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Person Envy

by

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A Note on the Stories

Person Envy includes two stories, “Babies” and “Beautiful Women,” which deal with parenthood, frustration, the malleability of love, and the puckish nature of the id. Both explore the possibility of bodies housing bodies, whether in an a real-world situation such as pregnancy, or in a literal reading of the metaphor “she’ll always be in my heart.” Although they have thematic similarities, they are trains propelled by protagonists from disparate worlds, leaving from separate depots and following their own diegetic trajectories. I hope you enjoy the journey.

Babies

More than anything, my sister Eliza wanted to be a mother. When we were little, she turned the basement of our house into a nursery for her dolls and would disappear there for hours, lost in the joys of bottle-feeding and lullabies. We had a big extended family and whenever we'd go to reunions she'd beg to hold the new baby cousins, while I climbed trees or played soccer with the boys. As she got older her desire for motherhood only increased, but ironically she found she had no interest in sex.

"You know how everyone gets so excited about the, you know, *naughty* scenes in movies?" she asked me after we had both seen *Titanic*. "Well, I don't think I *ever* want to do that. *Ever*."

"Come on, Eliza, you're just being dramatic," I told her.

But by the time Eliza was a senior in high school, she still hadn't had a first kiss, and although I was a lowly freshman, I'd already made it to third base, twice with guys and once with a girl I'd met the time I snuck into a college party.

"How can you know if you don't like kissing when you haven't even tried it?" I asked her.

"How do you know you don't like eating worms when you haven't even tried it?" she asked back.

After high school, she got a part-time job as a secretary at a dentist's office and another part-time job working at a daycare. She would call me twice a week to tell me about the daycare kids—how she taught Gracie to tie her shoes, or helped Ralph pronounce his "R"s. We'd get together on weekends to go out to dinner at *Valentino's,* the spaghetti restaurant our parents used to take us to, and Eliza always gazed wishfully at the couples with small children as the waiter led us to our table for two. I was working in New York at a non-profit gay rights organization, and one weekend I brought my coworkers, Jill and Hannah, and their two-year old daughter to come with me to Boston for an evening and meet Eliza.

"Oh, what a *doll*," Eliza cooed, playing with their daughter, Fran. "But who's the father?"

"Donor 02408," Hannah said brightly. "Brown hair, brown eyes, six foot two, and double majoring in French and Geography."

The rest of that night turned into an animated discussion of sperm donors, cryobanks and turkey basters, with intermittent Pat-a-Cake breaks for Fran. While babies always made me feel uneasy and self-conscious, Eliza was lost to the world as soon as she had a toddler in her arms. Little Fran was a loquacious babbler, and although I couldn't make heads or tails of her vowel configurations, Eliza actually gleaned meaning from them and babbled back in a way that Fran seemed to understand.

"You've cracked the code of Baby Talk," I told her. "You could market your skills. You're like the Baby Whisperer."

"Oh, anyone can speak Baby," she said, tickling Fran's chin.

"Jill and I can't," said Hannah. "Next time she babbles, can we call you on the phone and have you decipher it?"

"Yeah," Jill said, laughing. "For all we know, she's a Russian spy."

The evening with Jill, Hannah and Fran had lasting consequences for Eliza. She started to do serious research on artificial insemination procedures, and went to consultations at various fertility clinics. I helped her search through the cryobank database for the perfect donor, and we decided on #4521, a blond, blue-eyed 18-year old, training to be a professional opera singer. A vial of his frozen sperm from the cryobank cost $790, and Eliza worked overtime so she could afford it.

"Oh my God, Janie, you wouldn't believe the instructions that come with this," she told me on the phone the day it arrived. "You're supposed to *masturbate* after you inject because it helps the cervix absorb the sperm. God, Janie, I don't even know *how*."

Eliza's naïveté boggled my mind sometimes, but I dutifully informed her about the wonderful world of vibrators, and a few weeks later she was pregnant.

"I'm so happy, Janie!" she squealed on the phone. "I'm pregnant but I didn't get knocked up! I feel like the Virgin Mary!"

Over the next few weeks, Eliza bought dozens of bibs and bottles, painted a room in her house with little ducks, set up a crib and a changing

table, and purchased a small library of pregnancy and motherhood advice books. I went shopping with her for gender-neutral baby outfits even before she showed the tiniest bit of belly pooch, and she was so happy all the time that being with her made me feel cheery and buoyant. Our mutual happiness deflated, however, when two months into the pregnancy, she called me sobbing and mumbling horrible things about cramps, bleeding, and fetal tissue clumps in her underwear. After the miscarriage, she became sad-eyed and withdrawn, and though I suggested therapy she refused to go, saying she didn't think anyone could understand her pain. She told me she broke into tears sporadically while working at the day care, and was probably the most grim-looking secretary that Dentist Horton's patients had ever seen. I thought for certain that she had given up her quest to be a mother, but then there was Meg.

Eliza showed up at my apartment with Meg while I was doing a freelance research piece on dildos for BUST magazine, so my apartment looked a bit like a sex den. I opened the door in my pajamas and immediately noticed that her green eyes sparkled with Christmas-light radiance. Her yellow curls were down instead of tied in a sober bun, and she was holding a ducky-printed bundle in her arms.

"It's a girl, Janie!" she said. "I wanted you to be the first to meet her."

Eliza held up the bundle to display a beautiful blond-haired, green-eyed baby, with wrinkly skin and peachy little cheeks.

"I adopted her. Her name's Meg. Short for Margaret."

"She looks just like you, Eliz—" I started to say, but then I noticed the baby was still and not breathing.

"That's a doll, isn't it?" I asked.

"It's a reborn," Eliza said. "They're handmade to look just like babies."

I looked again at the baby's skin. It was painted in perfect detail, down to the tiny veins and mottled newborn coloration. The eyes were painted marbles, and the hundreds of hairs had been hand-stitched individually into the head.

"You know, Eliza, I think me and about 97% of the population thinks those dolls are creepy," I told her.

"That's just what mom and dad would say."

Eliza was somewhat right about that. Our parents, both ornithologists who had moved to Taiwan after my high school graduation, tended to dismiss any of our imaginative whims as either pointless or indicative of mental illness. I gave Eliza a hug, careful not to press too hard on the doll, and decided to be supportive.

"I love you," I said. "I'm sorry I said Meg was creepy."

"I don't want you to just apologize," she said. "I want you to really treat Meg like your niece."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do," I said. "Want something to drink?"

Eliza came in and I made us both coffees, adding a secret splash of Kahlua to mine. We went to my bed as I hadn't yet bought any other furniture, and I brushed a few of the sex toys off the bedspread so that we could sit down. She asked if I would like to hold my new niece, and when she

passed the doll to me I had the brief illusion again that it was real—somehow the doll artist had given it the weight of baby fat instead of cloth or plastic. I rocked the doll slowly back and forth in my arms, and stared at its unblinking face.

"This is weird," I said before I could stop myself. "I don't think I can hold her and pretend she's real." I handed the doll over to Eliza and went to my closet for a sweater. Just holding the doll had given me chills.

"It's not *that* weird! Lots of people have them. I just wanted to be a mom, Janie, you know that."

"Okay," I said. "But is this a privacy-of-your-own-home kind of thing, or are you going to take her out in public?"

I had dreadlocks at the time, and was often seen in public holding hands with one of my same-sex lovers. This got me all sorts of dirty looks and snide comments from what my friends and I referred to as the Bible humpers, and we pretended not to care. But after a while all the sideways glances wear a person down, and I never imagined my dainty sister could ever stand up to it. She looked perpetually embarrassed anyway with her naturally rosy cheeks—if humiliated in public I could only imagine that she would turn bright red and disappear in a puff of smoke.

"What kind of a question is that? Of course I am."

"What about work?" I asked. "You're gonna take her in to Dr. Horton's office? Or the Hokey Pokey Daycare?"

"No, Janie, people don't take their kids to work."

"Yeah, I know, people leave their kids with babysitters."

"I'm not going to leave her with a babysitter, but when I'm *not* at work, like if I'm out shopping or going to the park, then I'll take her with me."

"You're gonna get some weird looks," I said, reaching over to my nightstand for cigarettes. "Want one?"

"No, I quit. Smoke's bad for babies."

I lit one for myself and leaned back on the bed frame, but Eliza made exaggerated coughing noises and waved her hand to clear the smoke. With her other arm she bounced the doll gently as if to calm it.

"Seriously, it's just a cigarette. You used to smoke two packs a day."

"Is it so hard not to smoke around Baby Meg?"

Eliza stood up and started rocking the doll as she paced across the room. She was wearing a casual red dress that clung to her curves, and she really did look like a young mother. I was peeved that she told me not to smoke in my own house, but I knew the miscarriage had really addled her, and maybe this was just one of the steps in the grieving process. I didn't really know what it was like to have a miscarriage, but the way she had described it to me brought to mind horror-movie-esque scenes of fetus bits crusted in blood. If that had happened to me, who knows what crazy things I might have done? I reminded myself again to be supportive, and put out the cigarette.

"Thanks, Janie," Eliza said. "Do you want to hold her again? I brought her over here so she could get to know you, y'know."

I nodded and accepted the gentle transfer of Meg into my arms. She really was a beautiful doll, with tiny rosebud lips and wide, green eyes.

"She's pretty," I said.

"Isn't she? And you're her auntie! "

I was still uncomfortable holding Baby Meg, but I had always been uncomfortable around real babies as well, so I tried to tell myself that this wasn't much different. I rocked the doll gently like Eliza had done, and, in an attempt to put myself in "auntie" mode, I pressed my lips to my niece's vinyl forehead.

"She has nice skin, doesn't she?" Eliza asked.

"I can't believe it's not baby! " I joked.

"That's not funny," Eliza said, but she smiled.

*

Baby Meg didn't meet our parents until they came home three months later for Christmas. They had heard about her, but I don't think anything could have prepared them for the shock. We held Christmas at my grandpa's house in Demarest, New Jersey, where it had just snowed ten inches. While my aunts cooked the grand feast, I went outside to smoke a cigarette under the pretense of babysitting my cousins, who were building a lopsided igloo. Two of the older boys, Cliff and Mitch, had just gotten into a snowball fight when Eliza showed up with Baby Meg.

