him bent over in pain and disbelief, his face purple and swollen. Warned him to stay away from that fish. She could have sprinkled a potion around to keep the hurt away. Speiled a power stronger than the evil she saw. That is the Mona I know. And I don't think she's crying.
Life At The Lake

What he just doesn't understand is that I really am hungry for an In-N-Out Burger. And no matter how hard you try to make one on your own, even if you use all the same ingredients and toast the bun and all, it will never be the same. It just doesn't work. The burgers have to come from those sweaty little kitchens, half grill, with about eight people working in them at one time, after you've waited in the drive-thru line for at least ten minutes. They have to have wilted lettuce and real drippy tomatoes and the little pile of grilled-black onions. They have to be eaten with the thick, greasy fries that come in a little red and white checked cardboard dish. And washed down with lemonade in paper cups with palm trees on them. Any other burger, in your own home, or at a restaurant, no matter how good, will never be the same.

"Jake, I am homesick." Like he is going to hear me, upstairs, behind the closed door of his study, over the tiny hum of his computer and the rushed clicking of the keyboard.
Caught up in the book he is trying to write. My real novel, he calls it. The one he is going to use his real name on.

I make a meatloaf for dinner. Boiled potatoes and a tossed salad. Jake likes to eat dinner promptly at six. That's the only time of the day anything really interrupts his work. His stomach overrides his brain. I never even have to call him to tell him dinner is ready, he just comes down from his study, exactly at six, looking for a plate.

"Smells great, Lou," he says, sitting down at the table.

"How's it going today?" I ask. It of course is the book.

"Good." He is already half way through one slice of meatloaf.

I watch him eat for a minute trying to remember if he had come downstairs for lunch. "There's a message from Owen on the answering machine. He must have called while I was out walking."

"Did he say what he wanted?" Jake asks.

"No, just to get back to him."

"Tomorrow." Jake starts on his second helping of potatoes. "I've got a bit more to get down on paper tonight. You're not eating?"

"I'm not very hungry... Jake, let's go to the city."

"Do we need something?"
"No."

"Oh," he says, looking up from his plate. "You're bored, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well, why don't you go tomorrow. Take some time to shop or something?"

"Jake, I don't mean Polson. I don't mean Kalispell. I don't mean me. I mean us. Let's go somewhere for a few days. Seattle. Or Edmonton. We could go to the world's largest mall."

"Lou, I'm working. I can't just get up and go. I'll lose my train of thought. We'll go somewhere soon. After the book." His dinner is finished. He gets up from the table, kisses me on the top of the head and goes back upstairs.

"How soon?" Like he can tell me.

***

I know something Jake isn't ready to know. He is having trouble with this book. Trouble with this dream. I remember how excited Jake was when he first came home with the news. He'd found a lakeside cabin in Montana that we could buy for a very good price from some producer he'd met, B-rated, who needed to reorganize his assets. We spread out
an auto club map and searched for Flathead Lake. Finley Point. Jake knew it'd be just the place for us. Just the place he could finally do his serious writing. Of course, I've never considered his writing frivolous. He's written successful detective novels for years. Three a year for seven years, ever since he got out of college. Three different pseudonyms. Twenty-one books. He's always said it's a good market. But he wants a little more from himself. He has this Hemingway thing.

We'd talked about moving out of L.A. Jake's always seen himself in the country somewhere, a gentleman writer. So we bought the cabin. Only it isn't really a cabin at all. It's much larger than the house we rented in Eagle Rock. Maybe we should have seen it first, before we bought it. Seen where it was really. I think we both thought it would be like Lake Arrowhead, which isn't, after all, too different from L.A.

Within a month after we bought the cabin we were following a wide yellow-highlighted line on a map, taking turns driving the U-Haul, towing our jeep behind us, north through California, Oregon, Washington and Montana.

We got to Polson, with its one stoplight, and turned at the Four B's Restaurant. We went past a llama ranch, past a Christmas Tree farm, past an apple orchard, and tried to find our place on the narrow dirt and gravel trail that
is Finley Point Road. It circles and forks, and every so often there are clusters of signs with names on each one and arrows pointing one direction or the other. A lot of signs. A lot of names. We stared a long time before we spotted Landrey, the name of the man we'd gotten the cabin from. We followed the arrow. The houses are set back from the road, on the lakeside. It's like driving through a forest.

We got the U-Haul down our steep, rutted driveway and looked around the place. It was in better shape than we'd expected. Four large bedrooms, a kitchen with a separate dining room, a living room with a long outside porch facing out over the lake. A garage, a storage shed, a dock.

