

The Subaru's air-conditioning purrs arduously, pitted against the one-hundred-and-one degree radiance of Texas, turning the dust on its dash to platinum lint and burning twin suns into the big black lenses hiding Tom's wife's eyes. Tatters of orange peel, a Styrofoam cup whose crescent indentations are the repeated nicks of Tom's wife's thumbnail, a foxed map folded to the Rio Grande, a tiny quartz arrowhead—bird point—from the desert beyond the last rest stop: the litter, cumulatively somehow depressing, of five hours' conversationless travel. Her silence isn't aimed at him, Tom knows. They're not a couple to nurse mutual incomprehension in silence; they're more likely to expect too much of each other, and so, after a little oblique study, he decided to leave Nina alone.

Ten miles back, she'd caught his wrist and slanted it toward herself to read his watch, and then, he'd thought, she would say something; she'd say, "It's two o'clock," or "It's getting late," in the faintly marveling tone she reserves for that observation, but she'd said nothing after all. In essence, despite touching him, she had not felt compelled to acknowledge his existence. She'd simply taken possession of his wrist. For years they had done such things back and forth without their meaning anything. She had straightened his tie, or he had brushed strands of hair from the corner of her smile. He can remember using a fingertip to rub lipstick from one of her front teeth, the left, which minutely, endearingly, overlaps the other, his favorite imperfection in her body. Just now her clasp was too light to alter the peacefulness with which his hand lay on the wheel. Her touch was utterly familiar, light, practical, dismissive, quick. It made him nervous. Yet they can't make each other nervous; it's a possibility that vanished from their marriage long ago. They're so deeply unselfconscious with each other, in fact, that it's not even clear that she "borrowed" his wrist, or "took temporary possession" of it. It's as if she read her own watch, really, moving her own arm slightly to do so, thinking nothing of it. Her touch couldn't have been more neutral, so why did he experience it as so suddenly, exquisitely sexual? If a stranger, someone he'd never seen before, touched him unexpectedly, wanting only to learn the time, he would feel this intruded on, this moved. How can Nina's touch be as disturbing as a stranger's? A generous interpretation: sex, sensing a vacuum, nimbly presents itself as a way of making contact.

Here, on the map, the Rio Grande's blue hairline intersects the black dashes of the Mexican border, but if the river's down there, it's lost in the glare of sunstruck sand. The American traffic slows for the bridge. On its far side the sentry boxes that should house Mexican Customs are boarded shut, spray-painted in slashes and scrawls naming couples and sexual acts. Nina asks, "Nobody stops us?"

"Hey, they want us," Tom says, relieved. Garbo talks. She goes further, twisting in her seat belt to report, of the baby behind them in his car seat, "Still out. Thumb in his mouth."

"Is he getting enough air-conditioning?"

She leans over the seat back to not-quite-touch the baby's forehead. "I think so."

The books say parents should spend time alone with each twin, but this is almost the first occasion Wills and Griffin have been separated. Griffin has been left in Santa Fe with the boys' sitter, Carmelita Diaz, who was hardly in the door before she cocked a confident hip for Griffin to straddle and told Nina to leave now, please, before the *hijito* knew what was happening. If Nina had only trusted her with Wills, too, this weekend would surely be easier.

Juárez is, first, a small park of dead grass edged with dying palms and an asphalt spur where drivers lean against their cabs, surveying the crush of tourist traffic. Tom could park the Subaru, safe in its shiny, uninsured Americanness, and bargain for a cab. Too late. Traffic carries him past the turnoff. His sunglasses are so clouded with baby fingerprints that he hands them to Nina to burnish on her skirt, hoping that her gesture will clear his mind as well.

What he wants wiped away is a scene: himself, growling like an airplane, aiming a spoon at

Griffin's mouth, while in his high chair Wills yelled, "Da! Da-da!" Nina came up behind, putting an arm around Tom's neck, weighing against him until he knew from the tightening helplessness of her hold that something was wrong and asked, "O.K., what?" She said, "I am," and he had to look from the brilliant blue slip of litmus paper into her eyes, also brilliant, reading there that until he too saw this proof, she had not believed it. "Oh, Nina, no," he said. "It can't be right."

"It is right. I knew anyway. I feel like before."

