



a novel

The
Unfinished
Child
Theresa Shea

When Marie MacPherson, a mother of two, finds herself unexpectedly pregnant at thirty-nine, she feels guilty. Her best friend, Elizabeth, has never been able to conceive, despite years of fertility treatments. Marie's dilemma is further complicated when she enters the world of genetic testing routinely offered to older mothers and is entirely unprepared for the decision that lies ahead. Intertwined throughout the novel is the story of Margaret, who gave birth to a daughter with Down syndrome in 1947, when such infants were defined as "unfinished" children. As the novel shifts back and forth through the decades, the lives of the three women merge in an unexpected conclusion.

"*The Unfinished Child* is a compelling, unflinching portrayal of the complexities of motherhood and family."

—Jacqueline Baker

"In *The Unfinished Child*, Theresa Shea trains her compassionate eye on the heartbreaking pressures and counter-pressures felt by a woman who has conceived a child with Down Syndrome. The novel is the debut of a gifted and sensitive writer, and one who has important things to say."

—Merna Summers

"*The Unfinished Child* is a heart wrenching and honest story. Shea's exploration of the lives of those affected by Down syndrome is unexpected, well-researched, and hopeful."

—Canadian Down Syndrome Society

"Theresa Shea tells an important story of womanhood, motherhood, and friendship. I read *The Unfinished Child* in a weekend and was sad to say goodbye to the characters after I put the book down; they left a deep imprint on my soul. I love it when a book affects me that way."

—Gail Williamson, Founder/Director of Down Syndrome in Arts & Media

The Unfinished Child

Theresa Shea



For my children, Dashiell, Sadie Rain, and Levi

There is nothing more truly artistic than to love people.

—Vincent Van Gogh

At five in the morning, Margaret felt her water break—as if a crystal had been shattered by a lone, high note. An invisible hand, or perhaps the unborn child’s deft heel, flicked a switch and the floodgate opened. As the warm liquid rushed from her body she moved as quickly as her lumbering figure would allow from her reclined position on the couch, where she’d been elevating her feet to relieve the swelling in her ankles, to a standing position beside it. It’s time, she thought calmly. Finally it’s time.

After carefully preparing for months, she was ready. An overnight bag sat packed beside her dresser in the bedroom where her husband, Donald, slept soundly. The nursery was equipped with all the necessities—a crib with a shiny white finish, an oak rocking chair with a padded cushion tied onto two of the back rungs, and a multicoloured mobile hanging from the ceiling above the crib.

In the bathroom she removed her wet underwear and cotton nightgown and rinsed them in the sink. Then she washed her thighs with a warm cloth, wondering when the contractions would begin.

Start a pot of soup, her mother’s voice echoed in her mind. That had been the only advice her mother had given her about labour. *Keep yourself busy. There’s no knowing how long it will take, and you might as well pass the time by being useful.* Farm women like her mother believed that leisure was as unnatural as a two-headed calf. Sleep was the time to do nothing, she used to say, and from the time her feet touched the wooden floor in the morning until the time they lifted off that floor at bedtime, her mother didn’t stop doing. Margaret watched her mother with a mixture of admiration and dread. The lines on her mother’s face stemmed from irritation and fatigue, not laughter. And her dark hair, tucked into a scarf, was constantly covered. She could have been pretty if she’d tried, or if she’d cared, but she’d spent her entire life keeping busy.

Keeping busy was the one trait her mother had tried to pass on to her only daughter. To follow in her footsteps would mean living a life without joy.

Garlic sizzled in the hot oil, an unusual sound and smell for the early morning hour. Margaret sliced into an onion and cut quickly before her eyes teared from the pungent fumes. The carrot skins curled against the peeler and dropped onto the cutting board.

She thought of her mother, already up and working at the farm, and recalled the time she’d threatened to cut Margaret’s hair off if she spent one more minute brushing it. She thought of her father, tight-lipped, dusty, and stoic. She thought of her brother, gamely hiding his affliction as he shyly put his arm around Ethel, the girl from the neighbouring farm. She thought of stones in her back. And she thought of Donald, her young husband, asleep still and not knowing that today was the day.

Thirty minutes later the first contraction tightened her belly into a shell as hard as a turtle’s. Then the heat came and she felt as if her torso were roasting over a flame. She held her breath and stared at the hard, moving swell of her belly, and she was both amazed and afraid. This was it. There was no turning back. No saying she’d changed her mind.

The stories about childbirth she’d heard her mother and women friends talk about in corners and kitchens, with astonishing and descriptive details, sprang vividly to mind. Babies lodged inside birth canals. Forceps puncturing infant eyeballs. Infections and depressions. Detailed descriptions of the sounds and smells of new life ripping its way into the world. Her own mother’s voice describing her

inability to have more children after Margaret. *My labour was so hard that my insides ruptured after Margaret came out*, sounding both proud and aggrieved at the same time. No, this was it; even if she couldn't endure the pain, the pain would happen anyway. The labour would come, and the labour would go. That's how time worked; both the things you dreaded most and the things you wanted desperately came and went. Margaret knew that by this time tomorrow she'd be a mother, and all the events leading up to her child's birth would be behind her. She put her hands below her bulging belly and rocked herself gently. "Let's go, little one," she whispered, adopting a joyful tone, trying it out. "I can't wait to meet you."

Outside the kitchen window the eastern sky glowed a soft pink. It would be another warm day, sunny with blue skies and the threat of an evening thunderstorm if the heat built up throughout the day. A great prairie storm with a dramatic display of lights and sound, and the brownish surface of the river quickly rising, carrying sticks and twigs that turned in slow circles and snagged on the concrete bases of the High Level Bridge that spanned the waterway.

Margaret reached for the wooden spoon and stirred the blackening onions and garlic in the pot. Then she opened a jar of tomatoes and gripped it tightly as her body contracted again and the tomatoes rushed from the jar's smooth mouth.

By the time they arrived at the Misericordia Hospital, her body was a third-degree burn desperate for cool comfort. Margaret bit her lip and felt hot tears slide down her cheek as Donald helped her to the admitting desk, where the nurse recognized her panic, quickly put her into a wheelchair, and found someone to take her to a room. She was wheeled past a small population of pain and injury in the waiting room. Metallic smells and guttural moans assailed her senses. Life and death were intricately connected here, linked by an orderly's mop, each pull a bleached path that connected hope and fear to a long history of human struggle.

This is what delirium must feel like, Margaret thought as her mind bounced from one image to the next in the small pain-free moments. A kindly nurse put an ice chip in Margaret's mouth, and she sucked the cold shaving with silent thanks in the pale green delivery room.

Then the injection came and she welcomed the oblivion that followed.

Twilight sleep, they called it, even though she wasn't asleep. But she no longer felt her body, so the pain was entirely gone. Sweet Jesus. A voice from far away issued instructions. *Push*. She tried to obey but wasn't sure if her numb body listened.