"I didn't know you had a *baby*," Cliff said, dropping the half-formed clump of snow in his hand. "Can I see it?"

"Um, she's sleeping," Eliza said. "I'm going to go help your mom with cooking, maybe you can see Baby Meg later."

"You didn't warn anyone?" I whispered to Eliza as we headed inside.

"I told our aunts and uncles, but I guess they didn't tell their kids."

"Liza!" exclaimed Kelly, the six-year old daughter of one of our cousins. Kelly had always been ridiculously fond of Eliza, and immediately latched on to her pant leg. "I missed you! "

"I missed you too," Eliza said, bending down to kiss Kelly on the cheek. Kelly was wearing about a million pigtails on her head that she had tied herself with princess ribbons.

"Ooh, this is the new Baby Meg you told us about! Isn't she just adorable!" cooed Aunt Felicity, gliding through the kitchen in a sauce-splattered apron. "Let me hold the little angel, is that okay Eliza?"

Eliza reluctantly handed over Baby Meg to a woman even crazier than herself, and we watched as the relatives clustered around like vultures, all craning their necks over the plastic addition to their family. Aunt Felicity continued to praise Meg's cuteness, but the other aunts could only manage to give weak smiles and clear their throats, and the uncles just grunted, exchanged glances, and then returned to the television. Aunt Marge pretended to smell a pie burning, and the other aunts immediately picked up on her ploy, eagerly heading to the oven to avoid the awkwardness of Baby Meg.

"Don't mind them," said Aunt Felicity, handing Baby Meg back to Eliza. "Greta! Have you seen your cousin Eliza yet?"

Aunt Felicity's obese daughter Greta was munching chips in the living room and holding her baby Charlie under one arm, which had the unfortunate effect of making him look like another roll of fat on her side. When she heard

her mother, she reluctantly waddled over, and Aunt Felicity made the weird and sad mistake of trying to introduce the two babies.

"See your cousin Meg, Charlie?" she asked, taking the slobbery infant from Greta and bringing him to Eliza. Charlie took one look at the frozen eyes of Baby Meg and started to squall.

"Sometimes it takes other babies a little while to get used to her," Eliza said.

"I can see that," Greta replied, taking her baby back from Aunt Felicity. "Has she met Grandpa?"

Grandpa, hearing his title, hobbled over with his medical walker and put on his glasses, which he wore on a chain around his neck.

"Meg's your great-granddaughter, Grandpa," Aunt Felicity said, preventing Eliza from making introductions. Grandpa raised his overgrown eyebrows and peered at Meg's perfect little face.

"Damn weird," he said. "I don't like it."

"Time for dinner, everyone!" Aunt Sheila called, interrupting Grandpa's assessment of his newest grandchild. "Everybody to the table, quick, quick, quick!"

The children were ushered inside, tracking in snow and mud from the yard and practically trampling the scrawny little artificial Christmas tree that stood like a haggard elf in the living room.

"Hey, let me see your baby!" Cliff said to Eliza. He was a stocky kid with mean eyes and a shaved head. He looked like a miniature convict.

"Why don't you buzz off, Cliff!" said Kelly, who was still attached to Eliza's pant leg. But Cliff stood up on his tiptoes and peered into the blanketed bundle.

"It's *fake*!" he screamed. "I knew she didn't have a baby! It's fake, it's fake!"

After having spent most of the afternoon watching Cliff boss around the other cousins and generally be a little brat, his prepubescent screeches made me snap.

"Shut *up*!" I said, slapping him on the arm. "Sit down for dinner like the other kids!"

My disciplining was interrupted by my parents coming in from outside—they'd just taken a taxi from the airport. My sugary aunts rushed over to get the first hugs, and the rest of the family lined up behind them, eager to put their arms around their globe trotting, scholarly relatives. My mother looked sleek and elegant in a fur-lined coat, and my father looked tight-lipped and tired in a suit beside her. It was good to see them in the sense that I liked seeing first-hand that they existed and were relatively happy, but their personalities didn't really click with mine, and it was never more apparent.

"Janie, my little girl, you're all grown-up!" my mother said, stroking my dreadlocks. She planted a red-lipstick kiss on my cheek and I wondered why she'd bothered to re-apply make-up after a twenty-two hour flight.

"Good to see you, Janie," my father said, squeezing my shoulders. Eliza stood behind me holding Baby Meg, and after giving Mom and Dad each a one-armed hug, she held her up for them to see.

"Remember you have a granddaughter?" she asked. "I'm so glad you can finally meet her."

The rest of the family all fell silent in their nervous huddle as they watched my parents' eyebrows glide slowly to the top of their foreheads.

"Honey, *really*," my mother said. "Aren't you too old for dolls?"

"I think Baby Meg is lovely," Aunt Felicity said. "She looks just like Eliza."

"I like Baby Meg too," Kelly said.

Eliza cradled Baby Meg and began to bounce her softly.

"Are we all encouraging borderline delusional behavior here?" my dad asked. "Or are we just supposed to wait for someone to pop out from behind the Christmas tree and say 'You're on candid camera'?"

"Goddamnit, dad, she knows it's not real," I said. "Why can't you just play along?"

Bratty cousin Cliff interrupted the scene, looking guilty and carrying two halves of the scraggly Christmas tree.

"Mitch and me were playing tag," he said. "I only tripped on the tree 'cause it was right in the middle of the living room."

The aunts and uncles saw the destruction of the tree as the perfect excuse to leave the awkward scene in the kitchen and discipline Cliff. They left

the five of us—me, Eliza, Baby Meg, and Mom and Dad—standing around and looking at each other in an atmosphere of ice.

"I feel like I'm on the Funny Farm here," my dad said to Eliza. "I mean, you've always had an active imagination, but this has gone too far."

"I agree that it's upsetting," my mother said. "But it *is* Christmas, so maybe we should save the psychological evaluations for later."

"Don't either of you want to hold your granddaughter?" Eliza asked. We all looked at Baby Meg, her cheeks rosy pink and her lips red as holly berries. She looked so perfect that evening I could've sworn Eliza had put a touch of makeup on her.

"My granddaughter?" my dad asked with a snicker. "That is a doll. A plastic baby doll."

"If you could just not call her that," Eliza said softly.

"Okay," Dad said, rolling his eyes. "And I won't call a table a table either."

"I think Dad's just a little tired from the flight," Mom said, massaging Dad's wide shoulders with her manicured hands. "He's sorry he called Baby Mandy a doll."

"All better!" called Aunt Felicity, coming into the kitchen with the duct-taped Christmas tree.

"Nothin' duct-tape can't fix is there?" she asked. "Come on in to dinner before it gets cold! "

Eliza didn't eat much during dinner, but the rest of us were eager to eat instead of make chit-chat, and Aunt Prudie turned up the Christmas music so

loud that we couldn't have talked if we'd wanted to. My parents' closed-minded rejection of Baby Meg had made me instantly more protective of her, and after dinner Eliza and I took turns pushing her in Charlie's baby swing.

"I don't think Mom ever really wanted kids," Eliza said. "I think she just became a mother because everyone expected her to be."

"Well, I guess I'm like Mom, because I'm I don't want kids," I told Eliza. "But I'm not like Mom, because I'm not going to have them."

"You're so good with Baby Meg, though," Eliza said. "She really likes you."

"Thanks, but Baby Meg is—" I stopped myself from saying "not real."

"Baby Meg is what?"

"Is perfect," I said. "Baby Meg is perfect."

Because that was true, too.

*

After Christmas, Mom and Dad ended up staying for a week at Eliza's place and then a week at mine. I took the week off from work to spend time with them, but I kept waking up with nausea so I had to keep calling off the morning's plans. That left Mom and Dad sitting around bored with nothing to do, and despite my urging them to do things on their own, they insisted that they'd come to see *me* and would have felt bad leaving me sick at home.

"Why don't you see a doctor?" Dad asked. "If you're throwing up every morning, you could have ulcers."

"Or—" my mom stopped herself.

"What?"

"Nothing, honey. I know you're careful."

I was convinced there was nothing wrong with me because I always felt better by the afternoon, but after the third day of throwing up I found a pregnancy test my mom had left conspicuously sitting on my bathroom counter.

"I use condoms, Mom! " I called out from the bathroom, but peed on the stick anyway, and what I saw made me throw up even harder.

"Goddamnit," I said, staring at the ugly pink plus sign. My mother knocked on the bathroom door.

"Everything okay in there?"

"Not okay," I screamed back.

I curled myself around the toilet and sobbed while my parents talked in soft voices outside the bathroom. The whole experience reminded me of my high school days, when I came home from parties after having too much to drink, except I was an adult now and had fucked up much worse. When I finally emerged from the bathroom, my mother had a blanket and a cup of hot tea for me, and we sat on the couch together while she talked to me about abortion as if it were as simple as buying an ice cream.

"It's definitely not a big deal these days, sweetheart," she said. "It's a really easy medical procedure, sort of like, well—have you ever seen those little bug vacuums that you can use to get flies stuck in window ledges?"

"I heard you can just take a pill," my father called from the kitchen. "Doesn't that sound easy, to just take a pill? By the way, where do you keep your turmeric, sweetheart?"

"Get out!" I screamed through my tears. "Go tour the Statue of Liberty! Ride a carriage through Central Park! Go to fucking MOMA! I don't care! Get out! "

My father rushed in the room and my mother tried to hug me, but I pushed her away. I felt adolescent, yelling at my parents like that, but there's a reason you don't live with your 'rents after a certain age. As soon as they left, I destroyed the lamp my mom had bought me at a flea market the day before, partly to release rage and partly because it was tacky. After kicking the shards under the bed, I scrolled through my contact list and called the three men I had slept with in the past few months. They all told me they'd used condoms and hadn't noticed any breakage or leak, but the third one said it with a waver in his voice.

"Okay, we always used condoms, but I'm not the fucking Virgin Mary, so there's a *reason* I'm pregnant," I told him. "You'd better think *really* hard whether a condom broke or not, because I'm pretty sure there were a couple times we had sex when I was too drunk to remember."

"Too drunk to remember? Only a slut would say that, Janie. Why don't you call the other fifteen million men you've been sleeping with and ask *them* whether the condom broke?"