We spent a few days unpacking. Jake arranged his books and his computer. We looked over the things that had been left behind in the shed, shovels, tools, and the like. In town I bought some paint. One day I drove all around Finley Point Road and redid the signs, Manning in black letters on bright pink. In case we got any visitors. Then Jake announced that he was ready to start writing. Announced it like it was the beginning of time.

***

I plan to make baked chicken for dinner and pick the last really good tomatoes for fresh salsa. I planted the
tomatoes late but they grew anyway. I lined up pots along the deck and let the vines wind up the railings. I had a terrible time with bugs. I didn't think about that when I thought about planting tomatoes. I had to get a bottle of pesticide from the Tru Value hardware store in Polson. I'd check the plants every morning and every afternoon and give the bugs a few squirts and watch their green bodies twist and shrivel up. Jake asked if it wasn't going to get into the tomatoes and into us if we ate them. Like we hadn't been living directly under malathion spraying for years.

Phyllis says there's a way of planting two things together that naturally keeps bugs away. She thinks it is carrots that go with tomatoes, or maybe marigolds. She cannot remember for sure.

Phyllis is our nearest neighbor. She lives down the shore from us. She showed me a path that connects the two properties with a little gate in the fence separating them. Phyllis is about eighty. Well, she may be younger, but she looks about eighty. Jake doesn't like her, but I get along with her very well. I seek her out sometimes and sometimes she seeks me out. Jake says she is a crazy old woman but I don't think so. And she is our closest neighbor.

When we first met, Phyllis told me, "Too many Californian's coming up here lately. Your skin can't take it. Get you some vitamin B-1. It keeps the bugs from you."
Jake laughed but I've been taking it and I don't get any bites. It's strange the things Phyllis knows. Talking to her is like reading an old almanac.

In August when the first apples were picked Phyllis advised me to wait before getting a box. "The last picked are sweetest," she said. She patiently explained how to make applesauce, talking slowly and repeating herself while I wrote it all down. Jake was really pleased about my making the applesauce. "Nice life we have here," he said, giving me a kiss. Like he knows anything about it, up in his study all the time.

"Phyllis says the power will go out in the winter," I tell Jake when he comes down for dinner. "We'll need wood."

"She's probably right for once," he says. "We can get a truckload from someone. Check the ads in the paper. This salsa is great, where'd you get it?" He is lavishing it on his chicken and tortillas. "I feel like we're back in L.A., at El Pollo Loco."

"I made it. With the last of my tomatoes."

"It's good, Lou. You're really doing all right here, aren't you?"

I shrug. I don't know.

"Owen wants me to put the book aside for a month or two. He thinks I can finish another detective novel in that time."
"Really?" Owen is Jake's editor.

"I told him I'd think about it." He reaches for more salsa. "The thing is, I'm really into my novel. I don't want to break my train of thought. You know."

"I know." When Jake writes a detective novel he works from an outline and sits at his computer for about half the day. We always had plenty of time to go to the movies, to Dodger games, to concerts, out for dinner. This book is taking all of Jake's time. He is in his study ten, twelve hours a day. I fall asleep waiting for him to come to bed.

***

I sit in the woods with the tall trees and short shrubs. Only a bit of sun slants down through the trees. I got an old Sunset Field Guide to trees at the used book store on one of my trips to Kalispell. I thought I might use it to try and learn the names of the trees. I remember when I was a little girl my Girl Scout Leader showed us a ponderosa pine and how to scratch the bark and sniff the ice cream smell. Maybe I will learn all the names of the trees and teach them to a child someday, but the book is an excuse really. It sits unopened in my lap.

I like to sit in the woods and wait for the deer. Huge deer, not in a hurry like the ones you sometimes see in
California, startled and bolting beside the freeway, but
tall, proud deer. I hear some small sound, pressure on a
leave or a twig and there they are. I sit very still and
the deer look at me with solemn black eyes. I look back.
Jack thinks it's dangerous. He thinks it might be a bear
someday. "They're wild animals, Lou," he says. Of course,
he's right, but he's never sat with me and watched the deer.
He doesn't know the majesty of it.

There is a large package in with our mail. It is the
yarn I ordered from a crafts catalog. I'm going to make
sweaters for Jake and me, for the winter. I'm not sure how
long it will take me to finish them both. I've never done
it before, but I've got some patterns. I show Jake the yarn
at dinner. Cream for his sweater, to show off his dark hair
and blue eyes. Red for mine, because Jake has always said
it looks good on me.