Griffin threw his bowl to the floor, and oatmeal splattered Nina's bare feet. She bent to wipe them clean with the sleeve of her sweatshirt, and he couldn't see her face for the fall of her hair when she said, "I can't have another baby."

"I know."

He was agreeing, but she went on as if he hadn't, her voice as furious as when they quarreled. "These two take everything. I'd be gone. I'd disappear. My life would be gone."

He turns his head briefly for Nina to slide his glasses back on. Her touch smarts on his nose, burned from the few desert minutes in which, walking away from the rest stop into an arroyo whose air had the sick shimmer of gasoline-tainted heat, past the inevitable charred tires and shattered glass, he'd found the quartz point. It had a fresh whiteness like salt's, and was weightless as a contact lens, ancient, intact, still pristinely sharp. He'd wished he could walk farther—an archaeologist's constant impulse—but Nina was waiting, and he hadn't worn his baseball cap. Usually he's pretty self-protective. The sun at his dig in Chaco Canyon has an X-ray intensity. He's in the sun a lot. Gone a lot. Nina's needed him, and he just hasn't been home. The sleepless intensity of the twins' first ten months fell almost entirely on her. This time there's anguish in the commonplace recognition that he could have been more careful.

"This traffic," Nina says vaguely.

"Want to stop?"

"Where? And it would wake Wills."

"How's he doing?"

Absurd to ask for the second time in five minutes, but again Nina reassures him, "He's really out. He's fine," the tenderness in her tone referring backward, as she assumes his anxiety does, to ten months ago, to a relief so pure that time has scarcely diluted it. His brother was fine, but Wills, too small, spent his first week in neonatal care, heels periodically pricked for blood, fists small as violin scrolls, chapped skin distressingly red against sterile cotton; even his mewling sounded raw, fetal, exposed. Nina would not touch him. The nurses said this was not an uncommon response. It wasn't unusual, even, that Nina didn't want to name him. Attachment, at this point, seemed too dangerous, but a touch or a name would be good signs. Under the heat lamp's mild aura the newborn waited, silver disks taped to his chest, wires flexing minutely with his breathing, illumined dials presiding, until one night Nina, stepping cautiously across the trailing wires, stroked his cheek. His head jerked, his eyes opened to her gaze. In a corner, there was a rocking chair. The nurses whispered back and forth. Wills gained two ounces—three—to weigh four and a half pounds. Rocking, Nina looked up at Tom as if she didn't remember him. The baby that might not make it was always crying, Nina's head bent until her lips grazed his hair, repeating the name she'd given him: Will, to add, with each repetition, a feather's weight to the side opposite death. Tom was stunned, when once a vial of the baby's blood was carried past him, by the wish to cry out.

Ten days, then two weeks. Their neighbor Carmelita Diaz had moved into their house, taking over Griffin. Though he needed a way to pass the time, there were only so many phone calls Tom could stand to make, so many quarters he could stand to send chinging into the pay phone in the corridor. Once as he waited there, about to dial his home number again, a nightgowned girl in labor approached, wheeling her IV stand, stopping to brace herself against a wall when a contraction hit. Tom found

himself wanting to ask, as her breathing eased, if he could do something, get her something, but his T-shirt was sweated through under the arms; he probably smelled of his own sick tension. He hung up the phone. He went to the window: outside was a July evening, birds skimming past, cumulonimbus clouds boiling up over the Sangre de Cristos. Tom leaned his forehead and forearm against glass alive with the permanent, mute, scarcely perceptible tremor of air-conditioning, while the girl, with small moans, rode out another contraction.

In the end, they were lucky: Wills weighing five pounds, they went home, but the emotional constellation formed in neonatal care subversively persists. It's Wills whose hold on his parents is the more potent and infatuated, Griffin who chose to wean himself abruptly, biting Nina whenever she unbuttoned for him. Letting himself in one evening, wondering at the silence, Tom padded in stocking feet through the house to find Nina asleep in a pile of dirty laundry, the naked twins crawling around her. As Tom caught Wills, Griffin peed, crowing, on Tom's favorite shirt. It was an hour before Tom got both boys bathed and in bed, and still Nina lay dreaming in a welter of sheets and shirts and small overalls.