Four seasons could have passed before she finally heard a small whimper. Had she made that noise? Or was someone crying?

There were sounds all around her. Hands on her body. Was someone knocking at the door? Answer the door.

Slowly she became more aware of her surroundings. She was in a hospital, that much she remembered. How long had she been here? Was Donald still outside pacing? Had the child been born?

She felt a hand on her wrist and opened her eyes to see a dark-haired nurse taking her pulse.

"What time is it?" she whispered hoarsely, licking her parched lips.

The nurse smiled. "It's just after nine o'clock."

"At night?"

"Yes. We're done now. You did great. The doctor will be back again any minute."

She opened her eyes again to Dr. Morrison's deep voice. He had long, shaggy sideburns that almost reached his chin, and big hands.

Soup on the stove. Did she turn it off?

Darkness.

“Margaret?”

Someone was shaking her. She opened her eyes and a wave of dizziness almost made her vomit. Donald’s creased brow was before her; his eyes were wet and full. She smiled weakly as he squeezed her hand.

“The baby?”

“It’s a girl,” he said with relief. “We have a daughter.”

The world tilted; everything was different.

“Where is she? Have you seen her?”

He shook his head. “No, not yet.”

“I want to see her.”

“Okay. She’s in the nursery. They’re just having a look at her, cleaning her up. They’ll bring her in soon.”

Margaret tried to sit up. Everything hurt. There was a burning sensation between her legs, a throbbing heat from where she’d been sewn up. She groaned with embarrassment when she realized someone had shaved between her legs.

The umbilical cord that had attached her to her baby had been cut, replaced by an invisible cord that tightened as the minutes passed. Where was her baby?

“When did they take her away?” she asked. “How long has it been?”

Donald’s calm demeanour started to fade. “I’m not sure. The nurse came to get me just before I came in.”

“Go find her,” Margaret said. “Tell them I want to see her.”

The minutes ticked by on the big round face of the clock over the door to the hallway as Margaret waited for her baby, and with each passing minute her sense of dread deepened. Donald returned and said they’d be bringing the baby soon, but when Dr. Morrison finally entered the room, he was empty handed. Donald stood up and the two men shook hands, but there was something missing from their transaction. The doctor wasn’t smiling. The crow’s feet around his eyes were stark scars etched into tanned skin.

“You’ve delivered a baby girl,” he said, scratching his right sideburn thoughtfully. “But I’m sorry to tell you that she is a mongoloid.”

Margaret looked at her husband to see if he registered what the doctor had said. Donald was a city boy, born and raised. Unlike her, he’d never seen how nature can go horribly wrong. On the farm, she’d seen chickens hatched without feet. A calf born with its intestines spilling out of a hole in its side. A kitten with no eyeballs. Her father’s gun was always ready and loaded to dispense with nature’s accidents. Or sometimes he’d leave the gun and wring a neck with his strong, bare hands. But mongoloid? The word came as if spoken from a great distance through a thick fog.

“What does that mean?” she asked, repeating the word in her head as her brain began nonsensical to search out rhymes. *Mongoloid. Celluloid. Unemployed. Sigmund Freud.*

“It means your child will be sick a good deal and require special medical and nursing care, which cannot be given at home,” he said. Then Dr. Morrison switched to autopilot, delivering blow after blow until the bruises quietly blossomed beneath the surface of her flesh. She didn’t even remember delivering the child, and she had yet to lay eyes on it. She wasn’t squeamish; farm women were practical to the bone. It was city people who talked too much without taking any action. Margaret knew first-hand that schooling didn’t necessarily make a person smart. Or good. How could Margaret

make up her own mind about the child without seeing her? “I would advise you not to take the child home, or even see her, for that matter, as there’s no sense becoming attached. To do so would make it even more difficult when the time comes to place her in an institution. Besides,” he continued, glancing quickly at Donald, “the child will be difficult to feed, and you’ll need to think of the larger picture: she will require a lot of time and money.”

Dr. Morrison made eye contact with her husband again, and his tone took on a more paternal note. “You’re young,” he said, placing his hand on Margaret’s shoulder. “I’m assuming you’ll want to have more children, and this child will take time away from their normal development. Having a child who is so difficult will be a strain on your relationship with your husband and it will restrict your friendships.”

The fog was thickening now. Dr. Morrison’s face was hazy, his lips shone with saliva and moved in slow motion. Margaret locked her gaze onto his mouth, saw the once-white teeth now stained yellow from tobacco, and marvelled that his lips would not stop moving.

Should their daughter live, he continued, she would have the mental development of a three- to six-year-old. She would have no friends, never be allowed to go to school, never work, and would spend all her days at home with nothing to do. The humane thing was to put her in a place where she’d be housed with others who were just like her. Society’s rejects. The retards, mongoloids, and imbeciles. Those weren’t the doctor’s exact words, but they could have been. But didn’t Margaret herself feel like a reject most of her waking hours? A move to the city was almost like moving to another country. She didn’t speak the same language as the women she met. Around Donald’s family, with its comfortable money and polite conventions, she felt as if she had four arms, three legs, and stood ten feet tall. Maybe that’s the kind of girl child Dr. Morrison saw, one ill at ease in a foreign land, stunned by her removal from her mother’s warm body.

“The odds of you having another mongoloid child are slim,” he went on, patting her shoulder as if she could now look forward to her next delivery. Then he smiled and made some quip about lightning never striking twice in the same place.

“I want to see my baby,” she said.

Dr. Morrison’s face grew stern. “I don’t think . . .”

The invisible cord that tethered her to her child tightened. “I want to see her now.”

The doctor fixed his gaze on Donald and shook his head almost imperceptibly. Margaret cleared her throat and Donald met her eyes. Her heart constricted. He was just a boy, really, sweet-natured and kind, used to being taken by the hand and safely guided through his days. He’d never learned how to push against someone in authority. Make waves in a still pond. There was fear in his eyes, and as he reached out to take her hand, she could see him waver between asking her to lead him and taking the lead himself. How quickly his first test as a father had come, before he’d had any time to get used to the role, before he’d even set eyes on the being he’d helped bring into the world. Margaret found she was holding her breath. What kind of man was he going to be?

“We need to see her,” she said firmly. Donald nodded.

“I think you’re making a mistake,” Dr. Morrison said, “but if you must see her, please do so quickly. Believe me, it’s for your own good.”

The doctor left the room. Two minutes later a nurse arrived and placed the swaddled infant into Margaret’s arms.