"I never knew you could knit," he says. He is spooning
salsa over a plate of leftover meatloaf and potatoes.
"You've been full of surprises lately, Lou."

"I've got time on my hands. I have to do something," I
tell him. Like I'll ever find a job around here. I used to
be a cataloger, part-time, at the Brand Library in Glendale.
I worked on collections of musical scores. The library in
Polson is small. The library in Kalispell is small. They
are both staffed for life. Anyway, the pay wouldn't be
anything like it was in L.A. I suppose I could volunteer, but I was a cataloger and I can't bring myself to file cards or shelve books.

"I know you've been bored," Jake says. "But you're not unhappy here, are you?"

"Not really." I do like what I've been doing, even if it has been just to fill in the time. "I just get homesick sometimes."

"I know," he says, reaching across the table and giving my hand a squeeze.

But I don't think he does. I think he has been so involved in writing his novel that he hasn't had time to miss L.A. or the way we used to live. After he goes upstairs I take the last of the yarn from the box. Six skeins of twinkly white baby yarn. Enough to make a baby blanket.

We've always talked about having children, we've just been waiting. First to see how Jake's books would do. Then to see how much we could save up for a house in a good neighborhood. Now I've told Jake I think this is a good time to start our family. So suddenly he has to think about it.
My sister calls from L.A. "I miss you," she says. "I went to the Galleria and all the Christmas stuff is out already." I miss the Galleria, three stories, two blocks, six anchor stores and hundreds of smaller stores. It's one of the better shopping malls in Southern California. Renee and I used to walk there, once around each floor, window shopping, three times a week. "I took Christina," she says. My eight year old niece. "Her legs gave out on the second lap."

"There's a regional mall in Kalispell," I tell Renee, "but you'd think it was a mini-mail."

"How do you stand it there, Lou? L.A. is L.A., people can say what they want, good or bad. I can't imagine leaving and living anywhere else."

"Lucky for you your husband can't imagine it either."

"How is Jake?" she asks. "Has he finished his new book yet?"

"No, it's taking longer than the ones he usually writes."

"Well, I'm sure it'll be in B. Dalton one of these days. What's going on with you? What do you miss the most, besides the mall?"

"I really miss The Wave. There aren't any New Age radio stations here."
"I can fix that," she says. "I'll tape a few hours for you and mail the cassettes up." She'll send the tapes, a few newspaper clippings and a letter. I love it when we talk on the phone, but a phone call drifts away in your memory. A letter can be reread. "Any snow yet?" she asks.

"No, but it's getting colder. The leaves are turning colors and starting to fall from the trees." Like a tourist I pick them up while they are still supple, searching for the brightest colors. I slip them between sheets of waxed paper and close them in heavy books. I don't know what I want them for.

"I still can't believe you moved to Montana," Renee says. "Remember how you used to hate it when Dad made us go camping? What are you going to do with yourself?"

***

I go to Phyllis with a jar of my applesauce. She looks it over good. She says the color is just right. That the pulp looks good. She gives me a jar of her last year's huckleberry jelly. It is purple and sticky. Jake is gone when I get back to the cabin. He's left a note, Gone for snow tires. It's odd for him to take off like that. Something must be wrong. I go up to his study. It is clean and neat, the way he always keeps it. No papers lying
around. No sign of his book. I don't even know what the book is about or what he is calling it.

All afternoon I sit on the porch with my cream colored yarn and metallic blue knitting needles, practicing until I feel comfortable with the stitches. Knit and purl. Rows and rows of knit and purl. Jake comes home in a good mood. He got the tires, had the engine winterized and arranged for a load of wood to be delivered.

"I got a lot done," he says.

"What about your book?"

"I finished the first draft a week ago, Lou," he says, sighing and heading for the kitchen. He opens the refrigerator and gets out the macaroni salad and cold cuts I got ready for dinner. "Where's the bread?"

"Jake, that's great, why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not good, Lou. I've spent a week looking at it and it's not good. The characters are undefined, the dialog's weak, the story line doesn't go anywhere. . . ."

I look at Jake and wonder what it means. He's never spoken about his work like this before. Maybe he will give up on this book and write the detective novel.

"It's only the first draft," he says. "I'm going to rewrite it. I'll just back off a little, like today, and get some things done around here. Then I'll be ready to get down to business." Jake spreads mayonnaise on bread and
layers meat on it. He eats in silence for several minutes. "There's something else Lou. The book needs a lot of work. I might have to change the voice, take it in a whole new direction. I've been thinking about what you said, about wanting to have a baby... it's just not a good time for me right now, Lou. I don't have time for a baby."