"Did we lose a dirty diaper in here?" Tom asks. "No," Nina says shortly. A lick of red hair, loosed from her chignon, clings to Nina's nape, and her freckles are out in force. Six lanes of idling American cars are the Avenida de la Revolution. Neon ice in cones: their vendor, a pretty girl ducking to Tom's window, smiles brightly to show missing front teeth. Nina shakes her head, and the girl is gone. Glacierlike, the glittering cars grind forward in concerted, decisive inches. Nina bites her thumbnail in rapid, critical clicks. What her ob-gyn in Santa Fe gently told Nina was that abortions are not considered safe before six weeks. She was—the sonogram proved—only four weeks along. The wait is now almost behind them. The abortion is scheduled for Monday, the day after tomorrow, in Santa Fe, but they couldn't have stood waiting at home.

When a street opens to their right, Tom tries it. "How hot do you think it is?" Nina says. "Do you know where we're going?"

"Is there a dirty diaper lost in here?" Tom demands, with such miserable rudeness that she scrabbles underfoot even as he chooses street after street for their increasing emptiness, and the buildings on either side grow smaller, meeker, older, and more foreign, their plaster no longer pink or turquoise but dusty ocher, no neon advertising *cerveza*, no iron flourishes. When Nina sits up, having found nothing, the world is poor and shut against them.

"I hate this," she says.

"Well, we're lost." Desperately, he's trying to reconstruct the turns he made, each on the spur of the moment, no logic linking them, when Nina says, "Look," and a bicycle whisks alongside agilely as a trotting dog. The bicycle's crouching child, a wing of black hair falling just shy of his eyes, asks Tom, "Where to?" This phrase exhausts the boy's English and he can only, pitched forward optimistically over the handlebars, wait on Tom's answer; he does this by gracefully, agreeably coasting, adding not a pedal's stroke of pressure to his sweet selling job.

Nina leans across Tom, her hand on his leg, and asks in Spanish to be led to the big shopping *mercado, por favor*. The bicycle flicks away, down an even narrower street, and Tom asks, "Did we have a deal?"

"He's showing off," Nina says, "but yes."

"What are you getting us into?" Tom wrenches the Subaru into the turn, but it's tight, and he's glancing back to check the fender when Nina cries "No!" in time for Tom to brake, the Subaru jolting to a stop, the boy inches before them, holding up his arms to show no harm was done. Nina calls, "*Oye, chico, demasiado cerca!*"

"Can you get him back? I'm going to get out and scream at him. That was fucking dangerous."

"In what language?"

"He'd get it."

"He thought he'd lost his rich customers," Nina says, "plus he's a little macho."

"Now where are we?" Tom asks, because this street is wider, opening into another, where spandex-legged girls balance on high heels and iron arabesques guard shop windows. Here it is again, the blazing Avenida, traffic locked tight, and Tom hammers the wheel with a fist.

"It's O.K., it's O.K.," Nina says.

"How is this O.K.?"

"So he made a mistake. He can't be more than ten."

"I should never have followed him," Tom says, and then, "Did you notice his hand?"

"His hand?"

"He's got it bandaged in something filthy."

"All I saw was his face. His face is beautiful."

"I haven't given him a dime," Tom says, "and he's sitting out there for us in that sun."

Tremors of movement run toward them through the traffic. The boy waits for an opening to the right, taking it so fast that Tom pops his turn signal and begs over his shoulder for a way in. Granted, by an Isuzu pickup; Nina waves thanks, and the boy shoots away again, another lane over, behind a refrigerator truck.

"I'm going to lose him again if he's not careful."

"Pay attention."

"This is his fault," Tom insists, because it's infuriating, the adroit bicycle, the blocked traffic unpredictably spurting ahead, the glare he's squinting into when Nina cries out. Something thumps into them and spills with a raggedly rolling momentum across the hood and down. He has automatically slowed and stopped, he has even assured himself from the rearview that he won't get hit from behind, because while his fear is great, it has endowed Tom with the lucidity of adrenaline, plowing him through a single vast thought at a time as everything around him shudders, slows, and stalls, and the beautiful life he has lived until this moment breaks off and floats away.