Margaret felt the weight of the child sink into her chest. If only she could absorb this child back into her body and hold her safely there. The warm flannel blanket against her skin radiated heat like a late winter sun in a blue sky reflecting off newly fallen snow. She closed her eyes against the

brilliance and took a deep breath. Then, slowly, she peered down at her child, at the flawless skin on her baby's face, perfect as a newly ripened peach. Such relief. Her baby wasn't monstrous in the least. In fact, she didn't look that different at all. How could they possibly know she was a mongoloid?

The girl had thick, dark hair covering her scalp. Her chestnut eyes were slightly up-slanted, but they weren't dull in the least. A spark of life burnt within, just waiting to be fanned. Margaret's heart melted and broke at the same time. Was what Dr. Morrison said true? Was she to look at her baby with only the future in mind? Couldn't she mother her child in the present? Give her love and sustenance for just this day? Surely there was hope.

She continued to inspect her child. Maybe her nose was a bit flat, as if she didn't have a bridge, but maybe she just had a little nose that would fill out in time. Hadn't Margaret spent endless childhood hours pulling the tip of her nose down to stretch it from its blunt roundness into a more dignified and lengthy line, with little result other than developing a bad habit of pulling at her face all the time.

Margaret placed the baby onto the coarse bedding that covered her outstretched legs and unwrapped the blanket. "Look, Donald. She's not missing anything." Ten toes, two dimpled knees, ten fingers, two ears, a tiny cleft in her small chin. The dread was fading now. Margaret lifted her baby to cradle her against her chest, but the child's arms fell slack like a rag doll's and her neck rolled perilously toward her shoulder blades.

"Careful," the nurse cautioned kindly. "Her muscle development isn't what it should be. She needs extra support, like this," and she put Margaret's hands not just beneath the baby's neck to cradle her head but also at the base of her shoulders to keep her arms from flopping too low.

Margaret raised the baby to her chest and held her. Then she lowered her face, placed her nose at the baby's head, and breathed in the scent of her. She had never smelled a newborn before, but the infant smelled like she imagined a normal baby would smell—sweet, needy, and infinite.

Should their daughter live, the doctor had said. Did that mean she might die? Or was it a question he posed? *Should* she live? Was he asking if the small bundle of warmth in her arms should have a life? A small cry escaped from her throat. Oh, it was too much to take in. Yet this was her baby. This was the child she'd said she couldn't wait to meet, but now their meeting was all wrong. It was without joy. If Dr. Morrison had just given the baby to her without saying anything, she'd never have known something wasn't right. She'd have taken it home and let it sleep in its crib. She'd have nursed the baby in the rocking chair and watched the colourful mobile sway above the crib. Oh, why didn't he just let her love it and find out on her own?

The nurse returned with a bottle of formula and, once she had confirmed the doctor wasn't present, asked, "Did you want to try to feed her?"

Donald shifted nervously beside the bed. "Margaret . . ."

She waved away his fears, took the bottle, and placed it to her baby's lips. Milk dribbled down her daughter's cheek and filled the hollow of her ear. The baby sputtered and choked and began to cry even as her mouth opened for more fluid. Despite her efforts, Margaret couldn't quite direct the baby's mouth for proper suction to occur. She stared at her child, her little mongoloid, a defenceless infant who needed care. Extraordinary care, if what the doctor said was true. Extra-ordinary.

"It's not so bad," the nurse said softly, as if reading her mind. "I've seen far worse."

Margaret met the nurse's eyes. What was she trying to tell her?

Dr. Morrison returned to the room with a sheaf of papers in his hand. "Look these over," he said, handing them to Donald. Then he took the baby from Margaret's arms, handed her to the nurse, and nodded toward the door. "It's for the best," he repeated. "She'll get the special care she needs. Poplar Grove Provincial Training Centre. She'll be taken care of there. They even have a special ward just for

mongoloids.”

The door closed behind her baby.

The room emptied of life until just she and her husband remained.

The overhead lights shone like a spotlight onto the black type on the pages before her. A government-run institution for undesirables. All they had to do, according to the doctor, was sign at the bottom of the page and their troubles would disappear. Dr. Morrison said their baby would have the mental development of a three- to six-year-old, but people loved three- to six-year-olds, didn't they? Why hadn't he spoken about love?

Shame wrapped them in its dark cloak. “She's just a baby,” Margaret cried. “It's not her fault.”

Donald sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed her shoulder. Margaret took his hand and forced him to look at her. His eyes were wet and afraid, like a little boy who had hurt himself. In that small glance before he looked away, she saw his fear and his attempts to hide that fear so he could be strong, like a man should be. She saw his desire to take charge, to comfort and not need comforting himself, and as she witnessed his clumsy effort to shield her from his own fear, she loved him more and desperately hoped his decision would make him someone she could be proud of.

“It's not anybody's fault,” he said. “If the doctor says Poplar Grove is the right place for her, then we have to trust him. Those places must exist for a reason.”

“Did you see her? She was warm and sweet and—”

“Stop it, Margaret. I can't . . .” He stood up and walked to the dark window.

Margaret felt herself go cold. Did he think his mother might be outside in the parking lot, ready to tell him what to do? Was she standing by to heap more criticism on Margaret, in her muted way. *You tried, dear. Better luck next time. Don't use the dessert fork for the salad, dear.*

Donald looked so vulnerable that for a brief moment Margaret felt her heart constrict. He *had* chosen her; he'd stood up to his mother at least that one time.

Finally he turned and spoke. “I'm not a pioneer, Margaret,” he said so quietly that she strained to hear. “I'm sorry to say that I'm not that brave.”

She held out her hand. “Maybe we could learn to be brave together.”

He turned back to the window and didn't respond. Against the dark pane, his face was reflected back to her, but she was unable to read the variety of emotions that played across his face. Finally, she saw his back gradually straighten and she knew what he had decided.

Hours later, when Margaret finally stopped crying, she and her husband signed the papers, but first they named their child. Carolyn, after her mother's sister who died of tuberculosis at thirteen. Jane, after Margaret's childhood friend. Carolyn Jane Harrington.

Donald gathered up the papers and tapped them on the table to line them properly. The death of expectation, that's what this was. They'd expected to take a baby home, and now . . .

“We'll try again,” her husband said, wiping a tear from her cheek. Then he kissed her softly on the mouth and held her chin up to look into her eyes. “We'll be okay, won't we?”

Margaret smiled weakly and nodded, moving her hand to touch his unshaved cheek, gathering all her energy into that simple gesture to move them both forward.

It was worse than a funeral. Nine months of hope and a lifetime of regret. No ceremony, no finality. Her in-laws tried to be kind to her, but Margaret could read their true thoughts: if only their son had married someone from his own background . . . Sometimes Margaret caught her mother-in-law looking at her as if she wanted to wash her hands, as if Margaret was a piece of raw meat left out too long on the counter.