"I already did that, thanks," I said. "Can you just tell me if there's one time you think it *might've* broken?"

"Okay. Okay. Once," he said. "I'm really sorry. It happened once."

I wasn't really in the mood to listen to the rest of his apology. If he had been in the room, and I had been a bull, I would have gored him. But he wasn't, and I wasn't, so instead I just cried.

When my parents got back my mom had another lamp "because I could tell you weren't too fond of the one I picked out yesterday" and my dad had brought me a chocolate frostie, which he always used to buy me when I had to get shots as a kid. It was strange to be treated as a child as a result of my entrance into motherhood, and I started to feel as if everything in my world was starting to twist into its mirror image. I wanted to call Eliza but I knew she was still upset about how Mom and Dad had reacted to Baby Meg, and I didn't know how to bring up the problem of pregnancy with a woman who wanted nothing more than a baby bump herself.

I read more about abortion on the Internet and realized that all the time I'd spent picketing for women's rights I'd never thought about what it actually meant. I'd always pictured it somewhat like a dab of lemon-scented stain-remover—rub on the tummy and baby-be-gone! I made the mistake, when using Google, to click on the "Image" icon, and found myself in a haunted house of dead baby images that latched to my mind like perverse cutout window clings. My mom found me curled up on the couch with my laptop, shivering and biting at the ends of my dreads, and brought me another cup of hot tea.

"I'm sorry this had to happen, baby," she said. "But I'm sure the abortion will go just fine. You'll keep in touch when we're back in Taiwan, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'll video-chat with you guys from the doctor's clinic. Look, here's your grandkid! Sucked down the drain! "

"Oh, don't be morbid! We never cared about grandkids anyway, did we Stan? We just wanted you girls to be happy."

In two days my parents were gone but my embryo was very much with me. The fact that my uterus knew how to grow another human was a boggling concept, especially when it was doing so against my will. I imagined some tiny little gene doctors down there playing Mr. Potato Head with my embryo, and for some reason they talked with Boston accents.

"Hey, let's give it lahng fingahs so it can play guitahr! "

"Yeah, and big eahrs! It's gotta have nice big eahrs like Obahma! "

I knew that, scientifically, that wasn't how things worked, but if I had been able to video-chat with my womb, I suspected that's what I would have seen.

And then, of course, I thought of Eliza, and how, for the two months she'd been pregnant, she'd been so filled with happiness that she'd made everyone around her feel floaty as kites. Now, with Baby Meg in her arms, she made everyone around her feel awkward, sad, and full of either pity or uncomfortable confusion. Even though I loved Eliza, it still made my stomach clench to be around Baby Meg. I think what bothered me the most was that she showered so much love on a piece of plastic instead of on something that could actually absorb it. Every day when she came home from work, she bathed her, fed her, and sang her lullabies despite the fact that she was permanently asleep. I wanted to tell Eliza that life isn't like *The Velveteen*

Rabbit—that loving something enough doesn't make it real—but how could I blame her for wanting to be a mother? I thought again of the embryo sprouting inside me, the cells multiplying like little spores on a petri dish, growing gradually into something you could knit yellow hats for and call "sweetheart." I imagined how Eliza would look with a real baby in her arms—one that could smile back at her, and learn to babble, and tug at her hair. And then I came up with a crazy-but-not-so-crazy-idea.

But no. I should abort, I thought. Abortion was clearly in my best self-interest, so I tried to convince myself that Eliza wouldn't want my baby anyway. She's probably perfectly satisfied with Baby Meg, I told myself. For all Meg's unnerving lifelessness, it was true that she never cried or wet herself. And if Eliza had wanted a real baby, she would have adopted one, right? And even if she did want a real baby, maybe she only wanted a girl, and what if my baby was a boy?

But my logic didn't hold up. After all, Eliza had been pregnant once. *That* baby could have been a boy, and she would have loved it just as much as Baby Meg. And *of course* she wanted a real baby. She always had. She'd just taken up a doll because she didn't want to risk another miscarriage. I had a baby, and she wanted one. That was all there was to it.

*

The next morning I went to a toy store, bought a Mr. Potato Head, gift wrapped it, and drove to Eliza's house. She opened the door in her nightgown, blue circles under her eyes and a bowl of granola in her hand. I handed her the gift.

"Janie, it's nine a.m.," she said, yawning. "What are you giving me a present for?"

"It's a symbol," I said, as she peeled off the wrapping paper. "What has little hands, little feet, a little body, a little mouth and a little nose?"

"Mr. Potato Head?" she asked, taking out the box.

"A baby! " I said.

Eliza laughed hesitantly.

"What I mean is, the real gift is in my womb right now, getting its eyes and ears and feet put on. And when it's born, I want you to have it."

"You mean you're pregnant? That's what Mr. Potato Head is all about?"

I nodded, looked at Mr. Potato Head and started to cry.

"Oh, Janie! "

Eliza hugged me. She smelled like cereal milk and baby shampoo, and though she was small, she gave good strong hugs.

"You're keeping the baby so that I can be a mom? That's really, really beautiful of you, Janie. Thank you so much."

"You have to admit it was pretty clever of me to turn an unplanned pregnancy into a belated Christmas gift," I said.

Eliza smiled and put her head to my belly.

"I can hear its heartbeat already! " she said.

"I think you can just hear that I haven't had breakfast, Eliza," I teased, and kissed her on the forehead.

*

Looking back, I should've counted the number of times in the next nine months that Eliza stroked, pressed, or put her ear to my belly, because we might have broken a record. She drove to New York to see me at least twice a week, always with some new gadget she'd read about in a pregnancy magazine: a water filter, a prenatal yoga video, nettle tea, a radiation-detecting bracelet, a *Baby Hears Beethoven* CD set, omega 3 supplements, an air purifier, compression socks for circulation, and an exhaustive chart of baby-safe exercise moves. She took away my microwave, so that I wouldn't "zap the baby to death," and helped me shop for everything from stretch pants to nursing bras, all the while bending over and talking to my tummy "so that the baby will get used to my voice."

I would have found it all a pain in the ass, if it weren't for the fact that I found myself even more fascinated with my pregnancy than Eliza was. What did this humanoid creature inside me look like? Why exactly did I need omega 3s to feed its brain? And why was it giving me hemorrhoids? At the ten-week ultrasound, I could see the grainy image of a bobble-headed thing with four scrawny little limbs and an umbilical cord.

"What a baby, ay?" said the freckled Canadian technician. "It's liver and intestines are a'rdy fully functioning! "

I was fixated by the image. There was my baby, trapped in a potent spaceship of woman-fluid, too naïve and premature even for fingernails. What was its mindset? I wondered. What could it feel? I imagined being in a womb would be like crawling to the center of an ancient oak and living there, curled up in a ball. I would be entirely at peace in that oak: rooted, protected,

and blind, full of hope in red-leaved autumn, meditative in snow-draped winter, and dreamy-eyed when spring arrived and birds came to perch in my limbs.

"You got a little gape-jawed there, starin' at your baby," said the technician, wiping drool from my chin. "Bit of a space cadet, ay?"

It was true. I had morphed into an astronaut in the womb universe and forgotten all about the plastic wand and blue jelly on my lower abdomen. It wasn't the last time I entered womb universe—I went there sometimes as I sat in the bath, with nothing to do but feel the wetness on my skin and ponder my mystifying protuberance. I felt more and more beautiful as my belly began to look more and more planetary, and every morning I spent at least ten minutes in front of a full length mirror, captivated by my own naked form. I watched my body becoming some other, more holier creature: a dark streak of melanin bridged my bellybutton and pubic hair, my nipples turned from pink buds to dark jewels, and my breasts, once small and perky, became womanly, whole and divine. At sixteen weeks, I felt the baby's first kick, a fluttering of life that sent me into almost frantic bliss. I started doing little kangaroo hops in the kitchen, hoping it would kick again, and when it did I got so excited that I hopped even higher, until the neighbors in the apartment below mine complained that their ceiling was shaking.

"It's not from sex this time! " I yelled down at them. "My baby's kicking! "

A few days later, Eliza felt the baby kick and wanted to bake me a cake.

"It's a pregnancy milestone! " she said. "We should celebrate! "

"The baby doesn't even have a name yet," I said, laughing. "What are you going to write? Way to go, Fetus?"

"No! " Eliza said, searching through her cupboards for flour. "It's a cake for *you* because you're my wonderful, beautiful sister and you're growing me a baby."

Although I was glad that my pregnancy made Eliza so happy, no cakes or compliments could compete with joy I felt when enjoying privacy with my paunch. I loved prancing around after a bath in Eliza's bathroom because it had more mirrors than mine, and I even started to like my stretch marks, thinking of them as tiger stripes of womanhood. I didn't call up any of my lovers, and instead spent glorious hours masturbating on my sofa. The one exception was when I invited over my friend Reggie, but I hadn't meant it as a booty call. Instead, I'd asked if she'd take some nude shots of me, since she I knew she was a hobbyist portrait photographer. I opened the door while eating the leftovers of the cake Eliza had baked me, and was struck by how voluptuous Reggie had become since I'd last seen her.

"Why the cake?" she asked.

"Oh, just for kicks," I said. "You look really good, by the way, Reg. You used to be like Twiggy."

"Yeah, my boobs turned into balloons when I went on birth control," she said. "Should we set up lighting and stuff in the living room?"

Reggie convinced me to put on makeup for the photos, and the best shot she took was of me standing on my balcony wearing rose red lipstick with my dreads tied up in a ponytail. After that photo, we went back inside and she

took close-ups of my belly while I lay in bed. We kissed, and for the first time I experienced sex as a lullaby instead of a rollercoaster of lust. She sent me the photos a week later and I flipped through them for hours, admiring the glow of two lives inside one body. Eliza asked about the photos I'd had taken, but I made excuses until she forgot.

I went back to my freckled Canadian ultrasound technician for the twenty-week ultrasound, which was when I would find out whether Baby was a boy or a girl. She rubbed the blue jelly all over my stomach, sending chills up my spine, and I felt my heart imitate the baby, kicking against my chest instead of my abdomen. I almost wanted it to be a boy because I generally get along better with men than women, but for Eliza's sake I hoped it'd be a girl.