I know what is in his head. He is thinking I cannot do this for you, you are asking too much. The thoughts I had but never voiced when he came home full of plans about moving to Montana. I have given things up for him. I left my home, left my family, my job, everything I knew in life, except him, I left. It doesn't matter that what I had doesn't compare to his dream. A book doesn't compare to what I want.

"I have time, Jake. Plenty of time."

"But there's no rush. I'm not saying never, Lou. Maybe in a few months, if things are going better, maybe we can think about it then."

What I need from him is such a small thing. One tiny sperm in a stream of sperms, one that is stronger than the others. That's it. One sperm to join with my egg. To rest in my womb. To grow in my belly. To become my child, the one who will nurse at my breast, turn to my voice. I've imagined this, and except for giving me the sperm, Jake is
upstairs, through it all, working on his book. How is that putting him out?

"I'm saying now, Jake."

His blue eyes flash and he leaves his plate still half full of food and gets up from the table. Without saying another word he goes upstairs to his study. I've been married to Jake for six years and this is the first time I have seen him leave his dinner unfinished.

***

In the evening the wind is cold and strong. I like to sit sometimes, at the end of our dock, wrapped in an old army blanket, and dangle my feet over the edge. The low water doesn't reach them. I don't really like water. I never learned to swim. When we first moved to the lake Jake talked about teaching me to float on my back. And I saw how it might be, his hands strong under my back, his voice encouraging. "That's it, Lou. That's it." Like he'd ever make the time.

Jake likes to dream he'll use the advance he'll get on his book and buy a small boat. Take up fishing. Spend all day on the lake with a rod and reel, whisper his stories into a tape recorder and have them transcribed.

I keep my back to our house, where I know there is one light burning, on the second floor, and cast on the stitches
for one edge of a small white blanket. Eighty stitches. I will get it ready. I will wrap it in tissue paper so it stays fresh. Damn Jake.

I could stop taking my birth control. Flush the pills down the toilet, every morning, one by one. Let Jake think I'm still swallowing them. But when I couldn't hide it any more, when he'd have to guess from my vomiting and swollen breasts, he'd be mean, complaining that I'd tricked him. Sulking and cursing, he'd tell me he had his book, he didn't want a child.

I tell myself I don't need him. I can drive to Spokane, or Portland. I can take a plane back to L.A. I can go to a sperm bank and fill out forms. Chose a man from a profile in a folder. Someone tall, blond, with no history of health problems. Someone who drives a truck. Or coaches little league. When the nurse asks what I'm looking for in a father for my child I will tell her I don't want anyone literary.

I don't need Jake. I can go out, I can meet a man, rendezvous at some hotel, ask him to masturbate into a cup. Sit naked in the bathtub with a meat baster. I can put an ad in the classifieds, under the personals column: Wanted, high quality sperm. References required.

I don't need Jake. I say it aloud, over and over again, to make it true. I put my knitting down and lay on
my stomach, my head hanging over the water. Tears fall into the lake, unwelcome, salty and warm, lost in the cold dark water.

***

Jake decides to put up the storm windows. He is looking for things to do. He needs to keep busy so he can think about his book, plot it all out in his mind before he gets back to his computer. I don't offer to help. I get out the red yarn and start to knit myself a sweater. Slowly I cast on and make the cuff of a sleeve. I have to be careful, to concentrate on the ribbing stitch. The load of wood comes, days after it was promised, and Jake leaves his windows to help unload it, stacking log after log between two trees close to the cabin. Those logs will have to be split. I can do it, a little at a time, as we need it. There is an axe in the shed. I can wear my red sweater against the cold as I chop the wood, lifting the axe above my head and bringing it down. I work at my knitting until I have almost six inches of sleeve done.

"What's for dinner?" Jake asks.

"Hot dogs and beans," I say, opening a can and pouring it into a glass bowl, putting it in the microwave to heat.
"We used to eat this all the time when I was a kid. You'll love it."

"No I won't," he says, "but I'll eat it."

"I've been busy."

"Lou, I've been busy. I unloaded the wood. I put up all the storm windows. You've been sitting on the couch."

"I've been knitting."

"Knitting?"

"Yeah, and I've been thinking. I might want to do it full time. Start a cottage industry. Knit sweaters and sell them at a road-side stand."

"You're not serious."

"Why not?"

"You couldn't possibly make any money at it."

