

NOTHING
RIGHT

Short Stories

ANTONYA NELSON

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NOTHING RIGHT

NEVER SHAKE A BABY,” the flyer insisted, “Never, never, never.” The public service brochures displayed at the district attorney’s office seemed to be speaking to Hannah, each pertinent and personal. The face on “Break the cycle of domestic violence” was one big yellow-blue bruise. “Substance abuse abuses us all,” another insisted, a martini glass with a slash through it. The illustration was so highly detailed as to include a toothpick-speared olive.

Her fifteen-year-old son had demanded that Hannah wait rather than join him and his probation officer. Down the hall, a door banged open, a courtroom released. A young man in an orange jumpsuit emerged between two older, somber men, trailed by weeping women. His lawyers, his guards, his mother, sister, girlfriend. Like the brochures, this scene also seemed a warning; Hannah had passed from one kind of life into another. A small boy brought up the rear of the procession, one hand hitching his pants, one swiping at his running nose. Hannah felt close to bursting into tears. Ten years from now, that little boy would be wearing the jumpsuit, leading the pack.

Her own son seemed poised somewhere between these two, teetering.

“Ma,” he brayed, suddenly beside her, nudging to indicate that his appointment had ended, they were free to go. Still free, Hannah thought, and her mood lifted.

“You take us to the most interesting places,” she said as they exited the courthouse. This had been the third required monthly meeting since he’d made a bomb threat at school. Beside her, passing through the metal detectors, Leo pulled in a savoring breath. “*Good* times,” he murmured. He’d been to jail, he’d worn handcuffs. He had a psychologist, a lawyer, and a probation officer; this current round of meetings was part of something called “diversion,” and maybe it *was* sort of amusing. Leo’s delinquency had to become *something* else, Hannah supposed, having already been terrifying, divisive, pricey, and heartbreaking.

He was her second son, and he’d never been the one she understood best. Recently, she’d found herself disgusted by him: she didn’t want to share a bathroom or kitchen, bar soap or utensils with her own boy. His brother, who’d passed through adolescence sobbing instead of shouting, had not prepared her for Leo. The pure ugliness of a more traditional male’s transformation to manhood—the inflamed skin and foul odor, the black scowl, the malice in every move—might eventually convince a parent to despair, to say to that child, “You are dead to me.” Because it would be easier—more decorous, acceptable—to mourn the loss than to keep waging a hopeless battle.

Their next stop was Wichita Central High School.

“Leo’s mother,” the PE coach greeted her. He was precisely as billed: soldierlike, down to the bullet-shaped shaved head and stiff-armed formality. “G.I. Joe,” her son called him. In his first-period class, Leo had recently pierced his own lip

with a safety pin. In the divot beneath his nose, a pulsing bump he'd tried to pass off as a bug bite and then a pimple. Finally he'd just shown up at breakfast with the pin hanging there, clicking against his cereal spoon. A parent was required to come pay penance, help reclaim the old gymnasium. The smell alone could have brought back adolescence—sweat, fried food, patchouli—but this was also the high school Hannah had attended. Back then, this had been Central's only gym. In the years since, groups would intermittently creak open the metal doors and throw a party or host a science fair. The drama club had contributed a couple of sofas. Windows, metal-barred and streaked with pigeon droppings, let through a gloomy cold light; voices echoed. Hannah had played basketball here, once upon a time. More recently, her first son had acted in plays on the very stage that, today, G.I. Joe would lead the group in dismantling.

"Leo's mother, meet Dylan's father." Several fathers, Reagan's, Meagan's, Dusty's, and Jordan's; a roomful of uncomfortable men, glancing around with their hands jammed in their pockets, awaiting instruction. Hannah couldn't help prescribing makeovers for everyone. First, twenty pounds off each, that defeated weight of middle age, of parenthood. Next: therapy and SSRIs, all around. Hannah knew that whatever she saw as deficits in these people, they themselves recognized. They, too, wished not to seem sad and skittish. They wished they were trim and brave and confident. They wished they were young—not as young as their offspring, these children, clustered and glowering fifty paces away, also in the proverbial doghouse—but younger than their forty or fifty years. They knew their best years had passed, that they'd been sapped of something vital, and now could only make futile guesses at how to get it back.

The group had been told to dress “grubby,” bring tools, and, now, to “buddy up.” Hannah watched her son pair himself with a big slow-moving girl. This was the daughter of a dad making his way toward her, a man who’d covered his bland sameness with a vivid orange Hawaiian shirt. His long wavy white hair and bright craggy face suggested decades of overindulgence, specific decades, the seventies and eighties.

“I’m Chuck,” he said to Hannah, thrusting out his hand, “and that’s my girl Niffer.”

“Leo’s mom.” They shook vigorously. He smiled quizzically, and Hannah smiled back. Perhaps they were both wondering the same thing: why their children had chosen one another. They glanced in unison that direction. Niffer was larger than Leo—taller, meatier—with soot-black hair pulled into a dozen little pigtails. She stood sullenly while Leo twitched alongside, talking at her eagerly, as if to sell her something.

“Finally, I meet the boyfriend’s family.”

“*Boyfriend?*” Hannah repeated. To her knowledge, her son had never been accused of this before.

“Leo. The boyfriend. I had to nail shut Niffer’s window to make him come in the front door. ‘Stop your sneaky ways, son,’ I told him. Frankly, I’m more worried about mosquitoes and West Nile than finding a boy in her bed.”

Hannah sighed, her heart heavy with Leo’s persistent deception, its busy proliferation. She took in Niffer once more, the faintly domineering power the girl seemed to have over her son, as if she might stretch out a paw and cuff him. “How old is she?” Hannah asked.

“Eighteen. Nineteen next month. This is her fifth year of high school.” The parents appraised one another, still quizzical but without the smiles, trying to guess the trustworthiness of their children.

