

CONFINEMENT: A MEMOIR OF ABORTION

by

Jessica Hadley Woolford

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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BY

Jessica Hadley Woolford

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree**

Of

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the unflagging enthusiasm, insight, and encouragement that Dr. Warren Cariou brought to this project, I have no doubt it would be little more than an idea and a pile of scribbles.

A University of Manitoba Graduate Fellowship and a University of Manitoba Faculty of Arts J. G. Fletcher Award provided me with the luxury of time to research and write.

In addition to Dr. Cariou, Dr. Dana Medoro, Dr. Susan Prentice, and Dr. Pam Perkins comprised my Advisory Committee and I am grateful for their consideration of my thesis.

Ellen Starr of Planned Parenthood of New England generously shared her expertise in order to answer my many technical questions. Any remaining errors are my responsibility alone.

Finally, I thank Andrew, my dearest friend and companion, for his gifts of faith and hope.

ABSTRACT

Confinement: A Memoir of Abortion challenges a social taboo by speaking openly about that which is allegedly 'unspeakable' because it is sexual. By offering a detailed first-hand recounting of abortion, the memoir challenges the polarized and often simplistic language and imagery that dominates the abortion debate and it questions the prevailing myths about women who choose abortion. It suggests that the dilemma of an unwanted pregnancy can only be resolved by individual women who are the sole experts on the complex realities of their own lives. Interrogating the tendency of some people to value fetuses above women, the memoir suggests that childbearing is an undertaking that deserves careful contemplation.

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CONFINEMENT: A MEMOIR OF ABORTION

Prologue

I see myself standing in a beam of light. Despite the impenetrable blackness of my surroundings, I know that I am in my own kitchen. From above and a bit behind, I watch as my right hand places the bright blade of a heavy chef's knife against the skin of the object that rests before me on a white plastic cutting board. Even though it is too perfectly spherical to be natural, and despite the decided lack of a stem, I feel certain that it is either a pumpkin or a variety of squash. Without hesitation or effort on my part, the blade divides the meat of the thing. The halves fall so that they appear to be a pair of bowls cradling the hot glow of lava. For a moment, that is enough, and I content myself with looking. Until I realize something is missing. No matter how I turn the vessels or dig at their soft flesh with a small silver spoon, I find neither seeds nor any indication that there ever were any. There should be seeds. Surely, there should be seeds.

When I consider what place I might truly call home, I think of the house in Corinth. That was not the first house, nor, unfortunately, the last, but it was the one where consciousness caught me. In the backyard an apple tree stood. Others grew on our property and beyond, but the tree on the slope just behind our house, its bark scaly with silver, was different. It was the only one I ever knew that bore pink-fleshed apples. Raw, they were the color of roses embroidered on an Easter dress. When my mother cooked and milled the fruit, that hue intensified. Steaming in a bowl, the sauce looked deep as guilt. Labial.

My father warned me that if I swallowed apple seeds, a tree would soon thrust its gnarled branches out of my ears and my head would bow down beneath the red weight of the fruit. I always laughed at that, but I was careful to eat around the seeds just the same. If one managed to find its way into my mouth, I spit it as far away as I could.

Now I wish I had saved a seed or two. I long for my own tree bearing impossible pink-fleshed apples. I imagine coaxing a green sprout from a smooth brown carapace and nurturing it into a seedling. When it became stout enough, I would ease it from the confines of its pot and settle its roots in my own backyard. A crab apple tree grows there now and at the close of every summer, it spreads a fragrant blanket of tiny apples over the patchy grass. Perhaps my young tree could also latch on to the heavy clay of the Manitoba soil.

Sometimes when I return to Vermont, I drive by the old house even though I am always afraid to approach it. As I head up the hill and pass the neighbors' sugar house, I slow the car and inhale. Breath stands between me and the possibility that everything I loved is gone. It is not much to rely on, but so far, it has been enough. Easing past our once-upon-a-time house, I can see that whoever lives there now has not chopped down the apple tree. Its branches still reach across that corner of the backyard. I would like to stop and ask for an apple but usually it is the wrong season. Maybe my timing means that I do not really want those seeds. If the new people invited me to pull myself up into the crotch of the tree and shimmy along a branch as I once did, if they invited me to pluck my own fruit, could I risk it? I might cut into the apple's flesh only to discover that all the color had bled away. Even if I were to place a cool slice on my tongue, I know that I could never taste those apples again.

*

Not long ago I asked my mother if she had wanted children. In part, I was trying to gauge whether or not my own ambivalence toward motherhood was normal. She said, "I always knew I would be a mother. I liked children and there weren't many interesting roles available for women then anyway." My mother had dreamed of going to college and her curiosity and creativity would have served her well there, but her parents had insisted that she study the practical arts of typing and filing instead. Before marrying my father in 1967, she worked as a secretary for an aerospace company that was awash in military contracts. Not only was the job tedious, but it was also a poor ideological fit for my peace-loving mother. "So, I was into the idea of being a homemaker," she said. "Having children was *de rigueur*—you didn't wait. After we got married, though, it became an emotional thing. I didn't know I'd feel this great yearning." When a late period convinced my mother she was pregnant, the eventual return of her flow triggered tears of disappointment. "When I did conceive, the doctor asked me if I wanted to go through with the pregnancy. They were just starting to do that in those days. 'Oh, yes,' I told him. 'Yes, of course.' I was very happy to be pregnant."

"Was Dad happy?"

"Of course. Of course he was." A pause and then, with her unnerving ability to guess my grief, she said, "I hope you know you were wanted. Oh, very much so."

I

My husband Andrew and I have just returned from the coast where we spent some time vacationing with friends. To me, it seemed that we were vacationing with babies, or rather, potential babies. As two couples are expecting and another is in the process of trying to conceive, the women were preoccupied with all things baby:

“Now that I’m pregnant, I only eat organics.”

“I call dibs on the name Isabelle!”

“Everyone else got pregnant on the first try. When we get back to the city, I’m going to ask my doctor to schedule me for a full fertility work up. I’ve heard it’s pretty painful, but I think it’s worth it. No pain, no gain.”

“Strollers? We’re getting a Peg Perego. They’re Italian and you know you just can’t go wrong with Italian design.”

“According to this book, every woman can master nursing.”

“It seems like all you hear are labor horror stories, but it can’t be that bad. I mean, if it were, women would just stop having babies! Right?”

Soon enough they asked the question I had been dreading: “So, when are you two going to start trying?”

“I’m ready to start tonight!” Andrew announced. I forced myself to laugh along with everyone before hastening to remind them that I have to complete my education.

Still, I care about our friends and children interest me, so I spent the following days trying to participate as well as I could in their talk. Mostly I listened and asked questions, but one morning I ventured, “It’s not that I don’t *want* to have a baby. I do.

It's just that the last time I was pregnant, it wiped me out. I was so tired, I felt like a zombie. And I can't afford to feel that way right now. I have so much work left to do."

When I finished speaking, silence stretched between us. Everyone knew that I had no child. Finally, someone said, "Every pregnancy is different." In that instant, I felt boxed in glass. I could see and hear my friends as they resumed their conversation but I could not join them. I wondered what they thought about what I had said and what I had not said. Had I spoiled their idea of me?

Why is it so easy for them? Why does it have to be so complicated for me?

I excused myself and walked down to the water. I slid the canoe off the dock, climbed inside it and paddled to the far end of the lake where I drifted alone for hours.

From then on, I held myself a bit apart. No matter how often I told myself that I was being silly and rude, I couldn't seem to stop. Each morning I rose before the others and swam alone through the warm silk of the lake water. Later I hid myself behind books or retreated to my room to sleep or write in my journal. At least once a day I paddled the canoe as far away as I could. When the week ended, it was a relief to know that babies had not laid sole claim to the world we were rejoining.

After we said good-bye to our friends, Andrew and I visited his family. We were enjoying a barbeque in the backyard when the neighbors brought their new baby outside. Everyone except Andrew, his brother, and me rushed to see it and soon my father-in-law called out, "Jess, don't you want to see the baby?"

His tone suggested that no one in their right mind could refuse such an invitation, but oohing and aahing over an infant was the last thing I wanted to do. "Why should I?" I thought. "No-one expects the *guys* to pay tribute to the thing." I didn't want to appear

boorish, though, so I dragged myself over to the rapt group, gazed silently at the wizened creature, and then headed back to my seat as soon as possible.

When we returned home yesterday, my chest was a clenched fist. Babies. Babies and their adoring fans had done this to me.

Andrew, however, smiled and sang. He clasped his arms around me, pressed his warm face to my neck and murmured, "I can't wait 'til it's our turn to start trying."

I pulled away and headed to the opposite side of the kitchen.

"What's wrong?"

"Everyone expects me to want children just because I'm a woman," I said. "It's not fair! There *are* other things going on in the world, you know!"

"I know," Andrew said slowly, the pink skin of his brow furrowed.

"There's all this pressure to have a baby. Everyone's pushing me: your parents, my parents, and now our friends. And you, too." At that, Andrew closed his eyes and pressed the fingers of one hand to them. He sighed.

"And I'm not sure I even *want* one," I added. Studying my hands, I clicked my right thumbnail against the nail of my left pointer finger. The noise was frantic.

Andrew crossed the room and stood before me, but I refused to look up. When he spoke, his words were tense with irritation, something I was unaccustomed to hearing from him. "Why are you saying that? I thought we'd resolved this."

I thought we had too. When Andrew had first asked me in earnest when I thought we might start trying, I was working as a nanny. Though I loved the little boy with whom I spent fifty hours each week, I could not help comparing myself to Andrew who was finishing his PhD, as well as to our friends, all of whom were becoming successful

lawyers, accountants, doctors and teachers. *What am I doing with my life? Surely, I'm capable of something more than this. How long am I going to spend raising other people's children?* Child minding was hard work. Hard, and sometimes boring too. I understood why nannies privately refer to it as The Ultimate Birth Control.

"I'm not ready yet," I had said.

Reluctant to worry, Andrew simply asked, "Well, when do you think you might be ready?"

"I don't really know. I guess I just want something of my own first."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm just a nanny, you know? I'd like to be something more than that."

I did not want to be a mother by default. Allowing my womb to define the parameters of my life seemed like a biological cop-out. If I could prove that I had other options, then choosing motherhood would seem less like climbing into a trap.

After some discussion, we had agreed that I would return to school to get an MA in English and then we would have a baby. Yet now that I am half way to my degree, the march to motherhood clangs in my ears. On the worst days, I think of the remaining months of study as my reprieve even though graduate school has proven more distressing and less empowering than I had imagined.

So, when Andrew asked me to explain my reluctance, I lifted my head, extended my hands and said, "I'm *afraid*, that's why! I'm not sure I want a child because I'm afraid!"

"I guess I don't understand what you're afraid of."

I tried to tell him though I was not sure I understood it myself. I could not bear to look into his eyes so I bowed my head and said, "I'm scared that a child will erase me...that I'll just be a mother and that's all."

"All? Don't you think that's one of the most important things you could be?"

"Yes! But it's not the *only* thing. And besides, what if I'm a *bad* mother?" I swiped at my eyes with the sleeve of my shirt.

Andrew's hand enfolded mine. "Sweetie, I've seen you with kids and I have no concerns about that at all. I know you'll be an amazing mother."

"Maybe. I don't know." I pulled a hanky from my pocket and blew my nose hard.

"Don't do this to me, Jess."

I crossed my arms and fixed my gaze on the floor. I did not want to watch as sorrow troubled Andrew's kind face.

"Come on, Jess!" He clutched my arm. "Don't do this to me. Please don't do this. You *said* you wanted children!"

Andrew's words twisted in my mind and reverberated off the past. His voice sounded like another voice, one from fifteen years before:

"You *said* you'd have an abortion!"

II

At first, the memory of that time trailed behind me no matter where I went or what I did. Once I became accustomed to its pestering, though, the past seemed to grow bored with me. It came around less and less often until finally its image faded and I recalled it no more than once or twice a year. Recently, I have hardly considered it at all and so I imagined I had left it well behind. Yet now the past has shouldered its way back into the present. No matter how I turn, it bounds ahead, blocks the path, and growls as if to say *You shall not pass*. “Scram,” I tell it. “Go on—get out of here!” but still it sits. When I scoop up a rock and raise it above my head, the past strains and bares its bright teeth. Showing me its moist, livid gums, it snarls and snaps. Surely it will tear out my throat. Breathless, I lower my hand. As I back away, the past matches its steps to mine. Quiet now, its gaze steady, it paces toward me until I am pressed up against it. There is no mistaking its fetid breath: central Vermont, 1989. That was the year I turned twenty-one, the very age my mother was when she gave birth to me. Unlike her, I was not married, though I had a boyfriend. Jon. He had dazzled me the previous summer and I remember expecting our second summer to be as brilliant as the first one. If only I wasn’t so tired. At first I told myself I was worn out from the demands of the school year and that it was nothing a little extra rest couldn’t fix, but after a few weary weeks had passed, I began to fret.

“God. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. No matter how much sleep I get, it feels like it’s barely enough.” I pushed my head through the neck of my tie-dyed tank top and yawned again. Noticing my reflection in the small mirror propped atop Jon’s bureau, I frowned. I looked like a sleepy, psychedelic turtle. Not exactly the effect I was going

for. I gathered two handfuls of my hair and hoisted it onto my head. After a moment, I let it fall and turned back toward the mattress.

Jon sat there hunched over his guitar, apparently intent on unraveling some mystery that lay furled within the hollow of its wooden body. Any spare time that came his way, he spent strumming its silver strings. This included first thing in the morning.

Sensing that a reply was not forthcoming, I tried again. "I mean, it's not like I've been doing anything different or especially strenuous lately. Maybe I'm coming down with the flu. You think?"

"Dunno." Jon glanced up at me and then immediately returned his attention to the tune he was crafting. His hair lay in loose waves at the base of his neck and I reached out to stroke it. As soon as I touched him, he said, "You'll be late for work." He was right, but I still felt stung. It was not so long ago that he had hardly noticed the clock when it came to me. Had something changed? Or was I just being histrionic, as my father had often accused?

We drove to town in silence. Parking my little red truck in the alley behind the popular vegetarian café where I cooked my way through school breaks, I turned to Jon and said, "So, will I see you later?" I felt pathetic asking, but I thought I could use his answer to gauge where we were emotionally in relation to each other. More practically, I needed to know if I should plan to spend the night at my parents' house or if he would welcome me into his bed.

"Well," he drawled, "we're probably gonna be tied up late trying to get the Piersons' lawn finished, and then me and Dev wanna jam tonight, so..."

"Look. If you don't want me to stay with you, why don't you just say so?"

“You can stay, but just so’s you know I won’t be able to spend much time with you, Mess.”

“Don’t call me that.” Usually I considered the silly nickname an endearment, but now I bristled. *He thinks I am a mess.* I got out of the truck, slammed the door, locked it, and stomped toward the back stoop. My foot itched to send the brightly colored milk crates stacked there careening into the river below.

“So, are you gonna come over?”

“We’ll see,” I tossed back over my shoulder. It made me even angrier to think that we both knew this was only a bluff since I would probably show up on his doorstep that evening. I let the screen door slap shut behind me.

A little while later, I heard Jon laughing up front. I glanced out into the café where I saw him sitting with Dev and the rest of their crew. They were feasting on an outlandish breakfast of plate-sized pancakes, eggs, and hash browns, and washing it all down with a sea of coffee, fuelling up before heading off for the day’s landscaping gig. It seemed to me that Jon laughed too frequently, as if everything was fine.

As soon as the lunch rush ended, I scooped a generous bowl of ice cream and escaped to the back stoop for a break. I sat on an overturned milk crate. It was blue and I had chosen it to match my mood, which had not improved since that morning. I peered into the amber water of the Onion River. A small school of fish darted there, but, intent on feeling sorry for myself, I hardly saw them and they soon flitted away.

After a few tentative spoonfuls of ice cream, I realized that my stomach was unreceptive to it, even hostile. This struck me as bizarre given my life-long passion for anything sweet. Besides, it was Dastardly Mash, my favorite flavor. The very first time I

had tasted it, I understood what “ambrosial” meant. I tried another bite, gagged, and knew I couldn’t finish it. *That* had never happened before. Maybe I really was coming down with something. Weird, though, since it was July. You just don’t expect to get sick in the middle of summer. I lifted my heavy ponytail and held the white bowl against the back of my neck. I closed my eyes and savored the way the cool of the ice cream seeped through the ceramic vessel and into my skin.

Back in the kitchen, the smells I had grown to love during the months spent working at the café seemed oddly unpleasant. I felt queasy, as if I had caught a whiff of something dead and decomposing rather than the pans of spanakopita being prepared for the evening’s dinner special. I put my hands out and grabbed the edge of the counter, then lowered my head and concentrated on inhaling deep breaths through my nose.

Sheryl, one of the waitresses, stopped. “Are you ok?” She put her hand out and touched my back. I nodded, then lifted my head and folded my lips into something that I hoped might resemble a smile.

“You’re exhausted.”

“God, you can tell that just by looking at me? I must look like hell.”

“Well, it’s kind of hard to miss those dark circles under your eyes. What have you been up to lately?”

“Nothing. I’m just so tired. I’ve been sleeping constantly but it’s never enough. I wish I could take a nap right now.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I live for the moment I put Max to bed so I can collapse.” Besides waitressing, Sheryl ran a small farm and parented her young son alone.

"So, have you lost your appetite, too?"

"No way! Are you kidding? Eating is one of the few dependable joys of my life."

"Well, food is making me sick. Just the smell of it bothers me and I can't seem to work up any enthusiasm for the stuff I normally like. I don't know what's wrong with me. Maybe I'm allergic to the restaurant," I said and tried again to smile.

For a long moment, Sheryl did not reply, but looked at me intently instead. Then she said, "I don't want to scare you, but it sounds like you might be pregnant."

As soon as she spoke the word, I knew she was right. I was pregnant. It was as if I were one of those Visible Woman science models and Sheryl had peered through my clear plastic skin and past the blue calligraphy of painted veins and spied the creature coiled inside me. Still, I could not get my voice to agree with my intuition. "Umm...I don't think so. I mean, we use birth control."

"Condoms?"

"No. The diaphragm."

"Well, I used the diaphragm and it didn't do me a damn bit of good." Sheryl tossed her blonde braid dismissively. "Hell, I've gotten pregnant on nearly every kind of birth control there is."

"But you only have one kid, right? Just Max?"

"One kid. Four abortions."

"Oh."

Sheryl must have noticed the sudden trench of concern between my eyebrows because she said, "Hey, it's just an idea. You won't know anything until you do a

pregnancy test. Try not to worry until you know there's something to worry about.” Then she shouldered a tray of the remaining lunch specials, turned, and strolled out to the dining room. As I watched her go, one palm moved to my abdomen and rested against it just as though it belonged there. When I realized what I looked like, I took a rag in both hands and busied myself scrubbing down the wooden countertop.

For the rest of my shift, the new awareness repeatedly thrust itself upon me. After two hours that seemed ten times as long, I tossed my stained apron into the laundry cart, clocked out, and quickly walked to the drugstore around the corner.

The last thing I wanted was for someone I knew to see me, so I plotted a roundabout course to the condom aisle, which was where I assumed the pregnancy tests would be as well. Except for the girl who stood behind the counter staring at the *Weekly World News*, though, the store seemed empty. The condom aisle turned out to be unpredictable as well: men's shaving supplies, shoe polish, and Odor Eaters flanked boxes of Trojans and Sheiks, but there were no pregnancy tests. I began to notice how the fluorescent lights beat down upon me as though I were awaiting interrogation. Eventually I stumbled into the aisle marked *Feminine*. It was there among the panty liners, douches, K-Y Jelly, discreet deodorants, and, inexplicably, laxatives in every form that I finally found what I was looking for. I grabbed a rectangular, sky blue box emblazoned with the words *Test anytime of the day!* and headed to the front of the store. I was too rattled to question why pregnancy or, for that matter, constipation, were “feminine” concerns.

At the counter I felt certain that the cashier, who appeared to be working just to keep herself in purple eye shadow, was staring at my left hand. Ideally, I supposed, a

wedding ring would have adorned it, but my reality was less than ideal. For once, I did not protest when the girl stuffed the box into a plastic bag. Its ability to shroud my secret outweighed its wastefulness.

I drove to Jon's and when I found the house empty, it took me a minute to recall that he had said he would be working late. Cursing, I slowly climbed the unfinished plywood stairs to his room. I dropped the bag onto Jon's bureau, curled up on the mattress, and awaited his return. Exhausted though I was, I could not allow myself to sleep. My mind teemed with questions. *Did I miss my last period? I'm really not sure...but how can I not know? Why can't I remember? Because I'm not on the rigid schedule of the pill? The diaphragm makes it easy to lose track of your cycle...but that's no excuse! I should have been charting it anyway! If I missed my period, would I have allowed myself to think about it? If I got my period, is it even possible for me to be pregnant now? What am I going to do if it turns out Sheryl's right? What about school?* During the past semester, classes had energized me for the first time in years. With almost every new chapter I read, it seemed that I discovered connections between philosophy and literature, literature and art, art and history, and my grades had reflected my zeal. I didn't want to have to give up my studies. I considered calling my mother, but decided not to. I couldn't be sure she would offer me any sympathy, and I didn't think I could handle a frosty response. Instead, I sat up and, cupping one hand low on my abdomen, swayed back and forth.

After watching the hands creep round the clock face for a slow hour, it occurred to me to start drinking water. When the time came to do the test, I did not want to make

the situation worse by proving empty. Besides, I was irritated with my brain. It ran a continuous loop of anxieties. Perhaps leaving the bed and doing something, anything, would provide some relief.

I descended to the kitchen and stood at the sink, swallowing tap water from a heavy glass beer mug, the only clean drinking vessel I could find. It was slow going. The iron-rich water smelled vaguely of blood. I imagined it seeping into my cells and tainting them ruddy, like onion skin stained with iodine. The water had left its mark in both bathrooms, clinging stubbornly to fiberglass and porcelain alike. I knew from experience that the stains were unresponsive to scrubbing and special cleansers.

To deaden the taste, I held my nose closed between thumb and forefinger. I watched out the window for Dev's black Scirocco to ascend the dirt driveway. By the time I finished my third glass of water, it was dusk. I could see tiny lights flickering in the air. Normally fireflies would have drawn me into their midst, but instead I started to cry.

"Don't be stupid," I whispered. I forced myself to swallow the panic swelling my throat shut, then rubbed my eyes and brushed the tears from my cheeks. I did not want Jon to know I had been crying.

I plugged the sink, ran the hot water full force, and added soap. Then I scrubbed my way through the pile of dirty dishes teetering on the counter. *I am washing the dishes. I am washing the dishes.* I repeated this mantra to discourage other thoughts from attempting to overtake me.

The dishes were dripping on the rack and I was finishing a fourth glass of water by the time headlights approached. Jon came through the door bearing a large pizza box and Dev followed, his dog Jane at his heels.

"Hey," I called, holding up a hand in greeting. Then I squatted and busied myself with Jane. I rubbed behind her floppy ears and she lolled her head with pleasure. When I scratched her chin, she licked my cheek and wagged her slim tail. I put my arms around Jane's muscular neck, closed my eyes and pressed my face into her brindled coat. It was sleek and warm. *This is the high point of my day*, I thought. One last squeeze and then I forced myself to rise.

"How's it goin'?" Dev asked.

"Ok," I lied.

"I wasn't sure I'd see you tonight," Jon remarked. "Want some pizza?" he asked as he opened the box. The smell flew at me like a blow. My stomach winced and I took a step back.

"No, thanks. Can I talk to you for a minute?" I hoped he would understand that I meant alone without my having to say it. Jon and Dev exchanged a quick look and then Dev lifted an arm and pressed his nose into his armpit. "Man, I stink. I'm gonna go take a shower." Carrying a piece of pizza in each hand, he left the kitchen, Jane close behind. The heavy clomp of Dev's work boots became fainter as he made his way to the downstairs bathroom.

"So, what's up?" Jon tore off a slice of pizza and bit into it. A thin trickle of oil ran down his chin. When he wiped it away with the back of his hand, a smear of dirt remained behind.

"You know how I said I haven't been feeling well lately? That I'm constantly tired?" He nodded, chewing. "Well, I almost threw up at work today."

"Wow. I didn't know you were that sick," Jon said between bites.

"I'm not so sure I *am* sick."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I told Sheryl how I've been feeling, and she said...well, she thinks I might be pregnant." I considered adding *and I know she's right*, but I didn't want to alarm Jon any further. As it was, he simply stared at me as if I spoke a language beyond his ken. I hastened on. "So I went to the drugstore and got a pregnancy test. I haven't tried it yet, though," I added. "I've been waiting for you to get back." We had made every other preparation that sex demanded together and I didn't see why this should be any different. Besides, I wanted not to feel alone when I read the result.