"Well, it'd be something to do. Something to try."

"Look, Lou," Jake says, "if it means hot dogs and beans for dinner, I'm against it."

"Hot dogs and beans won't kill you."

Jake runs his hands through his hair and down the back of his neck. "I know you're disappointed, Lou. I know you want to have a baby now, but I'd like to finish my book. I can't do both. A baby would be a distraction."

"The book is the focus of your life Jake, not mine. I need a distraction."
Jake won't look me in the eye. "Well," he says, standing up. "I think I'll call Owen."

***

I put a roast, potatoes and carrots into the crock pot, on low, so they will be ready for dinner at six. I take my knitting in a plastic shopping bag and walk through the woods to show Phyllis my sweater. She checks the work closely and says, "Nice and even, good tension. But red's not your color, Lou." She takes the needles and moves her hands very slowly, showing me how to bind off the stitches to end the sleeve. She passes it back to me and I try to do what she has shown me.

"Look," she says, pointing to her window. "First snow." Fine white drops of wet drift down from the sky, melting as they hit the ground. "Won't be long now, the whole place'll be covered. The lake will freeze over. The last few years it's frozen in whitecaps, but when I was a girl we used to skate on it."

"The ice must get awfully thick." I'd never considered the lake would freeze.

"It does," Phyllis says. "You tap on it to make sure. The sound of the tap tells you if it's thick enough or not. That's how we used to cross rivers and creeks, before they
had bridges over them." She checks the few stitches I've worked off and nods. "That's right. Good. I like to sit and watch the snow. When I was young I didn't have time to sit and watch things. You learn to as you get old."

"I was looking forward to the winter," I tell Phyllis. "I've never lived where it snowed. I thought it might be a nice change." Last night I dreamed I started helping out at the library. I dreamed I grew to like shopping in the small stores in Polson. I dreamed forgot what it was like to drive on the freeway, that I grew anxious turning left without a light. "I don't know anymore, Phyllis."

"Winter's a quiet time, Lou. I do what I can and don't worry over what I can't do. You'll see."

I walk back through the woods softly, hoping to see the deer. Do they come out when snow's in the air? Jake is waiting for me when I come in the door.

"Where have you been?" he asks. "Did you see the snow?" There is a small stack of wood beside the brick fireplace.

"You started a fire?" I ask him. "It's not even that cold."

"I wanted to try it out, you know, get the hang of it before winter really sets in."

"I thought you were writing today."
"I was," he says. "I finished the outline for a new detective novel."

"You told Owen you'd do it?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you were tired of detective novels."

"I was. I mean I am. I'm going to try a new detective. Start a new series. Maybe that'll help."


"I'll still work on it," he says. "I can do both."

"Both? You can do both? It won't be too distracting?"

I wonder what I ever saw in this stingy man, why I ever stood with him in a church and said I do.

Jake shrugs. A small movement. It was that. His little boy shrug. His drooping eyes when he is sleepy. His impulse to do dumb things like light fires we don't need. The way he smiles wide when he knows he's made me happy. The way he reaches for my hand without thinking about it. All those things brought me here, to him. To this moment when I realize they add up to nothing. And everything. It isn't fair.

"How's the knitting?" he asks. Like he is really interested.

"Fine," I say.

"Whatever you're cooking it sure smells good. We could eat in front of the fire, celebrate our first snow."
"How cozy." Something to remember when we are as old as Phyllis. The time we celebrated our first snow in Montana, when we were young. A memory for the time we will grow into, something to hold on to as little possibilities pass us by.

"Should we open a bottle of wine?" Jake asks.

"You go ahead. Go ahead and eat. I'm not hungry."

I put the white baby yarn, some of it waiting ready on a needle, in my bottom dresser drawer. Under the skirts I haven't worn since I left California.

***

It is a good day for a stew. Overnight snow fell and stayed on the trees and on the ground, a small layer of white. I cut up a chunk of meat in a pot of water and slice vegetables. I can season it with curry and bake fresh biscuits. I go out on the porch and look at the snow. It is a good day for a red sweater. If it was finished. But there will be more days like this. More days to knit. I'll finish both sweaters. Near the trees the snow looks dirty. It's been broken. The deer have been by. Maybe this winter I will stand on this porch, or inside, looking out the window, and wait for them. I can watch the lake from here too. Watch as it changes from something grey and moving
into something white and firm. Maybe when it is frozen 
solid I'll learn to listen for just the right sound of a 
tap, and how to skate across the ice.
Michele leaned over the sink, watching the dirty dish water rush into the drain. She put one wet hand on her large stomach. It must be gas. She shouldn't have had carnitas for lunch. She looked across the room. Rick sat in front of the TV, oblivious to everything except America's Most Wanted. The pig.