“You a doctor?”

“No, no.” Hannah looked down at her green scrubs, which had been the required outfit of her former job. “I worked at a doctor’s office.”

“Well, you’re not a doctor and I’m not Jimmy Buffett.” He laughed abruptly, like a dog. “Not anymore, anyway. And I’m betting that fellow is not Abe Lincoln.” An Amish father stood rocking on his heels, looking serenely about, his sons like sentries on either side of him. What bad deed had those boys done? Now Niffer’s dad noticed Hannah’s hand, from which she had removed her wedding ring. He didn’t wear one, either, and for whatever reason, the absence made a difference. You didn’t notice until you took it off.

For a couple of hours that afternoon the two of them hauled trash from the gym while others, those who’d brought sledges and crowbars, performed the more violent labor—enthusiastically, like cavemen. Despite the chilly October air, Chuck wore flip-flops. Hannah liked his casual use of profanity, as it made him seem not young, exactly, but immature, and therefore less likely to judge her. Having grown up in Kansas, she should have been accustomed to judgment, inured to the pity and superiority her neighbors felt toward someone like herself, with her foreign vehicle and secular Sundays, and yet it still hurt her feelings. Her neighbors would change her in ways she wouldn’t want to change herself, she supposed, reconsidering her earlier notion of a mutually agreed upon ideal. They would send her to pantyhose and pumps, hair spray, Episcopal fellowship, potluck dinners, blood drives.

“Do you donate blood?” she asked Chuck, trying to balance her loathing of small talk against her tendency to appear bored or annoyed by others.

“Nah,” he said. “I’m a nancypants around the needle. You?”

“Never.”

When his cell phone rang, he cursed reflexively. “Fucking cow.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ex-wife.” This opened the subject of divorce, his of twelve years, Hannah’s of four months. They discovered they’d been married the same summer twenty years ago, which led Hannah to speculate that if he’d stayed in the marriage, as she had, he probably wouldn’t be as bitter about the split.

“Yeah-huh,” he said skeptically.

“You could pretend that’s what happened,” Hannah suggested. But his wife had found a new love and life immediately, spawning a crop of younger, cuter children, Niffer’s half brothers she never saw; Chuck helped at high school whenever he could because his wife had simply abandoned their now-aging teenage daughter.

“No way can I forget or forgive what that bitch has done to Niffer.”

Hannah didn’t mention that she’d been hoping her ex-husband would do precisely what Chuck’s ex had, attach himself to another marriage so as to let Hannah off the hook. It was a particular kind of hook, and it was painfully embedded: the specific knowledge that she’d disappointed a good man, and disappointed him so deeply that he’d come unmoored, lost and adrift. There was no undoing that. She could only pray someone would arrive to save him. And she wasn’t a person who prayed.

“I went to school here,” she told Chuck now. “Go Cougars.” She made the traditional Cougar fist, the one that was supposed to resemble claws.

“I went to East,” he said. “Well, for a while I did. Then I just said ‘Fuck it’ and got my GED.”

“I played basketball in this very gym,” Hannah went on. “I was so stoned during one game I scored at the wrong end of the court. Right there,” she added, pointing to the netless rim under the snarling cat. They each carried two bags of trash to toss on the growing heap outside. “How’d you misspend your youth?”

“Chasing tail. Racing cars. Taking drugs.” He smiled his beach-bum smile, then shook his hair out of his eyes. “But I gave up partying,” he said earnestly, letting the gym door close behind them. “Since the divorce.”

“Oh,” said Hannah, made uneasy, as always, by someone else’s committed sobriety. Now, inhaling a deep breath of the fresh, cool air, she was afraid he would proselytize, attempt to sponsor her at AA or NA or whatever A wagon he’d climbed onto, and the spark of friendship she’d felt with him fizzled. But then he began slapping at his pockets until he hit upon his pack of cigarettes, offering Hannah one. She wasn’t a smoker but joined him just from relief: he’d not relinquished this bad habit.

You had to have something with which to fill the hours.

“I like Leo,” Chuck announced. “He set up my e-mail account, and he always says thanks. Although his fashion statement baffles me, him and Niffer both.” He had the self-possession to look down at his own feet then and smile at his flip-flops. “Fungus,” he explained.

“Ah,” Hannah said, trying to exhale elegantly. “Leo thinks he’s an anarchist.” Her son had taken to dressing like a homeless man, baggy wool pants with exhausted suspenders, food-stained shirts and holey fedoras. Anarchy, despite its resemblance to clown-wear, felt like a state of siege; Hannah was coping as best she could. Because money was regularly missing from her purse, she had begun sleeping with it beside

her on the bed. She stored all the liquor in her car trunk after finding a water bottle of gin on Leo's nightstand; when he caught scabies from his thrift-store clothes, she took him to the doctor. And it was Hannah herself who'd given him the idea of obtaining his fake ID, recounting to him her own adolescent scam at the DMV, where she claimed to be her older sister, acquiring a valid duplicate license with her own young photograph on it, a full five years' difference in their ages. "I just kept forgetting to respond to my sister's name," she had told Leo, laughing. "Margaret," sent trembling into the liquor store with all the money. So how could Hannah really complain when she found Leo's fake license in his dirty pants, his photo over his brother's name and birth date?

That was the thing: she both understood him, and was totally flummoxed. For instance, why so angry? Why the hair-trigger temper, so often? He was always breaking the telephone. Apparently, this aspect of his character was under control over at Chuck's house. "Maybe teenagers should be shuffled around," she speculated. "Maybe they'd be more mannerly with people they didn't know so well."

Niffer, it turned out, was depressed. "It's kind of like living with two different girls," Chuck explained. "You never know what side of the bed she's gonna get up on."