Nonetheless, her in-laws *did* try to be kind to her, for Donald's sake, and they repeated Dr. Morrison's words as if they'd written the script together. ~~She was doing the right thing. She was young. She would have more babies, healthy babies that would feed and laugh and not be sick. Babies that people wouldn't turn away from. Babies that would give her something in return for all her hard work.~~

Three days after Carolyn's birth, Margaret left the hospital empty-handed save for a set of strict instructions prohibiting her from visiting her baby for at least six months and the mantra *It's for your own good* firmly lodged in her brain. Her breasts pushed sorely into her thin blouse. Her milk had let down and left large, round stains in the silk. What dress-up game was she playing? What had she been thinking when she'd packed that blouse? She was nothing but a childless mother, left to fend for herself with an ear always cocked to an empty distance.

The sun scalded her pale skin. She and Donald returned home, and Margaret saved her tears for the long hours when her husband was at work. Nothing happened naturally anymore. She switched from taking baths to having showers because she couldn't stand to look at her bloated and changed body, the bruises still so close to the surface. Her feather duster stirred up unwanted images of her baby crying and alone. Better to have put it in a burlap sack and thrown it into the creek than to be left thinking of it unloved and untended. Faceless and unwanted. She dusted the images away. And when her husband reached for her in the night, tender and seeking mercy, she feared what the outcome might be.

On a bitterly cold January night in a northern city, Elizabeth drove west toward a restaurant where her friend Marie had made dinner reservations. Christmas lights still decorated the avenue and many of its storefronts in an attempt to change retail statistics. Elizabeth drove carefully on the now-rutted streets and finally pulled to a meter at the curb. All day she'd been fighting the feeling that she was moving underwater and something awful was about to happen. How absurd. There was no running or standing water in Edmonton at this time of year—the North Saskatchewan River was jammed thick with ice. But travelling on ice could produce a similar fear of drowning, for at any moment the ice, thin in spots from the moving current below, might give way and she'd fall right through, gasp at the excruciating chill of the water, and succumb sweetly to hypothermia just like that father of a boy she'd known in school who had fallen through his pond while using a tractor to clear the snow from the hockey rink he'd built for his kids. The whole class had gone to the funeral.

A cold blast of icy wind sucked the air from Elizabeth's lungs as she stepped from the car outside the restaurant. Move, she told herself as the fingers of winter slipped beneath her collar. Just move.

Inside the restaurant, a young, pierced waitress in cowboy boots led her to a booth at the back, far from the drafty door, and brought her biscuits with a green jalapeno jelly. Elizabeth ordered a margarita. She wanted to lick the salt rim and imagine herself at the beach, a hot sun overhead, and pull the heat deep into her bones.

Elizabeth watched the waitress, who looked as if she could step outside in her fashionably ripped leggings and not even feel the cold. Elizabeth was well past putting fashion before comfort. In this weather, she enjoyed her wool-lined boots and the silk long johns she wore beneath her jeans, and while she admired the fashion of youth, she definitely preferred her sensible attire that made its own fashion statement. She picked up the menu and instinctively scanned it for errors. Her father was an English professor, and every time they went to a restaurant he woefully pointed out typos and misplaced apostrophes.

Elizabeth was in her late thirties, of average height, thin and long-waisted. Women her age followed her with their eyes when she entered and exited a room, their gazes openly envious of her slim ankles, her muscular calves, her flat stomach, and her breasts, still high and firm. Nobody wanted to know that Elizabeth didn't have to work to have that body. She was simply built that way.

Marie appeared suddenly and plunked down on the leather banquette on the opposite side of the booth. She unwrapped the long black scarf around her neck and apologized for being late. "The roads are awful," she said. "Barry got stuck in traffic coming home, and I didn't want to leave the girls alone."

The girls, Nicole and Sophia, were twelve and ten and miniature versions of Marie, with their dark hair curled tight as springs. Elizabeth loved those girls and often wished they were her own.

Elizabeth noted that Marie had put on weight again; her cheekbones were no longer identifiable. In the thirty years she'd known her, Marie's weight had continuously shifted. It was easy to tell when she wasn't happy.

"What's new?" Marie asked.

"I'm happy to be on this side of Christmas," she said. "Business was great. I had record sales in December." She saw the yellow roses arranged in decorative vases in her display cabinet. The tropical

flowers sent direct from Hawaii. The spools of red and green velvet ribbons, and the sleigh-bells on each vase as an extra festive touch.

Marie nodded her head in agreement. "No matter how organized I am at Christmastime, it's still a lot of work to be in charge of all that holiday magic."

The noise level in the restaurant had increased. Elizabeth saw her friend's mouth moving but no longer listened to what she said.

Sometimes her joy in Marie's company was squashed by the weight of her longing.

"How's Ron?" Marie asked.

"He's good," Elizabeth answered, wincing inwardly. Once, when she'd said Ron was good, Marie had answered, *I know*. She'd meant it as a joke, but Elizabeth hadn't laughed.

"Don't look so guilty," Marie laughed. "It's water under the bridge. You guys were made for each other. It's not like I didn't try, right?"

Elizabeth had been in love exactly three times: at the ages of fourteen, seventeen, and twenty. Three times lucky, she had told Ron before she walked down the aisle in her pearl white dress with tight lace sleeves that showed off her lean arms, and before Marie walked down ahead of her, having finally forgiven her friend.

The waitress refilled their water glasses. Elizabeth drained her margarita. Marie ate fried chicken with potato hash. Obviously she was off her diet.

Marie talked about the girls' Christmas concert, their dance recital, their music accomplishments and the many other things her children were involved in. Her hands waved in the air as she illustrated each point she was making and exaggerated her own feelings of being overwhelmed.

"What did we do when we were kids?" Elizabeth finally asked.

"We climbed trees," Marie said. "I'm not sure what we did in the winter. Climbed cold trees."

They laughed and talked about their favourite poplar tree at the playground, the one with limbs perfectly spaced like rungs to the sky. "That tree was as good as having an older sister," Marie said. "We were privy to all kinds of information up there, weren't we?"

They reminisced about how they'd arrive quietly at the playground and, when no one was watching, quickly scale the poplar's branches. Invisible in the thick foliage, they listened to the mothers' conversations on the park bench below. They heard irritations with husbands, doubts about whether love would last, worries about offspring. There was no end to the private details about people's lives, details that ten-year-old girls didn't need to know. Mysterious bleedings. Infidelities. Sexual escapades. They learned that the principal at school was having an affair with one of the students' fathers; the police had arrived at Sammy Trainor's house because he'd been caught shoplifting again; Lorie Jones had three little children and had just been diagnosed with breast cancer; Jane Bosney was being held back a grade at school.

The girls breathed softly and listened. Sometimes they pantomimed great shock and held their sides to keep their laughter from bursting free. The bark of the old tree was rough against their bare legs, but they felt nothing, so great was their desire to hear the salacious tidbits of gossip.