"But you've been using the diaphragm, right?"

Since it was usually a mutual effort to position the device, his question bewildered me. All I could manage was a nod.

"Did you miss your period?" he persisted.

"I'm not sure," I admitted. I looked down at the floor. Someone had dropped one of the old Glenwood stove's cast iron lids and it had branded the pale linoleum with a black pattern of rings that looked like a bull's-eye.

"You're not sure?" Jon's voice rose.

"No, Jon, I'm not sure. It's not like the pill: it doesn't have a built-in calendar." Though that was the truth, I felt bad as soon as I pointed it out. The diaphragm had been Jon's idea. Even though I had taken the pill without any trouble during a previous

relationship, Jon was concerned that it would harm me. Eager to avoid the chafing and misery that condoms always seemed to leave in their wake, and moved by his concern for my health, I had finally agreed to rely on that odd rubber disk. Somehow, I had managed to push aside the thought that it looked a lot like a miniature version of my old Flying Saucer sled, the one that inevitably ejected me mid-run.

“So what are you saying? Are you blaming me?”

I sighed. “No. I’m not blaming anyone. I mean, we don’t even know if I’m pregnant. Let’s just do the test and find out what’s going on. Ok?”

“Ok. Maybe it’s a false alarm,” he said.

“Maybe.”

Once upstairs we opened the box and read the instructions. They were straightforward: pee on the end of the test stick for at least ten seconds and then let it sit for five minutes before reading the results. All that water was swelling my bladder and I was eager to get to the toilet. The hardest part would be the wait afterwards.

Grasping the test stick like a baton I could hand off to no one, I headed into the bathroom and shut the door behind me. After spreading a strip of toilet paper on the grubby counter, I lowered my jeans and sank gratefully to the toilet seat. My urine came in a torrent. I thrust the test stick in its path and shouted “Now!” at the door. Droplets of pee sprayed my hand and I winced. It was warm and my skin itched beneath it.

When Jon called “Time!” I shook the test stick gently and then rested it atop the toilet paper on the counter. Urine poured out of me yet, and I waited for it to stop. There was a rap. “Are you ok?” Jon asked. I smiled tightly, tempted to snap out a sarcastic reply, but instead I simply said, “I’m fine. Be right out.”

My bladder finally empty, I wiped myself, pulled up my pants, and washed my hands. I inspected myself in the mirror and then splashed some cold water on my face. When I opened the door, I found Jon pacing the hall like some 1950s father-to-be. He was clutching an alarm clock. "How many more minutes do we have to wait?" I asked.

"Three."

"You wanna come sit down?"

Jon followed me into the bathroom where we perched on the edge of the tub. He allowed me to remove the clock from his grip and set it on the counter. I took his hands in mine. "I'm glad you're here."

"Sure. Wouldn't want you to have to do this by yourself," he replied, though the words sounded strained and he seemed not to see me. A wicked desire to wave my hand in front of his face possessed me. I wanted to ask *Anyone in there?* but I watched the clock instead. The second hand did a lazy lap around the clock face. Then another.

"Time's up," I breathed. I squeezed Jon's hands and silently sent out a plea to any gods who might be listening: *Please don't let me be pregnant.* Then I rose and bent over the test. A pair of pink lines looked up defiantly from the result window. I did not feel surprise, just a sense of déjà vu coupled with dread. "It's positive," I whispered.

Jon held out his hand and I passed the test stick to him. He scowled at it and then dropped it into the paper bag that served as a trash can. "Maybe we made some kind of mistake."

"What do you think we did wrong?"

“Well, maybe there’s something wrong with the clock and we didn’t time it right.” Jon gnawed a thumbnail, slowly mining his brain for any deposits left there from the science class he had taken a few years back. “Maybe it’s a false positive.”

“I guess it could be.” I was skeptical.

“We should get another test,” Jon decided. “Didn’t the instructions say first-morning urine is the best?”

“Yeah. But the box says you can test anytime.”

“It’s almost nine. Do you think the drug store’s still open?” he persisted.

“I doubt it. This is Montpelier, not New York.”

Jon frowned at me. “Do you have to be sarcastic?” he demanded. “I’m just trying to help, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry.” Not for the first time, I wondered if I possessed the skills necessary to make a relationship work.

“I think we should go get another test for tomorrow morning.” His voice had a weird optimistic tone that sounded like denial, but because I also wanted to believe that there might yet be a way out, I said, “Ok,” and followed him down the stairs.

“Hey, man, I left you some pizza,” Dev said when we walked into the living room. He sat on the couch clutching his unplugged electric guitar and picking out the opening riff of *Ain’t Talkin’ ‘Bout Love*, Jane sprawled at his feet like an overcome groupie. Not for the first time, I thought that Dev resembled a stockier version of David Lee Roth, and I knew such a comparison would delight him. I kept it to myself, though. He was a known lech and the last thing I needed was him thinking I noticed anything about his body.

"I'll eat it later," Jon said and strode toward the kitchen.

"Hey, where you goin'? I thought we were gonna jam!" Dev yelled as we hurried by.

"Sorry, man, I can't tonight. Gotta go into town."

"Jesus, Jon! What the hell's wrong with you?"

The kitchen door slammed behind me. I passed the keys to Jon and then we were in the truck and moving down the driveway. I leaned my head against the passenger-side window and shut my eyes. In my mind, I watched Dev crooning to Jane. The words went something like *The sooner he dumps that bitch the better*.

As I had predicted, the pharmacy was closed. Though Jon hammered at the glass door with a determined fist, the store remained dark. When it became clear that he was not going to get what he wanted, he turned away as if to return to the truck. Suddenly, he spun around and booted the wall of the pharmacy, hard, and then again and again, as if that would help.

I had read somewhere that couples that survive a crisis, say a hijacking, often find it impossible to remain together. Apparently, it is a challenge to go on loving someone you've seen brought low by fear. As Jon raged, I thought that I could begin to understand such repulsion.

I watched my boyfriend with disbelief. Jon was usually so even-tempered, his good humor inspiring even notoriously difficult people to follow his lead. I had seen my own father happily repair my truck's colicky engine with Jon's help, when on his own he would have spent many resentful hours kicking the tires and swearing. How could I

reconcile what I thought I knew of Jon with the brat throwing a temper tantrum before me?

I took a breath, then got out and walked around the truck. Clasp my hands, I said, "Come on, Jon. Calm down. Let's just get back in the truck."

He turned abruptly. "Calm down? You're probably pregnant and you want me to calm down?" An old man gave us a sharp look as he scurried past.

"Yes! All of Montpelier doesn't need to know. And anyway, you can't kick the pharmacy back open." I worried that he might be arrested for vandalism or disturbing the peace. "Besides," I lied, "I've got another idea where we can look."

"Where?"

"Get in and I'll show you." I hoped he would not continue to press for details. If I could at least get us moving again, I would surely think of something. I walked back to the driver's side as though I felt full of purpose and confidence.

"Burlington? Is that where you're going?"

"Maybe." I got into the truck, eased the seat forward, slammed the door, and started the engine. I put on my seat belt slowly. Buying time, I rooted around in the glove compartment. I found a Billie Holiday mix and slid it into the tape deck. Then I leaned across the empty passenger seat and murmured through the open window, "Sure you don't wanna come with me? I could use the company." I looked into Jon's eyes and widened my own as I said this, hoping that I appeared tragic and lost. He got into the truck.

He did not say anything, though, until I drove across the bridge and turned left. "What are you doing?" he snapped. "Burlington's that way." He jabbed an indicatory thumb in the air.

"I know, but we're not going to Burlington."

"Well, why the hell not? Barre's even more of a backwater than Montpelier."

"We'll see."

Of course, he was right: any sensible person would have headed north to Burlington, the biggest city in the state and a college town no doubt rife with couples simultaneously enacting their own versions of our crisis. But what if we drove all the way up there only to come away empty-handed? I couldn't stop thinking about how tired I felt and how I had to work early the next day. I was keenly aware of the loss of each moment that I could have been sleeping.

We rode along without saying anything more. Billie filled the silence between us with *East of the Sun (and West of the Moon)*. She was launching into *Easy to Love* when I spotted the Grand Union sign glowing ahead. I had forgotten that the store was open 24 hours a day. I pulled in to the parking lot and switched off the engine. Then I clicked off the stereo and the bright music ceased. It had mainly been making a bad situation worse.

"What are we doing *here*?" Jon complained. "It's a goddamn grocery store. You know: milk, cereal, creamed corn. Jesus, Mess."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"We should have gone to Burlington like I told you," he said.

"Yeah, well, you don't have to come in if you don't want to."

"At least I can get something to eat," he muttered, following me inside.

Though weary, I forced myself to walk briskly through the store. The sooner we got what we needed, the sooner I could sleep. Of course, I doubted that we would actually find a pregnancy test there, but I hoped Jon would not insist on driving all the way to Burlington, especially since there was no guarantee that we'd be able to find a late night pharmacy.

Turning into the *Health & Beauty* aisle, I was brought up short by the floor polisher. A large man whose puffy face was red with effort piloted the buffing machine. He smiled and winked at me, then stared at my chest. I turned and hurried away, each step reminding me that I was not wearing a bra. Shielding my chest beneath crossed arms, I looked for Jon. He had apparently trailed off somewhere without bothering to say anything. When I caught up with him, he was deliberating between a party-size bag of sour cream and onion chips and one of Doritos.

"Did you find it?" he asked me.

"I couldn't get into the aisle. They're waxing it. Anyway, I thought we were supposed to be looking together." I tried to keep my voice light.

"Well, I'm starving," Jon said. "I hardly had any dinner."

"Well, you could have said something instead of just disappearing."

Jon shoved the chips back onto the shelf and tucked the Doritos under his arm. Sliding his hands into his pockets, he regarded me as if I was one of those unreasonable people one can only endure. "Like what?" he asked, his voice larded with skepticism.

Exasperated, I sighed loudly and frowned. "How about something like, 'Hey, Jess, I'm just gonna go look for some chips. Be right back.' It's basic courtesy, Jon."

“You’ve gotta lighten up, Mess.” As he said this, he slowly shook his head back and forth, as if my agitation was inconceivable.

“Gosh, you’re right. That’s just what I’ll do. Silly me, worrying that I might be pregnant.” I turned and hustled away before he could say anything else.

Jon caught up with me in front of the small array of sex-related paraphernalia. There were two types of pregnancy test available: a stick that looked similar to the one we had already tried, and a version that involved a cup, an eyedropper, and a test well. Reasoning that the first test had perhaps been too simple, we selected the latter and headed to the checkout.

“I’ll pay for it,” Jon said.

“Thanks.” Since I had paid for the other one, it was only fair. At that hour, there was just one cashier on duty and the line for her till was long. While we waited to check out, I kept my eye on the woman in front of us. In her arms, she held a baby with hair like milkweed fluff. As he bobbed above his mother’s shoulder, the baby’s mouth stretched in a wide, wet smile. He looked at me and laughed before patting his mother’s shoulders with excited hands. *Aren’t I wonderful?* he seemed to say. *Yes*, I thought. I closed my eyes and tried to swallow but my throat was too tense.

“I’ll meet you outside,” I told Jon and scurried back to the truck. I crossed my arms, and stared down at the tarmac. With the heel of my sneaker, I kicked at a pink gob of gum. *Maybe our own little one would be like that.* For a moment, longing swelled my chest. Then Jon was back and the surprising feeling shrank until it was small enough to tuck away inside me.

“Want me to drive?” he asked.

“Sure.” I handed over the keys. Then I got into the passenger seat, put my feet up on the dash, and wrapped my arms around the hump of my knees. I closed my eyes and listened to the crackle of the Doritos bag and the splintering of chips in Jon’s mouth. The tang of powdered cheese product filled the small space as the road meandered beneath us, and I soon rolled down my window. I needed air. It was not refreshing at all, though, but thick and heavy as a wet towel. I was still tired, but now I thought I wouldn’t be able to sleep if I didn’t cool off first. “I’m too hot. Want to go swimming?” I asked.

“I have to work early.”

“Well, so do I. Come on. It’ll make us feel better,” I said.

“Fine.” Instead of heading up onto the highway, Jon turned right over the bridge and then left onto State Street. The city soon slipped away and the road narrowed to a dark ribbon. Beside it, the hills looked as though they had been cut from tall sheets of black construction paper. From my window, I caught glimpses of the highway blasted out of the granite slope above us. A few pairs of lights slid through the gloom toward Montpelier and I wondered what had lured the drivers of those cars out into the night. Whatever their troubles might be, I thought I would rather be going their way than hurtling toward my own particular disaster.

At last, Jon pulled off the road and onto the dirt shoulder that served as an impromptu parking lot for the small crescent of sand bulging out into the slow deeps of the Mad River. I got out and hopped from the ledge to the beach. Despite the heat, we were the only people there, so I took off my clothes and stepped into the inky water. As it blacked out my feet, I thought that if I allowed it to, the water might erase me entirely. The idea was appealing. I pressed through the tepid liquid until it swirled above my

shoulders and I had to stand on tiptoe to keep my head dry. The crickets were out, and the air rang with their songs of sex. I took a breath and somersaulted slowly beneath the surface, then thrust my way down until I felt a feathery frond tickle my hand. I sought out its root place and clutched. The thudding of my heart filled my head and on the outskirts of that thunder, I heard a series of clicks. It sounded like the snapping of a small and brittle thing.

The next morning I peed into the plastic cup and used the tiny eyedropper to transfer a few sunny beads of urine into the test well. What with all the paraphernalia, I felt a little like a scientist, though it hardly seemed fair that I should have to be the subject of my own inquiry. I spent five minutes pacing the length of the bathroom before taking a deep breath and glancing into the well. What I saw there was a +. According to the test instructions, this meant I was pregnant. I slapped the receptacle off the counter, twined my fingers in my hair and pulled. Sinking to the floor, I pushed my mouth against one knee, and cried quietly. After a while, Jon tapped at the door. "Everything alright in there?"

"Yeah. Fine." I rubbed my hand across my eyes and then on my jeans and stood up. I gathered all the pieces of the test and dropped them into the trash on top of the first one. As I turned to go, I realized that Dev might see the tests and the idea sickened me. I snatched up the bag, rolled it shut and pressed it between my hands. Then I headed out to tell Jon the results.

The following Saturday, I took my third pregnancy test, this time at Planned Parenthood. As we waited for the results, I concentrated on visualizing the word **PLEASE**. When it looked as bold and desperate as I could make it, my mind gave it a sharp shove and it floated out into the ether. Maybe it would capture the attention of a merciful deity, one who had been off-duty before but would now seize what was quickly becoming my new reality and reduce it to a false alarm.

Jon sat with his arms crossed and his eyes closed. He had tipped the weight of his head back against the wall. We did not speak, but it hardly mattered. His boot jittering against the floor told me exactly how he felt.

The nurse practitioner returned, closed the door behind her and sat down before speaking. Then she said, "The results are positive." Her words lacked the power to surprise us. Instead, they shook the scrap of hope we had been clutching at so that it scurried away like paper in the wind. Dismay elbowed in to take its place.

"We want an abortion," I told her.

"That's a big decision. You need to think about it carefully. Have you considered any other options? Adoption is one possibility and..."

"We've already thought about it." Perhaps I shouldn't have interrupted her, but I had not expected any resistance. "We want an abortion."

"Well, I'm afraid we can't get you in for at least another week. Look, why don't you think about it over the weekend and give us a call on Monday? Here, take these pamphlets."

*

Jon thumped the dashboard with his fist. "Now we have to wait? Just in case we haven't thought about it enough? I can *not* fucking believe this."

I thought I knew what he meant. For days, it seemed like I had been thinking about our dilemma and little else. *What am I going to do?* The question shouted and swelled so that it occupied all my available mental space or, if I was working, it stood just off to the side and whispered a ceaseless interrogation.

"You might as well get rid of those pamphlets. Why'd you even bother to take 'em?"

"I don't know."

"Come on."

"It seemed rude not to."

"Well, all I can say is, you'd better not be backing out on me, Jess. You *said* you'd have an abortion. When we talked about it before, that's what you said. Remember?"

"Yeah, of course I remember. I mean, in case you didn't notice, *I'm* the one who told her we want an abortion."

"Ok, ok. You don't need to bitch at me. Just don't go getting any crazy ideas about keeping it."

I knew Jon was right. After all, I had never intended to become pregnant in the first place. When it came to sex, I was not a reckless person. Far from it: I had consistently used birth control, but *it* had failed *me*. I did not see why I should be punished for that and part of me resented the creature expanding within my body. Abortion was logical. Still, logic could not contend with another part of me. Since I had

first realized that I was pregnant, it seemed that babies waited for me around every corner and each time I saw one, the life I carried felt more compelling than everything else put together. I had never expected to feel anything like that and I did not know how to discuss it with Jon, especially since it was apparent that his views were absolute. I needed to talk to someone who would understand. My mother? She had chosen to have us kids, but she had also taught me that a woman has options other than motherhood. Maybe she could help me unravel this tangle. I stopped at Jon's just long enough to fill a bag with some clothes and then I told him that I was going to go stay at my parents' for the night. He didn't try to stop me. "Ok," he said and that was all.

As I drove alone down 89, it was as if Jon was still in the truck with me. I kept hearing him demand, "Remember?" How could I forget? In my mind, I saw us the summer before. Conjuring my old apartment, I lifted the roof off and peered in like a child cracking a dollhouse. There we were, Jon and I supine on carpet as bland as porridge, our heads pressed so close together that strands of our hair touched. From the tape deck, Taj Mahal's voice crackled and crooned (*How can you sleep when your baby is gone?*) and a hot breeze pushed the dusty-sweet scent of wild roses through the open window. We had not yet had sex, but we were dancing toward it. As if we were the stars of a film about sexual responsibility, we had already begun to strategize birth control. Though he had told me that he and his last girlfriend had tried everything except intercourse, Jon was technically a virgin, so I was the font of experience. I thought that in order for his first time to be truly special, he should be able to feel everything, so I had vetoed condoms. He did not object. Why should he have? We were free of diseases. I

wanted to take the pill but Jon worried that it could harm me. His concern for my health, for *me*, was something new in my experience of men, and it left me giddy with gratitude and tenderness. It was by that process of elimination that we arrived at the diaphragm. A few days hence, I would go for a fitting.

Lounging on the floor next to him, I was feeling pleased that we were taking such an open, practical, mature approach to sex, and I was thinking that that was just one of many reasons Jon was superior to every other guy I had dated. Soon, though, something began to disturb my glistening bubble of competence. It was the Worst Case Scenario, an entity that I seem unable to hold at bay for long, no matter what the situation. I did not know what Jon thought about abortion. I had two choices: I could continue to keep quiet and just go along hoping that I never got pregnant or I could take a risk and ask him his opinion. It was tempting to keep my worry to myself. We shared similar views about most things, but what if it turned out that we were at odds on this one issue? I was sure that it would rend my heart to have to let Jon go, but I also knew that I could not leave this detail to chance. I had to say something.

I turned on my side so that I could see his face. His eyes were closed and he was smiling. I rested my head on his chest and closed my eyes as well. The sound of his heart plodding beneath my ear lulled me and I wanted to follow it into sleep, but I forced myself to take a steadying breath instead. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." His hand was in my hair.

"I was just wondering what would happen if..." I shifted so that my chin was propped on his chest. He opened his eyes and lifted his head. "I mean, if I accidentally got pregnant, what do you think you'd want to do?" There. I had finally said it.

Jon let his head fall back to the floor. He was quiet and I had time to worry that I should have kept my mouth shut. After a while, he cupped his head in both hands and looked at me again. "Well...I'm not ready to be a father. I mean, I have to finish school and then I want to do a bunch of other things...you know, drive across the country. Play my guitar. Besides, we're too young to have a kid."

I felt my face warming. Did he think I meant that I *wanted* to have a baby? "Oh, I agree," I said. "That's what I hoped you'd say. I mean, I'm sure I won't get pregnant, but what if I did and I didn't want to have it, but you wanted me to? God, what a disaster that would be!"

"So, you'd have an abortion?"

"Yeah, of course. I wanna finish school too and even if I wasn't going to do that, I'm pretty sure I couldn't handle having a kid. I mean, I can barely take care of myself. And anyway, I'm probably too crazy to be a good mother."

"You're not crazy." Jon pulled my head down to his chest and stroked my hair. I was far from sure that I agreed with his assessment of my mental health, but I kept quiet and snuggled closer to him.

When I arrived at my parents' house, it was nearly dinner-time. At the picnic table my sister was setting out plates and cutlery while my brothers arranged the condiments in their midst. To one side a paper bag full of corn husks awaited resettlement atop the compost pile, and when I saw it, I felt sorry that I was too late to help with the shucking. I enjoyed peeling back the green husks and revealing the rows

like gold teeth, each one plump with promise. My siblings wanted to know where Jon was. "He had to work late," I told them. Just like that, the lie came out.

Inside, my mother stood at the stove. On the iron skillet hamburgers spat gobs of grease and the stench of searing flesh filled the kitchen. Even though the windows were open, a fug of bluish smoke hung in the air. No one had ever thought to install an exhaust fan.

"Hi, Mom."

"I didn't know you were coming." She glanced over her shoulder at me.

"Well, here I am." I hoped she would hug me, but she didn't.

"No Jon?"

"He's working late."

She gave her attention back to the skillet. "You should have called first. I would have made an extra burger."

"That's ok. I'm not really hungry."

"You have to eat." A few years before, I had rapidly whittled twenty-three pounds from my already slight frame and ever since then my mother had worried that I would try it again.

"I know. It's just the smell."

"The smell?"

"Yeah. Of the meat. It's kind of getting to me."

My mother turned to me then, a hand on her hip, her mouth barbed. "What's the problem? Preggers, Jess?"

It was strange. Like Sheryl, my mother saw through my body as if it were merely translucent, a filmy veil that did nothing to hide my condition. However, where Sheryl had expressed concern, my mother's voice held only scorn. Her words jostled me and I clutched at the countertop to steady myself.

I might have chosen to fix my gaze on my mother's face and say something like, "Well, as a matter of fact, I *am* pregnant, mother dear." I imagine her contrite and I think that would have given me a moment's satisfaction, though who can say whether telling her would have made much difference in the end. Instead, I lied. I don't know why. Maybe my siblings had moved within hearing or my father was stepping weighty up the cellar stairs and I wasn't ready for everyone to know. Maybe I simply wanted to punish her. What I said was, "No. No, I just don't like the smell of meat any more. I *do* work in a vegetarian restaurant, you know." A bowl of salad sat on the counter. I grabbed it and hurried out to the picnic table.

At dinner, my mother and father hardly looked at each other and when one of them spoke, the other pretended not to understand. Though long accustomed to this routine, it irritated me just the same. When the meal finally ended, I took my journal from my bag and walked up through the cool green shadows lengthening in the sugar-bush. At the top of the hill, I climbed over the old stonewall and crossed into a neighbor's field. Purple vetch tangled the high grass and I stretched myself out in it. I closed my eyes and slid my hand over my stomach. I knew better than to expect any help from my mother, but little else was clear. My feelings were still jumbled. It seemed incomprehensible that I could feel both love and anger toward the thing. I decided to

make a list. I sat up, opened my journal, turned to a blank page and drew a line down the middle of it. At the top of one half I wrote PRO, and on the other CON. What could be simpler? Then I noted every reason I could think of to support or oppose having an abortion. My list looked like this:

ABORTION

PRO

- *too young/can hardly take care of self
- *have few \$\$ and fewer skills
- *haven't finished school yet
- *history of depression

CON

- *feel attached to it, somehow
- *damnation?

It was four to two with PRO in the lead. I had hoped that seeing my reasons inscribed in black and white would free me from uncertainty, but I remained troubled. I didn't fully understand why. Everything I had written in the left-hand column was undeniable. I had turned twenty-one just two months earlier and I felt like I was only beginning to be able to look after myself. Furthermore, I didn't know how to do anything other than clean and cook. Hardly the sort of skills that would bring me enough money to support a child. Besides, I needed to finish school. I had no idea what, exactly, I wanted to do, but the spark of the past semester still shone within me. Didn't I have a right to figure out my own life before bringing another one into it? How could I be a good student and a good mother at the same time? Anyway, even if I could manage to attend to both books and baby, what if it turned out that my depressive tendencies were genetic? The year before, I had been hospitalized because I could not seem to haul myself out of despair. What if my potential child were to fall in there? I imagined a small black spot of a mouth screaming *How could you do this to me? I never asked to be born!* It wasn't just the

illness that concerned me, it was also the cure. As my doctor prescribed Prozac, he had remarked that it was such a new drug that he considered it somewhat experimental. Though at first the absinthe and cream-colored capsules had guided me back into the world, a year later they had boomeranged and shot me right back to melancholia. I had recently shaken the pills into the trash but I assumed that their trace still lurked inside me. Might it affect the fetus?