"I feel that way about Leo, too. And sometimes it seems like *he* doesn't really know, either." There often appeared to be a war going on inside Leo, the mild silly boy he'd been versus the hairy, hoarse-voiced soul who'd suddenly moved in. The divorce had contributed, no doubt, but her sons' behavior had influenced the divorce, too—their childhoods abruptly gone, leaving everyone feeling robbed. It just wasn't fun to be a family anymore. Plus, Hannah had been fired from her job. A

bad year. "It's a combo plate of reasons," she acknowledged to Chuck.

"A cluster fuck," he agreed.

Hannah decided to tell him that her husband, like his wife, had seemed to give up on their child. This wasn't strictly true, but it made her feel noble, loyal to Leo in the face of so much disapproval and lack of confidence. His father was in the throes of grief, overwhelmed by losing both Hannah's passion and Leo's innocence in the same season. His response, finally, was to take their older son and retreat to his mother's home half a mile away, to his knotty pine bedroom with its desiccated ornaments from his youth. He hadn't given up on their son; he just longed for last year's model, cursed as he was by that most disastrous of devilry, nostalgia. But Hannah found it more interesting to construct a different story for Chuck, Chuck who was field-dressing both his and her cigarette butts, ready to rejoin the group.

"You have to stick with them," she said, of their teenagers. "It's like they're toddlers again." All the common household objects were dangerous once more, pills, razors, knives, liquor, glue. "Except toddlers are sweeter."

"And now we're older," he replied.

"Don't forget divorced," Hannah added.

Chuck shook his wavy hair—gold, it must have been, now silver—and opened the door. "I have to check out Niffer every night to see if she's cutting again. Up her arms, on her belly. It's just vigilance, my friend, round-the-clock vigilance. We do a UA every couple weeks. I am on the case. My ex doesn't know the half of it."

"UA?"

"Urine analysis. I take one, too, for solidarity. I'm letting her know I'm on her side, I understand how hard it is not to

use. I'm telling her every day, in every way, that I am aware of the facts, and the facts are that life is a cage of pain, just a damn cage of pain."

"Must she be named Niffer?" Hannah asked that evening, trying to tease Leo.

He glared at the cheese and grater he held, as if he could imagine ways of injuring his mother with them. She had said a foolish thing; once said, it was not retractable. She was forty-three years old; why hadn't she learned that yet? When she and Chuck had left the gym that afternoon, they'd found their children kissing by the portables. It was an alarming moment for Hannah. She'd never seen Leo touch a girl; until earlier that day, she hadn't known he was a boyfriend. His brother Justin had been so easily embarrassed by the questions she and his father had asked concerning desire or romance that they hadn't even broached the topic with Leo. They were a polite family who lived in the Midwest under those unspoken rules. The arguments she and Thomas had had—even the final, fatal ones—were marked by respectful restraint; for all she knew, Justin was gay. Where had Leo learned what to do? How had he known to grip Niffer's buttocks while chewing hungrily at her mouth?

Upon seeing the groping pair, Hannah's response was to turn away, avert her gaze from the slight pump of her son's hips, but Chuck had boomed right in, waving his arms, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, let's keep it PG, boys and girls!" Leo had leaped back as if electrocuted, then trudged sullenly after Hannah to their car, where they got stuck idling along behind the Amish horse and buggy.

Once home, Hannah didn't know how to be tactful about

the subject. Up close, the girl seemed brain-damaged, her face not angry so much as smeary, as if her features had been smudged by a giant careless thumb: hooded eyes, mashed nose, down-turned mouth. She reminded Hannah of a rabbit—not a real rabbit but a stuffed one, lop-eared and lifeless, costumed in torn black fishnets and red plaid skirt, a pair of mud-spattered combat boots.

This was Leo's first girlfriend. "I mean, couldn't you call her 'Jenny'?" Hannah asked weakly. "Jen? J.J.?" Leo folded a piece of bread around his pile of cheese and stuffed it in his mouth without answering her. They were taking a break from writing his English paper on *Macbeth*. Year in, year out, it was always *Macbeth*. Leo resumed his position prone on the floor, Hannah hers at the computer. She typed, he was supposed to dictate. Mostly she asked him if her wording seemed natural to him. The paper had to sound authentically teenage, that paradoxical charge of childish eloquence. When she'd asked Leo why he didn't like literature, he'd told her it was all fiction, as if that were self-explanatory.

"Yes, and?"

"It's not real. Just a bunch of imaginary crap."

She'd persisted. "*That's* your complaint?"

"Yes. That's my complaint. It's all fairy-tale bullshit, imaginary crap. Witches, kings, elves."

"Elfs? And that"—she pointed to the lethal looking technology stacked under the television, the boxes and wires, the handheld control instrument over which he had such fluid mastery, these objects of his obsession—"that's not imaginary?"

"No less so," he said. There was his challenge to her. It was Hannah's temptation to summon his former self, the little boy who loved being read to, who longed to climb into the books,

go visit Winnie the Pooh or Mr. Mole. He couldn't deny he'd been that boy; for years he'd begged to hear the anecdotal evidence of his charming boyhood. But that was the maudlin terrain her ex-husband so willingly wandered, and Hannah was trying to avoid it.

"There's no narrative," she said, of his favorite video game, "no characters, no writing, just shooting. And that infernal moaning."

"There are so characters!" Leo said. "There's a story. It's a long story." He proceeded to tell it, with more enthusiasm than he'd shown in months for anything except perhaps mauling Niffer. "There's a Master Chief, that's you. Well, me, the player. And I'm a master fighter, and I'm fighting inside this ring around a planet. First I have to get thawed out, and then I go do battle against aliens . . ." The more he told her, the less solid her argument seemed. The game involved power struggles, bloodshed, and moral dilemmas; was it considerably less relevant than a weak king and his bitchy wife? Moreover, Leo might have learned *that* lesson in his own home. "And you know what else? The game doesn't always turn out the same every fricking time, unlike *literature*. We could play, if you want. There's a multiplayer option. Let me defrost you, Mom."

