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HONEY

Elizabeth Tallent

Solidity, sober commitment, a roof over each dark Dominguez head—those are the things Mercedes desires for her children, desires with the erratic detachment from them illumining this, her sixty-third year. She did not bring seven children from Nicaragua in order for them to choose the doomed American existence of nerves rubbed raw by divorce, of quarrels, mutual contempt, and lawyers' costly ministrations, but their lives unravel in spite of her, coming undone even as she grows older, more secretly watchful, and increasingly pained in her estimation of what they are wasting. In the wavy mirror with which the airline has grudgingly outfitted its ladies', Mercedes could be sixty-eight, her pinned hair harshly white, or fifty-five, her pupils as pitch-black as when her husband, long dead, found his tiny horseshoe-mustached reflection there. Mercedes observes her eyes lovingly in the mirror and discovers she can no longer summon up his face.

She was his life, he said, his heart, his dove, tenderesses that, thus recollected, sting faintly as they pass through on their way back to the cool black vault that holds her marriage, her children's childhoods, and their life in Nicaragua. For an instant, under unlocked Nicaraguan palms, a child rides her shoulders, rubbing a leaf over Mercedes's forehead; another child swings crying from her husband's hand, two more race barefoot down the darkening dirt road before them. The friction of these details against Mercedes's composure is acute; far worse is the shock of her gross, consummate infidelity in having forgotten her husband's face. Her heart thuds alertly, fearfully trying to take the measure of this event. This is the first form grief takes with her—a sudden despair in standing still—and because the dim stainless-steel wedge of a bathroom could not be more confining, she turns stiffly around and around until dizziness seats her politely on the closed lid of the toy toilet. Someone knocks and goes away. The ache, which belongs to her heart, abruptly

descends to her stomach. Mercedes kneels to vomit. The pilot, a voice from far away, announces they are beginning the initial descent into Albuquerque, New Mexico, where the temperature on the ground is ninety-nine degrees. Mercedes scarcely has the will to wash, to repin her disheveled hair, to neaten her clothes, before finding her seat between two salesmen. On earth, she is met by someone ponderously tall, absurdly red-haired, breathing wine into her face as he bends to her, as he tastes her pitiless old cheekbone with a son-in-law's kiss.

This son-in-law, burdened by her bags, blind to her mood, finds the chip of emerald that is his old BMW in the glittering midsummer parking lot. Mercedes feels herself begin to fear it, the desert. In the car's back seat, sheltered from the sun by the almost subsonic purr of air conditioning, is a boy, chin on his knees, eyes closed, Sony Walkman riding his ears. The boy has achieved the otherworldly privacy of a fetus, and is not about to acknowledge their arrival. Stranger still, the son-in-law offers no apology for his son's rudeness. Mercedes remembers him distinctly as a nice boy, too tall for his age, touched with the guilty displeasure in himself of adolescence, an elusive, embarrassed presence at his father's wedding to her daughter. Swinging out into swift late-afternoon traffic, the son-in-law runs through deferential Spanish phrases. He inquires whether she recalls his son from the wedding. She admits that she does, wondering just how much he is taking in over the mosquito-sized voices in his ears. Yes: he had handed his father the ring, while Mercedes from her vantage point studied him sharply, believing him to be the chief obstacle to her daughter's happiness. Mercedes's son-in-law wonders whether her flight was comfortable, hopes that she is not overtired, and assures her that her daughter will be insanely happy now that she is here at last.

Mercedes prefers to keep her distance from her children, her two sons and five daughters. In the domino theory of daughters, each, submissively tipping into domesticity, sets the next in motion. Only troublesome Caro resisted. Rumors of her love life filtered across the U.S.A. to the tiny, drab, harmonious Brooklyn garret where Mercedes sews for her living, though none of her children

like it that she lives alone. Anything could happen to her, they threaten. Seven children have taken turns at badgering or sweet-talking her out of Brooklyn. Her own vigilance, which made her more or less adroit in protecting small, straying children, is intensely irritating to Mercedes, now that it has been instilled in those very children. What Mercedes likes is settling each morning to her old Singer before her domain of roofs, of spires, of bare trees and tire swings. Summer is best, when the wind balms the nape of her neck, exposed by the pinned-up wiry wreck of her old hair, her cat sleeps on the windowsill, and the Brooklyn light falls lovingly on the cloth.

A lunar mountain range glides by on the right, steep points of bare stone, crevasses shadowed in powerful deathly blue. Her son-in-law wonders in English whether she is feeling the altitude. "It might make you sleepy," he says. The mountain range is replaced by a vast dun horizon in which there is no hope at all. "Why did you come, Kev, if you're not going to talk?" Hart asks. No answer, only the popping and sizzling of miniaturized rock and roll.