Surely, caring about this tiny thing meant protecting it. I knew that for some people, that's where adoption came in. They preferred to allow their embryo to develop into a fetus and then a baby, so that they could give it away. Maybe that was noble. One of my brothers was adopted and loving him made me think I appreciated something of the sacrifice his biological parents had made. However, I also knew that red tape had bound my brother to an orphanage for two years when he could have been with us. And when I thought about his habit of calling himself "ugly," I could not help wondering if that initial rejection had scarred his psyche. Anyway, how could I ensure that my potential child would be adopted by good people? Or even adopted at all? Given the way it was already demanding my allegiance, I suspected that if it spent nine months snug inside me, I would love it too much to be able to give it up. And then where would we be? I imagined us wailing together in a grey apartment in Barre, me adding green stamps to my welfare check in an endless attempt to create something that resembled security. We would have no one but each other. Grandparents, probably. But no partner for me and no father for the child. Jon had made that clear. To the PRO side I added

*Jon does NOT want it.

That one obstacle trumped all my other concerns. I saw my future self pleading with Jon to demonstrate even the slightest interest in a child: *If you can't bother to visit, you could at least call.* At the same time, I heard myself trying to reassure our little one: *Daddy's very busy, but I know he thinks about you all the time.* I did not see how I could force Jon to love our child. Of all the pains that await us in this world, I most desired to protect it from feeling unwanted. I knew something about that and I was damned if I'd subject anyone else to it.

I would have to take my chances with God. If he really existed, rumor had it that either he was an awesome well of infinite compassion and would appreciate my difficulty or he was little more than a control freak. I thought that I would rather take responsibility for my own soul and risk hell than accept being moved about like a tyrant's chess piece. Besides, wasn't it sinful to give birth to a child you didn't really want and couldn't properly care for? The truth of that possibility hummed through me, but as I watched the stars emerge, sorrow crept into my chest and together they sang to me of ambiguity.

*

I rose early the next morning and left the house before anyone else was up. I had the day off but it was of scant use to me. I should have been spending the time with Jon, but I had told him that I was not going to be around and I knew that knocking on his door after only one night away would make me look pathetic. Even if we did hang out together, it wouldn't be any fun. Not with the problem stalking us.

Still, I had no place to go. Well, there was the tent that Jon had set up for me at the beginning of the summer. I couldn't afford my own apartment, so I had made a shallow stab at finding a room to rent, but what I really wanted was for Jon to ask me to

live with him. We had been a couple for nearly a year and I thought moving in together was the Next Step. It never seemed to occur to Jon, though, and when I finally suggested it, he said, "But I'm planning to live with Dev. I can't back out now. He's my best friend."

I wished Jon had called me his best friend. To me he was that and a lover besides. I couldn't fathom why he was rejecting the chance to be together all the time. Wasn't I more important to him than Dev? I said, "But I'm your girlfriend."

Jon sighed. "I can't go back on my word, Mess. You know we've been planning this for months."

"Well, what am I supposed to do?"

"Why don't you just stay at your parents'?"

"All they do is fight. Anyway, it takes too long to drive to work from there."

"What about that old army tent of your brothers'? You could set it up somewhere." Judging from the tone of Jon's voice, he considered this idea a true inspiration.

"I don't want to camp all summer." I folded my arms and scowled.

"Come on, it'd be great. You wouldn't have to pay rent."

"Well, where would I put it? I don't even know how to set it up."

"I'll help you," he said.

After Jon asked around, one of my co-workers had offered up a spot in the woods behind her house. Beside a shallow brook, Jon set up the tent. It squatted on the stones, a drab testimonial to my scuttled hopes. I hated it. As soon as Jon finished pounding in the final stake, I had asked to spend the night with him. "I'm afraid of the dark," I said.

He was polite about it and so far, I had managed never to spend a night zipped inside it. I was not about to go there now.

In Washington, I pulled over at the general store and used the pay phone to call the café. It was possible that they might need some extra help. If people were going to call in sick or just blow off work, they usually did it on the weekend. I was in luck: *Yeah, that jerk Lyman never showed up and now we're screwed. You wanna come in? That would be great!* I spent the next four hours chopping vegetables, running racks of dishes through the Hobart and trying not to think. When Lyman at last appeared, I looked for other reasons to linger, but everything was under control. I could not remain without seeming peculiar, so I filled my water bottle, grabbed two whole wheat bagels and left.

I didn't know what to do with myself. I thought I should try to avoid Jon for the rest of the day, but I was loath to return to my parents' house. I swung the truck up onto 89 and headed in the opposite direction. On the horizon, Camel's Hump swelled blue and bulged through the gaps between the cliffs that hemmed the highway. Beneath an awning of cottony clouds, the mountain looked cool. I wanted some of its serenity for myself.

I took the Waterbury exit, backtracked south for a ways before crossing the bridge and then jounced along the corrugated dirt road on the other side. The tires churned up a gritty cloud that swirled through the open window and dried my mouth. Despite the dust, I found the turn for the trail head and drove up to the parking lot. It was nearly full and I was lucky to get a space.

Ducking into the woods, I followed the path to the registration box, but I didn't bother to write my name on the list. I checked the map and decided to go up the Dean

Trail and return by the Forestry Trail, a hike I had enjoyed on other occasions. At first, it was an easy lope across brooks and through thickets of fern, but the path soon reared up and I was relieved when I finally came to a clearing. Perched on a rock, I gazed at the pond below. Clustered by the water were pointy, white stumps jutting like sharpened teeth. A wattle beaver lodge stood nearby. As I drank some water and chewed one of the bagels, I watched the lodge but nothing moved. I imagined the beavers napping together inside their overturned basket and I envied them. Surely, animals existed free from the myriad questions and doubts that attend the alleged privilege of being human. I had read that rabbits simply reabsorb their embryos when times are harsh.

I took one more sip of water and rose. The trail continued at an angle and I climbed it slowly. Stepping aside for other hikers allowed me to catch my breath, but it also irked me. In the past, my body had always been perfectly capable of such exertion and now it felt like a lump of wet clay.

Finally, the trail descended through boulders and brittle pine needles. As I passed beneath its perch, a raven croaked. I strode away from it and pushed myself up the summit. From the top, I looked across Lake Champlain into New York State where the Adirondacks surged. To the east, a band of snow collared Mt. Washington bristling up out of New Hampshire. I wished that Jon were there to see the mountains with me. Last summer we had shared every spare moment.

I sat for a while and watched people come and go. Especially compelling were the families. Parent after parent stooped down to retie laces that had loosed themselves from miniature hiking boots while kids laughed through mouths full of gorp. Before the children skittered away to explore the rocks, parent after parent took commemorative

photographs of their victorious mountaineers. Everybody smiled. I wondered if what I was witnessing was steady delight or just the exuberance of a moment. My own family possessed similar snapshots but I did not think of us as happy. Placing both palms on my abdomen, I sensed anew that what I had to offer a child was insufficient. Yet this awareness did not bring me the ease I had sought.

Goosebumps covered my arms. Pulling on a sweatshirt, I rose, and then picked my way down the steep path to the Forestry Trail. Around a corner, the red spruce stood naked and dry, their spindly limbs thrusting forth as if to ward off some foe. Although I had seen them before and had heard often enough about acid rain, the sight still jolted me.

As I descended the trail, lush growth replaced the dead trees. Even the rocks underfoot glistened with water. Still, the picture of the devastation kept shouldering its way into my mind and dogging my already slow steps. *This poisoned world is no place for a child.* By the time I made it back to the registration box, it was dusk. Shadows raced me to the truck and it was a relief to climb into the tiny cab and shut them out.

When I knocked on Jon's door there was no answer even though Dev's car was in the driveway. I tried the knob and it turned easily, so I let myself in. The electric buzz of Guns N' Roses blared from the basement for a few minutes before disintegrating. When it stopped, I heard a short murmured discussion followed by the opening bars of *My Michelle*. I walked down the stairs, turned the corner, and stepped into the rec room. On an elevated plywood platform, Jon and Dev were jamming. Jon's fingers raged against the strings of his red Fender while Dev sneered and stalked his way through an imitation of Axl Rose. I made my way across the worn linoleum to the dilapidated couch where

Jane was curled. When I held out my hand, she sniffed it and then thumped her tail against the dingy plaid fabric. I sank down next to her and stroked her fur. A long cloud of pot smoke hung in the air and after a few minutes, my head felt heavy. I fought a yawn.

When the guys finished the song, Jon called to me from the makeshift stage. "Hey," he said. "How's it goin'?"

"Ok, I guess. How are you?"

"Can't complain when I've got a guitar in one hand and a joint in the other." He took a drag and grinned, then held the joint out to me.

"No, thanks."

"Suit yourself." Jon passed the white stub to Dev.

Dev took a hit, placed the joint in an ashtray, exhaled, and then turned to me. "Got any requests?" he asked.

"Oh, everything you guys play is great." That wasn't entirely true, but I was too tired to think of any songs. "Surprise me," I said.

After a brief discussion, Jon and Dev galloped into *You're Crazy*. They took turns playing lead guitar and singing and when they got bored, they went back to *My Michele*. They alternated between the two songs until I began to wonder if they were trying to tell me something. *Drivin' your friends crazy with your life's insanity*. That sounded like me. And, *You don't need my love/You gotta find yourself another/Piece of the action/'Cause you're crazy/You're fuckin' crazy*. Maybe the message was that I should just get lost. I shook my head. It was the pot, I decided. It was making me

paranoid. And sick. My stomach felt unsteady. I pushed myself up off the couch, gave Jon a small wave and went upstairs.

When Jon finally came up, I was lying in bed staring at the ceiling and listening to the rain pelt the galvanized roof. The first thing he said was, "So, you're gonna make that appointment tomorrow, right?"

I closed my eyes. "Right," I said. I turned over and pulled the covers up over my ears.

On Monday, I took a quick break before the lunch rush. Grabbing the phone, I hid myself beneath the lip of the lunch counter and dialed Planned Parenthood. When the receptionist answered, I identified myself in a low voice. I didn't want anyone to hear me.

"I've read the pamphlets," I said, even though that was not true, "and I've thought about it, and I've decided that I want an abortion."

"Ok, let me just check the appointment book...umm...it looks like we can get you in next Tuesday at 11:30. How's that?"

"Great," I said even though I knew I was scheduled to work that day.

After I hung up, I scribbled the information on a scrap of napkin and shoved it in my pocket. Then I went looking for my boss. I found her in the cellar sorting through bags of chickpeas and lentils.

"Hey," I said, "can I ask you something, Vicki? I know I'm supposed to work next Tuesday, but I really need the day off," I said. Before she could say anything, I added, "I have to have an abortion."

"Oh, no." She opened her mouth and then covered it with one slender hand.

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that, Jessica. I truly am. Of course you can have the day off."

"Thanks. I really, really appreciate it."

I had turned to head back up to the kitchen when she asked, "Do you need someone to go with you?"

"Jon's going with me. So I'll be ok. Thanks, though." I ran up the stairs.

Jon showed up at the end of my shift. He had finished work early and suggested that we go swimming at the reservoir. His invitation surprised and pleased me. Maybe he did still care. As soon as we got into the truck, he asked, "So, did you make the appointment?"

"Yes," I said.

Jon turned toward me and smiled. "Great!" he said. "When is it?"

"A week from tomorrow. You can go with me, right?"

"Yeah. I'll have to get out of work, but that should be easy enough."

"Vicki already gave me the day off." I didn't tell Jon that she had offered to accompany me. Instead I said, "So, you'll come into the room and be there with me when they do it, right?"

"Will they let me?"

"Yeah. The receptionist said it's fine. Lots of guys do it." I wasn't sure that was true but I thought it sounded good.

“Ok. Sure.”

“Oh, good. I hoped you’d say that. It’s just that it’s kind of scary and I know I’ll feel a lot better if you’re there,” I told him.

“Well, it’s no big deal. How much is it gonna cost?”

“Two-hundred-and-twenty bucks.” I turned onto the reservoir access road and guided the truck down the hill.

Jon whistled. Then he said, “Well, I guess we don’t really have a choice.”

His words hollowed me. I realized that all along I had been secretly hoping that Jon might ask me to marry him. Well, it wasn’t going to happen. “I guess not,” I said. I brought the truck to a halt in front of one of the boulders that line the parking lot.

“God, I can’t wait ‘til next Tuesday,” Jon said. He got out of the truck and removed everything except his cutoffs. “Wanna swim to the island?”

“Sure.”

As I followed Jon through the water, I thought about what he had said. While part of me was eager to abandon the pregnancy, another part of me felt sorry when I thought about what we would lose. When I reached the small island, I pulled myself up onto the rocky bank and sat next to Jon. I dangled my feet in the reservoir. “It’s kind of sad, though, don’t you think?” I asked. I kept my gaze on my feet, the skin gleaming pale through the tea-tinted water.

“What is?”

“Abortion.”

“No.”

“Well, it is to me. I mean, we’ll never get to know this possibility, this could-be baby. And I just keep wondering what he or she would be like. Part you, part me.” I picked up a dry leaf and began tearing it from its narrow spine.

“What are you talking about? You *said* you’d get an abortion. That’s what you told me, Jess. You can’t back out now!”

I threw down the broken bits of leaf and turned toward Jon. “I’m not saying I won’t go through with it. I know it’s the right thing to do. But it isn’t easy. All I’m saying is that I feel kind of sad about it.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Not even a little?”

“Nope.” Jon stood and began throwing dead sticks into the water.

“How can you say that?”

“‘Cause that’s how I feel.”

“So that makes it right?” I asked. “Just because you feel it?”

“Yup.”

“You don’t think we’re losing something here?”

“Nope.” With that, Jon jumped back into the water and set out for shore.

The next day, I told Sheryl. “Well, you were right. I’m pregnant,” I whispered.

“Oh, no.” She frowned. “So what are you gonna do?”

“I’m having an abortion. Next week.” I started chewing my thumbnail.

“Do you have anyone to go with you?”

“Jon said he’d go.”

"Well, good." She resumed wrapping burgundy napkins around settings of silverware.

"Yeah," I said.

"You let me know if there's anything I can do, ok?"

"Thanks." I began to walk away but then I turned back. "Hey, Sheryl?"

She glanced at me. "Yeah?"

"Did it...bother you?"

"Well, it did hurt a little." Sheryl looked back down at her busy hands. "But it's worth it. And anyway, you'll forget all about it before too long."

Later in the week, Cat approached me as I was drizzling tahini into the food processor. "So, you're having an abortion," she said.

I let the gun-metal colored measuring cup bang against the work island. "Where'd you hear that?"

"You were telling Sheryl," she said. A slash of flour powdered her brown cheek.

"Oh." I tried to figure out where Cat was going with this. Was she about to condemn me? It didn't seem likely, but then again, it was possible that she was anti-choice.

"Don't worry: I wasn't eavesdropping. I just happened to overhear, is all," she said. "Anyway, I wanted to tell you that I had an abortion and I don't regret it one bit. I thought you should know that."

"Oh. Well, thanks, Cat." I allowed myself to breathe again.

"Let me know if I can do anything to help out. Maybe you need a ride to the clinic?"

"Thanks anyway," I said. "I'm all set."

"Is Jon taking you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you're lucky. Jon's a good guy."

"Yeah," I said. "He is." I wanted to believe her assessment.

"Not like my boyfriend," Cat added. "He dumped me. Though he did pay for the abortion first. He was always good about picking up the tab."

After that, several others of my co-workers took me aside to speak about their abortions. I was surprised to learn that so many of them had had one. Except for Sheryl, I had assumed I was alone, but their stories revealed a complicated world teeming below the surface. I could have asked any one of those women if they had felt conflicted the way I did. Instead, I held my tongue. Neither Jon nor Sheryl seemed to know what I was talking about, so maybe I was making it harder than it really was.

The clinic resembled the sprawling white clapboard houses that populate Vermont like mushrooms. From the street, the most obvious differences between it and its neighbors were the long wheelchair ramp stretching to the side door and the distinctive sign staked into the tidy lawn. *Planned Parenthood*. The white letters hung like clean sheets against a blue sky.

I had braced myself for conflict, but on that day the sidewalk was empty. No protesters waved placards or prayed in front of fetus photos enlarged to the point of

grotesquerie. Jon drove around the building and into the parking lot. It held only other vehicles. As Jon eased the truck into a parking space, I realized that I felt a little disappointed. My reaction confused me because I knew how fortunate I was to elude the harassment many women face when they attempt to enter an abortion clinic. Though I had not bothered to arm myself with clever retorts, I would have resented any righteous stranger who attempted to persuade me to keep the thing. Could it be that I was looking for a fight, a public opportunity to galvanize my own will? Perhaps some part of me felt that it would have been easier to go through with the abortion if I could mark my choice with spit, vinegar, and fire. On the other hand, it is possible that the disappointment sprang from loneliness. After all, I did not doubt that I was the only person who would mourn the passing of this possibility, this cluster of cells more potential than anything else.

We were a few minutes early for our eleven o'clock appointment, but when we presented ourselves to the receptionist, she gestured at the crowded waiting room and told us that the doctor was behind schedule.

"I'm sorry to ask you this, but could you come back in about an hour?" Her voice was soothing, as if she knew that her request would flood me with a keen desire to vault across the counter and clutch her freckled neck between my hands. Since there was no choice, we could only agree.

"I've gotta get out of here." I stalked out of the waiting room and down the steps. Jon followed me, and then put a hand on my arm. I froze in place like a child playing Red Light, Green Light.

"You ok?"

He had been asking me that all morning. I clenched my teeth to keep from screaming at him. I wanted to shout *Of course I'm not ok!* Instead, I looked straight ahead and replied, "Fine, thanks." The words rattled and I imagined that Jon knew as well as I did that I was lying, but I didn't care. I folded my arms across my chest. I was cold even though it was one of the nicest days we had had all summer, but I also wanted to bar him from putting his arm around me or trying to hold my hand. Not that he was likely to, but that way I could at least make it look as though I was rejecting him instead of the other way around.

"Wanna get some lunch? There's a Subway down the hill." Jon scratched at his elbow as he spoke.

"I'm not really hungry, but if you want to get something, fine." Did he actually think I'd be able to eat? I had managed to drink a cup of peppermint tea that morning, partly to soothe my anxious stomach and partly to invoke my mother's presence, but appetite was nothing I knew. Besides, when I made the appointment, the receptionist had instructed me to eat sparingly if at all before the abortion, and I had already told Jon that. Hadn't he been listening to me?

We decided to leave the truck in the parking lot and walk down the hill into town. Sunshine warmed my bare arms and face and it felt good. Too good. I wished for black skies, cold rain, and an anxious wind to match my mood. Soon enough, Jon said, "I'll be glad when it's over." I had heard that particular phrase and its meager variations several times recently and it irritated me. What did he mean by "over"? Did he honestly think that everything would just go back to normal? That we would be able to act as if none of it had ever happened? I didn't ask him these questions. "Yeah," was all I said.

At the Subway Jon ordered a ham and cheese sub with everything. The dank smell of the meat disturbed my stomach but Jon didn't seem to notice the odor and he ate as though he was famished. I sat across from him and stared at the mustard yellow tabletop. I reduced a pair of paper napkins to a neat mound of confetti. Through the long window, I watched cars and people hurrying past. Every few minutes I checked my watch.

We returned to the clinic in silence. The receptionist thanked us for waiting and said that it would soon be my turn. Jon and I paid in advance, each of us counting out our share of the two hundred and twenty dollars. We had decided to split the cost fifty-fifty and each green bill seemed to signify a percentage of our responsibility. As the receptionist gathered up the cash, she said that it was good to see Jon there doing his part. "It happens a lot less often than we'd like," she told us.

We sat down to wait. I glanced at some pamphlets about the pill and the IUD but the words hardly touched the surface of my mind before skating far from my understanding. Since I couldn't concentrate, I surreptitiously surveyed the other women in the waiting room. Most of them appeared to be around my age, but there was also an older woman with dark hair who reminded me of my mother. Her two children played with blocks on the floor. Boxes of tissues were everywhere, but no one was crying yet. Instead, each woman's face wore an expression that looked like resolve, with a hint of distance around the eyes. I imagined that I looked the same.

When a clinician spoke my name, I got up and went to her. Indicating Jon, I asked, "Is it true that my boyfriend can come with me?"

"Yes, of course, but there are a few details we need to take care of first." She turned to Jon and said, "I'll come get you when we're ready to start."

I followed the clinician into an exam room where we sat together while she described the procedure. After I signed the consent form, she jabbed a needle into my finger and filled a tiny tube with blood. Then she applied a Band-aid, handed me a hospital gown and said, "You can change into this. Remove everything except your socks. I'll knock before I come back in." I have always hated the accessibility of those slit garments, their flimsy string ties barely able to secure even a modicum of dignity, but I did as she said. I slowly folded my clothes and placed them atop my sneakers. Underneath the small round Band-aid, my finger felt tight and hot.

The clinician returned and escorted me to the bathroom so that I could empty my bladder but nothing came out. After that, she showed me into a large room with an examining table in the center. As I climbed up onto it, the white paper slipped and crinkled beneath me. Other staff members busied themselves with equipment clustered at the foot of the table. When someone told me to put my feet into the stirrups, I felt a wave of panic. The stirrups always made me think of cows trapped and struggling in their stanchions while the barn blazes around them. After what I hoped was a barely-perceptible pause, I braced my feet against the metal and then lay back. Directly above, an optimist had attached a poster depicting an ocean scene to the ceiling tiles, and I wondered if it had ever succeeded in distracting anyone. Even though the clinician covered me with a blanket and eased a pillow beneath my head, I felt uncomfortable and chilly. *Of course, you're uncomfortable, stupid*, I chided myself. *You're about to have an abortion. What did you expect?*

When the doctor joined us, I was surprised. A man? My mind did not accept him easily. In that space where I had only ever seen women taking care of women, he seemed like an invader. He introduced himself, reaching between my bent legs to shake hands, and my helplessness embarrassed me. I felt a bit better when he promised to describe what he was going to do just before he did it. The clinician offered to hold my hand.

“Where’s Jon?” I asked her.

“Oh, that’s your boyfriend, right?”

“Yes. He’s supposed to be with me.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll go get him.”

After she left, the doctor asked me to slide my bottom down to the very end of the table and when I was sure that I was about to slip off the edge, he stopped me and moved his hands across my abdomen. “I’m trying to get a sense of how far along you are, Jessica.” He reached inside me, his long fingers glutinous with lubricant. “I’d say you’re at about nine weeks.” He removed his fingers and said, “Ok, I’m going to insert the speculum now. It might feel a little cold.” As the metal vise pushed into me, I tensed.

“I know it’s not easy, but try to relax. Don’t clench your buttocks. Just relax.”

After three attempts, the speculum finally burrowed and clicked into place and the inevitable cramping began. As soon as Jon arrived, I grabbed his hand and squeezed it. I looked at him and then closed my eyes. He touched my hair. “It’s ok,” he soothed. “You’re fine.”

When I opened my eyes, I could see that the doctor was preparing a needle. My breathing shallowed, its cadence frantic. He explained that he was going to inject anesthetic directly into my cervix and that it might hurt a bit at first, but that afterwards I

would hardly feel a thing. He went ahead before I could protest. It felt as if someone with claws instead of proper fingernails was pinching me hard and long. The pain skewered my flesh and I cried out against my will. Someone put a cool cloth on my forehead. "Let's give that a chance to take effect and then we'll finish up." The doctor left the room.

I stared at the ceiling, biting the inside of my cheeks, and tried not to cry. I listened to the clinician telling Jon how to use the damp cloths to prevent me from getting too hot.

When the doctor returned, he dilated my cervix and more cramps rippled through my abdomen. I squeezed Jon's hand again and he dabbed at my forehead. The doctor inserted a flexible tube through my cervix and then, using something that sounded like a vacuum cleaner, aspirated the contents of my uterus. I did not feel pain, exactly, though at moments, I was aware of a dull, uncomfortable pulsing, and I sensed tension radiating from Jon. When I glanced up, I could see that his face was pale and stiff, his gaze fixed on whatever the doctor was doing. His expression frightened me but when I asked him if something was wrong, all he said was, "No...no. You're fine." He swiped the cloth across my forehead and a trickle of water puddled in my ear. I lifted my head but the fabric tented across my legs obscured my view.