Nina pleads, "Don't go," in a tone so passionate and clear that he listens to her; he stops, thinking she knows something he's missed, but of course she doesn't, and though he hates leaving her now he answers in a voice as clear as her own, "I killed him," and climbs from the car to crouch at what should be the body of the boy and is, instead, *instead*, a khaki duffel from which, by lifting and violently shaking, he spills five pairs of boots, their leather superheatedly slick in the sun, unreal, real. From nearby cars, he is called a whore's son, an idiot, a *chingal*, but he feels an exquisite high, setting each miraculous boot onto its sharp-toed shadow. Nina is squatting, asking, "Are you all right?"

"I'm wonderful."

"Please don't lose it. Not now."

They stand up together. He takes her sunglasses off for the first time that day to tell her eyes "I love you."

"I know."

"How are you? Are you O.K.?"

"I'm fine," she says, but the bearded guy who's climbing out of the Mercedes in front of them, having heard Tom's question, feels obscurely bound to repeat it, and when Nina doesn't answer, he tries Tom. "How are you? How is she?" He's wearing a Dodgers cap, and mirror shades; little of his expression shows. "I'm a doctor," he adds.

"What's with the boots?" Tom asks, over the symphony of horns and insults.

"I bring my boots down here to get them reheelled. A Mexican guy does it for me. Hospital floors wear them right down. We're having one hell of a fight, and she says she can't stand it, and chucks these boots out the window before I can stop her. Throws the back door right open. She's always throwing things of mine away. Sometimes I come home after a long day to find two dozen shirts on the lawn, flung all over, getting rained on by the sprinklers. Next time we come down to Juarez it's for a divorce." He shakes his head heavily. "My insurance is taking care of this." He flicks through a satiny black wallet for a card.

"Good," Tom says.

Nina says, "We're leaving. I'm driving," hooking her sunglasses; Tom had forgotten he had them. She tells the bearded doctor, "We never want to hear from you. Never, got it?"

The guy appeals to Tom—"You should take this"—but Nina drops the card into the street. Nina drives, and either Juarez does not confuse her or the accident has, oddly, cleared her mind. A small street with one pretty restaurant in its middle appears for her. They park under palms. Inside, the restaurant is wonderfully cold and dark. Nina deciphers the handwritten menu while Wills peels cellophane from a saltine. The waitress stops to admire Wills's corn-silk blondness before liberating him from his high chair and waltzing him away.

"I should trust this, but I don't," Nina says, and follows. From the kitchen comes high, ecstatic Spanish—a baby party. The fuss is even worse when both twins are together. Tom agrees with himself that he's light-headed and should eat. The waitress reappears, alone but bearing huge plates. Tom tarts up his Tecate with salt and lime. In the poster above him, the bull's head is lowered, the cape soars out, and the matador's golden backside is beautiful as a girl's.

"It's nice you didn't go crazy back there with that guy," Nina says, returning to buckle Wills into his chair.

"I was so scared it was that kid I hit."

"You told me, 'I killed him.'"

"I remember."

" 'I killed him.' "

Well, didn't you think that?"

"I didn't think it was him you hit, no. You weren't being rational."

"So I'm the one who panics," he marvels, meaning he very slightly doubts her word. He doubts he went through those frantic emotions alone.

"Do you know that story Paula tells?" Paula is a friend of theirs, an anthropologist working in Cuzco; he nods, and she goes on. "The earthquake wakes her in the middle of the night, and she grabs her husband, and they're flat in the bed with fear, and it's this long, long time for them before they think of the baby in his crib across the room."

"And?"

"Don't be like that. Don't expect me to be like that."

"I still don't understand." "I mean"—she sets her fork down—"Paula fears for herself. That's natural. You feared for that boy. That's natural. All I think of is Wills right behind us in his car seat, strapped in, safe, quiet, O.K., and my fear stops right there, and that's natural. I'm not going to judge the way any of us responds to things. In what people feel, they're alone."

"But that's so lonely," Tom says. "I couldn't stand to believe that."

"You want to know the first time I even remembered that boy? When we got back into the car and traffic had carried him away, I thought, 'He's not going to get paid.' Then I felt sorry for him."

Tom says, "His instinct would be not to hang around trouble. The cops could come."

Wills oils a piece of avocado with saliva and skates it around his tray. Nina says, "Eat it, Wills."

Eat it. Eat it." Wills says, "Da fix," and sweeps it to the floor. He trades stares with his mother, angelic sweetness on his side, maternal inscrutability on hers. Nina says, "I want to go home *now*."