One afternoon black clouds blew in over the High Level Bridge. They travelled at great speed. When they finally let loose, the poplar tree, the girls' portal to an adult world, was blasted by a bolt of lightning.

"We played in the ravine too," Marie said. "But kids today don't run free like they did when we were kids."

"You were always trying to ditch me," Elizabeth said.

"That's because you never had any ideas of what to do." Marie laughed. "Somebody had to think of

something. If I didn't run ahead, I wasn't sure that you'd follow."

Elizabeth smiled and let Marie continue.

"I do get overwhelmed at times with all the girls' activities, but they seem to enjoy them all, so . . ." Marie used her finger to wipe the final bit of whipped cream from her plate. "My weight's up again, in case you hadn't noticed."

Elizabeth nodded.

"It's hard to say no during the holidays," Marie continued. "And *some* people aren't as lucky as you."

Elizabeth was the same weight she'd been in university. But how lucky was she, really? Would Marie rather be thin and infertile?

"Barry got me a gym membership for Christmas," Marie said. "I tried to look pleased, but sheesh. That's not really a present, is it?"

They paid their bill and said their goodbyes. Elizabeth tightened the scarf around her neck and stepped into the bitter cold. Only clear skies could produce an arctic chill this severe. Clouds at least acted as an insulation.

She held her scarf over her nose to warm the air entering her lungs as she walked down the street, where restaurant windows remained garnished with mistletoe and painted snowflakes and wreaths with large red ribbons wrapped the glowing streetlamps.

Post-holiday blues. That's what she felt. And a growing irritation that Marie's unhappiness was limited to such an uncomplicated discontent with the numbers on her scale. Why did she let a five-pound weight gain measure her happiness? She reached her car, and the cold engine slowly turned over. Buckling her seat belt, Elizabeth checked her side mirror and waited for a break in traffic before pulling onto the avenue.

The new year stretched before her like an endless chore. She hadn't made any resolutions. She had given up trying to hope.

THREE

The cold front lowered itself over the city like a cloud fallen from the sky heavy with grief. There was a kind of beauty in the savage wildness of it. Unexposed skin was frostbitten in minutes. Church basements became emergency havens for the homeless when two youth were found dead on top of a sidewalk grate downtown. Children drew pictures on frosty windows with their fingernails as curlicues of ice fell from the glass. The birds wintering over fluffed their feathers, creating air pockets for extra insulation, and sheltered in the thick branches of hedges and spruce trees. Here and there abandoned snowmen decorated front yards, their fronts slowly yellowed by neighbourhood dogs.

“You don’t ever listen, do you?” Marie said, staring at her husband. “Are you just going to pretend this isn’t happening?”

Barry was reading a book in his recliner. A fire burned in the gas fireplace on the far wall of the family room, producing a welcome heat.

“I just can’t believe this,” Marie said from the couch. “I like our life. I don’t want it to change.” A whine had crept into her voice. She didn’t want to be pregnant. She felt a momentous fatigue and envied her daughters, asleep upstairs, their uncomplicated, pre-menstrual lives. At twelve and ten years old, Nicole and Sophia were at the height of their girlhood powers. Marie remembered when her own breasts had just begun to develop. She had inhabited her body with an unreserved ease until she had had her first unrequited crush on a boy. Then that ease had abruptly vanished and was followed by a painful self-consciousness that had coloured the next ten to twenty years.

Outside, the winter wind howled. The cold snap was in its fifth day, frozen in place like a tongue on a metal pole. The night before, she had taken the garbage out to the curb and had stepped on an orange peel that lay frozen on the ground. It had shattered like glass.

“Plus, I’m too old to have another baby.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Marie, you’re *not* old,” Barry said. He wasn’t really listening.

“I’m thirty-nine! I’ll be *forty* when the baby turns one!” she said. “I was *eighteen* when my mother turned forty, and I thought *she* was old.” Marie reached up and ran a hand through her hair, fanning it out to look for grey strands that she could pluck from her head to illustrate her point.

Barry sighed loudly to be heard over the wind and placed his open book in his lap. Then he shrugged his shoulders as if the abrupt movement would dislodge his irritation and make it slip to the ground. He didn’t appear the least bit interested in what she had to say.

“And the girls are getting so old,” she continued.

It was his dismissive tone that irritated her; the way he acted as if she was being unreasonable. He’d never been that way in the early years of their marriage. Or maybe she’d just hung on his every word then. Familiarity had brought a sourness to their relationship; it was as if Barry no longer felt the need to impress her. He had a wife. He had kids. The wondering about who he’d marry had been over for some time. Now he thought nothing of passing gas freely.

“You know damn well they’d love to have a baby in the house.”

Pins and needles began their stabbing exploration in her feet, and Marie carefully pulled her legs out from beneath her.

“And anyway,” Barry said, “some people are just starting at forty. So what if you have another baby now?” Barry turned back to his book, content to let his words be the last on the subject.

Why did every conversation become adversarial—him against her? He looked so smug in his recliner, his chin jutting out like a snowplow pushing his point home.

She shifted on the couch and felt the leather crinkle beneath her thighs as she studied her husband. He was committed to routine. Barry hadn't changed his hairstyle in all the years she'd known him. He used the same shampoo, the same deodorant, and wore the same brand of shoes. Every morning he ate two pieces of toast, a bowl of Raisin Bran, drank a cup of coffee and a glass of orange juice. And he was superstitious too. Once, in the early years of their marriage, Marie had surprised him by buying a different brand of cereal. On the way to work that day he'd had a flat tire. He was convinced it was because his routine had been broken.

"You know what I think?" he said, licking the middle finger of his right hand to turn a page. "I think you're feeling guilty."

Guilty? She sifted through her brain. "About what?"

"About being pregnant again."

The first hint of jowls were forming in the thickening skin around his jaw line. He still had a full head of dark hair, sprinkled liberally with grey, but his hairline had recently begun to recede. Grandpa. That's what some people might think if they saw him pushing a stroller. Isn't it great that you're a grandpa?

"Why would I feel guilty about being pregnant? Stupid, yes, but guilty?"

"Be-cause," Barry said, drawing the word out as if what he were about to say was obvious.

"Because Elizabeth's been trying for years and hasn't had any luck." He reached for his cup of tea and took a sip, almost triumphantly. "You get pregnant even when you're not trying."

A hot sensation started behind her belly button and gained heat and intensity as it rose to her brain.

"I can't believe you said that," she whispered.

He didn't reply.

How like him to start something and then back off, making it her problem. Marie took a sip of the tepid tea and tried to ignore his comment, tried to wipe it from her memory.

The wind continued to rage as the minutes passed and Marie built a case against her husband, stealing an occasional glance his way to see if he noticed. How effortlessly he moved from one minute to the next without dragging anything from the previous moment along with him. It would be enviable if she didn't find it so frustrating.