In the strange, rambling house, Mercedes follows the boy. Like his father, he is an American giant, burdened by her bags, constrained by her frailty. Already she is tired of making tall people uncomfortable. He runs through an explanation she can't follow, either because she's exhausted or because in his embarrassed adolescent way he talks too fast. Swinging around at a doorway, he says, "Sorry," and offers with transparently faked, kind-to-a-stranger patience, "I was only saying Caro's sleeping. She's never out of bed in the afternoon anymore."

Determined to convince him she's understood perfectly, Mercedes fixes her face into a trance of shrewd attentiveness, but the expression fails to convince him, because her elderly foreignness slides between them like a glass door.

Her beautiful daughter must have been eating like a pig for months. Her deepset Dominguez eyelids have fattened, her small jaw is soft, and her belly is the moon. "Oh, Mama," Caro says, pushing up in bed. "You know what I want? I want you to braid my terrible hair." They touch cheeks; they kiss; this time it is a mother-and-

daughter kiss, tolerance on one side, charming pleading on the other. Caro has always wanted something from her mother; what she wants varies, but invariably she never quite gets it. Mercedes confronts her mass of hair, warm because Caro's been sleeping in it. It is Mercedes's own hair of thirty years before. Mercedes says, "A brush," is handed one, and notices, as she begins with a particularly cruel snarl, that her daughter's left ear, once triply pierced and adorned with opals and gold, has been let heal smoothly, and is naked, and therefore touchingly child-like again.

"I went to the doctor this morning, Mama."

"You did? So?"

"Nothing, *nada*, no dilation, no softening of the cervix. No sign that I'm going into labor. Time is so long now, Mama. A day is ten years."

At her wedding, Caro acquired not only her older husband but that husband's son, complex relations with the husband's WASPy ex-wife, and this house set remotely in Rio Grande gorge. At first it was the house—a straggle of light-starved adobe rooms, very old—that puzzled Mercedes most. Dirt walls, water bugs, and neighbors with goats—they had those in Nicaragua. How to keep the grandchild from falling into the river that breathes a reedy dankness right into the house when a window's left up? Caro has no idea how children are.

"She said—"

"Who said?"

"Mama, the *doctor* said we might try making love. Sometimes sex gets labor going."

How children are: they scald their hands, and puffs of blister as translucently unreal as jellyfish fill their palms. They get stung, and howl. They stain themselves with food, muck, blood, dust. In their bowel movements appear lost buttons and pale snailshells. Rashes flourish on their thin arms and disappear overnight. Storms of coughing begin at moonrise.

"But, Mama, it's been months since we made love. Months."

In swift, habitual rhythm, Mercedes braids.

"I have to tell you what's wrong with Kevin, too." Caro glances over her shoulder to stop her mother's hands.

Caro says, "A girl he liked killed herself five months ago. She swallowed a bottle of her mother's prescription sleeping pills."

Mercedes touches forehead, heart, shoulder, shoulder. "Her poor mother," Mercedes says. "Her poor father."

"Her father wasn't there."

"And why not?"

"Mama, that's irrelevant. They were divorced a long time ago. Kevin didn't love this girl."

"He says that?"

"He says he loves her. He's a child. How would he know? It's just too bad that he happened to go out with her more than he'd ever been out with anyone before, but it's not as if she were his girlfriend, really, and he didn't even tell Hart or me anything about her until the funeral. Since then he's gone to pieces. No one can say anything to him now." Caro sighs. "Hart and I try, but no one can reason with him. It will take time, we say, and he shrugs as if he hates us. He seems so far away from all our little concerns. I love him, you know. I keep trying to draw him back in."

"And?"

"Nothing works. Nothing. He's making his father crazy." Caro yawns. "And, Mama, I'm selfish enough to wish they weren't all I was thinking about right now. The baby has only this little leftover piece of my attention. Look." She tosses *Your Baby and Child* at the closet, jammed with Hart's shirts and the light-hearted thriftshop dresses the un-pregnant Caro fancied. "I wanted to start there," Caro says. There is a crib in the corner, but it isn't made up. The exposed mattress ticking bothers Mercedes, as does the decal of a dancing bear, one of its paws torn off. "I thought I'd get the nesting instinct," Caro says, "and instead I'm the Blob." Mercedes counts dirty teacups on the dresser. She had expected Caro's house to be cleaner, and finds herself disapproving. The disapproval is a mother's, nimbly inserting itself into a welter of other, more reasonable emotions, where it will be hard to weed out.