"Looks like a penis, ay?" said the technician. "Oh, wait. Nope. Definitely not man meat. Looks like you've got yourself a lovely baby girl! "

Eliza and I treated ourselves to a three-course dinner that night at our favorite back table in *Valentino's*. Instead of gazing longingly at other couples' children, she was fixated on my belly, rubbing it after each course "to help with digestion."

"I'd love to name her Martha," she said, her hand still resting on my stomach. "I always thought Martha was such a gentle-sounding name, like you couldn't be named Martha and be mean."

"The baby's not going to be mean no matter what we name it," I said. "What about Georgie?"

"Georgie's nice," Eliza said. "Not very feminine, though."

"Hey, where's Baby Meg tonight?" I asked, scooping some of Eliza's food onto my plate. I had a bad habit of doing that before the pregnancy, but once I was 'eating for two,' I had an excuse for it.

"She's just taking a nap," Eliza replied. "Hey, I met with an adoption lawyer today while you were at your ultrasound."

"We need an adoption lawyer?"

"Yeah, just to make it official, you know. But don't worry, you don't even have to meet with him, I brought the agreement here so you could sign it. All it says is that I'm the legal guardian, financially responsible and that kind of thing. Of course, they have to do a home study and a background check and stuff, but those are just the hoops that I have to jump through, and I don't want to stress you out about any of it."

Eliza pushed over a stack of papers.

"Here, here, and here," she said, pointing to the important "X"s. I fished a red pen from my bag and signed them, carefully not to spill spaghetti sauce on the pages.

*

The tail end of my pregnancy was rough—my swollen feet, aching joints and sore back made me feel like a nursing home patient instead of a new mom. I talked to my mother on video-chat and assured her that the baby and I were doing fine, and that my water would break any day now.

"You sure you don't want me to fly in for the birth?" she asked. "It's always nice to have another mom with you for the birth."

"It's okay," I said. "Eliza will be with me, and she's practically a mom. I mean, she's had Baby Meg for two years now."

"Oh, honey, that's not the same. You'll understand once you're a mom too."

"But I'm not *going* to be a mom," I protested. "*Eliza*'s the mom."

"Oh, details," my mother said. "In any case, I'll be the grandmother. And when your dad and I finish up with some of our research, we'll fly right over to kiss the new baby hello."

As soon as I ended the video-chat with my mom, I felt an internal pop and then a flood between my legs. I called a taxi, and on the way to the hospital called Eliza.

"Oh my God, Janie, it's the big day! " she squealed. "Please, please, please don't give birth until I get there! "

Eliza almost never broke the speed limit, but she must have floored it, because she made it to my hospital bed in two hours and fifteen minutes. Soon I was wrapped in sterile blue sheets and surrounded by masked faces, shaking with the pain of contractions, and forgetting to breathe.

"Janie, you're turning blue! " Eliza said. "Inhale, exhale! "

With every strained breath I felt another bead of sweat squeeze out from every pore in my body, until I thought I would drown myself from my own exertion. I tried to shut out the world around me and focus on the end result: I was finally about to witness the little body that had just been a grainy ultrasound, the little feet that had stretched against my womb. All the healthy food, all the forgone cigarettes and *Baby Hears Beethoven* CDs, were all for

this—the human being emerging from my between my legs, forced squalling from its spaceship into the mystical planet of earth.

"Oh, she's perfect! " Eliza cried as my daughter came out squalling. The doctor let Eliza cut the umbilical cord, and then took the baby away to be cleaned, weighed, and examined.

"Where's Baby Meg?" I asked, sweaty and exhausted.

"Napping," Eliza said. "Oh my God, Janie, I'm so proud of you. I can't wait until the doctor brings Martha back, I've never seen any human more perfect in my life."

"Martha? I thought we decided on Georgie."

"Georgie's a boy's name," Eliza said.

"But Martha's stuffy-sounding."

"Georgie can be her middle name, then, okay?"

"Here she is!" interrupted one of the nurses. "Six pounds, nine ounces." The nurse seemed unsure whom to hand the baby to, but Eliza reached out her arms.

"Hi, Martha Georgie," she cooed. "Hi, baby doll."

I cringed when Eliza said "doll." My daughter was *not* a doll. She had a beating heart, breathing lungs, and blinking eyes. Her newborn ears knew my voice, her thread-thin veins had shared my blood, and her pudgy limbs had stretched and pressed against the wet walls of my womb. Eliza rocked her just as she had always done with Baby Meg, but Martha Georgie started to wail.

"Here, give her to me so I can nurse," I said.

Eliza gently transferred Martha Georgie into my arms. I lifted up my shirt, held her warm body against my chest, and felt her tiny, silky lips search for my nipple.

"How does it feel?" Eliza asked wistfully. "Is it the most beautiful thing in the world?"

"No," I lied.

"Oh, come on, Janie, it's the most intimate connection two people can have."

How does she know? I wondered. She'd never felt it.

*

After Martha Georgie's birth, things began changing so fast that I started to lose track of my identity. Mom and Dad flew in from Taiwan for a whirlwind meet-the-baby tour, Eliza was granted full adoptive rights and twelve weeks of maternity leave, and I decided to ditch New York and move to Boston so I could be near Martha Georgie. My apartment in Boston was tiny and ugly, but centrally located so it still cost a fortune. My Mom convinced me to shave my dreads, buy some "respectable" clothes and put on make-up so that I could find a job, and she was right—the first post-makeover interview landed me a full time position as a pharmacy aide. I had to work from eight to five every day, wearing a stupid white coat and standing among rows of pills under fluorescent lighting, doing nothing but counting out pills and screwing on lids. After work, I'd rush to Eliza's house to nurse Martha Georgie, practically ripping off my shirt as I came in the door. Eliza would have

Martha Georgie freshly bathed and smelling like baby powder, and I liked to have her nurse naked, just her soft skin against mine.

"It's like my breasts can tell she's hungry," I told Eliza on the fourth day of our new routine. "I'm at work, and they're all, hey go nurse your baby! We're fat and full of milk! "

"How's work going?" Eliza asked, fishing around for something in the diaper bag. Everything in the baby room was white with yellow duckies—even the diapers, which Eliza had sewn herself.

"Oh, it's fine, I mostly just count out Adderalls for all the tweaked-out kids at B.U.," I said. "Adorable diapers, by the way—since when do you know how to sew?"

"*Your Baby and You* says it's safe to start using formula after just two weeks," Eliza said, ignoring me.

"Oh come on, Eliza, breast is best, right? And what else am I gonna do with the milk? Drink it myself? Hey, what are you doing?" Eliza had found what she was looking for and was coming at me with a pair of tiny nail clippers.

"You're supposed to cut baby's nails right after the bath, when they're nice and soft," she said, reaching for Martha's little fist.

"Geez, she's enjoying a gourmet dinner, give her a break," I said, pushing Eliza away.

"She'll scratch up her own face if I don't cut her nails."

"Okay, well while you're waiting for me to finish nursing, why don't you cut Baby Meg's nails instead? Or is she 'napping' like she always is?"

Eliza gave up and sat cross-legged at my feet, fiddling with the nail clippers.

"The reason she's been napping so much is that I don't really need her anymore."

"What? She's your daughter! " I said, holding Martha Georgie tightly to my chest. Martha Georgie sucked faster and made happy little grunting sounds that she reserved only for the times she was breastfed.

"Oh, she's so cute when she makes those noises! " Eliza said. "See what I mean? Baby Meg never made any sounds. She never did anything, really—she was just a plastic substitution for the baby I wished I could have. What do I need her for now that I have Martha?"

"Mom and Dad must be happy you gave her up," I said.

"I didn't give her up because of them, Janie. I don't care what anyone else thinks. She was just a coping device. I wasn't going to carry her around forever, you know."

"I don't know. Last time I checked, having a daughter wasn't an off-and-on sort of thing."

"Janie, stop pretending it's weirder to keep a doll in a closet than to carry it around with you everywhere," Eliza said. "Is Martha done nursing? You can tell she's done if the pauses between swallows are longer than six sec—"

"I can tell when she's done, Eliza," I interrupted. "Why don't you go boil her pink pacifier? She spit it out earlier and it fell on the floor."

"You made fun of me last time I did that."

"Yeah, well, I changed my mind. It's a good idea."

"Fine. But after that I'm cutting her nails."

Eliza picked up the pacifier and left the room, and I enjoyed watching Martha Georgie's final sleepy gulps. My nipple, I realized, was the last bridge between us, the final umbilical cord. Once she was weaned, Eliza would be able to provide for her entirely. I'd never gotten so emotional about my breasts before—and maybe you could blame it on hormones—but as I watched Martha Georgie nurse I felt my whole face clog up with tears. Eliza came back, and we argued over who would burp her. Eliza won, and I went to the kitchen so she wouldn't see me cry.

Later that evening, while Eliza was putting Martha Georgie to bed, I went to the hall closet and picked up Meg, feeling as if I'd pulled her from a coffin. I saw that some of her eyebrows and hair had fallen off, and her flesh tone paint had faded so the painted veins stood out purplish-blue. She still looked like a real baby, but a sickly one—ironically, all of Eliza's love and attention had rubbed away her healthy glow. In the other room, Martha started to cry.

"Janie? Can you get the swaddling blanket from the living room?" Eliza called.

"Sure, be right there! "

Martha's wails grew louder, and I set Meg back in her grave.

*

A few weeks later, Eliza surprised me by bringing me pepperoni pizza on my lunch break. We sat at a picnic table in a park near the pharmacy, and Eliza let me hold Martha Georgie while we ate.

"It's good to indulge every once in a while," she said, taking huge bites of pizza. "You know, I haven't told anyone this, but I still allow myself a weekly cigarette. Outside, though, of course."

I almost choked on my pizza when she said that—after nagging and nagging, Eliza had been the one who had convinced me to quit smoking completely. Not that I wasn't thankful—I knew both my lungs and Martha Georgie's were better off for it—but Eliza's hypocrisy tugged a little thread of anger in my gut. I was about to make a snarky remark at her, but Martha Georgie started to cry.

"She's probably hungry," I said, lifting up my shirt.

"Oh, here I can feed her," Eliza said. "I have a bottle of some of the milk you pumped earlier."