She picked up her book. *You get pregnant even when you're not trying.* Stop. Rewind. *You get pregnant even when you're not trying.* He made it sound like an intentional act, as if *he* had nothing to do with the process. And what right did he have to talk like this about her best friend? Was it bad luck that had kept Elizabeth from having a baby for all these years? And even if it was bad luck, didn't luck, good and bad, run out after a while? Three bad things were usually followed by three good things. If you believed that, then Elizabeth should have had some good luck by now. She should have had a baby. What did Barry know about guilt, anyway? He never second-guessed himself. He set a course of action and didn't deviate from his plan. So why was he seemingly calm about this new wrinkle in their lives? Had he even *thought* about it? Was it *fair* that Marie was pregnant again?

No, it wasn't fair, but she knew there was no such thing as capital-J justice. When she and Elizabeth had been in their early twenties, Elizabeth had often talked of how much fun they would have becoming parents together.

"I can see them now," Elizabeth had laughed. "Little girls with freckled faces who'll refuse to wear dresses and run around with bed-head." Her enthusiasm was infectious. It *would* be great. Their kids would grow up closer than sisters. And when Nicole was born, it seemed as if Marie was fulfilling a pre-ordained script, except that Elizabeth's pregnancy never followed. Twelve years had passed and Marie had had two children while Elizabeth had had none.

Back then, Elizabeth would flip her dark hair in a gesture of impatience. “We’re still trying,” she say. ~~Marie didn’t really want to think about them going hard at the sex, even though she was happy with Barry, because every now and then she couldn’t help but feel a slight stirring when she remembered how she and Ron had enjoyed each other in bed.~~

But as the years went by and Elizabeth “failed” to conceive, “trying” changed to mean they were making trips to the fertility clinic. “No luck yet,” Elizabeth always added.

Marie closed her novel, which was a simple tale of love and regret. She’d read two pages without taking in a word, while Barry remained engrossed in his book. Would he never notice her silence? If she stayed downstairs much longer, he would get to bed before she did. But that never happened, did it? She used his predictability to his advantage and always made it upstairs before he did.

She walked to the kitchen, rinsed her cup, and put it in the dishwasher. Upstairs, she quickly washed her face, applied cream with gentle upward strokes on the thinning skin around her eyes, and brushed her teeth. A few strands of grey hair stuck straight up like antennae from the part in the middle of her scalp. Grey hair and pregnancy. In Marie’s world, the two did not go hand in hand. Back in her bedroom she undressed, slipped her flannel nightgown over her head, and climbed into bed. Above her nightstand, the frost on the window reminded her of the puffy white mould that grew on food left in the fridge too long. Marie closed her eyes and tried to slow her heart. She imagined the mountain ash swaying in the icy blasts of wind outside her window and wondered how, in these frigid temperatures, the branches didn’t snap clean away from the trunk.

Finally, Barry quietly came upstairs. Marie regulated her breathing and pretended to be asleep. They had performed this scene so many times in their married life—she pretending to be asleep, and he pretending to believe she was sleeping. But maybe this time would be different. Maybe this time he would apologize for his remark and seek some kind of reconciliation. It wouldn’t take much, just a light touch on the small of her back, or a brief kiss on her cheek. Just a small acknowledgment that this pregnancy was not simply hers to deal with, nor was it a way to measure her life against her best friend’s. Why didn’t he ever just say that she was doing a good job, that she was a good mother? But when he emerged from the bathroom he slid slowly into bed, careful not to bounce the mattress. Then he turned over, his limbs contained to his side of the bed, and within minutes began to snore.

Sometimes loneliness was a physical pain that was worse than any cramp or contraction she’d ever had. She fought the urge to get up and steal quietly down to the kitchen to make herself something to eat, just to take the edge off the dreadful ache of feeling isolated from people who were supposed to love her. Barry might as well be sleeping alone.

Their conversation had settled nothing; they had talked around the baby as if it wasn’t there, but another baby had no place in her ordered life. It wasn’t only Barry who loved his routines. His love of order had rubbed off on her too. Over the years, she had become a careful list maker, the kind of person who didn’t wait for the ketchup to run out before buying another one. One look in her pantry confirmed the orderliness of her mind. She and Barry had life insurance, house insurance, car insurance, dental insurance, they even had disability insurance. Nothing would take them by surprise.

No, it wasn’t right at all. She felt as if someone had gotten a hold of one of her lists without asking and added just one word: *baby*.

In the morning, Marie awoke to find the bed beside her empty. She glanced at the clock and was surprised to see it was an hour later than her usual time to rise. The chill coming off the wall confirmed that the cold snap continued.

She could just make out the sound of her husband's voice downstairs, but the words were lost in the clinking of cutlery on dishes. ~~At the thought of food Marie's stomach heaved. She reached for the~~ box of saltine crackers on her bedside table and slipped one from its crinkly sleeve. The coarse salt crystals dissolved instantly on her tongue, and soon her mouth was moist enough that she could even lick her chapped lips.

Laughter filtered up from downstairs, and she smiled as she pictured Sophia telling her older sister a joke. Or maybe the two girls were laughing as they tried to get their dad to solve a riddle.

She reached for another cracker and nibbled tiny bites, beginning with the corners and then working her way around the edges to form a neat and uniform circle. Crumbs spilled onto her chest and settled in the bony hollow between her breasts. She stared at the dried bits of cracker for a moment, and then at the stretch marks on her breasts, silver minnows that mapped the terrain of breastfeeding.

Her nipples were sore. Her breasts were tender to touch and felt heavy and fibrous. The obvious signs of pregnancy that she had once so eagerly courted she had recently tried to ignore.

More crumbs settled between her breasts. When her kids were small she had lived for years with crumbs and sand in the bed and the feeling that she would never again have clean sheets. Once, when Nicole was three and Sophia had just celebrated her first birthday, Elizabeth had dropped by after work. The house looked as if a bomb had gone off inside of a toy store. Dolls and stuffed animals and small plastic knick-knacks were strewn all over the floor, mixed up with the pots and pans that had been dragged from the kitchen cupboards. Marie felt the sting of inadequacy that had shadowed her since having children. Normally she kept a clean house. Even when Marie was a child, her mother had never had to tell her to clean her room. She knew it was useless to expect any kind of order when the kids were so young, but she couldn't stop caring about the mess. She tried to laugh it off, but she was exhausted. Her sleep-deprived eyes burned when she closed them tight. Her shoulder-length hair no longer had any shape or lustre. Her waist had yet to reappear from the pregnancies. Her skin felt dry, her breasts overused. Just the day before she had discovered that her nipples no longer pointed straight ahead as they once had. Now they drooped downward as if looking for lost coins. How sad. Her breasts had been lovely once.