She hated him. Hated the way he sat there, mumbling fuck and shit. Hated his voice. Hated the way the sound of it hit her when he spoke. Hated his balding head. Hated the way he smelled, like Polo cologne and sweat. Hated his stocky body and his round arms. Hated his touch.

Michele straightened the kitchen towels on the rack and walked past Rick, down the hall to Anna's room. She listened to her little girl's deep breathing. No nap today at daycare so Anna had fallen asleep during dinner. Just like that. One minute she'd been eating her peas one by one and the next minute her body slumped. So Michele'd had to
wash her and get her out of the highchair and into bed. Rick couldn't be bothered.

Anna would sleep until ten or eleven or even midnight and then she would wake up crying and she'd be hungry and Michele would have to get her something to eat, give her a quick sponge bath and play with her for a little while before Anna would go back to sleep. Michele sighed. She may as well lie down and hope to take a short nap herself or she'd never be able to get up in the morning and make it to work.

Pregnancy hit Michele hard. Especially now, in the last few weeks. It had been the same way with Anna. Tired all the time. She'd barely been starting to feel like her old self, and not depressed all the time, when Anna was almost two, then she got pregnant again and it started all over. The constipation, the crying, the morning sickness, the swollen legs, the sleepless nights. It was all Rick's fault.

He just kept pushing one night. Putting his face in hers and touching her all over when she was so tired from work and taking care of Anna and cooking and doing laundry all she wanted to do was go to sleep. The next thing she knew he was inside of her without a condom and without any chance for her to put in a sponge. He swore he'd pull out, but of course he didn't. His pathetic excuse, "It just
isn't the same." She'd know right then that she was pregnant. Known that in a few weeks she'd miss her period. Known her breasts would be heavy and sore. Known that the receptionist at the doctor's office would congratulate her when she called with the test results. Known that she didn't want another child. Known that she'd have to have it.

Michele walked back to the living room and looked at Rick sitting on the couch. If she had a gun she could cock the trigger and he'd never even know it. She could hold it out in front of her body and inch toward him and he'd never even know it.

"I'm going to lie down," she told him.

"Hmm?"

She went into the bedroom and closed the door tight to shut out the sound of the TV. She changed into a nightgown and lay down on the bed, curling her body onto one side to try to calm her stomach.

***

The first time Michele went to the rehabilitation clinic to visit her husband, Gabriel, he wasn't in his room. Rick was sitting on a chair, waiting.
"Gabe's talking to one of the shrinks," he said. After weeks of talking to counselors Gabriel was still in step one of recovery. He had a bad attitude. Although he'd been able to call her, this was the first time they'd allowed him to have a visitor. "He said you'd be coming by. I'm Rick."

Gabriel had told her about Rick, his new friend. Rick was an alcoholic. His father had been an alcoholic. His grandfather had been an alcoholic. Rick came to the clinic so he could keep his job with the railroad. Michele sat on the edge of Gabriel's bed and crossed her legs. She smoothed her hands over her jeans, her fingers splayed, nails long and shiny. She looked down and then up again, her long hair moving about her face. She licked her lips and smiled at Rick, hoping that Gabriel would walk in.

"You know why Gabriel's here?" she asked Rick. Gabriel was there because their life together had fallen apart. Michele had found out about his drug habit, his affair with a sleazy cholita and his lost job. He'd broken down and cried. Michele told him the only way she'd stay with him was if he got off drugs.

Rick said, "He talked about it in group." So there wasn't much else to say. Rick knew all her secrets. She hadn't even told her family everything. It was too humiliating.

"I'm getting out soon," Rick said.
Michele kept smiling, her lips stretched so tight she thought her face would break.

A few days later Rick stopped by to see Michele at the Pomona Unified School District Office. She worked in the student attendance office. Casually, he asked about Gabriel, how she was holding up, how she liked her job. He suggested they go to lunch. Nothing special, he said. Just two friends out for lunch. Michele accepted the invitation.

"Do you like Chinese?" Rick asked.

"Yes," Michele said, even though she didn't. She suggested Chung King's. Gabriel knew the owners, who weren't Chinese at all, and she wanted them to see her with Rick. He was compact and had blond hair, even if it was thinning on top. He looked good in comparison with Gabriel who was fat, with dark greasy hair. Let them talk, Michele thought. And let the whispers float back to Gabriel.