"Lie down. Put your head in my lap," Mercedes instructs. A pregnant daughter calls on her mother for solidity, reassurance, proof that her fears are thin as air, and will vanish at the first maternal reproof. Caro sleeps. Mercedes has her work cut out for her. This room, then the

rest of the house. What is needed here is not only Mercedes's brand of astringent housekeeping but a makeshift serenity. A harmony sufficient for a baby to be born into. The old sensation of being hemmed in by need sweeps over Mercedes. Today she has come three thousand miles. She arches her tired back, and doubles an elastic band around the end of Caro's braid, a spit of hair like that which tips a paintbrush. On the messy bed in the sad room, Mercedes begins to shake her head, slowly at first, anxiously, tiredly, then stops. Stops to wonder what she thinks she is doing here, and how she found the strength to stay away so long.

This old woman with the quaintly strained English, her dry cheeks collapsed inward below cheekbones so big and smooth they are bulbous, her too-large eyes hypercritically aglitter, causes Hart to feel himself a lurching monster in his own house. He rests his Frankenstein forehead in his huge white-male hands and appeals for help, for something to save him from this plate of black beans, rice, and *huevos*, two doilies of fried egg slopped from the spatula onto his plate as his wife's huge ninth-month belly bumps the back of his chair. *Consider your cholesterol level*, Phil Donahue says, far back in Hart's brain. *Have you been drinking already this morning, and can anyone in this audience tell?* The old woman wields her flatware with dainty persistence. Black beans and rice mean home to her, and home has always been Nicaragua.

Breakfast, for Kevin, is a cup of loganberry yogurt. He is so silent Caro does not argue with him about eggs. He can stand his father, stepmother, and Mrs. Dominguez only as long as it takes to consume three hundred calories. He is six feet tall.

Kevin's mother, Hannah, is away now, gone to Europe with her boyfriend Florian, a doctor who has his own house on a canal in Amsterdam. A modest house, but filled with aqueous shimmer, with goosedown duvets, mirrors, antiques, and a bathroom with bidet, heaven for Hannah, whose home has no bathroom at all. She has been poor ever since the divorce, maliciously, flauntingly penniless, with a poverty she can throw in Hart's face. She sold their big suburban place after the divorce to buy, near El Rito,

a ruin needing everything: floors sanded down, roof insulation laid in, windows double-glazed against the northern New Mexico winters. In short, a fortune vanished there. The house was a black hole, but Hannah will never divorce it, and Kevin, cutting kindling, lugging a chainsaw out through biting wind to the woodpile, latching the outhouse door against the vast nights, grew up fast. In that house, alone with Hannah, he had responsibilities, and they did him no harm.

Of course Kevin led another, parallel life, as children of dissolved marriages do. Hart went through a series of viewless condos and cheap apartments. Into each of these, one after the other, Kevin helped him move. Hart would boil up two of those frozen dinners that came in pouches, then tip the steaming water, with its pale plasticky smell, into cups for instant coffee. He was troubled by insomnia, the worst of his life, and he fell in love every other month, and was bewildered when an ex-lover came knocking on his door, or ranted at him over the phone. Living long weekends with Hart, Kevin learned roughly a thousand times more about him than Hart ever knew about his own father. Moreover, Kevin seemed infatuated with an existence in which he could be the ordering force. He slid Roach Motels behind the grimy stoves, he dyed the water in the toilets azure. He scoured the sinks, he read letters left lying around, he knew and forgave everything, at least until the unexpected happened: his father and his mother began going out together. Parties, galleries. Oh, they were careful with each other, and very, very careful to be sure that Kev's hopes were not aroused. Hart came in so very, very softly from those dates that, one night, he overheard, "You love each other, you love each other," recited by Kevin, belly down in his soiled sleeping bag, the door of his room half open. But Hart and Hannah failed again in slow motion, because some time in the middle of this, Hart met Caro.

Kevin swigs coffee. "Not so fast," Hart says, surprised to find himself talking in Phil Donahue's paternal tone, and is countered by his son's silence, the slender, nervous gliding of bolts into place.

Kevin met Molly at a party on their lawn alongside the river last spring, when the Rio Grande had a glassy green,

rising smoothness from snowmelt, and the guests were all pleasantly sweated up from working on the fence on the slope. Among the hammering, nailing grownups was a girl. A mare's tail of fine dark hair clung to her baby-oiled back, and, when she turned to stare at somebody over her shoulder, a line of new tenpenny nails glittered in her clenched mouth. Hart has thought back to it again and again, that girl with the indifferently beautiful back turning to reveal her sea-urchin mouth.

She was looking at Kevin for the first time. At Kevin whose dark head is bent tediously over yogurt. Hart asks, "Have you gone through that Blue Book yet?"

"What?"

"You were supposed to check those used-car prices, so that when we went looking you'd know what was a fair offer. You said you'd take an active part in this."

"Hart." Caro intervenes so softly it stops him. Too late.

"I will. I'm going to." But Kevin's tone is defensive, and Hart guesses he can be no help to anyone on anything yet, but it would be a good thing if he had a car. They're so isolated, out here in the gorge. They're about to disappear into baby world, leaving Kevin behind, on his own. On his slender own.