In contrast, Elizabeth looked neat and crisp in her summer pantsuit and sandals. Elizabeth's dark hair had recently been streaked with golden highlights. Her toenails were freshly painted, her clothes weren't stained, and her breasts weren't leaking. Everything about her was proper and trim. When she stood up, her hips were high, narrow, and compact. She had the most shapely arms too, firm and muscular. When Marie raised her arms to point at something, she could feel the skin beneath her arms swinging from the bone. Batwings, someone had called them, and she'd hated that term with a passion. No, sleep-deprivation hadn't aged Elizabeth. She looked ready for anything. Marie looked forward to the possibility of an afternoon nap.

Sophia moved from Elizabeth's lap and flung herself at the box of crayons on the floor next to the table. Marie saw a look of longing cross her friend's face. Look at me! she wanted to shout. I haven't had a good night's sleep in three years, and I haven't showered in three days. I can't even remember I brushed my teeth this morning. I'm not doing this well!

Just then, Elizabeth confided, "We're off to the clinic after this. Round one."

"Really? That's great." At least she thought it was. Was it?

"We've been waiting for over a year," she'd said. "Apparently Ron and I aren't the only ones having trouble populating the planet."

Marie had crossed her fingers and held them up for luck. She wracked her brain for something

encouraging. “Good luck,” she finally said. “Let me know how it goes.”

~~The doorbell rang. “That’ll be Ron,” Elizabeth said, standing. “He dropped me off.”~~

Before Marie knew it, Ron was inside her house, saying hi to the girls and kissing her cheek in a chaste greeting. She felt grubby and overweight under his gaze. If she’d known he was coming she would have showered and made an effort to look good. Marie wanted to cry for the lost opportunity and for the way Ron looked at Elizabeth with a mixture of passion and pride. Almost immediately he had his arm around her, as if he’d been off balance without her by his side.

Marie smiled ruefully at her younger, vainer self. She’d spent so much time wanting to tidy not just herself, but her house as well. And now her girls were well past the stage of crawling into her bed day or night, trailing the playground and their last snack along with them. She’d gotten used to having clean sheets; was it wrong to be happy those days were gone? To not want to repeat them?

Barry was right—she did feel guilty. Why else wouldn’t she have told Elizabeth at dinner the previous week that she’d missed her period? Those were conversations you had with your best friend. Instead, Marie had circled the baby and ordered dessert instead. She’d even licked the plate clean. If she’d been alone, she might have ordered another slice. It would be Elizabeth’s fault if her weight went up again.

Or the baby’s.

She did the math again. A late summer baby meant she’d be heavy and hot through July and August. She’d gain at least fifty pounds. Her ankles would swell. Sweat would bloom beneath her heavy breasts that would flagrantly flop onto her damp stomach. She’d been through two pregnancies; she knew exactly what to expect, and much of it wasn’t in the least bit attractive.

Another cracker slowly softened on her tongue. Nicole would soon be thirteen; how embarrassing to have a pregnant mother. It was hard enough going through puberty; did Nicole need living proof of what lay ahead? A daily reminder that her parents were still *doing* it? Likely she would want a different mother. A slim mother. One who didn’t so visibly flaunt her sexuality. Not a mother who lumbered about, swollen and sporting damp odours and fatigue. Marie could well remember her own thoughts about her mother when she was Nicole’s age. How disgusted she’d been to know she’d come out from the small, dark space between her mother’s legs.

Yet at times she’d also secretly admired her mother, who sometimes sang at the kitchen sink and who waited in the foyer to take her husband’s coat and kiss his cheek when he returned home from work. There were sensuous secrets about her, and, for a time, she’d made becoming a woman attractive.

Now Elizabeth would fulfill that role for her girls. She’d stand straight and thin beside Marie’s bulbousness. And who would be envious then? There had definitely been times when she’d envied the freedom of Elizabeth’s childless life.

Marie pulled her knees to her chest beneath the duvet. No, it wasn’t guilt she’d felt in those early days of mothering, it was envy. Still, she wouldn’t trade her kids for anything.

Outside, the neighbours’ dog barked. Winter had submerged the city into a prolonged darkness. It would be almost another hour before daylight. She surveyed the room. The sheets needed washing, the carpet vacuuming, and the dresser dusting. The girls needed new pants and more socks. Nicole’s wrists were sticking out of the sleeves of her winter jacket. The fridge was almost empty. The kitchen floor needed to be scrubbed. The neighbours’ dog howled to be let in. Tiny caps of snow fell from the red berries on the mountain ash outside of her window.

Marie closed her eyes. There was too much to do. Too many people depended upon her.

Downstairs at last, she kissed her girls and placed a hand on Barry's head, a conciliatory gesture that wiped clean the silence of the previous evening.

"Guess what?" the girls said in unison. "There's no school today!"

Marie looked at her husband. "Didn't you hear the phone ring?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"The school called after seven o'clock."

"A pipe broke," Nicole said.

Barry nodded toward the counter. "Coffee's on."

Marie raised a hand to her mouth. "I can't stomach it."

She ducked her head into the fridge and started making a grocery list. "I've got to nip to the store," she said. "I invited Elizabeth for lunch today."

"Oh yeah? What for?"

"The sooner I tell her, the better."

"Tell her what?" Nicole piped up.

"I wasn't talking to you, Miss Big Ears," Marie said, ruffling her daughter's hair.

The telephone rang as she kissed Barry goodbye. She ran back into the kitchen.

It was her sister, Frances.

Marie inwardly rolled her eyes and glanced at the clock. Frances was a lot of work. She did all the talking and Marie listened. Yes, her sister was exhausted. Yes, the baby had kept her up all night. Yes, she could understand why Frances wasn't taking Max out today, not in this deep freeze. Marie made all the right conciliatory sounds and agreed with everything Frances said. It was quicker that way.

"I can't drop by today," she finally said to her sister's invitation. "Elizabeth is coming for lunch."

"What's the occasion?" Frances asked.

"Why does everyone think there needs to be an occasion to see a friend? I just have some news to tell her, okay?"

"Okay, okay. Relax. What news?"

Marie juggled her options. "Promise you won't tell Mom?"

"Oh yeah, like Mom's the first person I go to," she said.

"I'm pregnant."

"Good one."

"No, I am."

"I thought you and Barry were done having kids."

She grimaced. It was like the grand inquisition with Frances, and Marie didn't feel like defending herself. "Yeah, well, so did I."

"So you forgot birth control, or what?"

"For God's sake, Frances. Do you think that's helpful?"

"Sorry. I'm just surprised is all; I was caught off guard."

"Well, you and me both," Marie said.

"So you're going to tell Elizabeth?"

"Yeah, I want to tell her before she guesses."

"Do you think she'll take it okay?" Frances asked.