Under a half-moon, the border has backed up into a vast plain of taillights in which the only moving things are beggars. Tom hangs his hand out the window, but when a crippled girl lifts twenty dollars from his fingers and seesaws away on her crutches, he feels nothing, no more than if the wind had blown it away. U.S. Customs is the distant waist of the hourglass, letting a red grit of taillights tick through. In the seat behind him, Nina nurses Wills, being discreet because now and then a beggar leans right into the window, having observed that the driver is vulnerable, is guilty, will give. Though Tom empties his wallet, Nina says nothing. She doesn't say, "Save at least something." Nursing, Wills fools around, cooing to the breast. "I wish I was you," Tom tells Nina.

"Why?"

"Because all you do is sit there, and he gets what he needs." Tom keeps the Subaru nuzzled up against the rear of an old Ford pickup. Four men are sleeping there, dirty straw hats slanted down. When the truck reaches Customs, the inspector lowers his clipboard and lets his flashlight wake the men. He orders them out. They clamber down, standing ashamed in the concentrated light of waiting cars.

"These guys could take forever," Tom tells Nina. "They're Mexican, crossing on a big night. I'd be suspicious."

"Of what?"

"Don't you worry that Carmelita's husband comes and goes this way?" Carmelita's husband periodically disappears back to his Oaxacan hometown. "Sure," Nina says. "But he's paid somebody here. He knows how to get away with it. I'm not even sure she'd mind if he went to jail."

"The last time he was home, I could hear them making love," Tom says.

"What do you mean, you could hear them?"

She's not going to like this part. "It was when you had the flu and she stayed over. They were on the floor of the babies' room."

"My God," Nina says. "She's fired."

"They weren't loud. It was just their voices, talking."

"Were they happy?" He thinks. "Yes, they were happy. I think so." He waits a moment. "Nina, we'll be happy again. We'll be fine."

"You don't wish you were me," she says.

She's still behind him, so he can't see her. "Why don't I?"

"You couldn't stand to feel what I'm feeling."

The four men swing themselves in, the pickup rolls forward, and Nina and Tom are asked what country they're citizens of. The flashlight splashes the backseat bright as daylight and starts Wills crying, and he cries as they're waved through, he cries all the way through an El Paso abandoned for Saturday night, he cries at the desk under the disapproving gaze of the clerk and up the elevator of the hotel, the first hotel Tom noticed, Nina holding Wills and humming against his head. Somebody, some drunk, has punched all the buttons, and Wills cries in gusting wails until finally, as the elevator doors break apart on a last genteelly lit and carpeted corridor, he quiets.

Tom lugs bags around and settles them in while Nina bathes Wills. When Tom looks in on them, the mother leaning into the tub, the baby standing up sucking a washcloth, Nina yawns. "I can't stay awake," she says. "Please stay awake," he says, "we have to talk," but once she's put Wills down, singing him through his resistance to yet another strange place, she drags her T-shirt off, her shoulder blades set tight with fatigue, her bare back brilliant in the moment before the bathroom door closes.

Fresh water is run into the baby's leftover bath, a hairbrush clicks down against the sink, and then Tom hears her gratefulness as she enters the water, the skid of her bottom against porcelain, her chin tilted up, he imagines, so that her head can rest against the rim. While still distantly conscious of needing to stay awake, he's asleep. He's almost asleep. Wills whimpers and is shushed. Nina's in bed, then, and to his surprise she wants to make love. When they're done, she's still lying across him, breathing past his ear into the pillow; she says, "Sadness. Just such sadness"—answer to a question he can't remember asking. She kisses him before he can say "What?" His tongue finds the imprecision in her front teeth, that minute edge of overlap, and maybe because he's so tired he thinks something strange: if they were buried just like this, then someone unearthing Nina's skull could see that same flaw a hundred, a thousand, years from now, could even touch it, could be that far from now and not know what to feel.

Elizabeth Tallent

Table of Contents for Honey (<https://archive.org> copy)

Prowler 3 / Black Dress 21 / Ciudad Juárez 39 / Earth to Molly 53 / Honey 75 / Get It Back for Me 101/
Kid Gentle 119 / The Minute I Saw You 147 / James Was Here 173 / A Note About the Author 209