"What's the point? I'm right here," I said, as I helped Martha Georgie latch on to my nipple.

We ate without talking for a while, enjoying the pizza and watching a pair of gray squirrels quarrel over acorns on a nearby picnic bench. Martha Georgie drank in fast, greedy gulps, squinting up at me happily despite the brightness of the sun.

"You know, since your maternity leave runs out this week, I can quit my job at the pharmacy and stay home with her," I said.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you! The pizza party is supposed to be a celebration of my retirement."

"Your retirement?"

"Yeah, I'm quitting my job at Dr.Horton's. That way, I'll just have my job at the day care, and there they don't mind if I have Martha with me."

"Are you going to be able to make enough money that way?" I asked. Martha Georgie had stopped nursing and I burped her on my shoulder.

"Sure, if I cut a few corners here and there," she said. "Oh, look how cute Martha is with all the pretty trees behind her! I'll go get my camera, I left it in the car."

When Eliza left, I held Martha Georgie in front of me so she could see my face. Her blue newborn eyes had turned to brown, like mine, and her cheeks had a pink, postprandial glow.

"Mama," I said, touching my chest. "Can you remember that? Mama."

"One quick photo before your lunch break ends! " Eliza called, coming towards us with the camera. When she got to the picnic table, she reached for Martha Georgie, and handed the camera to me.

*

For a while during our nursing sessions, I would whisper "Mama" incessantly to Martha Georgie: a mantra born of jealousy that I repeated against all odds. I knew that as I spent all day weighing, counting, and pouring pharmaceutical products, Eliza was holding, playing with, or feeding Martha Georgie, reading her the "Mama Loves Baby" book before naptimes and singing "Mama is happy, baby is too" while tickling her toes in the bath.

My defeat came when Martha Georgie turned six months old and we introduced solid food into the diet for the first time.

"Can't it be something more exciting?" I asked Eliza, holding the box of gluten-free rice cereal. "The first time she tastes real food and it has to be rice?"

"*Every* baby book says rice cereal first," Eliza said, dabbing a little bit of the beige goo on her wrist to check its temperature. Martha Georgie sat in her ducky-printed high chair, naked except for a diaper and playfully blowing spit bubbles between her lips. Eliza blew on the rice cereal to cool it, and I got the camera to document the historic occasion.

"Airplane!" Eliza said, bringing a spoon of cereal to Martha Georgie's mouth. As I took the photo, I secretly hoped she would hate the rice cereal and be a breast milk purist, but she opened right up and swallowed it.

"Good girl!" Eliza cooed, nuzzling her face against Martha Georgie's. "Your first real food! Mama loves you so much!"

"Mama!" Martha Georgie repeated, and I knew I had lost.

*

That night, I had my first taste of alcohol in over a year. I had made friends with one of the women who worked at the café next to the pharmacy, and she had invited me out for drinks. Her name was Myna, and she was a tall, svelte brunette who tended to observe café customers with amused curiosity, as if they were strange jellyfish in an aquarium. She tended to get very drunk on weekends, and when I found her at the bar a group of attractive men in uniform had evidently surrounded her and taken to buying her drinks.

"Sorry I'm late," I said, squeezing in beside her.

"Oh, that's okay!" she said, handing me a beer. "Meet Chris, Michael, Roy, and James. They're shipping out tomorrow to a base in Guam."

I shook hands with all the men and locked eyes for a moment with Michael, who was olive-skinned and had an endearing smile with a chipped front tooth. We all tossed back beers and then started dancing, Myna shaking her hips while Roy, James and Chris shimmied around her, and Michael leading me through a complicated salsa routine that left me sweaty and sore in the calves. For the first time, I was enjoying the freedoms that I had sacrificed motherhood for, and yet I knew the drinking and dancing were just distractions from the depressing "Mama" incident of earlier that day. I started to catalogue my life's regrets, starting with giving up Martha Georgie and working backwards to the time I joined the Girl Scouts and hated it. I decided I'd been cursed with lack of foresight and self-understanding, that no matter what I decided, I'd want to rewind time and undo it, and that even if I won the Powerball, I'd somehow regret having bought the ticket. The only solution was to make no decisions, which of course was no solution at all, and feeling hopeless, I let Michael buy me more margaritas.

"You're beautiful," he told me. "You remind me a little of Marilyn Monroe."

I laughed. "I don't think we're in the same category. Did you know until recently I had dreadlocks?"

"Nice," he said. "Do you smoke weed? I have a pretty decent stash, and I have to smoke it tonight 'cause we're boarding a plane tomorrow."

Weed was another thing I'd given up in the past year, but floating around in a mindless high sounded perfect as soon as he mentioned it. I said goodbye to Myna and took Michael back to my apartment, leading him straight to the balcony so he wouldn't see how messy the living room and kitchen were. I handed him my dog-eared copy of *Baby's First Year* to roll on, and we ended up smoking about five spliffs, exhaling thick clouds of smoke into the night. After the third spliff, the high sent my mind into a dreamlike hyperspace, and every movement of my limbs left trails like a shooting star.

"I changed my mind about you looking like Marilyn Monroe," Michael said, blowing smoke rings up toward the stars. "She was like a Barbie doll, but you're pretty in a different way. More real."

Michael was handsome and looked like he had soft skin. I pulled him toward me and kissed him. He put out the spliff and we went inside, caressing and undressing each other before we even reached the bedroom. It was strange having him take off my dress—he did it as if he were peeling the skin off a grape, carefully removing the thin, clingy layer to reveal the vulnerable flesh beneath. There were stretch marks all over my breasts and stomach, and there was still the faint purple-black line linking my pubic hair and bellybutton. I didn't care about my blemishes though. I felt beautiful, even compared to Michael, with his muscles and even-toned skin. The sex was brief and glorious like a supernova, and in the morning, we woke up spooning and stuck together with sweat. While pulling on his army uniform he asked me if I was on birth control, and I said yes. But that was a lie.

Beautiful Women

While still lying in bed, Max opened the door on his chest and the beautiful woman stepped out of his heart and onto his palm. She was a petite blond, two and a half inches tall, and through her sheer nightgown Max could just barely make out the soft pinkness of her breasts.

"Good morning," Max said sleepily. The beautiful woman stretched herself out across his palm and blew him a kiss. Max smiled. The beautiful woman bent over to touch her toes, twisted side to side, and slid into splits. Max began touching himself, and the beautiful woman, feeling encouraged, performed a sultry dance routine: bending, sliding, and shaking her hips while Max moaned with pleasure. After his orgasm, Max checked his watch, and then set the beautiful woman back in his heart. She couldn't survive outside the heart for more than a few minutes, and Max had to get ready for work.

Downstairs, Max's son Kevin rolled out of bed to get ready for school. Kevin was dark-haired and built athletically, like his dad, and had a scar across his lip from a skateboarding accident. He liked the scar—it made him look tough—and when he smiled in photographs he kept his lips closed so it was visible. Kevin heard his father cooking breakfast upstairs and his stomach growled. He loved his father, and probably would have loved his

mother if he'd had one, but like everyone else, he'd been grown in a human incubation chamber from his father's sperm and a synthetic egg. After he finished packing his backpack for school, he ran upstairs for breakfast.

"Eggs, sunny side up, with cilantro and thyme," Max said, handing Kevin his plate. "You get all your homework done?"

"Yep."

"What're you learning these days, anyway?"

"I dunno. History's stupid, art's boring, and math's easy," Kevin said. "My math teacher's real cool, though. He has his nose pierced."

"Well, good thing you don't need your nose to teach math," Max said, glancing outside at the rain. "You better get going, and don't forget your jacket."

After breakfast, Max drove to work at the G.F. Madison Grooming Goods factory, his windshield wipers on high to beat back the pelting rain. He was a senior worker in the razor department, where he and twenty other men were in charge of overseeing the machinery that packaged the assembled razors. The job was simple enough: eighty packaged razors passed by Max on a conveyor belt every minute, and he had to make sure none of them were flawed. That morning, Max noticed that the G.F. Madison brand stickers were being pasted on the packaged products slightly off-center, and he had to divert his production line to another pasting machine while he fixed the glitch. Max actually enjoyed it when there were mechanical problems, because when production worked perfectly he had nothing to do.

"Hey, razor man," said Vance, a machine tech, who spotted Max bending over the equipment. "Need any help?"

"No, thanks, Vance. I think I'm good."

"Sure you don't need a bigger screwdriver?" he asked, peering into the machine. Max felt Vance's hot breath on the side of his neck and smelled his aftershave.

"Nope. Thanks though."

"Okay," Vance said, patting Max on the shoulder. "See you around."

Max had his suspicions about Vance. He always seemed to get a little too close, or make eye contact for too long, and Max didn't like being approached too closely.

When the 12:30 lunch bell rang, Max and all the other workers headed to the Stalls, which were built for lunchtime woman viewings. There were hundreds of stalls, all painted green, and inside each stall was a metal bin and a bench. Max had one that he always went to, not for any reason, just out of habit. When he got there, he sat on the green bench, unbuttoned the top half of his jumpsuit, and opened the door on his chest. His woman exited the heart leg first, tantalizing Max by making him wait to see the rest of her. When she finally stepped out of the heart and onto his palm, Max was delighted to see that she was wearing make-up and a tight black leotard. Instead of stretching and dancing, she sat on his palm with her legs in the splits and ran her fingers through her long, golden hair. Aroused, Max reached his hand into the lower part of his jumpsuit. A few minutes later, he

and all the other workers in the Stalls had made their expected contribution to the metal bin, and went to lunch.

Lunch that day was shrimp and rice, and Max, who was a good cook, knew the shrimp could have been improved with an orange glaze and fresh cilantro. He didn't say so out loud, though. It wasn't a manly thought to have.

"Hey, fellas," said Walter, a hefty, bearded man who worked as the razor department janitor. "Thought I'd try sitting in a new place for once. How's everybody doing'?"

The razor department colleagues scooted over to make way for Walter, but gave each other uncomfortable looks. Janitors were mentally handicapped or homosexuals, and generally didn't sit with the other workers. Max knew Walter wasn't dumb or gay, though. He was a nice guy, just not socially adept. Max remembered that Walter had more sons than most men, and that his family was his favorite topic of conversation.