"I'll find out," Marie said. "Look, I've got to get to the grocery store. We'll get together soon, okay? The girls would love to see Max."

She dressed quickly and herded the girls into the van. The garage door opened automatically behind her. Marie imagined Elizabeth's mouth, opened wide with joy, opened wide with anguish. Her

stomach twisted tight with anxiety. She put the van in reverse and drove slowly down the icy street to the four-way stop at the corner.

FOUR

Across town in an old wartime bungalow with a rooftop covered in snow, Elizabeth stepped into the shower and slowly turned from side to side to allow the hot water to erase all of her goosebumps. Standing fully beneath the shower head, she felt the water make its own course through her hair, over her face, along the slow curve of her waist, and down the full length of her body until it reached the drain. Gradually the chill left her bones, and when the water's heat began to fade, she turned off the tap and stepped out into the steamy room, drying herself quickly before the chill returned, avoiding the full-length mirror that would reflect the uselessness of her body.

As a young girl, she had been obsessed with horses. She read every horse book she could find, collected horse statues, and took weekly lessons at a local stable. Her favourite riding horse was a one-eyed palomino named 10-10 (who'd lost an eye as a yearling due to an unfortunate run-in with a tree branch), and every Saturday morning she made sure to arrive early enough to claim him for the day. She wasn't bothered that in all of his gaits he moved with his neck slightly at an angle to adjust for his lack of vision because she loved all things wounded and their various imperfections. In grade school she'd envied a girl who broke her leg and had to hobble about on crutches. And she coveted the neighbour boy's large husky that had lost a leg in a car accident. Aptly named Tripod, the dog was easy to manage on a leash because of its affliction.

Despite her kindness to flawed things, she couldn't accept imperfection in herself. When she was twelve, she started to believe there was a hidden flaw in her: she hadn't been perfect at birth. That must explain why her mother had walked away as soon as the umbilical cord was cut. *Snip snip*—free at last! Her adoptive parents were wonderful, and she loved them, but deep in her cells she craved a unique heartbeat, a familiar voice, the rhythms and vibrations of the woman who'd provided her first real home.

By the time she was a young adult, she understood better that women made hard decisions sometimes. Like Sandy, a girl who often showed up at the church dances. When Sandy got pregnant at sixteen, Elizabeth was as surprised as everybody else. Sandy was just an ordinary girl, not too bright, not too pretty. Then she disappeared for a while, and the following year at school, she didn't have a baby. Nobody referred to the incident, at least not to her face; only the Grade 12 boys snickered when she walked by. Elizabeth almost told Sandy that she'd been adopted, to reassure her that her baby would be okay. But she didn't because she knew there was another baby out there now who one day might hunger for its real mother. Plus, what Elizabeth really wanted to ask was if Sandy regretted letting that little bit of herself slip away. And she was afraid Sandy might say no.

Then Ron came along—funny, optimistic Ron—and he made her laugh at her superhuman attempt to be perfect.

Elizabeth had first met him at a party, which would have been nice if he hadn't been Marie's new boyfriend at the time.

The French expression is *le coup de foudre*—a bolt of lightning, an act of God—which translates in English to love at first sight. And it felt like that, a sudden and searing heat. Elizabeth held his gaze a fraction longer than necessary and then backed away, embarrassed. Ron had immediately put his arm around Marie for balance. All night Elizabeth couldn't help staring at him when she thought he wasn't looking. But on more than one occasion their eyes locked.

And then the telephone calls and Marie's sobbing voice on the other end trying to describe the breakup. "I don't know what happened."

Months later, Elizabeth's phone rang. It was Ron. Was she seeing anyone? If not, would she like to have dinner?

If only he hadn't gone out with Marie! She'd thought about him often and remembered that heady feeling when her eyes had locked with his. She'd never been so instantly attracted to a man before. Ron knew that it was awkward, he said as much on the phone, but he also said he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her. Could they go out just once? He convinced her that it was possible they'd both imagined the attraction. Yes—she'd see him once, let him down easy, and Marie would never have to know. But when he drove her home after dinner he'd parked around the corner from her house because she was still living at home then, and she'd stayed in his car for hours until they couldn't see out of the windows because of the steam before she stumbled home, thick-lipped and weak with desire. It took her weeks to have the necessary conversation with Marie. And it took weeks again for Marie to get over the idea that Elizabeth had stolen her boyfriend. When she finally did forgive Elizabeth, it was with the unspoken belief that Elizabeth had overstepped some line of friendship and was lucky to have Marie's forgiveness.

Elizabeth squeezed the excess water from her hair with a towel and tried to remember the last time Ron had made her laugh. Their dreams hadn't quite come true. Only after they'd married had her greatest flaw revealed itself—an inability to bear children. You didn't get to use crutches for that, and there was no special infertility sign that she could hang from her rear-view mirror to explain why her backseat wasn't filled with crumbs and government-approved baby seats.

In the bedroom, a feeble light pressed against the white sheers on the south window facing the backyard. It was a deceptive winter light, almost bluish, as if it had succeeded at the ultimate challenge of freezing itself. It could be eight o'clock in the morning, or it could be noon.

Elizabeth pulled on her silk long johns and blue jeans before finding a turtleneck and sweater. She'd told her staff at the flower shop not to expect her this morning. Business was always slow in the period after Christmas and before Valentine's Day, and even more so when customers worried about their flowers freezing before they could get them safely to their cars and then home. It was a good time to take a little break.

In the kitchen she saw the remains of yesterday's coffee in the pot and realized Ron hadn't made himself a fresh cup before going to work. He always said her coffee tasted so much better.

She ground some coffee and put on a fresh pot before heading to the bathroom to dry her hair. Bloodshot and swollen eyes stared back at her from the mirror. The small pocket of skin beneath her eyes was puffy and criss-crossed with spidery lines. She pursed her mouth in concern and then stared at the pleats that circled her lips. How quickly aging crept up on a body. At least the copper streaks in her hair made her complexion not so pale. She mixed some foundation and moisturizer in the palm of her hand and smoothed the lotion into her face with gentle strokes. She didn't feel like wearing her contacts, so she placed dark-rimmed glasses on the bridge of her nose, hoping they would conceal some of the puffiness around her eyes. Finally, she tucked her shoulder-length hair behind her ears and stretched to her full height. Ron still found her to be beautiful, or at least he said so from time to time, but she suspected he tried to bolster her self-image by paying her compliments to offset the years of negative self-image she'd suffered through with all the side effects of fertility drugs.

When she was thirty-one, and they'd been trying to get pregnant for five years already, she'd finally called the fertility clinic to set up an appointment. From the start, Ron said he'd follow her lead, but he also let her know he was already happy, without kids. He loved the life they already had; he wasn't looking ahead to the future one with kids that he didn't know. "I'm a teacher," he'd reminded

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