Once the whine of the vacuum stopped, the doctor slid the tube from between my legs and then set to scraping out my insides. It was as if he was gutting a Halloween pumpkin. I was convinced that I could hear the curette as it grated across the walls of my womb. Hurt wore through the anesthetic and I began to squirm, eager for the doctor to finish. High-pitched noises broke past my clenched teeth and tears leaked from my eyes.

“We’re nearly done,” the doctor announced. “You’re doing a good job, Jessica.” I wondered what he meant. A good job of what, exactly? Of doing the logical thing? Of honoring an agreement? Of lying back and allowing my own little one to be sucked out of me? Of insisting on my own worth?

The doctor finally released and withdrew the speculum. I scooted back up the table and stretched out my legs. Out of the corner of my eye, I looked for any sign of the fetus. I imagined it floating atop a froth of blood in a silver, kidney-shaped dish. I wondered if it was a boy or a girl and if the doctor could even tell. I did not ask, just closed my eyes and barred my teeth against another series of cramps.

“Well, Jessica, you’re all set. The staff will let you know what you need to do next. Oh, and be sure to talk to her about getting on the pill.” He directed his last remark to the clinician. With a brisk wave, the doctor exited before I realized that he was wrong: I was not all set. Another clinician had approached with syringe in hand. When I demanded to know what it was for, she explained that the finger stick revealed that I have Rh-negative blood, and that I needed an injection of RhoGAM.

“But why?”

“It protects against Rh incompatibility. Without it, you might develop antibodies that could attack the red blood cells of any Rh positive baby you might have in the future.”

At that moment, my brain refused to entertain the complexities of biology and her explanation made little sense to me. What I understood was that I had to have another needle, all because of some baby that would more than likely remain theoretical. “Well, what if I never *have* a baby?”

"We can't take that chance."

"Do we have to do it now?" I twisted the edge of the blanket between my hands.

"I think it would be better."

"Can't we do it later? Please? I just don't think I can deal with it on top of everything else." I sounded pathetic even to myself, but I couldn't seem to stop whining.

"You'll hardly feel it." She swiftly rolled me over and stuck the needle into one of my buttocks and it turned out that she was right: in comparison to the abortion, the shot was scarcely noticeable.

Jon hung back while the clinician helped me down from the table. She slowly walked me to a room where there was a narrow bed. Someone had placed my clothes on a chair. The clinician gave me a maxi pad, waited while I affixed it to my panties, tucked me into the bed and then told me that they wanted me to stay for a while so they could keep an eye on me. Just in case.

After she left, I stared at the ceiling where there hung yet another poster, this one of a crimson sun streaked pink and gold. It was impossible to tell whether it was in the process of rising or setting. Soon I lowered my gaze and allowed my lids to fall shut. Slipping my right hand beneath the sheet, I ran my fingertips back and forth across the skin of my stomach. As I lay there, the fine dust of that granite city settled upon my face.

*

Jon drove me back to the flophouse where I settled onto the couch. He brought me a blanket and then headed down to the basement where the first few riffs of *Ain't Talkin' 'Bout Love* buzzed again and again. Didn't Dev know how to play anything else? In a little while, Jon returned with Dev and his girlfriend and the three of them clustered

at the foot of the couch and stared at me. I felt like an insect pinned in a display box and I wondered if this was what it was like to be terminally ill. "Hey," I said, briefly lifting one hand.

Dev spoke first. "Jon told us. That really sucks."

I glanced at Jon and he looked at the floor. Why had he told them? I did not want everyone to know our business. "Yeah."

"How ya feelin'?" Dev hardly ever spoke to me, so his three sentences seemed a lavish expenditure.

"Ok, I guess."

Dev's girlfriend moved closer. "Did it hurt?"

"Yeah. More than I expected. But I'm ok."

"You're fine," Jon hastened.

I crossed my arms and shut my eyes.

"Well, we'll see you later."

"Let us know if you need anything."

"Where's Jane?" I liked the idea of the dog's velvet head pressed warm against my stomach.

"She's asleep," Dev said. "Why?"

"Oh, I just thought if she was around, maybe I could pat her."

After they left, Jon pulled a chair up next to me and sat down.

"You mad, Mess?"

"About what?"

"That I told them."

“Well, I was, kind of. I mean, it’s private. But I guess I’ve told a few people too. The main thing is that I just don’t want my parents to find out. You know?”

“Yeah.”

As the afternoon dragged on into evening, I bled through two or three maxi pads. According to the information the clinician gave me, that was normal, so I tried not to worry about it, even though the crimson stains reminded me of the ink blots I had had to look at back in the loony bin. Of course, there was no mistaking these marks: only one interpretation was possible, and I well knew what it was. More troubling was the memory of the needle pinching my cervix, a recollection that seemed embedded in my body rather than relegated to my brain. I had no appetite but that struck me as appropriate given the occasion. I took a shower but exhaustion weighted my limbs so that I could hardly maneuver the soap. I went to bed early and soon fell backwards through the black tunnel of sleep.

Pain woke me. It cinched my abdomen and knotted my lower back. I could not prevent a moan from escaping my mouth, but Jon did not stir. I crawled out of bed and felt my way down the dark hall to the bathroom.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I covered them with one hand before flicking on the light switch with the other. I peeked through my fingers as I made my way to the toilet. When my eyes had adjusted to the light a bit, I lifted my nightgown and pulled down my panties. The pad had leaked and blood painted my thighs. Gross. When I wiped myself, what looked like a string of red mucous stretched from my vagina to the toilet paper. Something moved beneath the surface of the flesh between my navel and pubic bone.

Sharp and swift, it contracted my muscles and kicked at my pelvis so that even my hipbones ached with the fury of it. Cramps clenched my teeth and I sucked up air. It hurt more than my worst period, and I wondered if this was what labor was like. I locked my arms around my stomach and leaned over as far as I could without falling off the toilet. I was trying to corral the pain, to bridle and subdue it, but it made little difference. I used my hands to force my mouth closed so that no one would hear me cry out. Tears left itchy tracks on my fingers.

Finally, something splashed into the toilet. I eased my thighs apart and looked down into cherry water. For a moment, I thought that the doctor had not gotten everything after all and that what I was seeing was part of the fetus, but then I realized that the fibrous lumps must be the blood clots described in the handout. They looked like canned whole tomatoes wallowing in juice.

I would have liked nothing more than to slide into a bath, but I did not want to wake anyone else by running the water. Besides, I couldn't recall what they had said at the clinic about the wisdom of baths and I didn't want to risk an infection. I glanced around for a washcloth but there were none in that house of men, so I tore off some toilet paper, dampened it under the tap, and used it to dab at my stained thighs. I affixed a new pad to my panties and then attempted to rise. The pain, though duller, surged back and I had to put one hand on the countertop in order to pull myself up. I slowly rearranged my clothes and then leaned against the sink. My eyes ached and my hair felt too heavy for my scalp. As damp heat prickled across my upper lip and snaked around my neck, I thought I might faint. Avoiding the mirror's eye, I turned on the tap and splashed water onto my closed eyelids, forehead and cheeks. Lifting the weight of my hair with one

hand, I patted coolness onto the back of my neck as well. After making sure that I turned the tap off tight, I forced myself to look into the toilet again. Beneath the surface of the bloody water, I glimpsed the clots, now a sunken black pile. For a moment, I thought about leaving it for Jon to see, but it was frightening to recognize that part of me would have enjoyed that cruelty. I flushed the mess away. The suction stretched blood and mucous into tadpole tails that lengthened before flicking out of sight. I closed the lid, and then lowered myself to the dusty linoleum where I curled up like a pill bug, my hands bunched against my stomach.

As I crawled back to Jon's room, splinters of plywood caught at my bare knees and I tried to stand. My body was not wholly willing to cooperate, though. I found that I could get to my feet and straighten out my legs, but that was the extent of it. Each time I began to raise my torso, broad hooves of pain struck my lower back.

Lifting my head, I saw the sheet rock walls glowing wanly as they stretched above and ahead, and I felt as if I was in a long, narrow box. I shivered then set about chastising myself for it. *Enough with the histrionics, stupid! If you just quit being such a baby, you'll be fine.*

I lurched the rest of the way down the hall and into Jon's room. Even though I had to crawl across his legs to reach my side of the bed, he remained unresponsive. Lowering myself to rest on my right side, I pulled my knees to my chest and clutched at my abdomen, and when more tears came, I let them quietly flood my cheeks. How could he sleep?

"Are you awake?"

"Mmm..."

"Is there any aspirin? Or a hot water bottle?"

"Dunno."

"I'm really sorry to ask, but would you mind taking a look?"

He finally turned toward me. "Well, where?"

Since it was not really my house, I had no idea where the aspirin might be. I sighed. "Maybe in one of the bathrooms? The medicine cabinet? Or under the sink? I know it's late, but it really hurts and there were these clots..."

Jon left. I heard the thud of cupboard doors shutting followed by his steps on the stairs. Then silence. I wondered if he would come back or if he would walk out of the house and keep going. After a while, though, he returned and handed me a cold bottle. "Drink this," he said.

"What is it?"

"Beer."

"Beer? With aspirin?"

"There isn't any aspirin."

Beer was the last thing I wanted, but I slowly pulled myself up into a sitting position and took a sip. It tasted like cilantro. I hate cilantro.

"Slam it," he said.

"What?"

"Slam it. Just gulp it down all at once. Best thing for ya."

When I was small and explosive with croup, my father sometimes held me on his lap and spooned Southern Comfort down my throat. Even though I never enjoyed the

taste of the amber liquid, I always felt lucky to be close to him, my cheek pressed to the burgundy wool of his bathrobe. Now I wondered if all men thought alcohol was medicine. I tilted my head back and took what amounted to a long swallow before spluttering to a stop. "I can't."

"What do you mean, you *can't*?" Jon sounded disgusted.

"I just can't drink it like that."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." Why were we even having such a conversation? I wished I were in my own bed at home and that my mother was taking care of me. She would know what to do. Either Jon had no idea how to help me or he simply did not care to try. Maybe it was both.

"Just drink it as fast as you can, Mess."

I pinched my nose shut between thumb and forefinger and worked on swallowing the beer. In the gloom, I could just discern the frown on Jon's face. Even though I could not see them, I knew his arms were crossed. When I finished, I handed him the empty bottle. He put it on the floor and then lay down, turning his back to me.

"Night," he said.

"Goodnight." I wished he would curve the warm length of his body around me, but there seemed little point in telling him that. Instead, I turned toward the wall and pulled the covers over my head. After a while, I realized that I was slowly rocking my body back and forth. Sometime after that, sleep took me.

The next morning I pressed a tentative hand to my stomach. The sharp cramping had dwindled to a remote ache glowing inside. Jon was still asleep, his head tucked under his pillow. I crawled out of bed and slowly rose. Thankfully, I could once again stand like a normal person. I chose a loose dress from the clothes I had piled in a corner of the room and then, holding onto whatever was at hand, I made my way down to the basement bathroom where I showered, changed my pad, dressed, and brushed my teeth. It seemed to me that my body was already functioning much more normally. When I went back upstairs, I found that Jon had scarcely moved. I touched his arm. "Do you need a ride into town?"

"I'll go with Dev." He did not bother to move his pillow but mumbled from beneath it.

"Ok." I waited for him to ask how I was feeling, but he remained silent. "I guess I'll see you later, then."

"Later."

I drove to work. I didn't want to go, but after paying for the abortion, I couldn't afford to take off any more time. When I pulled into the parking lot, I realized that I had no memory of the trip. Yet, how could that be? Had I been driving automatically? When I tried to recall the journey, all I got was an impression of my eyes gazing into a gap deep with shadows.

An overturned milk crate held open the back door and when I walked in, the kitchen was already steamy. For a moment, it seemed that everyone turned to look at me. I stopped walking. It seemed as though cotton dammed my ears and a layer of gauze swathed my limbs and face so that silence was all that I knew. Finally, Cat spoke.

Peering down at me from the wooden box she stood on when she was kneading bread dough, she said, "We didn't expect to see you here today."

"Surprise."

"It went ok?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

As I walked past her to clock in, she called after me, "You did the right thing."

I put on an apron and began the lunch prep. Slicing and stacking the vegetables in a logical fashion brought me a certain comfort, but I could not go on doing it indefinitely. Too soon, the lunch rush began and a confusion of orders flapped on the line above me. Despite trying hard to decipher them, it seemed that I gave every other customer cause for complaint. A singed burrito! A sandwich too thick with sprouts! A salad devoid of dressing! I felt as incompetent as I had the very first day I moved from prepping soup to cooking lunch, and that had been more than a year before. After two hours, the rush finally ended and I took a break. In the tiny bathroom, I peed and checked my pad. It was clean but for a single spot of blood no bigger than a quarter. I thought the worst was over.

III

I am in an airport hectic with travelers, all of them pulling those ubiquitous suitcases on wheels. I have just checked in and am climbing a short flight of stairs, fumbling with my tickets and trying to make sure I have everything I need, when I realize that I have somehow managed to forget the most important thing of all: my baby. The breath escapes from my chest like air whizzing out of a balloon and I turn and try to make my way back down the stairs. It is not easy because I have to struggle against the ceaseless oncoming stream of people who all seem to be taller and pushier than I am. I rack my brain for memories of each place I stopped and everything I did prior to this discovery, all the while trying to retrace my steps at a run. "Where are you? Where are you, baby?" At first, I ask this so that only I can hear, but as time heaves on and the baby is still nowhere to be seen, neither resting on a ticket counter nor nestled into the hard plastic shell of a waiting area seat, I begin to ask strangers. To each person who passes I say, "Have you seen my baby?" Most just stare at me and then glance away, intent on moving to their gates, and I must dodge or jump their black bags. Finally, a man says, "It's right over here." His tone is exasperated. He is so tall that I tilt my head as far back as it will go in order to see his face. His look says How could you possibly forget your baby? He wears a pilot's cap and a cape-like overcoat. When he turns, the dusky folds of his coat swirl and fall back to reveal a blue umbrella stroller turned to the wall. Grit and gray dust surround the black rubber wheels and wind shrills through the terminal. A sheet of crumpled newspaper skims across the scarred floor until the stroller wheels catch it. A wisp of fine dark hair is just visible over the top of the back of the

stroller. Surely, that is my baby. Isn't it? The man stalks away. I move toward the stroller. Slowly.

I never trusted the diaphragm again. Now, I begin each morning by swallowing a pill roughly half the size of my smallest fingernail. I have followed this ritual every day for years because it is the only thing I know that reliably wards off pregnancy. Well, ok, the only thing other than abstinence, but let's be honest: that is not realistic. So I take my pills, twenty-eight of them each month, a garland of sepia, white, ochre, and hospital green discs. Yet each time I open a new package, the stink of disinfectant rises to my nose and it frightens me a little. What the hell is in these things? The lengthy paper insert lists levonorgestrel and ethinyl estradiol, and explains that they are female sex hormones. It then proceeds to warn about a variety of "serious adverse effects" including blindness, the expectoration of blood, and the onset of severe depression, but I do not give these potential afflictions much weight. So far, I am free of physical symptoms and the melancholia I suffer predates my relationship with the pill.

Still, doubts pester me. For starters, does the pill liberate me from the consequences of sex in part by stripping me of desire? In theory, I could have sex every hour of every day of each successive year without a worry, but I find that I do not want to. Instead, I often have to make a conscious effort to get interested, though I have noticed that this is not the case just before my period arrives and I am about to take the "reminder" pills, those green pellets empty of hormones. This phenomenon of heightened arousal lasts long enough to remind me of the days when I relied on condoms

or the diaphragm: I felt interested in sex, open, spontaneous, and sensual. My daily ingestion of synthetic sex hormones seems, perversely, to lull my libido.

My concerns hardly end there, of course. I also fret about the state of my urine. Surely, traces of these hormones must exit my body and eventually flush out into a water source somewhere. If that is true, what happens to fish passing it through their gills? And what of people swallowing it? Are our municipal filtration systems sophisticated enough to screen out everybody's medications, or is our drinking water spiked with not only levonorgestrel and ethinyl estradiol, but also with Viagra, Lipitor, and Paxil? I cannot shake the notion that by taking the pill I am contributing to a stone soup of chemicals that none of us, human and non-human alike, has much choice about ingesting.

Also, though I hate to admit it, swallowing a prescription drug of any sort makes me an accessory to animal testing. When I lay the benefits of the pill on one tray of my scale of conscience, and the suffering of another animal on the other, my heart always sinks and I remember the ancient Egyptians. They held that after death, one's heart would be weighed against the feather of Ma'at, the goddess of truth and justice. A heart heavier than the feather was brimming with evil.

Why must this be so complicated? I believe it is wrong to birth a child carelessly, but in order to prevent the potential suffering of one creature it seems I must accept the actual suffering of others. By this point, you may well be wondering, much as I have often done, why I do not simply use something else. The idea appeals until I recall that condoms have been known to leak or break, the IUD can ruin fertility, and Depo-Provera often incites both weight gain and bone density loss. And knowing as I do that its

flexibility is far from infinite, how could I go back to the diaphragm? Plain and simple, it is fear that keeps me faithful to the pill.

I am not supposed to feel apprehensive. After all, Andrew and I are not one of those hapless couples who discern their unsuitability only *after* exchanging marriage vows. We were both looking for a sure thing so we compared our values and goals early on. Our preferences repeatedly came up matching like cards in a game of Pairs, and the subject of children was no different. Between parting from my previous boyfriend and connecting with Andrew, I had spent thirteen months contemplating what exactly it was I valued. Though I had concluded that I was better off on my own than eternally saddled to anyone I had already dated, I also knew that the right person could open me to the possibilities of partnership and motherhood. The chance to give love and receive it would surely loosen my abiding loneliness and wear away the sharp edges of the past. When Andrew asked me if children fit into my life, I had answered, "Yes."

From the first days of our courtship, I have witnessed the enthusiasm and care with which Andrew plays the role of favorite uncle. He happily sluices babies through warm pond waters and tirelessly slaps the puck to hockey-mad toddlers. He does not simply read aloud, but creates a different voice for each character and patiently answers seemingly endless questions. Should a situation demand silly shenanigans, he is happy to oblige, yet he can also say no (and mean it) when no is necessary.

Recently, Andrew had mentioned feeling envious of men he saw playing with their children. He had begun a mental activity list: "Wouldn't it be great to have a kid to play soccer with? Maybe I could coach..." That my husband is ready to have a child is

hardly surprising. What unsettles me is my apparent deafness. I cannot seem to hear the petition of my own rumored clock.

Opening the newspaper or standing in line at the grocery store these days means catching sight of yet another article admonishing women to check their biological clocks. Apparently, as we approach our mid-thirties, we can expect the ticking to grow louder. Should we carelessly allow the hour hand to reach thirty-five, the alarm will jangle so shrilly as to shatter the beautiful illusion of infinite fertility. Our eggs will begin to stale. Given that I am thirty-six now, my own eggs may well be bad, a malodorous clutch.

I remember the day my father pulled an anomaly from beneath one of our hens. Unlike the other eggs he collected that morning, this one lacked a crisp tan shell. Instead, the pale yolk swam within an oval bag the color of wax paper. When I held it, it felt leathery and warm in my palm. As there was no place for that odd egg in our kitchen and it seemed unlikely that a chick would ever emerge from it, I took it to school for show and tell.

"Ewww," said my classmates. "Gross! Can I touch it?" The murky talisman moved from hand to hand and expressions of horrified delight played across the kids' faces. After everyone had handled it, the egg found its way back to me. I do not remember what became of it. It is possible that it ended up in the dump for a crow or feral cat to devour. Or perhaps I set it down somewhere and forgot about it, my neglect causing it to shrivel.

Still, it is not entirely true to say that I am deaf to the call that other childless women my age are alleged to hear. Long before my friends became fixated on reproducing, I recall that they were far more attentive to the wine list than to the child

tucked into a high chair at the next table, while I could never resist trying to catch his sparkling eye. Receiving a smile or a wave or a bit of babble in response delighted and satisfied me in a way that felt rooted deep within the trunk of my body. When I step away from panic, I know myself as someone who enjoys and appreciates children.

Then what am I so afraid of? When Andrew asked me that question, I worried aloud that I might be a bad mother or nothing more than a mother. Yet if I take time to reflect on those fears, it seems possible to set them aside. After all, good mothers and, for that matter, good fathers are not born. Instead, they make themselves out of devotion and delight and any decent examples they have been fortunate enough to witness. If I wish to be a good mother, I can strive to become one.

Similarly, it is not imperative that I practice the intensive mothering that is so much in vogue. Among its disadvantages, two stand out to me. The first is that it demands the elevation of the child at its mother's expense. Second, such a scenario hobbles children's ability to imagine what being a woman can mean. If I allow it to do so, the paltry yet persistent notion of The Maternal Ideal will negate me. Yet if I opt to resist it, I can tend to a child as well as to my other interests. I do not have to sacrifice myself.

Despite the soundness of my reasoning, another misgiving remains. I cannot forget how Jon left me.

*

After that first day back at work, I returned to Jon's. He was there, picking through clothes strewn across his mattress. I was surprised to see him since the long light of the July evenings often kept him working until late.

"Hey," I said. "I didn't expect to find you here. What's up?" I placed my palm against his back and felt his shoulder blade tense.

"Nothing."

"Did you get out of work early?"

"I didn't go to work." He did not look at me but kept his gaze on the t-shirt he was folding. Glaring up from the white cotton was a skull outlined in black, its battered crossbones beneath. Jon had painted it the summer before and had made its twin for me.

"Oh. I thought you said you and Dev were going in today."

"Well, I changed my mind. I didn't feel like it."

"Why not? Are you sick?" Jon was never sick, but I couldn't think of any other reason for him to skip work.

"No." As we spoke, he continued folding clothes and arranging them in piles. I noticed a canvas backpack off to the side.

"What's going on, Jon?"

"Nothing."

"Then what's that for?" I pointed at the pack.

He sighed. "I'm going away for a while."

"What?" It was all I could think to say.

"I said I'm going away."

"You are?" I did not remember having heard any talk about such a trip.

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"To Florida. With Dev," he added.

"Oh. Well, how are you gonna get there?"

"Drive, of course." Jon grabbed the backpack and started shoving wads of clothes into its olive drab gut.

"So, when are you guys leaving?"

"Tonight."

Even though I knew I sounded stupid, I could not help echoing him. "Tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Well, when did you decide this?"

"Last night."

"And you're just telling me *now*?"

"You were asleep and I didn't want to wake you up." Jon buckled the pack as he spoke.

"Well, *that* was thoughtful."

Jon sighed again and finally stood and looked at me for the first time since I had entered the room. "Ok, what's the problem?"

"For one thing, you're abandoning me! I mean, I just had an abortion, Jon. And you're leaving?"

"You're doing fine."

"Well, we don't know that. I've barely started recuperating," I said.

"Well, you got up. You went to work. Anyway, it's all arranged." He picked up the pack and hooked it over one shoulder.

"So, what am I supposed to do?"

"About what?" he asked.

"I don't have any place to stay."

"What about your parents' house? Or how 'bout the tent? You haven't spent a single night there."

"My parents' house isn't exactly the most welcoming place in the world these days, you know. And it's too scary to stay in the tent alone. Besides, there's no place to wash," I said.

"So just stay here, then. I don't care."

"Yeah, I can see that."

"Come on, Mess. I don't wanna fight. I just need to get away for a while. Think things through." He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed it too hard before stabbing at my cheek with his lips. "I'll see ya later."

"When will you be back?"

"In a couple weeks."

"That long?"

"It'll go by just like that." He snapped his fingers for emphasis and started to turn away.

Clinging to his hand, I pulled him back. I pressed my face against his chest. "But I love you," I said.

Jon patted my head and then pulled away. "I'll see ya," he said, and walked out the door.

My boyfriend dumped me. As soon as Dev's car started up, I remembered Cat's words. Plus, I had heard elsewhere that many relationships do not survive abortion. Was

it true? I had no idea. The possibility alarmed me, though, and I rushed downstairs. When I reached the door, the Scirocco was gone. Maybe it was better that way. I did not know what I would have said to Jon, and it was likely that I would only have embarrassed myself. Still, every hour Jon remained away, his abrupt exit replayed through my mind. What were the things he was thinking through?

I worked as much as I could and when I wasn't working, I slept. Returning to the silent house, I climbed the shadowy stairs to Jon's room where I swaddled myself in his sheets and pressed my face to his pillow. I could smell the tangy trace of him there on the soft blue slip. Clasp my own pillow to my stomach, I drew my knees up to it and eluded consciousness for hours.