"A better mother might take you up on that."

He lay back on the floor, sighing. "Well, a better son might do his own *Macbeth* paper."

Justin, the first son, had also been a troubled youth. But his grief was different from Leo's. "Fine!" he'd cried, one desperate night in an argument with his father, weeping his excruciating boy tears. "I'll just *kill* myself!"

To which Hannah had made an instinctive and, according

to her husband, mistaken reply: "So will I! If you kill yourself, I'll kill myself!" The evening was out of control. This was where she and Thomas had first parted ways, as partners in being parents. Hannah's version of Thomas's strategy was that they should become militaristic drones, get tough with Justin; according to Thomas's interpretation of Hannah's ideas, they should capitulate, bend over backward, and do anything to prevent his suicide. They willfully misunderstood one another, courting their first son, neglecting their second. Leo, then age eleven, lay many evenings sniveling in his bed, burrowing into his blankets as if into a hole. Abruptly upon threatening suicide, Hannah had felt her adult qualities lift off and suspend themselves in a nimbus around her. It was liberating to act like a child, to *act*. The effect on Justin and her husband was to shock them, their disagreement instantly forgotten as they both turned toward her. A few years later, when Thomas moved to his mother's house, Justin joined him, his parting glance at his mother one of confusion, as if he did not recognize her. Thomas had won, she thought then, leaving her with the boy she understood less well. Thus, the family had been divided. Left behind, Hannah sometimes found Leo doing what she did, standing in the doorways of rooms, pondering the unused props, his father's desk, his brother's bunk. "Would you really have killed yourself," Leo asked her once, "if Justin had, would you have, too?"

"No," she had assured him, ashamed.

During this year in which she was letting her life fall apart, Hannah spent her afternoons like an invalid, reading books or want ads and drinking wine, dozing away upright in an easy chair, snug and hazy, waiting for the sound of Leo's bike clattering on the porch. You never knew what was going to pop into the house, hilarity or fury, the child or the burgeoning

man. He might request that Hannah sing a song to him or rub his back, share a blanket on the couch as they watched videos together or did homework. Without prompting, he would drop his head on her shoulder and say that he loved her. “I love you, too,” she would recite, the words offered in the rote, hopeful manner of the prayer; she wasn’t sure she loved anyone, anymore.

Then again, he might enter enraged, prepped for an evening of negotiation, argument, inquisition—these tiresome things that constituted her relationship with her second son.

A month ago, he’d come home in the mood of a salesman, hastily selling his mother a version of recent events. “Remember when I told you my cell phone was stolen?” he started off. “Remember when I called from school and told you? Last week, Tuesday, I think? Remember, I said it was a good thing you got insurance last time around? Totally worth the extra four bucks a month? ’Member?”

It wasn’t that Hannah didn’t remember (she didn’t), or that she couldn’t trust him (she couldn’t), but that she had no idea which of these was most lamentably the problem. Listening, from the depths of a near dream, half blasted, she could easily have failed to call in the cell phone loss. Just as likely, he had never notified her of it. Then a week later, he had roused her from her nap by slamming the refrigerator door. “Bomb threat,” he said casually, when she asked why he was home early.

“Wow.” She struggled into sentience. “They just let you go?”

He appraised her over the milk carton he held to his face. She didn’t drink milk, so he got to do what he liked with the container.

She said, “When I was young, we had snow days.”

“You’re funny,” he said.

That evening, they were called in to be questioned. It was his phone, his reputedly stolen phone, from which the bomb threat had been made. Clearly he had done it. Clearly she would lie for him, since he was already on probation. But clearly also she had been drunk, and inattentive, and somehow guilty besides. The problem with falling out of your life was that occasionally you got busted for doing absolutely nothing wrong. Doing nothing whatsoever—nothing wrong, yet nothing right, either.

Hannah was roused out of her dreamy fuzz on a frigid afternoon in December by a figure rapping at the front door, an insistent apparition that had pulled her from her chair and led her stumbling across the room before she gave the action any conscious thought. Leo’s large girlfriend, there on her steps.

“You’re a mother,” Niffer said, after Hannah had gotten her in out of the cold and an odd fur hat, settled at the kitchen table, served with a soda while Hannah refilled her wineglass.

“Yes,” Hannah agreed. Once, she’d told Thomas that she found it appalling—appalling!—that men could actually have children and not know it. Just little shots in the dark, and utter uncertainty.

Between her and Niffer a long quiet pause formed. Niffer did not appear to know that silence was intimidating. Also boring. For her, it was character. Hannah could not think of a way to fill the dead air between them.

“So *you* can understand,” Niffer finally went on. “*Being* a mother . . .”

“Possibly,” Hannah allowed.

The girl sighed, glancing slowly around the kitchen as if cataloging and dismissing its contents, the potholders and appliances and, admittedly, the somewhat useless decorative plates. “I’m pregnant,” she said at last.

“Oh good God,” Hannah said, blinking. The look Niffer directed at her now was blunt and opaque, large dark eyes without fear in them, without passion, either. Confrontation, perhaps, determination certainly—not quite like a stuffed rabbit, now. There would be no unsolicited advice, this look said. There would be no choice a grown-up could make except to go along. Maybe Leo liked being bossed around, the animated little bird pecking at the stolid pachyderm. Maybe that was what he needed, in the end, a girlfriend like an anchor, like a gun at his head.

“There’s an ironic part, too,” Niffer said, pulling in a deep noisy breath. “My mother’s *trying* to get pregnant.”

“I thought she had other children?”