"I expect you to do what you tell me you'll do," Hart says.

Kevin swears softly, rattling Mrs. Dominguez, who draws herself up, frigid Catholicism in a housedress.

Hart, who has never had much room for anyone else's disapproval of Kevin, jumps into decisiveness. "We'll go this afternoon anyway, all right? Want to, Kev?"

"Not today," Caro says. "Not now." "*Now*" rhymes with "*miaow*," it's so plaintive.

Is it doing Caro any good, having her mother here? At night, Caro seizes Hart's shoulder or tugs at his hair; grinding his molars together to stifle his yawn, eyes slitted, he rolls over, he asks her tenderly, "What?" and she tells him. She dreamed she was about to give birth in a strange, dirty swimming pool. She was going into labor in the stall of a public restroom, graffiti spangling its walls, *Fuck You* and *Fuck Me* and the telephone numbers. Or the baby was born and she'd lost it. This last dream was particularly vulnerable to transmutation. She'd lost the baby in Safe-

way, she'd lost the baby in the hospital, or she'd left the baby sleeping on the lawn and it rolled into the river. After any of these nightmares, she is slow to be consoled. A backrub, a cup of tea, another quilt added to her heap, and she cries in his arms before sealing herself back into sleep, leaving him awake to prowl the house, studying the black, child-eating river through the living room's plate glass.

"I won't know where to find you," Caro says, "if you're wandering all over Santa Fe."

"Your mother is here," Hart says. The old woman gleams his way, dispatching her coffee. Caro travels light-footedly to the pot. Odd, for all her bulk, that she is still so prettily swift in anticipating her mama's wish. Mercedes pats the arm that pours the coffee, and Hart sees what he sometimes doubts: that they are, they clearly are, mother and daughter.

"Maybe you should go." Reversing herself, Caro grows cheerful. "Maybe your being gone will bring it on. A watched pot."

"I'll call in the middle of the afternoon," Hart promises.

The daughter bends for a hairpin and deftly drives it into the old woman's knot of white horsehair without again acknowledging her husband's existence.

One after the other, the cars they search out are junk. Blasted Chevys, battered Volkswagen beetles well into their second or third mechanical reincarnations. All morning and well into afternoon, the only car Kevin likes is a brutalized MG with a bumper sticker reading, "Hug a Vet." The vet is Monroe, idly tossing Oreos to his rottweiler while he explains that though he has led a long and happy life with the car he could be persuaded to part with it now for seven hundred and fifty dollars. "What a crock," Hart says, over cheesecake at Denny's. Kevin argues hard. He's mechanical, and anyway he has a friend who works on foreign cars and owns all the wrenches. The MG is cool.

"No," Hart says, but the MG appeals to him as a car for Kevin. Its pleasingly seedy interior, so small a girl (what girl? When will Kevin risk another girl?) would have to ride knee to knee with the driver, its quality of scraped

daredeviltry so great for a first car. So infinitely desirable. "It'll cost a fortune in parts."

"I can take care of it. I will." Kevin's fingers alight on his breastbone—a vow, an unconscious one. Wow, Hart thinks, happy at this eagerness, which could not be more genuine. For once, possibly for the first time, Kevin has forgotten Molly Dubov.

"You'd have to."

"So, let me show you."

"So, let me think about it."

"I had an offer this morning," Monroe says when they swing by for a parting look. "It might still come through. I can't guarantee you this car will still be here when you get around to making up your minds."

"Let's go for it," Kevin pleads.

"That's not the way to make a major purchase, honey, under pressure," Hart says, and the magic of covetousness dies from his son's face. Hart has slipped and called Kevin "honey" in front of this earringed vet with his mean dog careening around his bare yard and his afternoon's beer cans lined up on the MG's hood, and something of the car's promise, the small-scale imported machismo it holds out to Kevin, dims.

Therefore, and probably predictably, Hart grows anxious to have the car. A subtle current of remorse, Hart's toward Kevin, runs just underneath the surface of the transaction, which Monroe senses and would exploit, if he did not feel sorry for Kevin.

Kevin twists the key and the MG startles into rattletrap authority. This is the honeyed moment, the thrill Hart has sabotaged for his son: Kevin's pleasure is partly, mostly faked, and rings false. Hart says, "I'll follow you," and does, taking from his glove compartment a Spice Islands jar that once held—he sniffs—nutmeg. He drinks Johnnie Walker Black and tries to remember what newborns are like. They can't hold up their heads, he thinks, and when they mew, you wrap them tightly in a blanket so that only their faces show, making little Taos Indians of them. He thinks he remembers Kevin that way. How could that girl bear to kill herself? The MG's canvas roof is up. From behind, it appears enviably snug. It is evidence of Kevin's

tense, imperfect bliss that he did not at once wrench the roof down for this first drive. Black exhaust gorges from the MG's tailpipe on a long curve, and the father's heart goes *guilty, guilty, guilty*, all the way home.