Gabriel left the clinic. He just walked out one day. He was waiting in the apartment when Michele came home from work. "I couldn't stay at that place. I really miss you," Gabriel said. He followed her all through the apartment, sticking close.

Michele knew what he wanted. "One night," she told him. "You can stay here just one night." She imagined she was the other woman, looking at Gabriel. What did she see?
What was this man to a woman who didn't have a history with him? Michele decided she would have sex with him one more time. For closure. And then their ten years together would be over.

The next morning Michele called in sick and told Gabriel to get out before she called the cops. She got the locks changed on the doors and went to Legal Aid to see about a divorce. Rick called her that night.

"You weren't at work," he said. "Were you sick?"

"No. I went to a lawyer."

Rick said he was thinking of going to Las Vegas. "Come with me," he said. "It would do you good to get out of town. We could drive up in a couple of hours, have some fun and come right back."

Michele hesitated. She and Gabriel had been married in Las Vegas, at the Chapel of the West. They'd driven up with her parents and his, her brother and all his sisters. She'd worn a lace dress and carried flowers, like it was a real wedding. Michele could almost pretend it was. There was a stage like an altar and seats arranged like pews. The recorded music sounded like an organ.

Gabriel had been loaded. He'd stood next to Michele with eyes as vacant as the sky. In an instant Michele had known Gabriel never would have said "I do" if he were
straight. She'd wanted to turn and run, but everyone was watching, and other couples were waiting in line, so she'd said "I do." But Rick wasn't taking her to Las Vegas to marry her.

He was taking her to Las Vegas to get her to bed. She knew it and she wanted to go with him. She wanted to get back at Gabriel. She wanted to make him feel like he couldn't breathe, the way she had felt when she found the too small black undies in the glove compartment of his car. She wanted to make him feel sick to his stomach, the way she had when she called the phone company to ask about the numbers on a bill that added up to nine hundred dollars and found out they were sex lines.

She wanted to know if what she read in magazines and heard from other women was true. She wanted to know if sex was about orgasms and feeling good. She wanted to be young again, seventeen, before she'd married Gabriel. She wanted to believe it was about more than his heavy body, fists, stickiness and disgust. She wanted to try another man.

Michele and Rick stopped at The Excalibur and played all the booths on the lower floor, the ones for kids. They posed behind cardboard cutout that made them look like princess and a knight with a sword. Rick put the picture in his wallet. They walked across the street and Rick showed
Michele how to play blackjack at the Tropicana. They played nickel slots there and ate all they could at the buffet. They never made it any further down the strip. Rick said he was tired.

"I'll never be able to drive back," he said. "We'll have to get a room."

At the Motel Six Michele took off all her clothes except the light blue teddy she'd bought at Victoria's Secret, specially for this night. Rick didn't try to take it off her, he just stroked her all over, kissing her and asking her what she liked. She said, "That, that, that," to everything he did until then there was just him in her and it was good.

Michele was sorry she told Rick about the baby the minute the words were out of her mouth. "Weren't you on the pill?" he demanded. "Get an abortion. "The timing's all wrong."

Michele had taken the pill for a few months right after she'd married Gabriel and then stopped because it made her sick to her stomach. She and Gabriel never used any other birth control and Michele had never gotten pregnant. Gabriel'd told her she must be infertile. Michele shouldn't have believed him, but he wore the thought into her, saying it so much. She did not tell this to Rick.
She ignored him. This was not for him to decide. She thought of all the years with Gabriel when she'd wanted a baby and not gotten pregnant. Years Gabriel had told her she couldn't have a baby. Years she'd believed him and been too embarrassed to go to a doctor to find out for sure. She would not throw this chance, possibly her only chance to have a child, away. She decided she'd have a little girl.

Often she dreamed she was running through Ganesha Park. It was safe, there weren't any drug dealers and gang members hanging there. No dead bodies in the bushes. A small blonde girl held her hand. They both smiled at the world. Awake she was sure it would be that way.

Michele announced her pregnancy to her family, announced it at work and listened to the objections everyone raised.

"How could you do this? You're still married to Gabriel!"

"How will you afford it?"

"How will you manage alone?"

She listened to her answering machine when the phone rang and didn't pick up if it was Rick. He left messages.

"Did you take care of it yet?"

"Pick up this goddamn phone, I need to talk to you."

"Do you need money to get it done?"