“She wants more. All she has are boys. Three bratty boys. And me,” she added, sighing. It was this sigh that permitted Hannah to begin liking Niffer. It wasn’t much—hardly less trenchant or flat than anything she’d said so far—but it was enough to build on, a little exhalation of hurt. Niffer not only hadn’t told her own mother yet, she hadn’t let Leo or her father know, either. Her secret had been kind of fun, but now it was growing undeniable. She thought her father’s response would be tears. Hannah, recalling Chuck at the gym, disagreed; shock, she said, then anger; men always defaulted to anger. And Leo? Shame, predicted Hannah, extreme embarrassment.

Happiness, declared Niffer, after another of her elephantine silences. “He likes babies.”

“Hmm,” Hannah murmured, never having seen this side of

her son, the baby-loving one. Yet he was full of surprises, that boy.

She watched herself carry on this halting conversation with Niffer while a confusion of other things leaped about in the back of her mind, all with exclamation marks: She was too young to be a grandmother! What if Leo wasn't the father! But babies were so nice to hold! How would she notify Thomas?! And, wait a minute, wait just one minute—what about the fact that Niffer was eighteen, an adult, and Leo, though full of adult mischief, was still legally a child!? This emphatic chaos—somewhat cartoonish and buoyed by a few glasses of wine—kept her busy while half attending to the girl, who professed self-righteously, dully, and far too familiarly her reasons for not having an abortion. But when she said, “Plus, getting pregnant means I won't do drugs anymore. Maybe I did it so I would stop doing drugs.” Hannah abruptly dismissed her own thoughts.

“Say again?”

“See, it might have been subconscious. Kind of tricking myself. Like you know what I did when I wanted to grow out my nails?” She displayed her fancy talons, which were shining black and spangled with frosty glitter.

“What?”

“I spread Super Glue all over my hands. After it dried, I chewed on it, instead, like a substitute. And I smoked, so I wouldn't bite. But now I won't smoke, since there's a baby. But anyway, I know I have to have a goal, a real reason to not use.”

“That actually sounds kind of smart,” Hannah said.

“Huh?”

“I mean, if you can quit because you want to be good to the baby.”

“Right. That's what I just said.” And Hannah's little seed of

affection for Niffer had sprouted a feeble root. “Anyhow, it’s too late now for an abortion. I’m six months. Everyone just thinks I got fat,” she said, lifting those heavy lips for a smile.

“You sure showed them,” Hannah said.

“Six months?” Thomas said, incredulous. Sure enough, it was harder to tell him the news than it had been to receive it herself. She did appreciate the fact of the telephone, that she was not watching his face. “How could her father not know?” he insisted.

“Guess what, Thomas? It’s just not fruitful to pursue that line of thought.” There were a million things her ex-husband didn’t know, many of them about his nearest and dearest family members. Did he know that Hannah had gotten fired for stealing a prescription pad from the medical office? He did not. Had she notified him of Leo’s most recent arrest? Negative. Was he aware of the true amount of alcohol she put away in a day? No sir. “Other nonfruitful avenues are the ones about adoption, abortion, or statutory rape.”

“Statutory rape?”

“She’s eighteen.”

“Eighteen?” Poor poleaxed Thomas; Hannah could almost enjoy shocking him, free as she was to simply hang up and not suffer his certain ensuing funk. There would be Justin for that, Justin as well as Thomas’s martyred old mother, Bea.

“Eighteen almost nineteen.”

“Sweet Jesus.”

At the kitchen table, earlier that afternoon, Niffer had suddenly reached two-handed for her tummy, interrupted by movement inside. Her expression recalled for Hannah the sensation, the stirring revolution. Thrilling—you couldn’t resist

clutching at it, verifying it. “It’s like having company with me all the time,” she had said.

Exactly like, Hannah thought.

“I never feel lonely,” said Niffer. And wasn’t that the biggest teenage malady? Teenage, and middle age, for that matter—loneliness? Hannah found it hard to argue with Niffer’s pregnancy; it was starting to seem like the preferable solution to many problems. She might have chosen pregnancy again for the same reason, to make herself grow up, to locate a line to toe. Pregnant more often, Hannah would certainly have drunk less over the years, spent fewer hours staring spellbound into the pages of a book and more on perfecting her motherhood. If there had been other children, no doubt Hannah and Thomas would still be married, too dizzy in the crowd to have yet uncovered the hollow space between them. And if they were still married, with more children, maybe Leo would have turned some of his spare annoyance on his younger siblings, maybe he would have been distracted by responsibility for them, less available to restlessness and boredom.

“Boredom is the reason for most bullshit,” Chuck had declared, back at the old gym, back before he and Hannah knew they would have a grandchild in common.

“I know I’ve made a lot of mistakes out of boredom,” Hannah had agreed. Boredom was like a revving engine stuck in neutral. Last year, when Leo had been arrested at the mall parking lot covered in paint—literally red-handed—he had claimed boredom as the reason for paintballing the signs. “Like *you* don’t like to see a big splatter of blood?” he’d pleaded, confident of the universality of this desire.

“No,” she’d said, stunned, scared. At least a baby didn’t scare her. At least there was that. But Hannah’s ex-husband

wasn't a person who could be convinced of such freewheeling logic. He had hoped only for an ordinary life. It occurred to Hannah that drinking was responsible for some of the fluidity of her thinking, and that wasn't altogether bad.

"Another good thing?" Niffer had said, heading out Hannah's door into the winter afternoon. "My complexion has really cleared up."

"Hormones," Hannah said. "You shouldn't dye your hair, you know. The chemicals and all . . ."

"Really?" Niffer had said, looking worried under her coal black pigtailed.