Caro comes up the slope, her belly leading, her flipflops clapping. The MG is exposed in all its failings. Its dented fender, its dappling of rust. Its broken headlight, crackled white quartz in chrome. Caro's disbelief, hidden by her sunglasses, finds a gesture: the flat of a hand set in the deep saddle of her back, her back arching more deeply, her belly jutting more extravagantly, tightening her swollen jumper. "How much?"

"Seven hundred and fifty. What do you think?"

"Do I think we have seven hundred and fifty?"

"Would I have bought the car otherwise?"

"You don't agree you're sometimes impulsive?"

"No matter what it cost, you would have implied, 'Too much,' Caro, wouldn't you? Anyway, it's too late now. It's done."

"He'll take it back."

"You don't know this guy."

"He'll take it back," she repeats. "The stupid, senseless greedy who sold it to you, you'll make him take it, you'll tell him it's not what you want after all. It's not safe. It's already been wrecked once, hasn't it?"

"Don't," Kevin says.

"Kevin is a good reliable driver. You have to—"

"How can you yell?" Kevin says. "She's pregnant. How can you stand there and yell at her? If she hates the car, I don't like it either. I don't want it. I could see you thinking it would do me good."

Caro turns dazzling dark sunglass lenses his way. "Would it?" she asks. "Help?"

"Right. Would it help for me to have a car you hate? Right."

"If I stopped hating it?"

"If you stopped hating it, you'd be lying."

"If it was something you wanted, I wouldn't hate it. I'd stop."

"Because you think it would make me better."

"Because nothing else seems—"

"You think a *car* could do that? Right."

"Kev," his father warns.

"It's not going to be a car," Kevin says.

"I can see that," Hart says. "Then what?"

"It's not going to be you," Kevin says. "Not a swine like you." He looks at Caro. "And it's not you. I don't know you."

She says, "You know me," two suns flitting across her sunglasses as she swings her chin up toward him.

"Kevin, you stop," Hart says.

"You love my father who left my mother when she did fucking nothing to deserve it. You don't know how good she is. I don't have any idea why you married someone like him. I don't have any idea why you're having this baby."

Caro says, "Ow," her expression a delicate mix: alarm, satisfaction, wistfulness, fear. "It doesn't hurt," she says, marveling downward so that her sunglasses slide to the end of her long, upturned nose. "It feels like a little ribbon rippling around, like a drawstring getting drawn in."

"It's my fault," Kevin says.

"So what?" Caro says. "This is a fine time."

"You think everything in the world is your fault," Hart says to Kevin, and to Caro, "You're supposed to walk."

"To walk? Walk where?"

"Down the road. To encourage the contractions. Come on."

"Come too, Kev? Keep me company?"

He won't. He shakes his head. "I don't want to be here."

Hart takes her elbow. "Another little pain's coming girdling around," she says. "Ow. It's nice. Ow. If my mother wasn't here, nothing would have been done in time, would it? The baby's bed would never have been made. Do you think she's cooking dinner?"

"Walk," Hart tells her.

Kevin runs down the slope. The screen door's single bark rides up the hot air toward them, and Caro asks, "Why did he run?"

"To boil water," Hart says.

They walk down the dirt road, Caro swatting early mosquitos from her bare arms, her gait duck-footed and majestic. "Nothing else," she says, and ten minutes later

adds, "I'm sorry. It's not happening." She's still wearing her sunglasses, but her mouth, when she turns her face up, is stricken.

"Hey, so we go eat Mercedes's dinner," Hart says. "It's not the end of the world."

"Don't you want this baby?" Caro asks. And clop-clops away from him through hard sunlight, full of hurt. She would run if she could.

"We won't let you go on too long after your due date, no," Dr. Mendez says.

Caro asks, sounding anxious, "You don't induce labor, do you?"

"When the baby is two weeks late, the placenta is aging, and may no longer be supporting the baby well, and, yes, we sometimes do induce labor. First we'd run some tests to determine whether the baby is under stress—"

"Then Pitocin," Hart says.

"Then Pitocin, possibly, yes," the doctor says. She smiles from Caro to Hart, who is visibly anxious too, and asks, "Did you try my suggestion?"

They both glance guiltily away.