"Hi, Walter, we're doing well," Max said. "How about yourself? How are the boys?"

"They're sure keepin' active, I'll tell you that much," Walter said through a mouthful of shrimp. "I have a three year old, you know, Walter Jr.? Well, little tyke caught me looking at my woman this mornin'—" The other workers shared subtle, disapproving glances. "—and do you know what he said? He said, Daddy, who's that little *man* on your finger? Ha! Couldn't recognize a woman! But how could he? I wasn't really embarrassed 'cause he's only three, but had Jeff walked in, well, *that* would have been trouble!"

"My boy's thirteen, too," Max offered.

"True words, Max!" Walter said. "And we can only hope they've got good teachers—those boys are the future, and if half of them are as buzzard-brained as Jeff, well—"

At that moment, a man named Jameson approached Max's table, looking as if he had just toured a slaughterhouse. He was pale and teary eyed, and just by looking at him, all the men at the table knew why. Jameson sat down next to Walter and stared glassy-eyed at his food.

"...Your father?" Max asked.

"Yeah," Jameson nodded. "Last night."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Jameson mumbled. "We knew it was coming. A week ago he started losing his hair."

The men at the table all nodded and offered their condolences. Their fathers had died the same way. First, there was a sign of decreased virility, often balding, arthritis or muscle loss. Then came the death of the woman, and when the man found the corpse in his heart, he would lose his will to live. The reason for a man's lost virility was often a developing illness, but the men always offed themselves before the illness had a chance to.

The atmosphere at the lunch table was somber after Jameson's news. Max thought about his own father, a gruff, reserved man whose harsh personality was the result of an even harsher life. His father had worked in coal mines since age sixteen for very little pay, and developed a lung condition that caused him to lose his woman and his life at thirty-five. Soon after his death, scientists developed a cheap, highly efficient synthetic coal that put all

mining operations out of business, and families who had been in mining for generations had to look for new avenues of employment. The G.F. Madison Grooming Goods factory was built in Max's town just around his twentieth birthday, and Max had been one of the first to get hired. He was proud to have made a better life for himself than his father had, and only hoped his son would reach even higher—perhaps becoming a supervisor or even a top-level administrator some day.

After lunch, Max walked with Walter through the underground tunnel past the Stalls and back to the razor department.

"You think I oughn'ta told that story about my son?" Walter asked, struggling to keep up with Max's long strides.

"I don't see why not," Max said, though he could think of more than a few reasons.

"You know, I work with the homos and the maybe less-than-all-theres, but I'll be darned if I don't of'en prefer their company," Walter admitted. "I mean, for one thing they listen to my stories and laugh at my jokes, and tell some pretty funny cracks themselves, sometimes. And what'd I do at lunch that got everybody's jumpsuits in a bunch? Well, all I did was mention my woman, just tellin' what you might call an anecdote, and there everyone was actin' like I said I killed somebody, all self-righteous like their women weren't sittin' in their hearts there and then."

Walter was beginning to make Max uneasy. Sure, he thought the anecdote was harmless, but perhaps the talkative janitor was taking things a little too far. There was a reason you didn't talk about your woman, Max

thought; it was the most private, intimate relationship a man had, and some things had to be kept sacred. As for the gays and the "less-than-all-theres," well, to be honest, Max couldn't imagine enjoying the company of such men.

"Good talking to you, Walter," he said. "See you around. I've got a meeting."

The meeting was about the new logo sticker that had been designed for the razor packages, but Max didn't pay attention. Instead, he re-played in his mind the lunchtime performance of his beautiful woman, and felt his skin prickle with eagerness for the next time he could remove her from his heart.

*

That evening, Max cooked pan-seared scallops with red pepper sauce for dinner—a specialty he'd been perfecting over the last few weeks. Kevin was late coming back from school, but that wasn't unusual. He often played soccer or capture-the-flag with the other schoolboys until one of the dads found them and sent them all home. The sun was just beginning to set when he showed up on his bike, and he was covered in mud.

"You know how it rained earlier?" he said, as he came panting into the house. "Well, the whole field behind the school pretty much turned into mud, and one of the guys got the idea for mud wrestling. It was real fun, everybody was slipping all over the place, and sometimes the scrawny kids beat the big ones 'cause they could slither out of their grasps!"

"Which one are you?" asked Max, grinning.

"Oh, c'mon, Dad, I'm taller than everyone in Class Nine. But I didn't go easy on 'em, you should've seen me out there. I was real good."

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised if you had an illustrious future as a mud wrestler," Max said. "But you better go get cleaned up for dinner."

"Thank God, I'm real starving!" Kevin said, running downstairs. Max set the table and put the food out—everything was ready, and he had nothing to do but wait for Kevin, so he decided to indulge in his daily Sneak Peek. The Sneak Peek was an extra look at one's beautiful woman that could be at any time of day. The morning, noon and night performances were, of course, guaranteed, and then every man could choose when to have the fourth performance—usually men did this when they needed a little mood-boost, or were feeling fatigued. Sneak Peak performances were sometimes disappointing, as the women did not have time to prepare, and Max's woman was acting less than frisky when he opened his chest door and took her out in the kitchen.

"Don't you want to dance?" he asked, but she merely sat on his palm inspecting her nails. "Come on, sweetheart, why so aloof? I've been missing you ever since lunchtime."

With a sigh, Max's woman stood up and began a sultry, slow-tempo belly dance, moving her arms and torso as if they were charmed snakes. She was beginning to take off her clothes when Max heard Kevin scream from the shower. Startled, he tucked his woman back in his heart and ran downstairs to see what was wrong. He opened the bathroom door and found Kevin, naked and dripping wet, standing outside the shower with his beautiful woman in his palm. Max knew he shouldn't look, but couldn't help himself. The woman was a gorgeous redhead with eyelashes that fluttered like

dragonfly wings. She purred from the back of her throat, crawling along Kevin's palm like a sultry cat, then stood up and began twirling her hips in slow, mesmerizing circles, while sensually massaging her breasts. Father and son both watched her, gape-mouthed and unable to react.

"You're... not supposed to have one yet," Max stuttered. "Are you sure you found her in your heart?" He knew as soon as he said it that it was a stupid question—where else could Kevin have gotten a beautiful woman? Kevin nodded in response, and looked even more alarmed.

"Okay...I guess you're an early bloomer. Just...get used to her. She'll be your favorite thing. You know, actually, I really shouldn't be looking at her. I'm sorry for disturbing your privacy," Max said, and turned and shut the door.

As Max headed back to the kitchen, the image of his son's dancing woman played on repeat in his mind. His woman had never been that sexual during the first two years that he'd had her, not even close. When he had found her on his fifteenth birthday, she had been wearing a modest skirt and top and had jumped rope. For years, instead of touching herself suggestively, she had skipped about on his palm or performed cutesy dances, and she hadn't revealed her nakedness to him until he was eighteen and a half. Why, then, had his son's woman been so unbearably provocative? And if she were this sultry now, how much more would she get as Kevin got older? Max thought again of the woman's flowing red curls; his beautiful woman's blond hair seemed plain in comparison. He could still picture her perfectly...that tiny waist, those long eyelashes...and the way she had fondled her breasts!

Max grabbed an onion and began chopping it just to give himself something to do. I shouldn't have seen her, he thought, his eyes watering. It was embarrassing and intrusive, and…well, it just wasn't right. He diced the onion, and then pushed the pieces back and forth on the cutting board with his knife. The reason society works, he thought, is that every man's private relationship with his woman becomes his beautiful secret from the rest of the world, and having a beautiful secret makes a man feel special and lucky, and a man who feels special is happy, and a happy man is a contented worker, and contented workers keep society running. That's why it was dangerous to see another man's woman, he told himself—it denied the specialness of each man's private relationship. And not only that, but it allowed him to compare, and comparisons could only make him unhappy with what he had. And that's why I need to forget all about it, Max thought. I just need to forget all about it, right now.

When Kevin came up for dinner, he could barely look his father in the eye. For a while, they ate their scallops in silence, and then Kevin burst.

"I don't get it!" he said. "I don't get what I'm supposed to do!"

"You're just supposed to enjoy it," Max said impatiently.

"Enjoy a naked lady crawling across my palm? What exactly am I supposed to enjoy about that, Dad? Why is she does she pretend she's a cat?"

"She does things that she thinks you'll like," Max explained. "And anyway, we're not supposed to talk about it."

"You know what she did after you left?" Kevin asked. "She touched herself between her legs. I mean, is that supposed to be interesting? Because it wasn't. It was gross."

"Kevin," Max said, in an irritated tone. "You are being rude. Change the subject."

"Well, you know what else she did?" Kevin continued. "She licked me! I'm telling you, Dad, she thinks she's an animal!"

"Stop it!" Max said, slamming down his fork. "This is not appropriate dinner conversation!"

"Fine," Kevin said, getting up to leave. "Your dinner looks like puke."

*

That night, Max lay in bed while the rain pelted the roof like bullets. His bed was King-sized, and the largeness of it made him lonely. He opened the heart-shaped door to his chest and allowed his beautiful woman to step out on his palm. She was wearing a white dress with a little pink cardigan, which she unbuttoned slowly and slid off her arm. Slowly, she shimmied so that her dress slid down to her ankles and she stood in only her underwear. Max tried to picture her with red hair and larger breasts, but no matter how hard he squinted, she remained small-breasted and blond. He reached into his pants and touched himself halfheartedly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm just not in the mood."

Max's woman looked dejected as he bid her goodnight and tucked her back in his heart. Once she was gone, Max closed his eyes and thought again of Kevin's woman, and how her hair had flowed down her back like waterfalls

of red wine. He longed to hold her just once in his palm. She was so alluring, and so insolent; she must smell like fire and honey, and have skin as soft as silk sheets. She must be the prettiest, no, the most *beautiful* woman in anyone's heart.

*

Later on in the week, Kevin was playing kickball at lunch recess when he felt a sharp pain in his chest. Was it the woman? he wondered. He'd been leaving her cooped up in his heart—maybe she needed fresh air. Facing away from the schoolyard, he pulled open his chest door and let her step out upon his finger. She was wearing nothing but a leopard-print bikini top, and when she got out she bit his thumb.

"Ow! Stop it!"