On the phone, Thomas had grown silent, pondering, reconstructing the world. His wife and sons were constantly knocking down what he knew and forcing him to put the pieces back together. It exhausted him, and the product probably seemed flimsy, flawed. Moving home to his mother's house had allowed him some relief, Hannah thought. Bea wasn't going to surprise him. "Leo's not responsible," he finally said. "This girl's an adult who took advantage of him. For all we know, she intended to get pregnant. She used him. It's rape, like you said."

"He was climbing through her window at night. And she's kind of slow."

"What?"

"Not retarded, but maybe damaged."

"My lord."

Hannah felt sad for her ex-husband. News like this took years off his life. He seemed to think not only that the past was something he could reclaim, but also that it had been ideal. He had been an optimist when she met him—and she'd not only divorced him but proven his outlook wrong. At least he wasn't crying, although he might never cease mourning.

However awful that conversation was, the one pending with Leo would be worse for being in person. “Don’t get all pissed,” he snarled at her when he finally arrived home, after midnight, eyes red slits.

“Were you riding your bike in the dark? High? With no headlight? It’s *snowing* out there!”

“You are always focused on exactly the wrong things!”

“Niffer came to see me. I have been sitting here worried sick for the last ten hours, with no word from you whatsoever.” She would also have to dream up some new punishment, and that was becoming a challenge. Already Leo had been grounded, suspended, and relieved of his allowance for the next indeterminate period of time. He’d been arrested, analyzed, medicated, interrogated, and put on probation. What was left? His father had been researching therapeutic boarding schools, whose brochures he dropped by for Hannah with yellow highlights on religious instruction or honor codes. There was one in Utah that especially appealed, the advertisement showing a group of earnest multicultural types sitting around a campfire, apparently in serious conversation about their remorse and rehabilitation.

“Don’t make me go there!” Leo had wailed. And this was all Hannah had, the brochure she could flap before his face.

“I’m *glad* Niffer’s pregnant!” he declared now. So the girlfriend had got it right; he was happy.

“Why are you glad?”

“Because it’s what she wants. She needs a baby. Her own mother abandoned her, just left Niffer like a . . .” He searched for the simile. Hannah started to speak, to help supply a word, when he cut her off. “And don’t start telling me how it’s going to fuck up my life!”

“I wasn’t going to.” Hannah merely watched him. He was hungry and confused. Hannah recalled this feeling from adolescence: stoned in the night, lost, cold, exhilarated with apprehension. A shower of snow in the face like a premonition of the future, a promise held in the dark, something out there that was calling, toward which you were fervently headed. She said, “I’m of the opinion that it might save your life.”

“How?”

“By forcing you to get your act together.” Now was not the time to mention her concerns with Niffer’s chromosomes. “By making you care about something more than you care about yourself.”

“You can feel it rolling around in there,” he said, turning to her with a passionate glance she hadn’t been treated to in ages. “It’s actually very cool, Mom.”

“And you didn’t know until today?”

“Nope. She wanted to surprise everybody.” He couldn’t help grinning at Hannah, giddy with what he’d managed to aid and abet in. And if you could possibly look past the absurdity of having this conversation with a *fifteen*-year-old, he sounded quite average in his response to learning he was to become a father. The news had restored him to humanity, Hannah thought. He wondered aloud if he and Niffer should get married before the baby was born, if that would be the proper move, and, oh, by the way, if Hannah would give her permission, since he wasn’t old enough. And how did she like the name “Roscoe”? They had decided that if the baby was a girl, Niffer got to choose, and if it was a boy, Leo would prevail.

“Roscoe?” Hannah said, in this instance having a definite opinion—not a favorable one—where in others she’d been, so

far, rather ambivalent. Ambivalent, or astonished, it was hard to say which. "I'm not wild for Roscoe."

"Amos? That was another I kind of liked. Niffer picked 'Ambrosia.'"

Her granddaughter, Ambrosia.

He was born seven weeks early, and even after ten days in the neonatal unit, still had "Baby Prentiss" marked on his ID tag. His temporary name on a strip of masking tape, slapped on a plastic case that resembled Tupperware.

"She doesn't want to name him until he's for sure going to live," Leo told Hannah, clutching her hand. His hand was large, a man's, but with a child's frightened need. Fatherhood of any baby might have made him scared, but this baby, whose odds of living were less than fifty-fifty, had left Leo traumatized; "scared straight," he might have been labeled. In any event, he held his mother's hand as if he would otherwise collapse.

Baby Prentiss was kept in a place like a church, replete with people prepared to genuflect and confess, bow their heads and pray, listen to what they were told with tears in their eyes, their responses mere whispers. Niffer had not returned to school after the birth—she would perhaps log yet another year in her lengthy matriculation at Central High—spending her days, instead, beside her infant on the other side of the glass, wearing a mask, reaching through the portals in Baby Prentiss's plastic container. She'd been forced to trim her nails, scour her hands till they were raw. Since she couldn't breast-feed, she'd bound up her large leaking chest with an Ace and taken up smoking again.

Some evenings Hannah and Leo found her at the hospital's

front entrance with the other smokers, huddled around a planter of dead foliage, clouds of smoke and steam over their heads. She fell upon Leo with too much emotion, heavy with need and sedatives; as Leo patted her back mechanically, Hannah saw that the power in their relationship was shifting. What would her son do with it, when he realized that it was his?

Up they rode in the elevator, first having to pass through the hall of healthy babies, the ones going home tomorrow in order to make room for the next wave, and then through the next, the legion of the normal, that ongoing birthday party of booties and Mylar balloons and laughter, and finally through weighty doors into an oddly awed silence.

This was the kingdom of sick infants. Moving into it from the celebration, you could be convinced you'd gone deaf. Behind soundproof glass, a horrific pantomime as the babies squalled. Yet when they reached Baby Prentiss, and Hannah watched his tiny face contort, his limbs turn suddenly an awful mottled purple, his concave chest flex in and out, bones like rubber bands, she felt his unbearable distress vibrantly in her head. Beside her Leo put his free palm to the glass. That pane was greasy with handprints.