Hannah has a Dutch boyfriend, Florian, with a head of curly hair and a libertine's merry eyes. He has, in addition, a quality of possessing great personal freedom in his relations with women. He is simply very clever with women; he knows how to catch them up immediately into conversation, a kind of conversation that another man would find repellent, almost viciously competitive—Florian presenting himself and his virtues—but often enough women respond to this approach delightedly, indulgently, coquettishly. Sexually. Women love Florian. He wandered into a bookstore in Santa Fe and captured Hannah, who had been slouching against a wall under a bad but beautifully framed print, abstractedly rubbing strands of her own hair between thumb and forefinger, estimating their loss of silkiness, the onslaught of her own middle age, the probability that she would never have another child, her positively oppressive sense that she should at last read *The Mill on the Floss*, she should

devote herself to that fat paperback for a hundred nights under her electric blanket although *Great Expectations* looked like more fun. Spendthrift that she was, she could afford both, and just as she was about to throw herself into the arms of the Victorians there was cool Florian, his sexually forthright city as far from dampened England as it was possible to get in Europe, his eyes wondering just who *she* was, evaluating and elevating her, because there had been in Hannah's recent life such a dearth of male attention of any kind, shape, or form—except for that of her son and her ex-husband, of course; how could they count?—that finding herself read as a sexual creature caused her to unslouch herself, shake her fair head, and let her eyes focus on this interested foreign face. Here was Florian, full of promise. He'd come for her. Both knew it. It wasn't long before they disappeared together.

Now, whatever has happened between the divorced husband and wife, and almost everything has, she has never before left Hart behind. Hart knows about Florian because Hannah has always confided in him. Her confiding in him is a symptom of the fact that from the world of men who approached her, Hannah had chosen Hart for herself, and remained assiduously true to her choice well after they were divorced, suffering rather lightly the inevitable desertion of one fleeting boyfriend, a carpenter she had taken on more passively than passionately. Or so it seemed to her ex-husband. Since the carpenter, who left last year, the one and only man Hannah has slept with is Hart. Their lovemaking was an act so baldly needy and spontaneous, so short, unadorned, and potentially devastating, that Hart can't bring himself to weigh its meaning. Oddly, it appeared to mean more to him than to Hannah. What right has Hannah to flaunt her new equilibrium in his face? She was once sure she could not live without him. No longer. She doesn't even like him, she told him in bed. She doesn't like the way he lives his life—an amazing, cold, unexpected remark. It hurt and stirred him. In bed with her he had felt the change begin, a subtle thing and small, dwarfed by the bitterness in her voice when she repeated, "I don't like you. I don't like the things you do." The

change, pitted from the first against skepticism harsh as Hannah's, had nonetheless begun there, in Hannah's bed, under Hannah's quilts, with Hannah's electric heater purring away at the sole of the single lovely, high-arched foot she aimed at it, with roughly the same degree of unself-consciously sensual practicality with which she had, five minutes before, shoved her pelvis upward to receive him more deeply. More satisfactorily. She had managed that for herself, though she no longer loved him.

Worse, as he soon came to realize, she was ashamed of having slept with him. As she came and went, dropping off or retrieving their son, Hart kept getting whiffs of her shame. Caro, five months pregnant, had begun to show. Hannah's shame smelled like a child's dirty hair, a sodden diaper, a cast about to come off a broken arm—some soiled, infinitely intimate thing.

This was the situation Florian stole her from. Hart, who can't blame her for going, can't forgive Hannah, either, for causing him to feel as if he has just, freshly, lost her; as if it were not he who had brought about their divorce, but her whimsical infatuation with Florian that tore apart some old, honest, married love.

When really Hart's only honest, relatively sane love is for Caro. Until she got pregnant she was, in bed, rich felicity, his great good luck. Pregnancy made her queer and touchy; her tongue flew through astounding recriminations, even as her body receded from him to the pearly white, indifferent shore of late pregnancy. The fetus defeated its father, or at least its father's desire. It was, in Hart's experience, an unprecedented thing for desire to do—simply to leave him as easily as it had come—but once it was gone, he settled himself in to play expectant husband. He could believe himself happy among the squatting and blowing couples of their natural-childbirth class. He could time a pretend-contraction with the best of them, and never avert his eyes from the film when the baby's head, surfacing like the glossily dark pit of a halved avocado, crowned in the huge vagina.

He pads barefoot into the cold kitchen. Mercedes has tidied it until it reflects the stasis of—of Heaven, he