Still, I knew that my avoidance tactics would have to cease before long. For one thing, I needed to drive up to Burlington and make sure that my financial aid arrangements were in order prior to the start of school. If I didn't see to it, I would be unable to attend and I craved the anonymity of school more than anything. At the University, I could resume my role as The Good Student. I hoped that cramming my head full of distracting words and ideas and facts would allow me to forget about The Girl Who Was Too Stupid to Keep from Getting Knocked Up.

During the second week of Jon's absence, I used my day off to drive to Burlington. I set out early, but when I arrived at the University's financial aid office, a long line of students was already trailing out into the hall. After hours spent waiting and scurrying from office to office, everything was at last resolved and I stepped out into heat that had grown muggier with the passing of each moment. The touch of its damp breath

on my skin increased my irritation. The chapel tower clocks proclaimed that the afternoon was almost gone.

I drove to the quarry. Cars crowded the edge of the road and I had to go some distance past the gate before I found room for the truck, but finally I pulled it onto a knot of weeds. By angling my legs across the emergency brake and resting them on the passenger seat, I managed to change into my bathing suit without exposing too much of myself. I pulled my shorts on, grabbed my towel, slipped past the concrete barriers and then followed the washed out dirt road up the hill through the field. The first time Jon had taken me there, I had worried about the tattered No Trespassing signs nailed to a few trees, but now I knew better. No one paid attention to them.

The quarry was a rectangular hole resembling a giant swimming pool and when I reached it, I saw a number of people clustered over on the cliff side. Clutching at the rope swings, they swooped far out over the water and hooted before plunging into its slate colored depths. I felt no desire to join them. Instead, I spread my towel in the high grass and stepped out of my sandals and shorts. Then I walked to the ledge, leapt off and broke through the water feet first. I allowed my body to sink until it insisted on rising again. At the surface, I tipped my head back and pushed my hair out of my eyes. From the cattail reeds crowding the shallow end of the quarry, red-winged blackbirds trilled, their crimson and yellow shoulder patches flashing each time they flew up to survey their territory. Dragonflies whirled past my face. I floated on my back, alternately watching the busy creatures and closing my eyes. I recalled the many times Jon and I had drifted and played there together. Soon, I told myself, he would rejoin me. In preparation for his return, I had begun taking the pill.

As twilight swallowed the afternoon, the skin on my fingers shriveled and my teeth began to chatter. I forced myself to climb back up the rough ledge to the grass. I squeezed the water out of my hair, dried myself off, wrapped the towel around my waist, and followed the other swimmers who were returning to their cars.

Driving back to the highway, I watched night settle in. With it came mist that rose from the fields and drifted across the road. I flicked on the high beams, but that only made the tarmac and its yellow backbone look more remote. Switching down to the low beams, I clutched the steering wheel and pulled myself up straighter. The road unreeled like film glimpsed through a keyhole. I had almost reached Waterbury when I began yawning. I rolled down the window to get some fresh air but the sour stink of pig shit clouted me. I shut the window but that only trapped the stench inside. Since no hog farms were located nearby, I couldn't figure out where the odor was coming from. In the distance, I glimpsed small red lights flashing manically. As I drew nearer, I could just make out a tractor trailer truck pulled off the road up ahead. Maybe the driver had decided to wait until the fog cleared. That was probably what I should be doing, I thought. It was not until I was nearly parallel with the truck that I noticed a black stream gushing from its tank onto the shoulder and dribbling across the road. That was weird. Had there been an accident? I slowed down to see if I could do anything to help. Immediately a bulky man, his arms akimbo, stepped out of the haze. He scowled and brusquely waved me on. Startled and recalling that I was wearing little more than a bathing suit, I pressed my bare foot to the gas pedal and the truck bounded forward.

It was too foggy to continue traveling quickly so I slowed the truck to a crawl again. All the way back to Jon's place, my mind pushed the pieces around and tried to

make them fit together. I had heard about the Mafia hauling toxic waste up from the city and secretly spilling it in Vermont, but I had never given such stories much credence. Besides, it had happened so quickly that it seemed like a shard of dream. Yet there was the stench that clung to the truck. And I couldn't forget how the man's tight face and impatient gestures made me feel like I had come too close to a secret. Still, I wasn't sure what to do about it. If I stopped by the highway patrol office, the cops might just scoff at my story. Even if I could tell them exactly where I had seen the tractor-trailer, it would probably be long gone by the time they got there.

I continued on to Jon's. As the truck crested the driveway, the headlights skimmed across Dev's car. Jon was back. Inside my chest, fear and excitement jostled against each other. I stepped into the house.

"Jon?"

There was no reply. The kitchen was dark. I flicked on the light and then glanced down into the basement but it was also dim. I felt my way through the living room and up the stairs to Jon's room. The door was shut, but a pale beam shone from beneath it. I knocked.

"Yeah?"

"It's me. Jess."

When Jon opened the door, I threw my arms around him. As I nestled my face against his neck, he slowly draped an arm around me. It felt no more substantial than a piece of clothing hanging from a hook. In that moment, I recognized something I had been blind to before and I stepped back. "Oh," I said. "You don't want me any more."

Jon looked down at the floor. "No," he told me. "That's not true."

"It's not?" I wanted to believe him but the crack of my intuition still smarted.

"No." He touched my cheek for a moment before dropping his hand. "No. I just need some time is all."

"Time for what?"

"To get comfortable with you again," Jon said.

"So, you're *uncomfortable* with me?"

"I didn't say that. Let's just take it slow, Mess. Ok?"

If Jon had never returned, it might have been kinder. At least that way his stance would have been clear. Or if he had had the courage to tell me the truth about how he felt, to say, perhaps, "I love you, but I'm just not *in* love with you anymore," it would have been better. While those classic Nice Guy kiss-off words would have filled me with anguish, maybe I wouldn't have spent the next months clinging to a lifeless thing.

At the end of August, we packed up and said farewell to Dev. As he had every year since leaving high school, Dev would finish out the landscaping season before dedicating himself to the Christmas tree racket. As for Jon and I, we were returning to University. I moved back into the pottery suite in the Living & Learning building while Jon headed off-campus. He had always roomed in the pottery suite, but at the last minute, his friend Mike had phoned and invited him to share an apartment on Pearl Street. After that, I hardly saw Jon, even though his new place was just a short walk from the University Green. At first, I strolled down there often, but it was rare that I found him at home. Most times no one answered my knock. At other times, Mike opened the door and said, "Haven't seen him since this morning. Not sure when he'll be back.

Sorry.” When I phoned, I usually ended up talking to the answering machine. If Jon happened to pick up, he said something like, “I’ve been really busy.” It wasn’t long before I felt as though I’d been reduced to the role of supplicant. I didn’t like it.

What made it worse was that Angus and Jane and my other suitemates kept asking, “So, what’s Jon up to?” and, “When are we gonna see Jon?” I couldn’t help hearing each successive query as an invitation to admit that Jon didn’t want to be around me. Even as I resisted acknowledging this, I was sure that everyone had guessed it. Still, I couldn’t bring myself to answer, “Probably never.” Instead, I relayed that Jon was busy and then I changed the subject. I found that most people were happy to describe the jobs, travel, drugs, and liaisons that had marked their summer break. As I listened, I brainstormed questions that would encourage them to babble on and I asked these whenever there was a pause. In that way, I avoided speaking about my own miserable summer. Wrapping it in strands of silence, I hung it out of sight.

I had thought that school would revitalize me and, for a while, I tried to force it to do just that. Arriving early for my classes, I sat in the center of the very first row where I passed the time taking copious notes. Yet afterwards, reviewing my scribbles felt like trying to decipher someone else’s code. My head was a black hole into which information vanished.

During my seminar class, I watched the other students talk. My copy of the novel under discussion sat in front of me, the binding barely wrinkled. When I tried to read, the words puzzled me. Scanning and rescanning the same sentence only made matters worse. For as long as I could remember, I had always been able to retreat into books and

I read with such intensity that if anyone attempted to interrupt me, I rarely noticed. Now I felt like an exile.

I was just as useless in my other classes, but Human Biology was the worst. As the professor droned on about zygotes, I wondered how he could possibly elaborate on what the summer had already taught me about the fusion of two bodies.

The truth was that I couldn't bring myself to care about any of my subjects and it wasn't long before I began cutting classes. When I did show up, I sat at the back of the lecture hall and slouched in my seat in the hope that the professor would not call on me. Yet after missing the first few classes, it seemed easier to continue to skip, so I spent the time in my narrow room instead. The ugly yellow cinderblock walls pulsed around me as I lay curled on my bed. I could hardly rouse myself to bathe and the idea of venturing outside beneath the sharp autumn sky filled me with dread, but once a day I walked down to the student store where I used my meal points to buy a pint of ice cream. Returning to my room, I sat on the floor in the dark and spooned the creamy sweetness into my mouth. Those were comforting moments and I savored them. What did it matter that pimples were rising on my face and a band of fat was thickening round my waist?

Other than ice cream, the only thing I managed to show up for regularly was my pottery class. That and my work-study job. I worked as an assistant in the pottery studio and the possibility that I might run into Jon there lured me, but I also wanted to prevent the clay crowd from suspecting that anything was wrong with me. Besides, I needed the money.

One day, I was alone in the studio measuring out the various powdered minerals and clays for a batch of glaze. Particles drifted in the air around me.

“What are you doing, Jessica?”

I turned around. It was Diane, my pottery teacher. Her approach had been so quiet that I didn’t notice her until she spoke.

“Mixing glaze,” I said.

“I can see that. Why aren’t you wearing a mask?”

“I forgot, I guess.” Privately I wondered what difference it would make. I was going to die anyway. We all were.

“What is going on with you? You know better than to mix glaze without taking safety precautions.”

“I don’t know. I just forgot, ok?” I hoped she wouldn’t fire me.

“No, it’s not ok. You’ve been acting strange since the beginning of the semester and I want to know why.”

If anyone else had noticed that I was barely functioning, Diane was the only one who bothered to say anything about it. As much as her rebuke inspired my defensiveness, I also felt grateful for her interest. Everything that I had been carrying shifted and began to spill.

“Well, I guess the summer didn’t go the way I thought it would,” I said.

“What happened? Did you and Jon break up?”

“No. I got pregnant.” I forced myself to add, “And I had an abortion.”

“Oh.”

In the pause that followed, I focused on Diane’s purple Doc Martins. I was afraid to look at her face in case it was full of contempt.

“Well, that’s rough,” she finally said. Then she added, “I had an abortion too.”

I looked up. "You did?"

"Yes."

"Why?" The question was out of my mouth before I had considered that it might be rude.

"It wasn't the right time. I was young like you, the guy was a jerk—it just wasn't right for me to have a child then."

I nodded. "I know I did the right thing," I said, "but I feel sad anyway. Jon doesn't. He just wanted it to go away. And even though it's better that it *is* gone, it still hurts. Does that even make sense?"

"Yes. To me it does. I remember feeling sad too. After all, it's a tough decision," she said. Then she added, "But you can't let it drag you down. You have to move on."

"How?"

"Well, one thing that helped me was creating a ritual."

"Like what?"

"My girlfriends sat with me and we lit candles and then I asked the baby's spirit to return to me at a better time. And now all these years later I have a wonderful family." Diane smiled. Her home was vibrant with two young children, a husband who seemed smitten with her, and a cage full of noisy finches.

"Maybe that would help," I said, even though inside I felt skeptical. What sort of power did I have to make a ritual?

"Let me know if you need to talk more, ok?" Diane patted my arm. "And wear a mask," she said before heading to her desk.

When I returned to my room, I searched for a candle but I couldn't find one. After I gave up, I sank down onto the bed and looked at the wall. I envied Diane her friendships with women. I wished I had a girlfriend or two to confide in, but I couldn't think of anyone special. I got along with the girls I knew from pottery but we were not so close that I would trust them with my secret. Jon was my best friend. Since he had no interest in my feelings about the fetus, though, I knew better than to expect his comfort. After a while, I mumbled to the grey air, "Maybe someday you'll return." Then I lay back on the slender mattress and slept.

The next afternoon there was a knock on my door. Lying with the sheet pulled over my head, I didn't want to move. I considered feigning sleep but then the possibility that it might be Jon flashed through me. "Who is it?" I called.

"It's me, Angus."

I sighed. But really, if it had to be anyone other than Jon, Angus wasn't so bad. It was tough not to like someone who started school by suspending a dozen Twinkies from the ceiling tiles. Angus claimed that at year's end, he would rehydrate and eat each and every spongy tube.

Disentangling myself, I opened the door. Angus stood before me wearing jeans and a pale blue towel draped around his neck. He shoved a bright box toward my face.

"Hey, can you help me with this stuff? I wanna make sure I do it right."

"What is it?"

"Hair dye."

"You're asking the wrong girl, Angus. I have no idea how to use that stuff."

Nearly all of my cosmetic aids featured the word *natural* on the label.

"Come on, Jessie Jess. There's nobody else around and I can't do it alone."

"Ok. Fine." I followed Angus into the bathroom. Together we read the instructions and then I pulled on the thin plastic gloves. As Angus sat on the toilet lid, I slopped the dye onto his hair and rubbed it in. The harsh odor of ammonia rose from his head and my eyes began to water.

"Jesus—this stuff reeks!" I said. "Sorry, but I can't stay in here." I squeezed past the bags and boxes of empties and out onto the balcony where I gulped chill air. Angus followed me and lit a cigarette.

"Are you sure you should be smoking? Your head might explode," I said.

"Ha, ha. Aw, it'll be fine," Angus said and took a drag. "So, any sign of Jon lately?"

This again. "No," I admitted.

"Well, I saw him at the wood shop the other day." Angus flicked some ash over the balcony. "So, what's going on with you guys?"

"What do you mean?" I wanted time to figure out how to end the conversation before it went too far.

"Well, last semester you were always together. But this semester he's hardly around. So, what's up?"

"Well, what did *he* tell you?"

“Just that the summer was tough.” Angus suckled his cigarette again and then blew out a plume of smoke. “But he didn’t say why. Look, I’m only asking ‘cause I care about you both.”

The idea of someone caring for me was an alluring one. Even though I knew it was also true that Angus relished gossip, I said, “Well, I don’t know what’s going on. Everything was fine and now it’s not and I’m really not sure why. If I could just talk to Jon, maybe we could get back on track.”

“We could have a party,” Angus said. With one large bare foot he prodded a bag of beer cans. “We’ve got enough empties for another few cases, probably.”

“You think he’d come?”

“Why not?” Angus looked at his watch. “Aw, shit. I think we left the dye on too long.”

At the redemption center, our collection of bottles and cans brought us more cash than we had expected. After stacking our cart with a couple cases of Genesee, a watery staple we favored for its cheapness, we still had money left over. We chose a case of Rolling Rock and then splurged on tequila, the kind with an unfortunate worm slumped on the floor of the bottle. Back at the suite, Angus put on a Beastie Boys tape, turned up the volume, and the party was on. It didn’t take long for the space to fill up. Everybody was there. Everybody except Jon.

I pulled Angus aside. “Are you sure he said he’d come?”

“Yeah, he told me he would.” Angus nodded his head to the beat but his hair, now the color of an eggplant and spiked with gel, remained unbending.

“Oh, my God, Angus! Your hair!” Kate squealed as she came through the door. She rushed over to him and started touching his head. Angus looked like a dog being scratched in its favorite spot.

I decided to get into a drink-off with some of the guys. I gulped a shot of tequila without benefit of salt or lime, a tactic designed to intimidate my opponents, and then I leaned back into the couch and shut my eyes. Inhaling the pungent smoke snaking through the air, I heard a familiar laughing voice say, “Let’s get this fuckin’ party started!” It was Jon. He stood in the doorway brandishing two black bottles and grinning as though he were Bacchus himself. Irritation pursed my lips. Jon had often brought that champagne into our bed and now he was sharing it with everyone. I closed my eyes again. I heard a pair of pops accompanied by squeaky shrieks of delight. Other girls. I got up and walked out to the balcony. In the corner, some people I didn’t recognize were groping each other and moaning. I turned around and went back inside.

“If it isn’t Messy Jessy!” Jon hailed me from across the room, then poured some bubbly into a blue plastic cup and brought it over.

“And if it isn’t Jon Cade,” I said.

“Want some Frickin’-A? I know you like this stuff.”

“Oh! Did you bring this just for me? How terribly sentimental.” I took a sip.

“Everyone seems happy to see you,” I said. “You haven’t been around for a while.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just that I’ve been so...”

“Busy, right? You said that before.” I swallowed some more champagne.

“Aren’t you having any?”

“Maybe later. Thought I’d start with a beer.”

"I saved you a Rolling Rock. I'll go get it."

When I returned Kate was leaning into Jon, one of her breasts brushing against his bicep. Overstuffed chest and natural blonde hair aside, the rest of Kate was lumpy and her narrow glasses made her moon face look even rounder. Although I knew she wasn't Jon's type, it pissed me off to see her pushing herself at him. As far as she knew, we were still together. I handed the beer to Jon and then stalked to the other side of the room. I sat down next to Angus who was taking a drag on a thick joint. When he tried to hand it to me, I said, "Blow the smoke into my mouth." He bent near. Just as our lips were about to touch, he pushed the smoke out of his mouth into mine. I passed the joint onto the next person and then rested against Angus. When I looked up, Jon's eyes were fixed on me.

I spent the next few hours flirting with every man except Jon. Each time he seemed about to approach me, I turned my back to him and laughed louder at whatever witticism my companion of the moment was uttering. I allowed the hands of other guys to rest on my back and even to squeeze my ass. I ignored everything about Jon except for his champagne. I drank more than my share of it and my brain began to tilt inside my skull. Heading to refill my cup, I stumbled and would have fallen if someone hadn't grabbed my arm. As I was turning to see who had saved me, Jon appeared and said, "I'll take it from here, buddy."

"Sure, man. I was just trying to help," I heard a male voice say as Jon slid an arm around my waist and led me to the bathroom.

Jon eased me to the lid of the toilet where I slouched as he rinsed out my cup and filled it with water. "Drink this," he said.

"I don't want to." My head felt so heavy that it seemed like too much bother to try and lift it. Besides, if I moved, I was sure to be sick. "It'll make me puke."

"You're gonna puke if you *don't* drink it, that's for sure. Come on." Jon brushed my hair back and then held the cup to my lips. I took a tiny sip. "Good. Now another one."

After five cups of water he left me alone so I could pee. Every movement seemed to demand an unusual amount of time and effort and I felt as though I were fording a river. As I was splashing water on my face, Jon knocked. "Are you ok?" he called.

"The water's not cold enough," I mumbled.

"What?"

I opened the door and sagged against the jamb. "The water," I said. "It's not cold enough."

"Well, go get into bed and I'll bring you some ice. Go on."

I staggered into my room and felt around for the bedside light. I clicked it on and then dropped down across the bed. Shimmying out of my jeans, I worked my way under the covers. Jon returned bearing a cup full of ice. I chose a piece and slid it back and forth across my forehead. "Unnh. The room. It's spinning."

Jon placed the wastebasket nearby. "Better safe than sorry," he told me. Then he pulled off his boots and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Are you gonna stay here?"

"Yeah." He wedged his long body between me and the wall.

When I awoke my mouth was a desert and I had to pee but other than that I felt better than I had a right to. I drank some more water, and then brushed my teeth and hair. After returning from the bathroom, I changed into a thin nightgown and lay back down. I watched Jon's face as he slept. It was good to have him close again and I wondered how I could keep him with me. I turned over and moved against him so that my back was pressed to his chest. He put his hand on my hip and pulled me closer and I smiled before easing back into sleep.

A few hours later I woke to find Jon pressing his mouth to the back of my neck. His lips were so dry and hot that each kiss hurt. He murmured something. It sounded like *I missed you* but I couldn't be sure and it seemed awkward to ask him to repeat himself. *I missed you too* I thought as I turned toward him. Jon cupped my face in his hands and gazed intently at me. He stroked my lips with one long finger before bringing his face near. When he kissed me, traces of beer and cigarettes seeped from his mouth into mine. Sour and stale, it was a sad taste, but I kissed him back anyway. As I did, my mind whirled with questions. *Was he finished "taking it slow"? Did he want to be with me again? Or was this just a dream?*

His orange t-shirt was in the way, so I pulled it over his head and dropped it to the floor. Pushing him down against the mattress, I leaned over and trailed the ends of my hair across his smooth chest and along his stomach. Then, starting just below his left ear, I brushed my lips over his skin until I reached the waistband of his jeans. I was unfastening the top button when Jon reached out and brought a hand down on both of mine. He squeezed. "Don't," he said and then drew back and sat up.

I settled on my heels and gazed at him. "What's wrong?" I asked.

He looked at the wall. "I can't...", he said.

"You can't what?"

He stood up. "I just can't do this." Jon flung out his arm with such force that I heard his elbow click.

"What? Sex?"

He wouldn't look at me. "I gotta go," he said. Scooping up his t-shirt and boots, he headed out the door. It slammed shut behind him.

I passed many hours trying to make sense of Jon's visit. Why had he gotten into bed with me if he didn't want to have sex? For that matter, why *didn't* he want to have sex? Before I got pregnant, he had always been eager. What had changed? Was the problem sex in general or sex with me? Maybe he had been drunk and jealous enough to get into bed with me but not quite drunk or jealous enough to stay. Maybe that was the truth. I felt confused and humiliated. And hideous. I didn't want to look at myself, but a mirror affixed to the door reflected my every movement. There was no way to remove the glass without forfeiting my room deposit, so I draped a dark cotton scarf over it. Then I climbed back into bed.

In the next days, I withdrew from my courses. Even if I had had the energy, it was far too late for me to catch up and I didn't know what I would say to my parents if I flunked. Or what they would say to me. They had always made it clear that scholastic mediocrity, never mind outright failure, was unacceptable. It seemed better to get out with my GPA intact. Only one professor asked me why I was abandoning his class. "I'm

ill,” I told him and after that he signed the drop-add form. My mother proved more difficult. When she called me later in the week to check in, I remarked that things weren’t going so well.

“What’s wrong now?”

Suggesting as it did that I was a bottomless pit of problems, her use of the word “now” stung for a moment and I paused before saying, “Well...I dropped my classes.” Then I held my breath.

“You did *what*?”

“I dropped my classes, Mom, but I had to.”

“What do you mean, you *had* to?”

“Otherwise I would have failed,” I told her, “so I thought it was better just to withdraw.”

“From *school*? You withdrew from *school*?”

“No. From my *classes*,” I repeated as I rolled my eyes. “But I can start over next semester.”

“Why would you have failed? You did so well last semester. Haven’t you been studying?”

“Yes,” I said. “But nothing stays in my head.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

My father growled, “You’re gonna have to do better than that.” Great. I wasn’t sure how long he’d been listening in, but I knew that almost every time he got involved in any discussion of my troubles, I fared worse.

"I haven't been feeling well," I said. I began gnawing a pink piece of flesh from my thumb.

"Well, Jessica," my father said, "I hate to break it to you, but part of being an adult is being able to meet your responsibilities no matter what." Ever since I'd been hospitalized for depression, his comments about the hall-marks of adulthood had increased.

I sighed. "You don't understand."

"Are you depressed again?" It was my mother this time.

I began coiling the beige phone cord around my wrist. "A little," I said.

"Are you taking your pills?"

"Not exactly."

"Either you are or you aren't. Which is it, Jessica?" she asked.

"Ok! I'm not taking them."

"Why not? They were helping you!"

"Actually, Mom, they were making me worse."

"Did the psychiatrist tell you that?"

"No, but he's completely useless." I met with Dr. McBain once a month and I continued to take the prescription slips he handed me every few visits but I no longer bothered to get them filled. I didn't see the point. No matter what I swallowed, my unhappiness lingered. Besides, ever since our first meeting, the good doctor had allowed me to sham my way through our sessions with criticism of the Reagan and Bush regimes. An immigrant, Dr. McBain was keen to compare European and American politics and I was happy enough to oblige. I had so far managed to avoid delving into discussion of my

own inner workings and I wasn't about to begin confiding in him. The few times I had tried, all he said was, "Most people feel that way."

"I just don't know what we're going to do with you," my mother said.

"It's no big deal. I told you, I can start over again next semester." Why couldn't they just leave me alone?

"Not so fast, young lady," my father said. "How do we know you'll do any better next semester? Maybe college is wasted on you. Maybe you should come home and get a job."

Having to return to my parents' house was the worst thing I could imagine. I had lived away too long to welcome the idea of being subject to their rules and requirements, and I knew that constant exposure to the strain between them would do nothing to improve my mood. On top of that, the prospect of living in the narrow town where I had gone to high school felt like failure. "Look," I said, "I know you both think I'm irresponsible, but I'm not. Really. It's just that something happened. And that's why I messed up this semester."