On either side of Baby Prentiss, the babies who had been there yesterday were gone. One had been taken home, one had died, just like the law of averages.

Chuck joined them when his shift at the towing company ended, unshaven and wracked, hat in hand. The nights were so cold he left the truck running in the parking lot, within view of the seventh-floor window, his vehicle down there rumbling, putting up a stream of exhaust like a powerful living beast, like a dragon. He worried over the tiny creature in the quiet ward, but he worried more over Niffer. He believed she would kill herself, he confided to Hannah, if Baby Pren-

tiss died. He hadn't foreseen this downside to her pregnancy. None of them had.

Only once did Niffer's mother come visit when Hannah and Leo were there. Hannah had met her at the principal's office back in November. The full complement of parents had been summoned to Central when Niffer announced she was having a baby, a compulsory meeting with not only the principal but the school nurse and a social worker. The social worker, who had been Leo's erstwhile emissary at school, shook her head disbelievingly. "I throw up my hands," she'd said, literally tossing up her hands, as if to release something heavy, like a rock, that she'd been carrying around.

"Now you'll have the pleasure of meeting my mortal enemy," Chuck had said cheerfully to Hannah. "Do you know that slag heap thinks she can just waltz on in and *adopt*?" Neither Hannah nor Niffer had correctly guessed *his* reaction to the pregnancy: it was all about revenge. He told Hannah there was no way in holy hell that woman was laying her mitts on Niffer's baby. He'd devote himself to another twenty years of single parenting to prevent such a thing. "Shit," he said at the principal's office, "I'll hire a fucking hit man."

It was terrible, Hannah thought, when only a hit man would suffice.

Her own ex didn't visit the baby very often, either. The last time Hannah had seen him had been just after the birth, when he came running into the maternity ward in the middle of the night, his face still wrinkled from sleep. Hannah felt some familiar, painful implosion whenever she met Thomas, some sad sighing hole in her chest. His clothes hung on him, as if he were shrinking, and the lines around his eyes were deeper, a series of runnels down his cheeks, as if his tears were corrosive. "Oh, sweetheart," she had said then.

“Hannah,” he’d answered, trying hard to remain formal. They’d spent that late night with Niffer’s parents, Chuck and Denise, four people either estranged or strangers. Hannah could only assume that the others shared her mixed feelings about the birth; maybe it would be best if the baby did not survive. It had been created by children, after all, and like other approximate projects—the sugar-cube igloo, the lumpy clay bowl—it was possible that they had not gotten it right; they’d used sticks and buttons, string and papier mâché.

But when she saw the baby—less than three pounds, without tear ducts or eyelashes, lacking the ability to inflate his own lungs—she could not wish him gone. Inside his plastic bin he wailed without sound, miniature body plastered with wires, limbs stuck with tubes, smashed blue face under a clear mask. Leo stood by, Hannah’s son the delinquent, done up in surgical garb from head to toe; he was reduced to a set of floating frightened eyes. He turned on Hannah as beseeching a look as she had ever received.

They lived these weeks in limbo. “Literally,” Hannah told Thomas on the telephone. “Isn’t that where the babies go, when their future is undecided?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’ll ask my mother.”

And it was his mother, Hannah’s former mother-in-law, who proved the most devoted in sharing the vigil at the premature babies’ window. Finally, her steadfast patience would be put to good use. A janitor had found her a chair. There she sat, many an evening, tidy and meek, fingers polishing a rosary. The hospital itself was Catholic; at the elevator doors you waited under a portrait of its patron, Saint Francis. Now and then a clutch of nuns would round a corner, immediately silencing their conversation until you were out of earshot.

"I lost three babies," Bea told Hannah. "Two before Thomas, one after. Three girls."

"I never knew that," Hannah said, ashamed of her long dismissive estimation of her mother-in-law's humorless outlook.

"Don't tell Thomas," Bea said, rising from the chair to let Hannah assume the watch. "He doesn't need another worry." Her eyes were damp. She opened her purse to pour the rosary beads into it, then touched Hannah's arm as if to bless her. "Some days I would get so furious I had to go sit in the car and yell at God, just scream until I couldn't scream anymore."

Niffer rode the elevator up less and less often, eventually arriving at the hospital simply to stand with the smokers, finally not going at all, staying at home in bed, sick, too. "You have to visit her," Hannah told Leo when he returned from school.

"Why?" he answered. "All she does is take pills and pass out. All I do over there is watch TV. Watch TV, or listen to Chuck call his ex-wife a cunt. No thanks."

At the hospital, in the daylight, when the sun was shining, the ward seemed more hopefully lit. Day by day, while the baby slept and bawled and breathed and survived, Hannah watched through the glass. She could see him, through it, and she could see herself, in it, reflected back. The plastic chair awaited her, often still warm from having held Bea.

It was in that cathedral space, one random afternoon, that Hannah realized she loved the baby. The notion struck her cognitively, like the solution to a puzzle, no different from the day last spring when she'd understood—as if that bare forty-watt bulb had blinked on overhead, as if somebody had conked her—that she no longer loved her husband.

Love, she pondered: perhaps a bit more left-brained than you might expect, more science than romance. Invisible, yet quantifiable matter, it might evaporate and float away, fall elsewhere, freeze, boil; it could circulate in the blood, bitter as an infection, benevolent as a nutrient. Clear, tangible. It died. It was born.

He came home in March, more or less on his originally predicted birthday. “He would have been a Pisces,” Leo reported, reading the horoscopes the day the hospital finally released the boy. “But now he’s a Capricorn, I guess. He’s only gonna have a two-star day. ‘Read between the lines,’” he read. “‘Tonight: close to home.’”