supposes, or possibly of her Brooklyn garret, sanctified by widowhood. He throws open the refrigerator door. His scrotum contracts in brilliant arctic air, his heart aches, and he smells old bologna. He makes himself a huge, comforting feast of a sandwich, like a cartoon husband comically unaware of his place in the world—his humiliatingly small, dark niche gazed into by huge, decisive women as they pass. Well, hello, telephone. The receiver's poison-control-center sticker, skull and crossbones, glows in the dark. Hart remembers the way that, in Hannah's warm bed, he felt the brisk angel's wing of his future pass over his heart. What had he wanted, how had he judged his chances, at that instant, her heater purring, the points of her collarbone flaring in her flattish, freckled chest when she threw her head back into the pillow, when she came? There is the telephone. Her number is on a slip of paper held with a magnet to their refrigerator. Like it or not, here it is, his new life: his ex-wife's number on the refrigerator among the coupons for Pampers, the Polaroids of friends' kids, the pre-divorce, pre-distrust picture of Kevin, then smaller, slighter, and more radiant, crowned by a soccer ball, crowing with triumph, sun pouring down on him, on the green field he spent his eleventh summer on. Caro's eternal unfinished shopping list that reads *skim milk, chicken breasts, toilet paper*. As far as he knows never a day passes when his household does not need chicken breasts. Caro is ready for this baby. Is he? He examines himself with an intensity that eats away a great rust of habitual, second-nature self-deceit and finds that, no, astonishingly, no, assuredly, *no*, he's not ready for this baby. He wades through the muck of this *no*, this terrifying black *no* nothing in him rises up to refute, to the telephone, and taps out the digits that will fly his voice toward a satellite, ricochet it off spacy cold metal to Europe, to that decaying old sea city where she is. *She answers on the second ring*. His surprise is slight, given the event.

But then again, so is hers. "You don't sound good," she says. "Let me sit up so I can think. There. I'm sitting." Then she recollects the terms they parted on. "What do you want? Is it Kev?"

"Nothing's wrong with Kev. This is me."

She's silent. "Hannah," he says.

"Yes. I said, *yes*, here I am, you found me. I'm hanging up."

"No, Hannah, no, it's this baby. I don't want this baby. I'm not ready."

She laughs.

"Hannah, don't laugh. I don't want it."

"Then you *are* in trouble," she says with a lilt, her voice not as unkind as her words.

"Don't tell me that."

"Don't tell you that? When anyone can see it? I'm going now."

"Hannah. Say you won't go until I'm all right."

"I can't do that," she says.

"*Please.*"

Hart turns, hearing a sound. Behind him in the darkened kitchen, gazing at him with pitiless, timeless recognition, is his mother-in-law. His mother-in-law has just heard him beg, despairingly, in the dark kitchen, "*Please.*"

He swipes a dishtowel from the counter and hangs it in front of his genitals. He says very clearly, "I'm not a bad man. Not as bad as you think."

Hannah says distantly, into his ear, "Try A.A., Hart."

Mercedes says nothing at all.

He fidgets the dishtowel until his genitals are completely sheltered. How long does she mean to stand there? He says, "I can change."

Hannah says distantly, into his ear, "Goodbye."

Mercedes says nothing at all.

It leaves him nothing to go on, no clue about what will happen, the silence in which Mercedes sweeps from the kitchen.

In the small bathroom, in a dimness that seems to her unnatural—no lights outside the window; sounds, but no lights—Mercedes undresses down to the nitroglycerin patch she donned two hours ago against proof of her son-in-law's infidelity. It had been, for Mercedes, a scene of great violence, the big man with the dishtowel hanging before him; the woman, whoever she was, who is so shameless as to fool with the husband of a hugely preg-

nant woman, to quarrel with him over the telephone in his own home in the middle of the night. In the middle of the night when such things should have been long ago settled, and the husband and wife in bed together.

Of course, Mercedes reflects, her own husband sometimes went prowling from their bed at just such an hour. Of course he went catting around, dishonoring their life together and all she was. His infidelity, great secret that it was, still pains Mercedes, two decades later and thousands of miles away, as she is an old woman meticulously flossing her long, elegant yellow teeth. He was unfaithful, and it was love between him and Mercedes. Though he was unfaithful, it was love and it remained love. Once or twice when he'd left the bed, she'd been no less pregnant than her light-footed, besotted daughter is now. The difference between Caro and Mercedes is that she, Mercedes, will never see her husband's face again. No one exists to come back to bed. In her garret there are pictures, of course, but none of them are precisely the face she wants. The long, gallant salt-and-pepper mustache, the wide wings of the aggressive nose, the cobble of chin, the bright lover's eyes, had not photographed well. They are not who she needs. They are inexact as memory never was. Seizing the nitroglycerin patch by its corner, Mercedes peels it away. It leaves a small chemically scorched rectangle, pink as sunburn, over her heart.

He said, "I'm not a bad man," and though that was a baffling thing for him to assert under the circumstances, there is something in it Mercedes can't dismiss. When he said, "I can change," it was, and she knows it was, the truth, and so they will go on together, her daughter and this palely alien American, and their life together will baffle Mercedes, surely, whatever else she learns about it, just the way her life would baffle them—or for that matter, any of her children—if she ever chose to tell them anything about it. But really it was none of their business, how you lived. It was their business that you took care of them, that you were there to nurse them through fevers and catch them before they fell into the river, but what, apart from love like that, did they need? The truth is that she is almost done with them.