The woman glanced up at him, smiling half-slyly, half-seductively. She bent over and slowly licked the place on his thumb that she'd bitten; while bent over, her silky red hair curtained her face. She then stood up, pulled Kevin's thumb downward and toward her, mounted it, and began to grind, as if she were riding a horse.

"What's that, Kevin?"

A bow-legged boy named Henry had wandered over to Kevin and spotted something on his thumb. Kevin shoved the woman back in his heart as quickly as he could, but reaching toward his chest only confirmed what Henry had suspected.

"So you have a woman," he teased, widening his stance.

"Yeah, so what if I do."

"Take her out and show us then."

"No."

"Hey guys!" Henry called to the others. "Kevin has a woman. He won't show it to us!"

The other boys ran over and joined in the taunting.

"All groooooown up, aren'tcha Kevin?"

"Why don't you show us your lady, Kevin? I bet she's ugly."

The boys knew Kevin wouldn't display his woman; they would have been shocked if he had. But they taunted him just the same, because he made them jealous. Henry kicked a clump of dirt on Kevin and laughed.

"Hey, fuck you," Kevin said.

"What's that, Kevin? Would your woman like it if you used that kind of language? Why don't you take her out and ask her?"

"Back off, Henry. I forsure mean it."

"Hey guys!" Henry said, addressing the crowd. "Ever since he got his woman, Kevin's got a little bit feisty! What's wrong, Kevin, don't you like her?"

Kevin pulled back his arm for a punch. "Fight!" yelled the boys. Henry punched at Kevin's head but Kevin ducked. Kevin's return punch knocked Henry out cold.

*

Meanwhile, Max was on his lunch break, entering the Stalls. He heard the sounds of other men's pleasure from all around him, and, for the first time, was curious about their moans. What did they woman look like? Were

they sultry like Kevin's, or tame like his own? What kind of dancing did they do? What if they did things other than dance? He wanted to find a peephole in one of the stalls, but he hated himself for the desire. There was nothing more wrong or perverse than seeing another man's woman, and he knew it. The fact that he'd had nothing but inappropriate desires ever since seeing Kevin's woman was proof. So Max sat on the bench in his stall and opened his chest door as usual. His woman was wearing a slinky red dress when he took her out, and he tried to focus on her most attractive features. Her breasts, though small, were well shaped and symmetrical, and she had a long and pretty neck. He stroked her body gently with his pointer finger, feeling her softness and admiring the unblemished creaminess of her skin. She giggled and flirtatiously pushed him away; he sighed and put her back in his heart.

As he ate lunch with his colleagues, Max ignored their conversation and thought only of Kevin's woman. The only thing she had been wearing were sheer pink panties, and he recalled that he could see through them to shaved skin, which, for some reason, he found much more titillating that the mass of brown pubic hair that his own woman had. The more he thought about the redhead, the more he longed to touch her—to tug her hair and let her bite him with her feisty mouth. He wanted to touch himself while she touched her breasts and…No, stop these thoughts, Max told himself. Nothing good could come of them.

And yet, not masturbating in the Stalls had left him so frustrated he could barely eat or think. Before he could convince himself otherwise, he excused himself from the cafeteria, went to a stall he'd never used before,

imagined the redhead dancing, and came almost immediately. But after the wave of pleasure came a wave of shame and guilt. He went to the bathroom and washed his hands, adding soap and scrubbing hard, until his knuckles bled.

*

"Hello, this is the principal of Unzerton Academy calling. I regret to notify you that during lunch break at school, your son Kevin, a member of Class Nine, violently beat another student, leaving him unconscious. Although the student did not suffer permanent damage, your son's behavior was completely unacceptable and in extreme violation of school policy. He has received 200 demerits and will stay after school in detention for three weeks. Another violent episode will result in his expulsion. Thank you for your time."

Max switched off the answering machine. The message had to be wrong. They must have called the wrong house. And yet, they had said "your son Kevin, a member of Class Nine." Nervous and angry, Max prepared broiled lobster for dinner, telling himself to refrain from judgment until he heard Kevin's side of the story. Although the principal had said "Kevin violently beat another student" and not "Kevin and another student got in a fight," he expected that Kevin had been hit first, and hunted down a first aid kid so that he could tend to his cuts and bruises. But when Kevin came home and into the kitchen, Max didn't see a scratch on his body.

"Explain," he said simply. "And tell the truth, because if you don't, I will find out."

"I didn't mean to hit him that hard! " Kevin said, his eyes pleading. "This kid Henry saw my woman, and he wouldn't stop teasing me about her. He wanted to start a fight and he was being a real jerk, so I hit him. But I didn't mean to hit him that hard."

"Why would he see your woman, Kevin? It's absolutely inappropriate to take her out where other people can see!"

"I didn't mean to! I only let her out because she was hurting me, and Henry snuck up behind!"

"That's not an excuse!"

"I knew you'd be mad," Kevin said. "So just tell me what my punishment is, okay? I just wanna know."

Max was angry with Kevin, but furious at himself. The fight was only more evidence that ever since he'd seen Kevin's woman, everything was going wrong. After all, the fight had happened during lunch break, probably around the same time he'd been thinking about spying on other men in the Stalls, or maybe around the time he masturbated while thinking about the redhead, and to Max, it didn't seem at all like a coincidence. In fact, he wondered if it might be a pattern: if every time he let his perverse desires get a hold of him, things went wrong for Kevin.

"You shouldn't have hit him," Max said. "But you know that. And you know now not to take your woman out where anyone could ever see her, ever. Only in a bathroom or alone in your room—*never* in a place without doors. Understand?"

Kevin nodded. "Does this mean you're not punishing me?"

"I just hope you learned something," Max replied. "Go get cleaned up for dinner."

*

The following week it rained every day, and Kevin had afternoon detention, which made him grumpier than ever. Having Kevin mope around the house in the evenings put Max in a bad mood as well, and his car broke down, so he had to bike to work in the rain. While biking home on Friday, he stopped at a place he had looked up in the phone book the night before. *Ralph's Wigs*, the sign said, *Real hair for real men*. Max left his bike on the sidewalk and slipped inside, checking first to make sure no one saw him.

"Do you make custom wigs?" he asked the man behind the counter.

"We sure do," said the man. "But if that's your real hair, I have to say I don't know why you're asking."

"It's not for me," Max said. "It's for someone much smaller. And it needs to be red."

The wig was ready in a few days, and Max took it home with a bounce in his step. He sat on his bed, open his chest door, and took his woman out.

"I brought you something," he said. "I thought it'd look good on you."

Max used a tiny rubber band to pull his woman's blond hair into a high ponytail, and put the wig on her head, tugging it down so it fit snugly. She seemed a little put-off by it, but she danced for him anyway, rubbing her leg on his little finger with the long, red hair flowing down her back. Max touched himself, but was not aroused. His woman would never look or move the way the redhead had. On his tame, ordinary heart woman, the wig only

looked pathetic, and out of place. She finished dancing and looked up at him, smiling shyly, as if to ask how she'd done.

"That was wonderful," Max told her. "But you don't have to wear it again."

*

The next day, while biking home, Max spotted an establishment he hadn't seen before. The handwritten sign on the door said "Your Heart's Desire. $5.50/minute. Inquire within." Seized by curiosity, Max entered, which made a little bell ring. For a moment he stood alone in the red-lit room, and then a short, stubby man with gold rings appeared from a side staircase.

"Beethoven," he said, holding out his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Hi," said Max, reluctantly accepting the handshakes. "I'm—"

"You don't have to say," Beethoven interrupted. "Follow me, we'll find you a real nice lady, your pick."

"I…I don't think I understand," Max said. He'd felt unclean ever since the handshake, and Beethoven smelled strongly of sweat and beer.

"You don't have to play dumb, mister. It's just down these stairs."

Max followed Beethoven down the side staircase, which led to a subterranean red-lit room. The room was full of glass cases on pedestals, and in each glass case was a human heart, attached to two blood-filled tubes that ran down through the pedestals and into the floor. On top of each glass case was a note card, and as Beethoven walked through the room he read them out loud.

"Woman 298: Dark-Skinned, Full-Figured, Bleached Anus," he read, gesturing to one of the pumping hearts. "Woman 901: Blonde, Teen, Shaved Pussy. Woman 902: Redhead, Large Breasts, Full-Figured—now she's a real favorite, if it's your first time, I'd recommend her."

"This is perverse," said Max, his heart thumping with fear and revulsion. "This is horrifying."

"Well, I'm *sorry* to have offended you, Sir," Beethoven said, cracking his neck. "And you are now cordially invited to get the fuck out of my establishment."

Max turned and strode briskly up the stairs and out into the alleyway, where he felt an overwhelming surge of nausea but managed not to vomit. He wanted to set the building on fire, to watch every glass case shatter, to watch Beethoven burst into flames. He couldn't believe that such establishments existed, and was sure that if more were built that society would crumble to pieces. One man, one heart-woman, that was the *only* acceptable configuration; any deviation was dangerous.

*

That evening, Max didn't feel like cooking. Rain was coming down in buckets, and pumping hearts in glass cases paraded through Max's mind. As he heated up some chicken nuggets for dinner, he heard soft sniffles and assumed Kevin was crying for some reason, but when he went down to check, he found Kevin sitting calmly at his desk with his math homework.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yep, just finishing some equations," Kevin said, not looking up.

"You weren't crying just now?"

"No, why would I be crying?"

"I don't know," Max shrugged. "Dinner's in five."

Max and Kevin watched T.V. during dinner, partly to take their mind off the taste of the bland food, and partly because they hadn't been talking much since the shower incident. The news was doing a segment about the new piercing and hair-dye fad, and Kevin seemed especially interested, even though he normally found the news channel boring. Max, on the other hand, could think only of the beautiful redhead, who was just an arm's length away from him, curled up in Kevin's heart. He considered asking Kevin how she was doing, but thought better of it.

After dinner, Kevin stayed up working on a history project and Max ran on the treadmill, hoping that physical exhaustion would drain the thoughts of the redhead from his mind. As he sat in bed after his shower, his libido was high and he pulled out his woman. Much to his surprise, she was sniffling, and little dewdrop tears slid down her pretty face.

"You're sad because you think I don't like you anymore."

The woman nodded.