"What are you talking about? What happened?"

I paused. What was I doing? My parents wouldn't accept the vague "something" as an explanation and I didn't know any parents who would. I had kept the summer's events to myself for three months, but now I was desperate. I exhaled and said, "I got pregnant, Mom. And I had an abortion."

Except for a faint electronic buzzing, the line felt empty. Then my mother asked, "Why didn't you *tell* me?" She actually sounded bewildered.

"Why didn't I tell you?" Adrenalin cart wheeled through my chest. "Why *would* I have told you anything at all after you said that awful thing to me?"

"I don't know what..."

"You said, 'Preggers, Jess?' And it sounded like you'd be pleased if I was in trouble."

"Well, I didn't mean..."

"It doesn't matter now. It's over. And I didn't need you anyway," I added. I chose my words with care. I wanted them to gouge at her conscience.

"Hmm," was all that my father said. Then there was a click. He had hung up but it was better that way. Now that he knew my virginity was gone, I could intuit my father's disappointment. I didn't need to hear him pronounce me a failure to guess that's what he thought. I felt guilty even as I resented his power to define me.

My mother kept talking. When had I had the abortion? Was it expensive? Had Jon helped me? Before we said goodbye, she said, "I wish you had told me."

"Yeah, well...whatever," I said.

I dropped the receiver into its cradle and stretched out on the floor. A slab of concrete covered with thin carpet, it aggravated my back. I lifted my head and let it slam down, and then I did it a few more times. Each time my skull connected with the floor, I thought, *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.* I should never have said anything about my classes. Still, my parents would have found out when my grades showed up in the mail and then my father would probably have accused me of lying to them. Of all the things that incensed him, lying was the worst.

I managed to wangle my way into spending Thanksgiving in the dorm, but I had to go home for Christmas. I didn't want to leave my cinderblock box. Who knew how my parents would treat me? Since I had told them about the abortion my mother had been phoning me weekly, but I hadn't heard anything more from my father.

It was almost a relief to discover that my father had decided to ignore me. He seemed to believe that if he refrained from making eye contact with me, my sexuality—and my shame—might cease to exist. At least he wasn't saying anything more about preventing me from returning to school. My mother, on the other hand, went out of her way to be considerate. Here was my favorite ornament—would I like to put it on the tree? Here was that recipe for the gingerbread house I'd always wanted to make—would I like to try it now? It was tempting. Ever since I was small, I had begged her to engineer the gingerbread house with me but she always refused. "It's too complicated," she had said. Now that she was willing, it was too late—no matter how much I might wish to be, I wasn't a child anymore. I knew that my mother hoped I would confide in her as I had when I was young and part of me longed to give in to her overtures. If I did, maybe she would allow me to roll into a ball and rest my head on her warm lap. I imagined her hand stroking my hair and her gentle touch seemed like the only thing that could soothe me. But another part of me believed that she had squandered her chance and that was that—why should I trust her again? In the end, I maintained a resentful silence.

Looking back, I suspect that I used anger to camouflage my fear. If I started talking, I knew that the subject of Jon would arise and when that happened, I'd have to admit that our relationship had become little more than a pathetic habit. If it was even

that. When I had asked what he wanted to do for Christmas, Jon stated that he'd be too busy with his family to squeeze me in. "I'll see you in January," he'd said. His words stunned me. I couldn't stop thinking about the previous Christmas when we had set aside time especially for each other and exchanged presents. Jon had given me a vintage dress. A muted shade of burgundy, the embroidered taffeta fabric rustled when I pulled it out. I remembered that I had laughed with surprise and delight. Yet this year Jon hadn't given me anything. Not time, not a phone call, not a package. Nothing. And surely that meant something. The more I thought about the gift I had sent home with him, the dumber I felt.

Yet just after I returned to school, Jon phoned and invited me to see a film. I readily accepted and then spent the intervening hours contemplating his invitation. Maybe the date would mark a return to the close relationship we had shared before the abortion. In the shower, I shampooed my hair until it squeaked and then I shaved my legs for the first time in months.

Jon wanted to see *Dead Ringers* and I agreed. I knew only that it starred Jeremy Irons, but that was enough since it really didn't matter to me which movie we chose. What I cared most about was being with Jon.

I met him at the theater. When I arrived, Jon was standing just inside the lobby doors, looking at movie posters. "Hey," I said. I hugged him and took his hand in mine. I held it until we reached the ticket window and he let go to pull out his wallet. After he paid for the tickets, he strode to the concession stand.

"Want anything?"

"No, thanks." I was too nervous to eat.

Jon ordered a barrel of popcorn and a large Coke. Once we settled into our seats, his hands were busy with his snacks.

The opening credits were accompanied by archaic and fanciful illustrations of the womb and the fetus within and as they spooled across the screen, I began to feel uneasy. What was this? *Settle down*, I told myself. *Just give it a chance*. What followed was the curious story of twin gynecologists whose emotional entanglement leads them into madness. Convinced that his lover has betrayed him, one of the twins takes his anger out on a patient by roughly examining her with an inappropriate tool. Claiming it is not the tool but the woman's body that is wrong, he designs a series of gynecological instruments for so-called mutant women. As I watched, each shiny implement appeared more cruel than the last and I felt my cervix cringing the way it had months before when the doctor injected it with anesthetic. I glanced at Jon. He continued to gaze at the screen, his hand regularly lifting popcorn to his mouth. Although he looked untroubled, was it possible that he was reluctant to show his distress?

I leaned over and whispered, "Wanna leave?"

"No." He looked at me. "Why?"

"Because this is creepy. It's making me sick."

"Well, I want to see the rest of it. Anyway, it's almost over." Jon turned his attention back to the screen. Crimson light flickered across his face.

I could have left. Nothing was stopping me. Instead, I stayed where I was. Sitting in my plush seat, I seethed. How could Jon watch this horror show? I sank down

low and closed my eyes. I wanted to cover my ears with my hands but I knew that would look childish.

When the movie finally ended and the lights came up, I grabbed my coat and rushed out to the lobby.

Jon ambled out of the theater a few minutes later. "What's wrong with you?" he asked.

"How could you stand to watch that? Especially after everything that happened last summer?" Moisture pooled in my eyes and threatened to spill out. I pushed aside the heavy door and stepped out onto the trampled snow that hid the sidewalk. Through the hot haze of my tears, snow banks and shadows seemed an ominous blur.

"It's just a movie. It's not about you," Jon said.

I was not so sure about that but I didn't say so. Instead, I brushed the heel of one mittened hand across my eyes and marched toward the truck. Even though I had parked it nearby, the tension between us made the walk seem arduous.

"Want me to drive?" Jon offered.

"Fine."

After I handed him the keys, he unlocked the passenger door and waited for me to climb in before shutting it tight. Then he got into the driver's seat and started up the engine. As it warmed up, Jon said, "We need to talk."

I sensed what he had to say to me and the tears I had been pushing back began to fall. Jon pulled a crumpled paper napkin out of his pocket and handed it to me before driving up Main Street. Leaving Burlington behind, we passed the quarry and then moved out through the fields beyond.

On a stretch of road marked by nothing but snow drifting through acres of corn stubble, Jon pulled the truck over. I pressed one damp cheek to the cold window and concentrated on the stars pricking the black sky like needles.

"I've had some cool adventures with you, Jess, and you're a great girl, but...I just don't feel the same way I used to." I imagined that Jon had practiced those words for hours before the movie. The same hours I had spent preening and dreaming.

"Why not?" I asked without moving my head. My voice sounded hollow.

"I don't know. I just don't."

"Come on, Jon." I turned in the seat and looked at him. "There must be a reason. Did I do something?" Then, before he could answer, I added, "Am I too heavy for you now? I know I've gained some weight, but I can lose it." I thought that I would abandon the solace of ice cream forever if it meant that Jon would stay with me.

"No. That's not the problem." He crossed his arms and looked down at the steering wheel.

"Then what is it? You can't just say it's over and not tell me why. It's not fair!"

"Ok! Fine." He looked down at his hands for a moment and then curled them into tight balls before turning to me. "I didn't want to have to say this but I'm just not attracted to you anymore."

"Oh. So you *do* think I'm fat," I said. I sniffled and dabbed at my nose with the napkin. It was heavy with the odor of butter.

"That's not why."

"Then what?" Had I done something? I tried to think of what it could be.

He sighed. Then he said, "Last summer."

“What about it?”

“You know. What happened,” he said.

“The abortion?” Jon nodded his head. “But you wanted me to have it!”

“You wanted it too!” he said.

“I’m not saying I didn’t. I’m just reminding you...”

“Thanks, but I remember well enough. I don’t need your help.”

“Fine,” I said. There was a pause as we sat with our arms crossed, our stone faces fixed on the black void of road that stretched before us. A chill rattled my spine and I clasped my arms closer.

“So, what about it?” I finally asked.

“It’s just that...there was so much blood, you know? And when we’re together, I can’t stop thinking about it,” he added. Jon’s voice was thick. In the light from the dash, I saw a tear slick down his cheek. I recalled how still and drawn his face had looked during the abortion and how his expression had alarmed me. I remembered too his insistence that nothing was wrong. *You’re fine*, he had said.

“Is that why you don’t want to have sex anymore?”

Still looking straight ahead, he nodded. Heat crept across my face.

“So, what are you saying? That I’m tainted or something?”

Again, Jon nodded. “Yes,” he whispered. “Yes.” Then he made a choking sound and more tears struggled out of him.

How could I respond to that? I sat silent for a little and tried to make sense of what Jon had said but my mind would not stay still. Instead, it caromed off his words

like one of those crazy high bounce balls you can get at the Five-and-Dime. After a while, I said, "Just give me the keys."

I clenched my teeth all the way back to Burlington. When I stopped in front of Jon's apartment and he reached to open the door, I said, "Don't do this. Please." He turned then and pulled me close and it felt like everything caught inside me would splinter and fall away. After a few seconds, Jon got out of the truck and slammed the door. Hurrying now, he climbed the steps and slipped out of sight.

Left to my own devices, I wouldn't have bothered getting up the next day. Instead, I would have allowed my head, which felt far too heavy to lift, to remain where it had fallen. So what if my pillow was wet with saliva and tears? So what if pain poked my temples and prodded my eyeballs? If nothing else, it was inspiration for another round of weeping which was all I could imagine myself doing. Yet when the phone sounded its shrill demand, I peeled my face from the sour pillow and sat up. What if it was Jon calling to say that he had been mistaken, that he realized how much he loved me and that he wanted to get back together, and I just let it ring? I might not get another chance. I crawled to the end of the bed and pulled the phone off my desk. Lying back, I lifted the receiver. "Hello?" I said. My voice sounded tight and out of use.

"May I speak to Jessica?"

"Mom, it's me."

"Oh. What's wrong? You sound awful."

"I am," I said. It was hard to speak through the knot in my throat. "Haven't you heard? I'm tainted."

"What are you talking about?"

I managed to say "Jon..." before the knot unraveled. My mother let me cry for a bit before trying again.

"What happened?"

"We broke up!"

"Oh, honey."

"He dumped me! Because of the abortion. He says there was so much blood that he can't look at me now without seeing a stain. He thinks I'm tainted, Mom!" The unfairness of his stance walloped me again and I sobbed some more.

"I'm sure he doesn't think..."

I jerked upright. "He does! That's what he *said*, Mom! Jesus! I was there. I know what I heard."

"Ok, ok. But even if that *is* what he thinks, you know he's wrong, don't you?"

I stood up and began to stalk a path between the door and the bed. "I don't know. I mean, what if I *am* marked and everyone can see that I had an abortion, that I chose myself over a fetus? Maybe I *am* bad."

"Honey, come on. First of all, an abortion isn't like an amputation—no one can tell that you had one just by looking at you. You know that, right?"

"I guess." I pulled a tissue from the box and blew my nose hard. "Sorry."

"That's ok. Anyway, didn't Jon *want* you to have the abortion?"

"Yeah," I whispered. "But I didn't do it just because he wanted me to. I knew I wasn't ready to take care of a baby."

"That doesn't make you a monster."

"It doesn't?"

"No. At least you know your limitations. Think about those people you always see at the grocery store who are just so hateful to their kids. Shouting at them if they touch anything. Ignoring them if they dare to open their mouths." My mother had long made a point of encouraging me and my siblings to talk with her and it was rare that she resorted to screaming at us. "You know you wouldn't want to be like them."

"No. That's true. And it's not like it was easy to have the abortion. So now when Jon says this horrible thing to me, it just makes it harder. Like I don't already feel bad enough."

"What would make you feel better?"

"I don't know."

"Would you like to come home? Just for a visit?" Hope tilted through her voice.

"Not really."

That wasn't what she wanted to hear. "Well," she said, "what *are* you going to do, Jessica? I hope you're not planning to just lay there in that bed getting more and more depressed about this."

"I don't know."

"Maybe you should start taking your Prozac again."

I stopped pacing. "Mom! I'm not crazy!"

"No, of course you're not. Sorry. Sorry." I could tell she was worried about losing ground with me. She sighed and then she said something she would repeat in years to come. "I really do think my worst failing as a mother was not being with you for the abortion."

As much as I would have liked her to have seen me through the abortion, I knew that if anyone had asked me to name my mother's primary fault, I wouldn't have thought to choose that particular omission. All I could think to say was, "You do?"

"Yes. I feel awful about it. I should have been there."

"I did want you with me," I admitted.

"You did?"

"Yeah. But it seemed like you wouldn't understand, so I didn't tell you."

"But I should have known! A good mother always knows what's going on with her children."

"But I didn't tell you, Mom, so how could you have known?"

"I should have *sensed* it."

"So, you're saying you have to be psychic to be a mother?"

"No, but..."

"It helps, right? Mom, it's ok. I'm not holding it against you, if that's what you're worried about." As I spoke, I realized it was true: her harsh July words didn't seem so important now.

My mother had great faith in the power of action, particularly of the charitable sort, to alleviate personal unhappiness, but I was skeptical. Her approach to trouble seemed parasitic: identify someone worse off than yourself, and your own situation wouldn't seem so bad. Besides, as I lay in bed considering what might make me feel better, the scenario I cooked up was far-fetched at best. I sensed that talking about the abortion was what would help me, but not within the confines of a therapist's office. No.

What I imagined was going into high schools throughout the state and speaking to students about the complexities of abortion. I saw myself standing at the front of a classroom before thirty rapt faces. I wanted to explain that abortion wasn't as simple as the factions, both pro- and anti-, tended to portray it. I wished to relay that the world was not a series of geometrical figures limned in white and precisely arranged on black slate, not the stark chalkboard affair we had been led to believe in, but that in fact it was cloaked in shades of gray. I needed to say that it was indeed possible to feel both relieved and sad about the decision to abort. Yeah—like that would ever happen. First, I had no idea how to go about realizing my vision. And besides, even though abortion was legal, I knew it was socially unspeakable.

Before my contraceptive failed, I had assumed I didn't know anyone who had ever terminated a pregnancy. It was only when Sheryl and Cat and some of the other women who worked at the café entrusted me with stories of their own abortions that I began to understand just how common the experience was. Had those women not recognized part of themselves in me, I would no doubt still be ignorant. Such information was guarded for good reason. If you followed the news at all, you couldn't fail to conclude that anti-abortion violence was on the rise. A group calling themselves Operation Rescue had recently emerged and increasing numbers of protesters swarmed family planning clinics, erected blockades, and hassled clients. Waving baby dolls, they were known to scream, "Mommy! Mommy! Please don't kill me!" Their goal was clear: shame women and shut down clinics. If protests didn't work, some activists used other tactics. They shot at, bombed, and set clinics ablaze. The very year I had my abortion, a clinic in neighboring New Hampshire had been targeted by an arsonist. Under

these circumstances, it was natural to wonder when women who chose abortion would begin to be assaulted. Standing and testifying to my choice would place me at risk. I thought I could contend with being shunned or mocked but it was fear of violent retaliation that held me in check.

That was the semester I was supposed to redeem myself scholastically but Jon had derailed my plans and I couldn't seem to get back on course. Given that the simple task of dressing daunted me, attending classes was about as likely as scaling Mt. Everest. Each morning, guilt skulked around my bed and eventually I blocked it out by pulling the pillow over my face. I wondered if I could suffocate myself with it. Inside me, a space had opened up and, for the most part, I knew it as a wide weariness. At other times it raged raw, especially when I revisited the breakup and the events leading to it. Whatever guise the expanse assumed, it impressed me as limitless and I imagined myself bobbing and wheeling through it forever. How could death be worse?

I managed to keep up with my work study responsibilities, but just barely. The glazes I concocted proved unstable and the clay I mixed looked and felt chalky. In class, every piece I made ended up in the slip bucket, a big plastic trash can filled with water that we used for recycling clay. I didn't want to bother with pottery anymore but I kept on because of Diane. She was keen to have us put on an art show toward the end of the semester and since I regarded her as one of the few people who understood what I had experienced, I thought I owed it to her to at least make an effort. Otherwise I wouldn't have gone. It was too awkward. It was public knowledge that Jon and I were done. That became clear one night when I was about to slide another warped bowl into the murky

slip. Kate was dumping some scraps of clay into the water. As I joined her, she turned to me and said, "That's the third pot you've thrown out tonight. But if I were you, I guess I wouldn't be able to concentrate either."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's just that I heard..."

"What?"

"That Jon broke up with you, of course." Her voice rose above the chatter and it seemed to me that everyone stopped to listen.

"Oh?"

"Yes. He told me himself," she said. "We had lunch together yesterday," she added. Then she smiled at the memory of it.

I wanted to hiss something that would lash the stupid expression from her face but I was too surprised. So Jon was going around announcing that he had dumped me? It was the truth, but so what? I had assumed that the ugly mechanics of the break would remain between us. Now everybody knew. Had he also been telling them why?

I felt just as I had that day long ago at vacation Bible school when I had broken away from one of the impossible games (*Red Rover, Red Rover, send...Jessica over!*) and hurtled down the hill to our house. Now I knew that same urge to flee. Instead, I glared at my adversary and said, "Well, I wouldn't go getting your hopes up, Kate. Jon hates fat girls."

Her face tightened then and I felt a bit better.

After that, Angus was the first to speak. "Uh...hey! Did you guys hear that the Red Hot Chili Peppers are coming to town? They're gonna play on campus. At the gym."

"Really?" I said. Under any other circumstances I would have considered this information irrelevant. However, while I had no interest in the band's testosterone-fuelled posturing, I knew that Jon was sure to attend their show. Maybe I could approach him there. Springing as it did from the bitter ground of my resentment, I recognized that the idea was a bad one. I should have uprooted it, but I didn't want to.

The next day I was at the store peering into the ice cream freezer when someone said, "Jessica?"

I turned around and there was Charles, a professor I had had the year before. His resemblance to John Lennon had appealed to me. That and the fact that he had given me an A. "Oh. Hi," I said, pushing my hair out of my face. "How are you?"

"Good, good. How 'bout you? You look great." He smiled then, as if reassuring me that teachers often made such remarks to students. Even if they did, I knew that they shouldn't but I ended up having coffee with him anyway. It felt like a long time since a man had paid attention to me. As I listened, Charles described the classes he was teaching and the books he was collecting. I talked a bit about clay but kept my academic woes to myself. When it seemed clear that we had picked clean the conversational topics, I rose. "Well, thanks for the coffee but I have to go now. I don't want to be late for work."

Charles stood and hooked a dark curl behind one ear. He adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses and said, "Well, it was just great seeing you. We should do this again sometime."

"Sure," I said.

"Soon," he said and handed me his card.

The next day Charles called and invited me to lunch. We met at a pizza place on Church Street and he drank a pitcher of beer with the meal. After that, we walked to the waterfront where the wind slapped our faces pink. When, as I had suspected he would, Charles took my hand, he asked, "Is this ok?"

"Great," I said. It wasn't true, though. His touch felt clammy to me.

As we parted, he asked, "When can I see you again?" It was the sort of dorky line you expect to hear from a soap opera, not your actual life, and for a second I wondered if Charles was joking. He looked so earnest, though, that it was a little embarrassing.

"Well," I said, "there's this concert I've been hoping to go to. The Red Hot Chili Peppers. You know them?"

"Umm...yeah," he said. His puzzled expression made it clear that he was lying and for a second I wondered just how old he was. His hippie look made it hard to tell but it didn't really matter. In a way, the older he was, the better.

"So, you wanna go?"

"Sure," he said.

*

Charles paid for the tickets and we climbed to a spot in the bleachers. Once we sat down, he slid his arm around my waist and I tried not to think about it. Instead, I busied myself scanning the crowd for a glimpse of Jon but I couldn't see him. When the lights went down it was too dark to identify anyone, so I spent the first set bobbing my head as if I was enjoying the music. Still, the Peppers' attempt at *Higher Ground*, Stevie Wonder's passionate track, was so dull that I couldn't help sneering. I angled my face away from Charles so that he wouldn't notice. When the lights finally came back up, I stood and stretched. That's when I saw Jon. He was striding away from the mosh pit and a tall girl I didn't recognize was waving to him. He stopped to talk to her.

"Will you excuse me? I see someone I know," I told Charles. "I'll be right back," I promised.

I was already up and walking away when I heard him say, "Ok."

I approached Jon. "Hi," I said. He glanced at me.

"Oh. Hey," he said before turning his attention back to the tall girl. He didn't bother to introduce us. The longer I hung at the edge of their conversation, the clearer it became that Jon was in no hurry to finish talking with her. I hadn't been sure what I was going to say to Jon, but having to wait for his attention rankled. When she finally left, he turned to me and said, "I didn't expect to see you here. Didn't think this was your scene."

"I'm on a date," I said.

"Huh. So what's up?"

"I heard you're telling people you dumped me, Jon. That's nice. Real nice. Are you telling them why?"

"No."

"And why should I believe that?"

"Because it's true."

"Well, it's also true that you wanted the abortion and when I had it, you left. I believed you were different from most guys. But that wasn't true, now was it?"

"Look, I didn't come here to get into it with you. And I've gotta go meet some people, so..."

As Jon turned, I clutched at his arm. "It's not fair," I said. "You can just walk away like nothing happened. Well, I can't." My voice cracked. "I have to carry the abortion around with me. Every day." A tear hung from the end of my nose and I brushed it away. "But not you. You can just walk away. It isn't fair, Jon."

"Well, what the hell do you want me to say?"

"Oh, I don't think there's anything you *can* say. So go on. Keep walking. Just remember I hate you for it." Before he could react, I pivoted and stomped back up the bleachers.

As I drew nearer to Charles, I saw him slip a small flask into his coat. Then he looked up as if he had just noticed me and smiled. When I sat down, he put his arm around me again and said, "You're shaking. What's wrong? Did that guy say something to you?"

I realized then that Charles had probably witnessed the entire scene. I wasn't prepared to go into it with him, though. "Nothing," I said. "I'm just cold."

"Why don't we get out of here? Your place is nearby, isn't it? We could get warmed up."

Now that I had attacked Jon, there was no point in lingering, so I allowed Charles to lead me out of the gym.

When we reached my suite, the common room was empty. In fact, it was so quiet throughout I knew that everyone must either be sleeping or elsewhere and I felt relieved. I wasn't sure I wanted my roommates to see me with a prof. Of course, a lot of people had probably already noticed us together, but I told myself that as long as I didn't know them, it didn't matter. I wondered how I could get Charles to leave before anyone returned. "Well, thanks for walking me back," I said.

"Are you still cold?"

"Uh..."

"We should have some tea," Charles said.

"Yeah. Ok," I said. Eager though I was to be alone, I felt a little embarrassed that I hadn't played The Good Hostess and offered Charles something in the first place.

As I was heating the water and rinsing the crusty residue out of the mugs, Charles strolled around the suite inspecting everything. "Nice," he said, gesturing at the dangling Twinkies.

I decided to ignore the sarcastic tone in his voice. "We like them," I said as I poured the boiling water over the tea bags. "We're all looking forward to partaking in the feast at the end of the year."

"You plan to *eat* them?"

"Of course. After all, they're a space age food designed to withstand the rigors of dehydration and rehydration."

"Is that right?" He disappeared down the hall. "So, which one is your room?" he called.

"Well, it's kind of a mess right now..."

Charles sauntered back into the common area. "I'd love to see it," he said. He smiled at me.

"Maybe another time," I said. "Tea?" I handed him a mug. As I did, I realized that Jon had thrown and glazed the small vessel. One of his trademark skulls leered from the black lip. I watched as steam rose from the surface of the liquid and lifted the scent of mint into the air.