"I know you're there. Call me."
When he called at work Michele hung up and said it was a wrong number. Or an obscene caller. She checked her insurance plan and preregistered at the hospital. She asked her sister to be her lamaze coach. Inside her something small, a butterfly, started to flex new wings.

Rick showed up one night at her door. Michele'd begun having morning sickness, every evening. She'd try to eat dinner slowly, to keep it down, but it didn't work and she rushed into the bathroom and threw up until she shook and was sure the baby was coming up with the next wave. She was afraid of what was going on with her body. Afraid of what was growing inside of her. Afraid of what her family and friends were telling her. She let him in.

"I like Amanda," Rick said. He read a baby name book every night during commercials and used a red pencil to mark the names he liked. "Amanda if it's a girl."

Michele said no to every name he chose. She refused to name any child Amanda because she might latter be called Mandy. She didn't like Patricia because she'd known a Patty once and never liked her. She didn't like Christina. She didn't like Cheryl. Michele chose the name Anna. Anna Marie. That much was easy. The last name was a bit tricky. Michele's last name was still legally Herrara. But she couldn't name the baby Herrara. She could give the baby her
maiden name, Wilson, but since she wasn't planning to change back to it after the divorce that didn't make sense. And she couldn't just choose any name that she happened to like. Rick's last name would have to do. Anna Marie Miklesen. Well, it was like a protection. A proof that Rick couldn't dispute. He couldn't say Anna wasn't his child and refuse to pay support.

"How about Dennis if it's a boy?" Rick asked.

Michele shook her head. "I'm having a girl."

Once when she was at her parent's house Gabriel showed up. He said he came by to talk to her father, but Michele knew he must have seen her car out front and stopped to see the baby. She showed Anna to him proudly and watched his face fall as he looked at the tiny head with pale hair and the fair sleeping face. She watched him give up on the small hope that the baby was really his. Michele thought she saw machismo ooze from his body.

Anna was a colicky baby and cried for hours every night while Michele held her, walking back and forth across the living room. Rick sat on the couch and turned up the volume on the TV. "She's crying because she doesn't like the daycare," he said.

"She sleeps all day at her daycare," Michele said. "She likes it fine."
"You should stay home and take care of her," Rick said.
"And do what for money?"
"Sell your car."

Michele refused. She knew Rick's plan. He wanted her to lose everything she had so she would have to rely on him. And he would give her nothing. She kept walking the baby. The baby kept crying. Rick fell asleep in front of the TV.

On weekends Michele took Anna outside, pushing her stroller around the block. Everyone said babies needed fresh air. Anna's face would turn blotchy red and she would open her small mouth and scream. Nothing was as Michele had dreamed it.

Rick had a habit of standing around while Michele got things done. Things like the cooking, the laundry, the vacuuming. He liked to suggest ways she might manage her time and get everything done. He was on the night shift, with a layover in Barstow, but he couldn't watch Anna because if he was home he needed to sleep or he might get a call to come early. Michele got up early to get herself and Anna ready to go. She stayed up late to get the things they would need for the next day ready.

Sometimes Michele couldn't stand to see Rick in her bed or on her couch another minute and screamed at him to leave. "Go," she'd say. "I want you to go." He never did.
"You don't mean it," he'd say. "You're just mad."

Or, "You're just stressed out from work," or "It's just PMS."

She thought of ways to get him out of her life. Car accidents, hired killers. Michele started a savings account. She would try to save enough money for a down payment on a little house for Anna and her. One with a backyard and a fence. She thought one day she would just empty the apartment while Rick was on a run and he'd come back and find them gone.

With another baby coming all that had changed. Michele's dreams were falling apart. She'd need all the money in her account to cover her maternity leave, and formula and diapers, and baby food. When she went back to work her daycare costs would double. And Rick would still be sitting on the couch. Watching *Top Cops* and saying "Shit," like it was all there was in the world.

Michele had bad dreams about the new baby. Restless dreams about small red bodies and nurses with shocked eyes. She'd wake up hot and cold at the same time, her arms clenched tightly across her chest, scared of herself.

She relived things in her mind. If only things had been different when Rick had come to her door that one night. If only she'd opened the door and told him he
couldn't come in, told him she didn't want him there, not ever. If only she'd looked through the peephole on her door before she opened it and refused to open it when she saw it was him. If only she'd listened to his knocking, listened to it become pounding, listened until someone, a neighbor, had shouted at him to go away.

***

Curled on her bed, Michele heard the pounding. Nobody yelled for it to stop. She felt it strong and steady in her stomach, again and again. She didn't care. She wouldn't answer it. This time she wouldn't answer it.