"That's not true, sweetheart. I love you."

Max reached into his underwear, and his woman brightened a little and began to dance. She failed to arouse him, however, and after he tucked her back into his heart, he found he was unable to sleep. It was windy outside, which made the house seem to shudder, and Max felt alternately too hot and too cold. He tossed and turned for an hour, blankets on, blankets off, until he

realized it was useless and decided to get up and pour himself a nightcap. He went to the kitchen and made himself a nightcap with coffee liqueur, nutmeg, sugar, and milk. It wouldn't be so bad to stay awake tonight, he thought. I could have a few drinks, read a book, and watch the sunrise. Max went downstairs to the bookshelf, which was outside Kevin's room, and as he scanned the titles, he heard a very soft, very sensual moan. Max assumed Kevin had taken his redheaded woman out, and wanted more than anything to see her. He knelt down and peered through the keyhole of Kevin's door, and saw that Kevin, strangely enough, did not have his woman on his palm. Instead, his right hand held the crossbar of a small marionette, which he made dance on the desk in front of him. The marionette had been fashioned out of ordinary household objects—a marble for the head, wooden spools for the body, fabric for the clothes—and, with its short hair and flat chest, it was unmistakably a small man.

The realization hit his gut and trickled upward to his brain: his son was attracted to ordinary men. And as Max headed upstairs, dizzy and weak in the knees, he realized that it all made sense. Most boys were excited to find their heart woman—Kevin had been frightened and repulsed. And Kevin had taken his woman out at school because he said his chest hurt—chest pain likely meant that Kevin was keeping his woman cooped up, maybe even for days at a time.

Max poured himself another nightcap, stared out at the gray night, and shook with anger, pity and guilt—anger because his son was sick-minded and ungrateful, pity because his son would forever be a social outcast, and guilt

because he felt that somehow, in some part, he was to blame. He hadn't been a good enough father—he'd indulged in perverse desires himself—and it had rubbed off on his son. He didn't understand how it worked exactly—he only knew that he'd broken the rules, and that ever since then things had turned rotten. You couldn't see another man's woman: it was a rule for a reason. You see another man's woman, and he knocks a student unconscious, builds a male puppet and masturbates to it. You see another man's woman and your own woman fails to excite you, you visit a prostitution den and a wig shop, you start to wonder about what other men do in the Stalls. You see another man's woman and you pour yourself drink after drink in the night, the sky is all clouds, and you cry.

*

The next morning at work, Max was puffy-eyed and hung over. He watched the razors go by in their packages, and thought of the rows and rows of hearts in glass cases. He saw his short, fat supervisor Mr. Gates, and thought of foul-smelling, gold-ringed Beethoven. He saw Vance and thought of his son, saw a red-headed, delicate-featured man and thought of his son's woman, and saw the men entering the Stalls at lunch and thought of the woman in his heart. The cafeteria smelled strongly of fish, and he wasn't even hungry, but he had nowhere else to go. He sat in a corner table where he hoped he'd be alone, but Walter spotted him and waddled over.

"You look blue, Max," he said, sitting down. "What's eatin' ya?"

"Everything, Walter."

"Your dad die?"

"No. Well, yes. But that was a long time ago. Look, Walter. I don't think you want to eat lunch with me. I think you should sit somewhere else."

"Hey, Max, I'm your buddy. What's goin' on? Is it somethin' with your son?"

And at that point, Max broke down. He found himself speaking without knowing why. He told about Kevin finding his woman, about the fight at school, about finding out Kevin was gay. He didn't mention his feelings toward the redhead, or "Your Heart's Desire," or the wig shop—nothing about his own guilt or perversity. But just confessing about Kevin made him cry.

"That's not gonna be easy," Walter said. "For your son I mean. He's gonna need a lot of love and support."

"But I think it's my fault. That he's gay."

"Bull*shit*, Max!" Walter said. "It ain't *anybody's* fault he's gay. Not yours, not his, not mine and not G.F. Madison's. Shit, Max, go home, give your son a goddamn hug, and tell him you'd love him whether he was gay, straight, three-legged or purple. And to show that you mean it, do somethin' bondin'."

"Something bonding?"

"Yeah, you know, *bondin'*. Take him campin'," Walter said.

"I used to take him fishing."

"Great! Fishin', campin', don't matter. Bondin', that's what I'm sayin', just the two of ya. Hey, you don't got lunch, want a roll?"

Max took the roll and watched the rain outside slow to a drizzle. His headache was fading, and the warm bread gave him unexpected satisfaction. He did love his son, he realized. What was he sitting and crying about?

"You know, Walter," he said. "You're not as dumb as you look."

*

That weekend, Max and Kevin went camping.

"It's been real long since we've gone camping and fishing, Dad," Kevin said as they set up the tents. "Remember the last time? I was scared of the worms and you had to put them on the hook for me."

"I don't know why we don't go more often," Max said. "Pretty soon you'll be too old to do lame stuff like hang out with your dad."

"You're not *that* lame," Kevin said. "You're cool sometimes."

Max and Kevin cooked rice and beans for dinner, and then roasted marshmallows over a small fire, serenaded by crickets and teased by the wind. The stars twinkled in the sky like the blades of new razors, and after toasting the perfect marshmallow, Max handed it to his son. He's a great kid, Max thought, as he watched Kevin enjoy the sticky treat. He's gay, but he's a great kid, and I know just what to do about his woman.

In the morning, Max and Kevin untied the old blue fishing boat from the top of the van and dragged it through the pines to the lake. They loaded in their gear, strapped on life vests, and pushed in the boat, which wobbled on the rough morning water. Max had packed ham and arugula sandwiches for breakfast, and the two of them munched thoughtfully, trying to ignore the wind.

"You sleep well?" Max asked, noticing the bags under Kevin's eyes.

"Mmm, not too good," Kevin said.

"Why not?"

"I dunno. Chest pain."

"Chest pain's not good," said Max, raising his eyebrows. "How's it been going with your woman?"

"It's fine."

"You take her out three times a day? And do you know about the Snea—"

"I know about it."

They sun was beginning to show up behind the pines, and father and son went back to chewing their sandwiches. Max had not taken his woman out in the morning, and his chest ached a little too.

"So, then, what do you think of your woman?" he asked.

Kevin looked down at the pile of fishing wire at his feet, chewed his scarred lip, and ran his fingers through his scruffy black hair. Max recognized the downcast gaze as a signal of his son's reluctance to speak, but pushed ahead anyway.

"I'm only worried because you mentioned your chest pain. Did you know it's important for her to get fresh air?"

Kevin nodded.

"You don't like your woman very much, maybe?"

"No, she's okay. It's just, I'm not all the way used to her yet."

Max pulled out his fishing rod and began threading the line through the guides. He searched through the box of fishing gear and found a hook.

"You remember how to tie a clinch knot?" he asked.

Kevin shook his head. "I don't really care about fishing right now."

"Some people like men, you know that?"

Kevin froze. He remembered the glass he had found outside his door next to the bookshelf a few weeks earlier. It had smelled like coffee liqueur and milk, and hadn't been there when he'd gone to bed. He figured his dad had just come downstairs to get a book, but none of the books had been missing.

"You spy on me," he said. "You must have fucking spied on me."

"What do you mean?" Max asked, instantly ashamed.

"Do you think I'm a faggot or something?"

Max saw a few small tears float to the surface of Kevin's eyes. The wind had picked up, pushing waves into the water and making the boat rock. Max took a few wobbly steps across the wooden belly of the boat and sat next to Kevin, who was staring at the lakeside trees.

"If you're gay, I still love and support you," Max said. "But what I'm concerned about is your woman, and making sure she's healthy."

"What do you mean?"

Kevin felt his woman pressing painfully against the walls of his heart like she'd done last night. He hated her. He wanted to throw her out of his heart. He wanted just to be alone with his marionette, or maybe, someday, with a real man. But he knew that kind of thing was looked down upon. He

hated that his dad knew now, too. He stared out at the pines. His dad put his arm around him and squeezed his shoulder.

"If you don't want her," he said, "I'll find her a home."

*

That night, Kevin was practicing clinch knots and Max left the campsite under the pretense of gathering firewood. Instead, he walked to the lake, far from where they had launched the boat that morning, and opened the door to his chest. His beautiful woman stepped daintily out from her heart cave, and although she was surprised at such a late night Sneak Peak, she began to dance obediently on his palm.

"No, don't dance," Max said, stroking the woman's hair. "I only wish you'd both fit in my heart."

He sat the woman down on a pebble and stood up. She panicked. Where was he going? She wouldn't survive outside the heart for more than a few minutes!

Back at the campsite, Kevin had given up tying the clinch knot and was shivering beside the dying fire. Max had picked up some sticks on his way back to the campsite, and he pushed them into the embers. Soon, the flames were dancing against the night again, and the smoke drifted off toward the lake.

"My chest really hurts, Dad," Kevin said. "What exactly are you going to do with my woman?"

"I'll find her a home, like I said," Max said, dropping a few more twigs into the fire. "Want to hand her to me?"

Kevin nodded and pulled off his T-shirt to reveal his pale, hairless chest. He opened the heart-shaped door, and the redhead pushed through his heart and collapsed onto his palm, gasping for air like a fish.

"I hadn't taken her out in a while," Kevin admitted, shivering.

"That's what I was worried about."

Kevin held out his palm toward Max, and Max gently scooped the redhead into his hands.

"Be right back," he said, ducking into the tent. The redhead, having revived herself with air, fluttered her eyelashes like dragonfly wings.

"I love you," Max said, and tucked her into his heart.

*

The next morning, the beautiful redhead stepped out of Max's heart, wearing nothing but black panties. She swirled her hips in mesmerizing circles and ran her hands through her hair while Max moaned and touched himself. He was so aroused that he had an orgasm almost instantaneously. After tucking his woman back in his heart, he checked the time and hurried to the kitchen to make breakfast. Kevin came bouncing up the stairs, but froze when he saw his father.

"What's wrong?" Max asked.

Kevin stared at him.

"What? Is something on my face?"

"No," Kevin said.

Max went to the dining room, where a large, gold-framed mirror hung on the wall. His eyes looked bright and alert, and his skin was healthy and tan. But neither of those things mattered now. His head was balding.