"Thanks," Charles said and took a sip. "If I could see your room, I think I'd be able to imagine you better. When we're apart, I mean."

It was clear that he wasn't going to give up until he got his way. What could it hurt to show him my room? If we were going to go on seeing each other, I couldn't expect to keep my space to myself.

"Well, if you really want to..." I led the way down the hall, unlocked the door, and switched on the bedside light. I smoothed the blankets clumped on my bed and turned to Charles. "There's not much to it," I said.

"Oh, I don't know. I like it."

"You do?" It was the sort of remark that could only be made by someone lacking aesthetic sensitivity.

"Yeah, I do. It's...intimate." With that Charles shut the door, set his mug down on my desk, and moved closer. I didn't want him to kiss me but that's what he did. Clasp my body tight, he bent down and mashed his lips against mine. I tried to pull

away, but he clutched my head in his hand so I couldn't move. Then he maneuvered me toward the bed until the back of my knees hit the metal frame and I sank to the mattress. Charles sat too, his mouth still attached to mine like a leech's sucker. That was bad enough but then he forced his tongue between my lips. As he thrust it into my mouth and swabbed it around, I tasted something sharp and astringent just beneath the thin wash of mint left by the tea. I wanted to break away from him, but my arms felt inert. Instead, part of me stole away from my body and rose until it hovered near the ceiling. As Charles continued his assault on my mouth, I watched from above. It was the only way to bear the pressing and drooling and probing that made me think I was being kissed by a boy who had never kissed anything more responsive than his pillow.

The kissing, if that's what you could call it, seemed to go on for a long time. Finally, my watching self couldn't take it any more. *What are you doing?* it demanded of my embodied self. *Are you really going to settle for this? After Jon? Yuck!*

"Mmm," I said and pulled back.

Charles pushed up his glasses. "Something wrong?"

"No. Of course not," I lied. "I'm just a little tired." I raised my arms above my head and yawned. Then I stood up. "Thanks for everything," I said.

"Sure. Maybe I could call you tomorrow?"

"Why not?"

After Charles left I locked myself in the bathroom and scrubbed my teeth and gums and tongue until the foam I spat into the sink was rosy with blood.

That night I dreamt that Jon stood before me. Dismay rumbled his face. He shook his head and said, "If you had just _____, we'd still be together, Mess. I *loved* you. Don't you know that?" Then he turned, bowed his head, and shambled away down a dark hall. Soon he was no bigger than a speck. When I jerked awake, tears were streaming into my hair and ears. What was it I should have done? I couldn't understand what Jon's apparition had told me. Still, I knew that I shouldn't have behaved the way I did at the concert. I had expected to feel contented and even light but instead a rock of regret bowed my shoulders.

When the phone jangled I ignored it. It was probably Charles or my mother and I didn't want to talk to either one of them. As soon as the noise stopped, I picked up the receiver and dialed Jon's number. As his phone rang and rang I began to question whether I was being sensible and it was a relief when I got the answering machine. After the tone, I said, "Jon, it's me, Jess. I really need to talk to you. About what happened last night. I know you're probably mad, and I don't blame you, but could you call me anyway?" I paused before hanging up. Then I lay back in bed and waited.

As time ticked on, the importance of speaking to Jon grew in my mind until it took over. When the phone rang, I pounced on it. "Hello?"

"Good morning, sleepy head." It was Charles. The intimate implication of his words made my stomach clench. "How are you today?" He was practically crooning.

"Fine, thanks. And you?"

"After last night? Just great," he said.

I raised my eyebrows. "Well, I'd love to talk to you but I'm expecting a call."

"Why don't you phone me afterwards? I'll be waiting," he said.

"Yeah, sure," I said, rolling my eyes. It was satisfying to hang up.

When a few hours had passed without any word from Jon, I called again. And then again. Even though I left several messages, Jon never called me back. By early evening I decided to walk down to his apartment and see if he was there.

After I knocked there was a long pause before Mike opened the door. When he saw me, he opened his eyes wide and stretched an arm across the doorway.

"Is Jon around?" I already knew the answer because I could hear his electric guitar. He was playing Stevie Ray Vaughan's *Pride and Joy*.

"Uh, yeah, but he's kind of busy right now and..."

"Well, I need to talk to him. It's important, Mike. Really."

He sighed. "Ok," he said. He dropped his arm and stood aside. "But I'll have to let him know you're here."

"Sure." I sat down on the couch and picked up a creased copy of *Rolling Stone*. Flipping through the pages, I felt like a patient trying to get past a surly receptionist. Why was Mike running interference between Jon and me?

When Mike returned, he repeated, "Jon's real busy. I don't know how long he'll be."

"Well, do you mind if I wait?" Privately, I wondered why playing his guitar was so crucial that Jon couldn't give me two minutes of his time.

"I guess not," said Mike. He frowned and went into the kitchen.

As I continued to sit, I studied the water stains on the ceiling and puzzled over what I could say to Jon to convince him to give me another chance. Would sorry be good

enough? Judging from the jaunty sounds of the extended jam he was playing (*She's my sweet little baby / I'm her little lover boy*), he was in high spirits, so maybe it would go better than I thought.

After a while the music stopped and I heard muted laughter. A door snicked open and Jon walked into the living room. I stood. "Hey," I said. Then I noticed the girl trailing just behind him. Short and plump, she wore baggy blue overalls and her black hair stuck out from the sides of her round head in two stiff pigtails. She was gazing at Jon as if he were the sun and she a hungry little flower.

"Edie, this is Jess. Jess, Edie," Jon said. "Friends!" he added and waved his hand as if casting a spell of enchantment over us. Then he said, "So, what's up?"

I looked from Jon to Edie and then back at Jon. "Uh...nothing much, I guess. I mean, I was just hoping we could talk."

"Shoot," he said.

"Umm...I meant in private," I said.

"Sorry. Can't do it. Maybe another time, Mess." He put a hand on his companion's shoulder. "Me and Edie are headed to Nectar's to catch The Joe Turnip Experience and we don't wanna be late."

My mouth clamped shut and I wheeled around and hurried out of the apartment. As I marched back up the hill, I considered Edie. She seemed familiar but I wasn't sure why. It wasn't until I'd made it halfway across the Green that I remembered where I had seen her before. Last spring I had stopped by Williams Hall to visit Jon in the woodshop where he worked as an assistant. He was leaning against one of the scarred workbenches talking to a girl, her face lifted as she absorbed his words. When I approached and

slipped an arm around Jon, the girl ducked her chin and said, "Well, I guess I'd better head out now." When she left, I noticed that she glanced back as if hoping to catch Jon's eye.

After she was gone, I asked, "So, who was that?"

"Can't remember her name," Jon said. "Just one of the wood students."

I had taken him at his word but now I wondered how long he'd known Edie's name. And how long had he been resting his hand on her shoulder? Was it possible that something had been going on behind my back? For months?

As I thought about how Jon had just glibly pronounced Edie and me "friends," I stepped off the lighted path and began kicking a new one through the snowdrifts. Unwelcome questions followed me. *Had Jon used the abortion as an excuse to break up? If he knew that he was just going to end our relationship, why had he bothered to invite me to the movies first? And why Dead Ringers? Was he trying to hurt me? But why? And just how long had he been lying to me? Was anything he'd ever said true? And what was so great about Edie? Why would he choose her over me?* Kicking harder, I tried to discern a way through the gloom.

The heavy snow made the hike back to Living & Learning a slow and clumsy one. When I finally arrived I was panting, but I hadn't worn myself out. I was still too angry to consider sleeping. As I passed the pottery studio, I looked in through the tall windows past the shelves lined with pale pots that had just emerged from a bisque firing. The fluorescents were on but the room looked empty. I entered the building and tried the door to the studio. It was unlocked. I let myself in and walked into the back room, but it was also deserted. Just the way I wanted it.

From the storage cupboard I pulled out a log of new clay and sliced off a large chunk. I didn't know what I was going to make but I was sure it would be big. After replacing the log, I hauled my chunk to one of the wedging tables where I attacked it. It felt good to squeeze and slap and slam the damp mass, and I lingered over the task until my arms ached and I was certain that every air bubble had been banished. Then I wrapped the lump in a soft piece of dry cleaning plastic and took it into the next room. Setting it down on my favorite table, I turned to the tool cans. I chose a heavy rolling pin, a cutting wire, and a pin tool.

Slicing the clay in two, I rolled out the first piece until it was about a quarter inch thick. I paused for a moment to regard the smooth slab before lowering the pin and pressing it into the clay. The sharp tool moved through the grey matter without hesitation and I soon peeled away the excess to reveal what appeared to me to be a torso. It curved in a particular way.

Veiling the torso in plastic, I set it aside and took up the other chunk of clay. I separated it into two equal pieces and rolled them into balls. From each sphere I pinched a small pot. When I had coaxed them into resembling each other, I uncovered the torso and set about joining the three pieces together. With my fingertips, I smoothed the seam between breasts and body. As I stroked the velvet surface, I understood that I was to create a woman.

Before I left the studio that night, I pierced a series of small holes through the torso. I knew that appendages were inevitable.

When I got back to the suite, Kate said, “Oh, *there* you are. There was some guy here looking for you. Angus thought he was a prof.”

My stomach churned, but I wasn’t about to tell Kate anything. “A prof?” I said. “Are you sure? Why would a prof be looking for *me*?”

“Maybe *this* will refresh your memory.” She handed me a scrap of paper. On it was scrawled: *Last night was special but I haven’t heard from you all day—what’s going on? CALL me. Charles.* Below that he had printed his phone number in oversized digits, as if he thought my eyes might be faulty. The note wasn’t sealed or even folded over and I knew Kate had read it.

“Huh,” I said. “I *did* meet a guy at the concert last night but we barely even talked...weird.” While Kate watched, I tore the scrap into smaller pieces and dropped them into the trash.

I was lying in bed wondering how Charles could have been so careless when the phone rang. I let it shrill for a while before answering. “Hello?”

“Oh, hi—it’s Charles.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I recognize your voice.”

“Wow—already!” He made it sound like I had some kind of incredible talent.

“I’ve been waiting all day for you to call,” he said.

“Yeah, I know. I got your note.”

“Oh, good. So when can we get together?” I paused and he added, “I really enjoy spending time with you.”

"That's so sweet," I forced myself to say even though I was thinking that his words were code for *I really enjoy pawing at you*. "But I'm super busy right now. I'm just not sure when..."

"What's so important?"

"The pottery show. It's coming up soon and there's just so much to do," I said. I hated the apologetic tone in my voice.

"Well, you have to eat. Why don't you come for dinner tomorrow? I'll cook my famous lentil soup and you can see my apartment."

"What a nice idea. How 'bout I give you a call if I can make it?"

"Well, ok," Charles said. Though it was clear that he was unhappy with this, he didn't press me. I didn't bother to call him the next day. Or any of the days after that.

Over the next few weeks, an image of the clay woman solidified in my mind. I suppose I was imagining her, but the process was unlike most other thinking I had done. The act of making, whether throwing a pot or writing a paper, had often stymied me. Maybe it was due to a mania for perfection that had dogged me from early on. Usually I considered my ideas so stupid that I put off working on them until it was almost too late. When I did tackle them, I was driven by fear of failure and each stage of the process was a miserable slog. This was different. Now it felt like a window had opened in my head. When I looked through it, I saw what I was meant to do next.

When I couldn't attend to my project, my thoughts played across the nascent form swathed in plastic but I didn't tell anyone about it. In the studio, I always tried to get a table to myself and I made sure to keep all the finished parts covered. Still, it was hard to

prevent people from peering over my shoulder and speculating while I worked, especially since the date of the art show was creeping nearer. As panic and doubt set in, many folks seemed to find it easier to observe others than to attend to their own projects.

"So, what are you making?" Angus asked me one night. "That piece looks sorta like a ham. Hey, that would be cool: you could make a slab pot that looks just like a ham! And if you filled it with green eggs, you could call it *Green Eggs and Ham!*" Angus grinned. The ease with which he delighted himself was enviable.

I sighed. When Angus interrupted me, I had been cutting out one of the thighs. "It's not a ham," I told him.

"Then what is it?"

"You'll just have to wait and see."

"I don't know why it has to be such a big secret. You know what *I'm* making," Angus said. For months Angus had been modeling an army of clay cockroaches. Some were hefty as cats while others were no bigger than acorns. He had also mentioned something about doing a plaster cast of his body. I knew he had taken *Man Versus Nature* as his theme, but I couldn't say that I understood how all the parts were meant to fit together.

"I guess," I said.

"What do you mean, you *guess*? It's *Man Versus Nature!*" His cheeks flushed red.

"I *know* that, Angus. You don't have to get all upset about it. I think it's a great idea. Really. But I probably won't be able to appreciate the full power of it until you set it up. That's all I'm saying."

“Yeah. Ok.” He bounced on his toes for a minute. “I need a smoke. Hey, Kate,” he called, “you wanna take a butt break?”

“Sure thing.”

After they left, I resumed incising.

By the time of the final bisque firing, I had managed to sculpt all the necessary parts: face, neck, torso, groin, thighs, legs. There weren't any arms, though. It wasn't that I had forgotten to make them or that I had run out of time, but that they simply seemed *wrong*. Out of place. While the Venus de Milo had lost her arms, the clay woman's torso sprouted diminutive stubs that looked as though they had never realized their potential. Unlike the goddess of love and beauty, the figure I labored over was not an emblem of perfection.

As I laid out the body in the electric kiln, I looked to the small gods clustered on a nearby shelf. A horned goat, a leering jester, and a sinuous serpent were among the many creatures anxious potters had fashioned over the years. The figures were believed to protect firings from evil spirits. Before I closed the kiln and started it, I asked the deities to watch over my creation.

I was weary when I left the studio, but I couldn't rest. Imagining the clay woman enclosed in the steadily warming kiln, I felt as though I were awaiting assurance of a dear friend's safe passage through surgery.

A few days later the kiln had cooled enough to be unloaded. As I removed each of my pieces, I checked them for damage, a bit like a new mother counting her baby's fingers and toes. Everything was perfect until I reached the torso. A third of the left

breast had sheared off. Shadow pooled in the resultant gap. Running a finger along the jagged tear, I assumed that the missing curve had shattered in the red heat. My mood began to plummet but when I turned back to the kiln, I spied the fragment leaning against the firebrick. Scooping it up, I folded my hands around it and held it close for a moment. The kiln gods had given me another chance. I thought I could make everything right.

Out in the courtyard I chose one of the galvanized trash cans that we usually used for raku firings. After pouring sawdust into the bottom of it, I placed the bisqued legs atop the yellow shavings. Once they were concealed beneath a mix of dead leaves, newspaper strips, and pine needles, I added the thighs. I continued alternating the body parts with the fuel until at last the face gazed up at me. I shook the remaining bits of sawdust into the eyes and filled the forlorn O of the mouth. Then I scraped in more of the leaf mixture until the face was buried.

The first match I struck flared for a second before bowing to a brisk wind. I dropped it into the can and lit another. Sheltering it with one hand, I touched it three times to the sawdust. As the trinity of tiny flames took hold and began to grow, I lowered the lid to the can and pushed down hard. Just to be sure it was on tight, I weighed it down with a few bricks.

The next day, when the can had cooled enough to touch, I removed the bricks and eased off the lid. Within the blackened walls lay a pile of grimy pieces. As I lifted them out, the warmth they held seeped into my cold fingers. Wiping each part clean of loose ash I placed it onto one of the brown plastic trays we had swiped from the cafeteria.

Back inside the studio, I arranged the pieces on a table. The skin of the woman no longer resembled raw dough. The slow fire had mottled it sable and dun and chalky gray.

I was fiddling with the broken breast when Diane approached. "Do you know how to fix that?" she asked.

"Glue?"

"Yeah, but you have to do it in a certain way so it doesn't show. I have to run up to the gallery right now, but I can help you with it later."

"Ok," I said. I had hoped Diane would give me a word of encouragement but she left without saying anything more.

Earlier in the semester Angus had hauled two large spools of wire back to our suite. Usually you couldn't get him to stop talking but when I asked Angus where he had found the spools, all he would say was, "Uh, around." Brightly colored and hair-thin, the wire wrapped around one of the spools reminded me of the veins of phones and other electronic gadgets. The other spool held dull silver wire about as thick as a strand of spaghetti. Since the night I sculpted the torso, I had known that the latter was part of the clay woman.

By threading lengths of wire through the holes I had bored into the clay, I linked the body parts together, knee to thigh, thigh to groin, and so on. Though careful to twist the ends of the wires tight, I made sure that the loops themselves were loose. Instead of appearing flawlessly joined, the form was riddled with gaps. From the utmost angle of

the head and from each knee I ran additional wires. They would anchor the figure to the gallery wall.

When I stepped back to assess the effect, I thought that the creature I had envisioned at last lay before me. The flames had caused the face, a triangle with one blunted point for a chin, to appear veiled, and the mouth was a black unanswerable question. The nipples and pubic hair, each strand of which I had etched carefully into the groin, stood out burnt umber against the pied skin. The heavy legs spread wide, as if in anticipation. Ignoring her broken breast, which was, after all, a problem easily solved, I felt a surge of exhilaration. It was fleeting, though. The longer I looked, the more it seemed to me that something was missing. I didn't know how I would find it in the two days left before the show.

That night I dreamt my body stretched on a bier, the generous folds of my white gown flowing into the shadows crowded round. From a dim corner, I watched my chest. At first it appeared motionless. Afraid that I might be dead, I willed myself to steal closer. As I did so, I saw that my rib cage indeed rose and fell and rose again, though the movement was subtler than the lazy lift of a moth's wing. Despite the evidence of breath, my flesh was so pallid that it did little to conceal the blue lump lodged in my chest. I watched my heart flutter rapidly for a time but it soon began to falter. When I leaned in for a closer look, I heard my hair rustle. A pale slug-like creature slithered into view. Unafraid, it gazed at me and opened its mouth to reveal a tangle of incisors. Then it tore open my dress and bent to the well of my neck.

I reared up, struggling for air. When I managed to calm down and lie back in bed, it felt as though something grey and dense was squatting on my chest. The sensation was familiar. I had first noticed it when I was trying to grapple with my pregnancy, but ever since Jon had said I was tainted, it had grown more pronounced. I knew it was the fetus constricting around me and sucking out what it could. Acknowledging such thoughts added guilt to my burden. After all, the fetus was innocent. Still, guilt wasn't powerful enough to chase away my resentment. I had seen enough *Choose Life* bumper stickers on enough cars to know that plenty of people believed that pregnancy, intended or not, rendered a girl's own life irrelevant.

My attempts to recapture sleep proved useless. Finally, I rose, dressed, and snatched up the spare studio key. Easing closed the door of the suite, I shuffled through the halls. They were deserted at that hour and a heavy blanket of night smothered the windows reaching from floor to ceiling.

It was a relief to step into the studio, turn on a single light, and shut the door behind me. I retrieved the wire and the cutters, and then stirred a finger through the odds and ends that had collected in the bottom of my own red toolbox. There were seed-heads and a piece of coral that I sometimes used to impress patterns into clay, as well as an assortment of beads. Some I had made and others I had found. Choosing what I needed, I set to work snipping and crooking and entwining the wire until the greedy creature I had seen in my dream lay before me, its mouth treacherous with pointed white beads. Unveiling the clay woman, I bound its parasitic form tight to her neck.

With a day left before the show, I decided I couldn't wait any longer for Diane to help me repair the broken breast. I would just have to go ahead and do it myself. I squeezed a skinny line of clear glue along the edge of the break and then married the severed part to it. As I applied pressure, excess adhesive bubbled up out of the seam. I ran for a paper towel but when I wiped the mess away, a shiny stain remained. It made me sick to look at. I tried scraping the sticky mark with my thumbnail but it wouldn't budge. I considered applying water or nail polish remover but I was afraid that they might interfere with the necessary glue. Besides, there was no way of knowing what either liquid would do to the finish. I would have to leave it. It was too late to do anything more than regret my haste. As the sky lightened to dingy grey, I slouched back to the suite.

The next evening we set about installing our pieces in the gallery. I hammered three nails above the spot that Diane had assigned me, and then attached the wires extending from the head of my piece. After that, I tapped in two more nails. Around them I wound the wires that stretched from the knees. Then I moved away. I was sure the figure would sag and drop and shatter. Instead she hung motionless against the creamy wall.

Working carefully, I arranged a rosary around her neck. The beads were made of a girlish pink crystal and the crucifix fell so that it hung before the tangle of pubic hair. There was only one thing left to do. Just below the crotch and between the figure's substantial thighs, I pasted the title card. In tiny letters it read *Nice Girls Keep Their Legs Closed* and after that was my name.

Stepping back once more, I felt pleased. Except for the still visible fracture running down the repaired breast and the glue stain, the clay woman was all that I had imagined. Though she was little more than burnt earth joined together with metal sinews, I hoped she would be able to speak what I could not.

As I was cleaning up, Diane approached. Earlier in the day she had reprimanded me for botching the repair job and now I felt wary of her reaction. At the same time, what she might say mattered more to me than everyone else's opinions combined. Not only was she my teacher, but she had faced what I had. She couldn't fail to know my inspiration and all the feelings behind it. Diane studied my sculpture for what felt like an hour. She moved back and then walked from one side to the other, as if trying to gain a fresh perspective. As the moments crawled by, my chest tightened. Finally Diane spoke.

"It's *so* angry," she said. She shook her head. Then she looked at me. "Does it *have* to be so angry?"

What did *that* mean? Of course it was angry. Wasn't that ok? I felt so betrayed I could hardly speak. "Yes," I finally pushed out through clamped teeth.

"Well, if you're sure..."

"Yeah," I said. "I am." I turned away from her then and walked out of the gallery. As soon as I skirted the corner, I ran.

Everyone else was still busy installing their artwork, so I had the suite to myself. The tears came as soon as I stepped beneath the shower and I wailed as I huddled on the floor of the tub. Recalling Diane's words, I felt bereft. Was she really suggesting that I tone it down? And why? Besides, what was I supposed to do about it now that there

were just a few hours to go before the opening? After all the care I had put into crafting my piece, I had begun to doubt my instincts. It was terrifying to think that I might be about to make a fool of myself.

Sobbed hoarse, I got out of the shower, wiped the mirror clear and faced my reflection. The whites of my eyes were bloodshot, my lids were beginning to swell, and my nose was fat and flushed. I had long suspected that I was not one of those girls who look good in tears and the past months had proved me right. I splashed cold water into my eyes and, as I waited for the sting to subside, blew my nose. Looking into the mirror again, I knew there was little I could do to repair the damage.

As I scrambled through my dresser drawers and groped through the closet in search of something to wear, I imagined myself in a black t-shirt embroidered with a large scarlet A. It was too late to create anything like that, though. Instead, I chose a simple black dress with a wide skirt that hung to my ankles. I looked a bit like the Wicked Witch of the West.

After the gallery lights were adjusted, the refreshments arranged and the door thrown wide in welcome, we spent some awkward moments. Wandering from piece to piece, we pretended to admire each other's work. Angus had staged a scene in which a swarm of purple cockroaches hoisted a man's body through the door of a kitchen cupboard while Kate had created a Heaven's worth of frilly porcelain angels. She had attached them to loops of Christmas lights strung along the ceiling. I couldn't look at them without thinking that she had bastardized Angus's Twinkies and I was grateful to all

the other students who were exhibiting their work—at least I wouldn't have to stare at those stupid angels all night.

As we murmured encouraging remarks, I think we all secretly wondered if anyone else would show up. Soon, though, the gallery was thick with students and a number of professors. Parents who lived within driving distance, including mine, also appeared. I managed to get through all the introductions thanks to the preparatory champagne we had swilled back in the suite.

I had known for a while that my mother was planning to attend the reception but I was surprised to see my father follow her into the room. At the same time that his appearance put me on guard, I felt a bit sorry for him. Probably facing my sculpture wasn't the easiest thing for him to do. Especially when everyone else's work appeared neutral, sentimental, or even absurd. However, after standing in front of my piece, he managed a smile. That I no longer recall what he said about it suggests that his remark was inoffensive. I suspect he was trying to be Supportive, a task he undertook on occasion. It helped if you were very ill or otherwise damaged. Each time he played the role of the patient and understanding father, I found myself hoping that he had changed for good, but I had known him too long to believe my wish was realistic. It was just a matter of time before he reverted to his critical ways.

After surveying all the work in the gallery, my mother took me aside. Gesturing at Angus's display, she said, "Your piece is so powerful, especially compared with everything else in here."

"You like it?"