In her robe she stares down the hallway to the opening

window, and finds Kevin climbing clumsily in. To Mercedes's surprise, he is naked except for drenched cutoff jeans. This must be her night for coming across hugely tall, nearly naked Anglos. He is as astonished to see her as she is to see him. He could not have expected from her such a torrent of hair, or such self-possession.

"I'm sorry," he says, crouching over the window. "You heard something, and were frightened."

"Do I look frightened? Is this the way you come into the house?"

"I am sorry," he says, and then, as if she were not standing there, he rakes his hand down his side, his long boyish bare rib cage, and Mercedes, coming closer, sees the rising dappling of hundreds of mosquito bites. He goes for them feverishly with bitten fingernails, so harsh with himself she can hear the scratching. She says, "You'll bleed." "I can't help it." "Stop that," she commands, but his is the impotent impatience of someone whose skin is *itching*, and despite his evident wish to appear polite to her, he can't stop. She reaches forward and seizes his wrist, which has a compact, knit-together solidity that feels adult and male, as does his reluctance to yield to her, but she is a general of little emergencies. "My room," she directs, and once there daubs his spots with oil of camphor from a neat brown bottle as he sits on the edge of her bed, leaning forward, his huge elbows on his big knees, his entire attitude a fusion of miserable courtesy and real relief. Through the tonic vapor of camphor she smells cold water drying from a child's skin. "You were in the river," she accuses his back.

Embarrassment freezes him.

"I could never have gone into a river," she tells his back. At his nape, his hair is drying in a curl. "No matter what I felt, I could never have gone into a river."

"It's our river," he says, and shudders when she touches his back again.

"You mean you're used to it."

"The way you're used to the subway, and the gangs."

"I do not court death," she says.

"Because to you, it's a sin."

"To you, it's not?" she asked, her voice going provocatively rueful. "And your father, and my daughter who loves

you now, and the little brother or sister who is coming? You go into the water thinking of what they'll feel?"

His resentment is intact again. It lies in the millimetric tensing of his cold white back, and in the texture of his skin, which shifts in that instant from a grateful to a guarded passivity, so that she stops her doctoring and waits until he says, "I do think of them."

"You don't think of them enough, then. Imagine a vast hurt."

She gives him a moment to imagine it.

"Imagine them feeling it."

She gives him another moment.

"You would cause them such pain."

The expanse of his bare back, with its fine muscles, its rather daintily set shoulder blades and the long channel, deeply indented, of the spine, waits on her.

She says, "You can't do that to them."

She says, "It's simply a thing you can't do."

She says, tipping the bottle into cotton, fitting cotton to a welt, "You're through with this now?"

He says, "I just want to stop feeling what I feel."

She takes a deep breath. She inhales hugely, as against some formidable physical task. She apologizes to her dead husband's beautiful forgotten face for the calm with which she is about to tell this truth. She says, "You will."

When Hart rolls over, he is as quiet as can be, but it's no use. He dislodges Caro from sleep. Her curly long hair lies in a mess on the pillow. When she turns toward him, he tries to take his bearings from her expression. "I had a good dream," she says. "I was riding my mother's shoulders down this dirt road, and it was going dark, and I was rubbing a leaf across her forehead, I don't know why."

"Why was that a good dream?"

"I had some idea the leaf was magic. That it could keep us all safe."

"You know what I wish?" Hart says. "I wish that damn girl had listened for her mother's key in the lock before she started swallowing."

"No one could have expected there to be a traffic jam that evening," Caro says.

He tries to settle into a position that is both companionable and will still allow for the possibility of sleep, but she sits up tailor-fashion and begins caressing her belly.

"Anything?" Hart says.

"Not a thing."

"You and your body," he says. "Don't you think you're as stubborn as your mother? Let me ask you something."

"Ask."

"What is it? Why hasn't she ever liked me?"

"She likes you." He looks at her, arching his eyebrows morosely. "My mother," she says. "My mother is a mystery. All the time when we were children, living together in the tiniest house"—she fixes him with a dark, judicious, almost accusing gaze—"in intimacy you can't even begin to imagine, each of us knowing every single thing about all the others, we still knew she was a mystery. I don't think you can change her mind about you, Hart. But it doesn't matter to me, what she thinks."

What will happen now? Hart wonders, resting his knuckles on her defiant belly, pretending to knock, saying softly, "Come out, come out, and I'll be good to you," and she laughs and falls carefully onto her side in the rumpled sheets, the quilt sliding silently from the bed, she bringing her knees up and giving him a quarter-profile glance, and he locks a long arm around her, above her belly, under her breasts, and enters her from behind, and their pleasure in each other is so acute they forget it is meant to bring on pain.