"Yes, I really do," she said. "It must have cost you a lot to make it." It was clear she didn't mean money. I nodded. Even though I knew that all mothers tend to lavish praise, deserved or not, upon their children, I welcomed her assessment. I hadn't been able to avoid noticing how Angus's work made people chuckle and Kate's set them cooing while mine almost invariably commanded silence and a swift retreat.

After the opening, my parents took me out for dinner. As my father drove along Shelburne Road, my mother continued comparing my work with everyone else's. Eventually, she turned to my father and said, "So, what did *you* think of Jessie's piece?"

While I waited to hear what he would say, I told myself that it didn't matter. At the same time, I wished that my mother hadn't solicited my father's opinion. It reminded me of a night the summer I was eight. We were returning from a play in which I had had a leading role and my mother was extolling my fine performance. She went on at some length and I realize now that she was offering my father ample opportunity to leap in and concur. He never did. Finally my mother had whispered to him, "You need to say *something* to Jessie." Her plea made my face go hot. I wanted to drop through the seat, hit the tarmac and die and that wish became more fervent when my father responded to my mother by pretending he hadn't heard her. As he gazed ahead, I watched a muscle rise and throb in his jaw. I knew then that he remained silent because there was nothing good to say. Much as I had enjoyed my mother's fine words, I had to face the fact that they were nothing but lies. The truth was that I was worthless. Worthless and guilty. I had made the mistake of drawing attention to myself.

Fifteen years later, I had done it again. I looked out the window as I listened for my father's reply. Finally, he deigned to speak. "It was...interesting," he said.

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When I wasn't extruding new clay from the pugger or wet vacuuming the pottery studio, one of my work-study tasks was proctoring the art gallery. It sounded fancy, but what it amounted to was sitting in the small square room and keeping a subtle eye on anyone who wandered in. Who knew what sort of trouble a disgruntled patron might start? There was even a phone in case I had to summon Security. Of course, that had never happened because in reality the gallery usually held about as much tension as a library. In fact, in spite of the subdued lighting, it was an excellent place to read and I always brought a book. It was a good thing I did, too, because as I proctored the pottery suite show, it was handy to have something to hide behind. Somehow I was unprepared for the challenge of listening to what people had to say about my clay woman:

“What on earth was the artist thinking?!”

“It's awful—just awful!”

“Whoever made that thing must really hate women.”

Every time I heard one of these assessments, I wanted to leap up and protest but I had to sit quiet as if I wasn't there.

One day, Paul, a guy I sort of knew from one of my classes, came in, said hello, and started browsing. After looking at my work, he stalked over to where I was sitting and demanded, “So what's that thing you made?”

“Umm...what do you mean?” Couldn't he see it was a sculpture?

He sighed. “Well, what's the *point* of it? What am I supposed to be *getting* out of it?”

His impatience made me nervous, but I said, "Well, it's about abortion. I was trying to illustrate how the fetus can suck the life-blood out of a woman and how religions often fail to offer her any compassion. How society crucifies..."

"Well," Paul interrupted, "*I'm Catholic.*" His voice rang as if he were declaring *Checkmate!* "And I'd be really curious to know what the difference is between abortion and infanticide." He crossed his arms. "Care to enlighten me?"

"Well, I think they're two different things. Besides..."

"How?" Paul leaned closer to me and I noticed a few white bubbles of saliva nesting in the corner of his mouth. "As far as I'm concerned, they're both murder. And anyone who has an abortion is no better than a murderer."

The urge to slap his smug face was keen but I pushed it down when three other students walked in. "Excuse me," I said, "but I have to greet those people." I forced them to listen to me talk until Paul gave up waiting for me to return, spun on his heel, and left.

I had hoped to create something provocative but now that my piece was drawing people's ire, I wondered if I had made a mistake. For days after our clash, Paul's words snarled through my head. Maybe he was right: maybe I *was* a murderer. But when I chose abortion, I had believed my motivations were good ones. After all, in trying to figure out what to do, it wasn't like I imagined myself as this great person with such an important life that I simply couldn't be *bothered* with a baby. Instead, I recognized that I couldn't hope to do a child justice. I simply wasn't ready. And I was alone. Still, maybe I should have tried harder. Perhaps the truth was that I was only a selfish person using art to try to excuse her repulsive behavior.

I filled the tub and stepped in. It was far too hot, but I forced myself to sit and then sink down until only my head remained dry. As my skin purpled, I wished I could slough it and the rest of my body off. Along with the responsibilities and expectations that accrued to it, I wanted to leave behind everything that marked me Woman. If only I could revert to the smooth innocence of early childhood. Or, barring that, retreat to the peaceful time before birth when I was nothing.

As the show neared the end of its run, Diane announced that our work would be critiqued by one of the ceramics professors who taught in the Art Department. "He'll tour the gallery on his own and then he'll meet with us as a class and speak about each person's piece."

"When?" I asked.

"Probably on the last day of the show."

It seems strange in retrospect, but I didn't feel too anxious about Diane's news. Of course, as with everything I did, I hoped my piece would make a good impression, but I guess I thought that a *real* artist's remarks would almost certainly be more positive than the comments of people who seemed to expect art to be pretty and passive.

When the appointed day rolled around we met Diane on the steps of Williams Hall and together our group tramped inside to meet Professor Prater. After taking us on a quick tour of the pottery facilities, he said, "Before we begin, I think it's important for you to know a bit about who I am and where my artistic sensibilities lie." Beginning with his years as an undergraduate, he recounted in detail his entire career up to that very moment. His rich, rolling voice threatened to lull me to sleep and I had to hide more than

one yawn behind my hand. Just as Prater reached the end of his reminiscences, he yanked down a white screen, turned out the lights, and showed us 43 slides of his work, all of which he commented upon. When he flicked the light switch back on, Angus caught my eye. His look said *What the hell?* I shrugged.

After that, the professor addressed each one of us in turn and assessed our work. When he got to me, he paused for a moment before saying, "Well, it's bold, I'll give you that. However, having said that, its boldness is its weakness. Because it's *too* bold. So much so that it risks parodying whatever it is you're trying to say."

My throat tightened. Fighting against it, I said, "But I thought art *could* be bold." I glanced at Diane but she began to inspect her fingernails.

Professor Prater arched his brows, probably because the other students had listened quietly to him. Then he went on. "Well, yes, that's true—as you say, art *can* be bold but with one caveat: the artist must know what she's doing. Quite frankly, you shouldn't be taking on something like this. It pains me to say it, but you simply haven't had the proper training."

As I tried to work out the logic of his words, the professor turned to Angus and began, "Whimsical, sir! A most enjoyable piece!"

After the critique ended, we walked back up the hill. Moving slowly, I trailed behind the rest of the group. I didn't want to have anything to do with talking. If I had to open my mouth, I knew I would cry and I wasn't about to allow that to happen. I thought I had already endured enough humiliation.

When we reached Living & Learning, Diane unlocked the gallery so we could begin dismantling the show. She wouldn't let us take our work down until she had photographed it, though. When she finally reached my piece, I said, "That's ok. I don't want a picture of it."

"Well, I do. And anyway, you may change your mind."

"I doubt it. But go ahead. Do what you want." I concentrated on cracking my knuckles.

"Look, Jessica, I know you're unhappy about what Professor Prater had to say, but being able to accept criticism is an important part of art."

"I don't know why you think I'm unhappy," I said, "because I'm fine. Perfectly fine." I wasn't going to make the mistake of confiding in Diane again.

When she finished and moved on to the next person, I set to work. Five swift yanks with the prong end of the hammer and the clay woman was down. Choosing a rectangular box from the pile in the corner, I crumpled a few sheets of newspaper and shoved them inside. I knelt over the figure. I thought I'd be able to keep the head and neck together but in order to fit everything into one box I saw that I'd have to dismember the rest of the body. Using a pair of needle nose pliers, I eased apart the wires that held the form together. I was careful to swath each part in newspaper before arranging it in the box. When that was done, I crumpled more newspaper and laid it on top, closed the cardboard flaps and secured them with brown packing tape. It was then that I remembered the title card. I peeled it off the wall and taped it to the top of the box, though I wasn't sure why I was bothering. It seemed pretty clear that no one would look at its contents again.

*

Reluctant to be reminded of my failure, I shoved the box under my bed. That didn't prevent me from thinking about its contents, though. Each night as I stared into the dark and waited for sleep, I pictured the clay woman lying beneath me, her limbs constricted, her eyes wide, her charred mouth astonished.

When school ended, I yanked out the box, packed it into the truck along with the rest of my belongings, and drove to the apartment where I would spend the summer. My room had a closet and the first thing I did was to slide the box inside it. When I hung up my dresses the hems fell across the cardboard like curtains masking an ugly view.

Over the itinerant course of the years, the box accompanied me and after each move I tucked it away again. I never opened it. If I had, I might have been tempted to extract the pieces, shatter them against a rock or beneath a hammer's hard eye, and feed them to the trash. But what difference would that have made? Clay is stubborn. Forged in flame, even fragments endure.

Now the clay woman waits in the basement of my father's house. The last time I visited, I slipped down there alone. Everyone else was asleep and the only sounds came from the furnace ticking and wheezing in the corner. I found the box beside a row of pickled beets so old they had turned black. As I lowered it from the shelf to the rough floor, the box seemed lighter than I remembered. Almost hollow. Crouching, I blew and brushed the thick dust from the surface before plunging the point of my small knife through the tape that bound it shut. Slicing through it, I lifted the flaps, pulled out wads of bunched paper and set them aside. An object concealed in dim newsprint confronted me. Propping it up with one arm, I pulled away the ashen wrappings. The face, her face,

regarded me, her expression still taut behind a dusky caul. The nascent monster was still fastened on the graceful neck. I knew how it ached.

I replaced the pieces and then laid the palms of my hands against my stomach. Tracing my fingertips across the skin, I felt something inflexible beneath. It was hot, like earth baked in the sun.

Critical Statement on Confinement: A Memoir of Abortion

As Kristin Luker describes it, in the early 1960s, “abortion...was like reproduction and menstruation—very real facts of life but not something to be discussed in polite company” (Luker 98). In 1961, the Society for Humane Abortion (SHA) set out to change this. Founded with the goal of repealing all abortion laws, SHA altered the perception of abortion in two ways. First, its members proclaimed women’s *right* to abortion, and, “by...leafleting, abortion teach-ins, and petitions they accomplished something both subtle and profound: they made the ‘unspeakable’ speakable and thus cleared the way for public dialogue about women’s rights to abortion” (Luker 96-7). With the help of SHA, women began to demand that politicians acknowledge and legislatively affirm their right to control their bodies.

Forty-four years later, activists regularly air their abortion views in public spaces including newspaper opinion pages, talk shows, and sidewalks in front of women’s health clinics. Yet, far from indicating an increasingly nuanced and sophisticated approach to abortion, the discussion seems to have devolved into a cacophonous repetition of polarized slogans: *It’s a child, not a choice!* v. *Keep your laws off my body!* and *Every child a wanted child!* v. *Abortion stops a beating heart!* While the subject is no longer taboo, subtle social codes police its expression. According to these codes, the conversation must remain anchored to the stark concepts of ‘Pro’ and ‘Con.’ Indeed, although abortion is currently legal in North America, outside of these parameters it remains, for the most part, ‘unspeakable’ and women comply by relating their personal experiences of abortion only rarely. Discussing the procedure is not only considered indecorous, but there is also a sense that revealing the truth of one’s abortion to any but

the closest companions might well place one at risk. Now that some activists have moved from shouldering placards to carrying a rifle or a can of gasoline and a lighter, and others have abandoned the sidewalk protest in favor of the vigil on the abortion provider's lawn, it is natural for women who have had abortions to wonder when they might be targeted for retaliation.

In the United States, silence around reproductive issues is increasingly becoming enshrined in public policy. For instance, William Saletan writes,

During their first year in power [in Congress], often with Clinton's acquiescence, the Republicans...barred federal employees' health insurance from covering abortions. They outlawed the use of American military hospitals for abortions on U.S. servicewomen and dependents of soldiers stationed abroad. They banned federal funding of abortions for federal prisoners (229).

Not content to insist upon silence, the anti-choice contingent is also hard at work filling in the gap that censorship inevitably leaves. As a result, President Bush refers again and again to the importance of creating a "culture of life" in America.¹ Additionally, one researcher has recently found that Ohio's federally funded abstinence-only 'educational' programs inform teens that "sexual activity outside of marriage can have damaging psychological effects" and that God has a "plan for purity" requiring abstinence until marriage. Moreover, the programs "do not include information on how to use a condom properly" and "[c]ontain inaccurate or misleading information about the transmission of STDs."² In another example of administrative gabble, Bush and his cohort renamed the dilation and extraction abortion procedure the "partial-birth abortion" and this move successfully generated panic, silenced dissent, attributed personhood to the fetus, and eroded women's rights. It didn't seem to matter that the Alan Guttmacher Institute found

¹ See Fletcher; Bush—President's Dinner; and Bush—Prayer Breakfast.

that of the 1.31 million abortions performed in the U. S. in 2000, a mere 0.17% of them were dilation and extraction procedures (Finer and Henshaw).

Memoir can function as a potent antidote to both troubling silence and obscuring noise. Obeying Audre Lorde's injunction, "you who hear tell the others" (101), memoirists who speak publicly of trauma draw attention to issues that have been muted. For example, in *Lucky*, Alice Sebold relates how a violent rape altered her life. Rape is hardly central to public discourse, but Sebold compels us to address it. Her story demonstrates why survivors of rape often feel further assaulted by the justice system. In *Don't: A Woman's Word*, Elly Danica testifies to the havoc wreaked in her own life by her father's relentless sexual abuse, a topic that many people would prefer not only to ignore but also to consider a fiction. Both Sebold and Danica show that society's reluctance to engage with the 'indelicate' topic of sexual violence is yet another form of punishment because it burdens survivors with the weight of unspeakable shame. Ultimately, the authors' direct, open speech challenges shame and inspires compassion.

My own memoir project is inextricably linked with those that precede it and I am indebted to the many women who have revealed the details of their lives in order to request justice for others in similar circumstances. The confessional surge springs in part from theory's recent autobiographical turn as evidenced in Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* and Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater." Regarding the intersection of autobiography and abortion in particular, Annie Ernaux has cleared a small space for discussion of the topic by writing *Happening*. The only book-length memoir of abortion, it details Ernaux's search for an abortionist in France in 1963-4, when abortion was

² See Ohio Abstinence Programs.

illegal, as well as her grueling experience of abortion itself. Ernaux writes that she is driven to end her pregnancy because

Somehow I felt there existed a connection between my social background and my present condition...neither my *baccalauréat* nor my B.A. in liberal arts had waived that inescapable fatality of the working class—the legacy of poverty—embodied by both the pregnant girl and the alcoholic...the thing growing inside me I saw as the stigma of social failure (24-5).

Ernaux fears that carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term will destroy her academic aspirations and trap her in the working class origins she is desperate to escape.

Additionally, I would like to move further back in time in order to suggest that *Confinement: A Memoir of Abortion* is also influenced by Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Owing to their gender, female slaves were subjected to relentless sexual exploitation and were "considered of no value, unless they continually increase[d] their owner's stock" (49). Jacobs is well acquainted with this particular sort of degradation because, as she notes, at every turn her master "tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images...I turned from him in disgust and hatred. But he was my master...He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things" (27).

When forced to confront the hard fact that the loss of her virginal 'purity' is inevitable, Jacobs decides to command a modicum of power by choosing which man she will share her body and create children with. However, though she receives some benefits as a result, Jacobs considers herself a 'fallen' woman and is burdened with shame. It is not until many years have passed and she has deliberated at length that Jacobs can bring herself to relate her "painful and humiliating" (56) story and even then her narrative is marked by pleas for readers' compassion. Still, she continues writing for

the sake of “the thousands...of Slave Mothers...still in bondage... [and] their helpless children” (Yellin xiii). Eventually, Jacobs decides that the benchmark of purity she sought to live up to was unreasonable given the reality of her circumstances. My own authorial resolve was strengthened by Jacobs’ commitment to aiding other women despite the considerable discomfort entailed in revealing her story, as well as by her ability to renegotiate her sense of self.

Jacobs’ struggle for self-determination resonates with women’s ongoing efforts to exercise control over their fertility, a question of reproductive rights that, in the 1870s, Elizabeth Cady Stanton called “self-sovereignty” (qtd. in Brodie 5). Simply put, without control over one’s body, one cannot hope to direct the course of one’s life. Yet Rachel Roth makes the point that

Reproductive control of women has taken many forms. On plantations, slave owners and overseers wielded tremendous power over female slaves and their families by raping women and deciding whether to sell off their children. In the nineteenth century, all states passed laws making abortion a crime. Around the [same] time...campaigns against “vice” successfully restricted women’s access to birth control devices and information that might have reduced the need for abortion. The eugenics movement succeeded in sterilizing masses of “unfit” persons, ranging from developmentally disabled persons to sexually promiscuous women. The legacy of sterilization abuse continued throughout the twentieth century, shifting primarily to African American, Native American, and Puerto Rican women...The stigma associated with out-of-wedlock births operated as an effective mandate for white women to relinquish their children in the years following World War II (22).

Deprived of bodily integrity, women have repeatedly been subject to manipulations designed to force them to comply with social expectations, an injustice that Margaret Atwood describes in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Atwood’s cautionary story of a woman reduced to the potential of her womb and subjugated, along with all other women, to a

misogynist theocracy is a chilling portrayal of the extremes to which reproductive control could be taken.

Judith Jarvis Thompson also describes reproductive bondage in her well-known scenario of the ailing violinist who must be plugged into “you...so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood...” (70). Thompson reasons that while it would be generous to allow the esteemed musician to remain connected to “you” for nine months or nine years or whatever length of time is required to restore him, it is not *incumbent* upon “you” to do so. Therefore, Thompson concludes that the decision to disconnect yourself from the violinist is an understandable and acceptable one (73).

Nonetheless, poll after poll reveals that approval for abortion is directly related to the number of people who might possibly ‘help’ a woman decide what to do about her problem pregnancy: “[W]hen people were asked whether abortion decisions should be left to the woman or the government, more and more respondents shifted toward the pro-choice position as the interviewer added more and more participants—families, doctors, clergy—to the woman’s team of decision makers” (Saletan 74). Clearly, many people are uncomfortable with affording women the power to decide whether an embryo or fetus will live or die. Regarding women as too mentally feeble and too morally suspect to be trusted to make their own decisions regarding their bodies and lives, patriarchy infantilizes women, just as it once did slaves.

Of course, one cannot discuss slavery and reproductive issues without referring to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. When Schoolteacher and his nephew discover Sethe in the shed with the bodies of her apparently dead children, the nephew wonders, “What she go and do that for? On account of a beating? Hell, he’d been beat a million times and he

was white...[b]ut no beating ever made him...I mean no way he could have...What she go and do that for?" (150). His puzzled reaction illustrates his inability to grasp the hopeless reality of Sethe's situation, the misery sanctioned by law and church that drives her to take "every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful...[and put them] where no one could hurt them" (163).

When Sethe tells her story to Paul D, he chastises her, saying "You got two feet, Sethe, not four..." (165). His response implies that she behaved like an animal instead of a human being and it echoes Schoolteacher's earlier suggestion that Sethe is not wholly human: "I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right" (193). From the early 17th-century, when the first black slaves arrived in Virginia, to at least 1863 when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, many Americans viewed slaves not as human but as objects, animals, and even monsters. The latter term is one that has also been hurled at women who seek to control their fertility. Forced by her shrink and her husband to bear a child, Elly Danica decides to leave her husband and son. Her sisters, she writes, "...do not understand...How can you leave that darling baby? What kind of monster are you?" It is not long before "I stop telling people I have a son. They are too quick with their judgment. Women call me monster, unnatural. No one offers support or understanding." She recognizes that there is "[n]o sense that I do the best I can. I know I can't support the child. Know that the hatred growing in me would destroy him. I don't want to destroy him...So I throw him clear before I am pulled under. And for that I am a selfish monster woman. Not brave. Not wise. A monster" (88). Danica's difficult decision to claim her life for herself and to protect her son from

the abuse she experienced as a child must be paid for in shame as society attempts to force her to resume the oftentimes self-erasing roles of mother and wife.

Interestingly, Danica's decision is not dissimilar from Sethe's. After listening to Sethe's tale, Paul D realizes that, "more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him" (164). Both Sethe and Danica overreach the limits their indifferent societies have imposed upon them. By complicating notions of 'motherhood' and 'love,' each woman's choice thwarts her respective society's expectations. But it is not just social mores at stake. Both Danica and, in particular, Sethe claim 'God's' powers for themselves. Sethe's attempt to kill her children in order to protect them from slavery is a decisive rejection of the passive 'role' she is expected to play and it renders her out of place to the extent that Schoolteacher pronounces her "wild" (149) and "lost" (150). Though Sethe's story is tangled up in slavery's convoluted knot, it shares a common thread with the stories of countless other women who seek self-determination and are accused (in overt or covert fashion) of meddling with God's putative design.

Like the texts by Sebold, Danica, Ernaux, Jacobs, Atwood and Morrison, *Confinement* challenges a social taboo by speaking openly about that which is allegedly 'unspeakable' because it is sexual. In the memoir I describe how I complied with what seems to be a societal expectation that women who choose abortion should feel guilty about it, yet also how I came to question the appropriateness of that expectation. By detailing the resentment and anger I experienced afterward—and the way I attempted to negotiate it through art—I seek to suggest that many people judge women without making the slightest effort to understand the particularities of their individual situations and that such response is inadequate to the complexities of women's lives.

In the anti-choice movement's efforts to prevent women from fully inhabiting their bodies and their lives, by attempting to limit their ability to control their destinies, it is as if the movement seeks to colonize women and their wombs. This is an instance of the "misknowing and being misknown" (Hames-Garcia 104) that Michael R. Hames-García terms "restriction," a phenomenon in which the myriad aspects of the self are whittled away until all that remains is the one with "the most political salience" (104). Restriction flattens one into unrecognizable form. Hames-Garcia notes,

In his discussion of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Satya Mohanty observes that Sethe does not defend infanticide; she widens the focus of the moral debate to include the relevant contexts of her action, and thus makes it more complex. Paul's growth is predicated on his coming to know Sethe's perspective, on learning to acknowledge both the partiality of his knowledge and the reason Sethe knows something that he does not about the world in which they both live" (61).

This bears upon the ways in which the anti-choice movement fails to take into consideration the context of the abortion-seeker. Without a sense of the circumstances that lead a woman to attempt to access abortion, whether she is alone or poor or a rape survivor or ill or unprepared to be a parent or has enough children or doesn't want children at all, it is too easy, for those so inclined, to promote a one-size-fits-all approach to the problem of unwanted pregnancy. As Mohanty reminds us, "humanity is...measured in terms of a moral personhood, a capacity for self-determination, which the institution of slavery denied the slave" (54). We now recognize that it is wrong to deny another's full personhood, yet some seek to regard women solely in terms of their reproductive potential. Portraying women in monolithic terms allows those who are so inclined to ignore the contexts of women's decisions and to deny women "moral personhood." While this approach demeans women, it also confines those who judge

them in such simplistic fashion to a rudimentary and inadequate ethics. If we seek to improve our social circumstances, surely it is more useful to us to acknowledge and explore the complexity of human existence than to shield ourselves behind empty rhetoric.

I feel that *Confinement: A Memoir of Abortion* is an important contribution to women's autobiography because it challenges the reader to recognize the intricacies of fertility and its attendant responsibilities, to acknowledge that birth control fails, and to question the myth that women who choose abortion do so glibly. It also interrogates the tendency of some people to value fetuses above women. Moreover, by refusing to remain silent, it 'talks back' to the shame that steadily erodes women's agency over their bodies and their lives. Finally, it suggests that childbearing is an undertaking that deserves careful contemplation.

In writing the memoir, I have referred to my journals, dreams, and recollections, as well as to conversations with my mother, husband, and friends. I have also relied on objects (a receipt, a photograph) related to my abortion and its aftermath. Though I have altered some details out of respect for other people's privacy, I have attempted to relate in honest fashion events in my own life and what I decided to do about them, as well as how I felt throughout the process.

This project grew out of my earnest desire to know why the issue of childbearing was so problematic for me and if/how I could resolve it. At the same time, the steady

emergence of an anti-choice, anti-woman, and anti-child theocracy in America, the land of my birth, galvanized me to speak openly about my abortion. Silence strikes me as a luxury I can no longer afford. I am encouraged in my endeavors by Annie Ernaux who writes of her own unwanted pregnancy and subsequent abortion, "these things happened to me so that I might recount them. Maybe the true purpose of my life is for my body, my sensations and my thoughts to become writing, in other words, something intelligible and universal, causing my existence to merge into the lives and heads of other people" (92).

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