The baby weighed six pounds, like a brisket. He came to Hannah’s house because his mother did not want him. Her milk had dried up; he would be bottle-fed anyway. “He bonded with nurses,” she said to Hannah dully, under the influence of drugs meant to keep her from other drugs. “He’ll probably like those outfits you always wear.”

Would the story of Niffer and Leo’s teenage romance, their baby’s conception, their naughtiness, have been enough to carry them through a lifetime? No, Hannah thought. Adamantly not. But whose incendiary beginning—no matter its heat, or the thrilling flare it created—didn’t end up, eventually, simply extinguished? She and Thomas had been happy for a long time before they suddenly weren’t.

“There is no way to look cool with a car seat in your car,” Leo said, snapping in place the elaborate plastic contraption. He smiled, delighted with their errand. Still happy, Hannah marveled, at having a baby.

The baby rode home with them that first day in what Hannah came to recognize as his constitutional calm. He’d per-

haps cried so much, for so long, that he'd mostly cried himself out. He was a quiet baby now, not wise-seeming exactly, but shrewd, as if he would pick his battles, as if he would wait and see. Hannah had a lot of time to study him, first swaddled and vaguely immobilized in his chair, then, as the season grew mild, in clothing designed for babies younger than him, his steady stare and palpable rib cage. After several months he was still called Baby; his expression seemed to say he understood that his parents were not fully done themselves, and that he would be charged, now and later, with surviving despite bad odds. Better him, he seemed to indicate, than the fat oblivious models one met in the grocery or park, with their festooned strollers, those dimpled, gleaming butterballs with their robust sets of parents. Those babies need not have exerted a single effort on their own behalf. Not so, Baby Prentiss. He was sallow still, as if he smoked cigarettes, with more hair than seemed natural on an infant, and somehow covering his head like an executive's, with a defined part on one side. His nose was slender, his neck and elbows and hands refined, dexterous and bony as an older child's, and he rarely smiled, as if the world had taught him to challenge its charms.

The crib had been in Leo's room, but the baby's hungry sounds in the night often did not wake him; Leo slept like the teenager he was, greedily, obliviously, his body accustomed to taking for granted his mother's vigilance. Hannah, by contrast, woke at the first rustle, the first minor squeak; she would never not be a mother, she deduced, standing at the microwave, heating the bottle before Baby P even realized it was hunger that had pulled him from sleep. It was a pleasure to know something so surely, to do a job so well. After they moved the crib to her bedroom, Leo knocked before he came in, visiting every morning to say good-bye as he headed to school.

“Grandpa Chuck” brought over diapers and jars of mashed food, stuffed toys, and other haphazard supplies. He and Hannah stood at the crib, staring down at the boy, neither of them too old to be his parents—they might have conceived him right over there, on Hannah’s bed. On its bedpost hung her nightgown, limp satin rag. There was no way not to think of sex in such a situation, and she knew Chuck was aware of it, too. And in some other lifetime, they might actually have gone that route, found each other in this curious circuitous way through their children and grandchild, reverse incest—a prospect her poor ex-husband might never successfully assimilate. But fortunately, he wouldn’t have to. Not in this lifetime, Hannah decided.

“Niffer isn’t getting any better,” Chuck chose to say. “Her doctor says postpartum’s a bitch. It’s sure kicking my ass.” He sighed. “You should see our medicine cabinet. I never knew there were so many happy pills.”

“Yet so little happiness.”

“Amen.” He squinted down at his grandson. “It’s fucked up to say so, but I wish he hadn’t happened. You know?”

“Yes.”

“I mean, having a kid gave *me* a reason not to kill myself, but that’s not working for Niffer. I don’t know *what’s* gonna work for Niffer.”

The girl’s misery descended momentarily between them, over the sleeping child, like a bleak, black miasma. And then was abruptly dissipated by Baby P’s swinging fist and toothless yawn. Chuck cupped his own nicotine-tinged fingers around the baby’s. “I don’t wish you didn’t happen, buddy,” he apologized.

Hannah still drank wine, but only one glass a day. It was difficult to drink only one glass, maybe more difficult than not

drinking at all. That initial infusion of alcohol prepared its drinker to let loose the reins. And though Hannah had always loved best the first drink—the sensation of ease with which it filled her, largesse, affection, gratitude—she had never been good at stopping while she was ahead. She likened this one drink to the hour it accompanied, when the air was oaky, just before dark, the benign warm light in which everyone looked lovely and life did not seem a useless and redundant pursuit. Every day, she closed her eyes under the wave of fulfilling calm. This abbreviated happy hour corresponded with Baby P's afternoon nap, and she had the additional luxury of toasting his sleeping peaceful face.

One afternoon in June, Hannah had just poured her ritual wine when she was surprised to find her other son Justin on the porch. He had not spoken to her for almost a year—and now he knocked at his own front door. These days, she knew of him only from what Thomas or Bea reported: he'd come out of the closet and landed himself not only a boyfriend and a job but an acting scholarship at the university. He was flourishing, suddenly at ease in a body he'd once loathed, a body he'd skulked about in as if to shrug it off and abandon it somewhere.

Justin had hurt Hannah's feelings when he moved away. Then, she would have bet her life he'd choose her rather than his father—and she would have lost that bet. Sometimes it seemed that she *had*. "What's wrong?" she asked him, opening the door.

"What isn't?" he answered, rolling his eyes. He thrust out a scholarship form that required his mother's signature.

"If you didn't need me to sign this, when would I have seen you again?"

"I don't know."

Since she held the form, he had to follow when she invited

him in. She led him to the kitchen, where Baby P slept crooked in his stroller. Surely the sight of the baby would melt his coldness? Hannah sat at the table and set her foot on the stroller's footrest, resuming the rocking metronomic activity that had become second nature to her. She and Baby P had recently returned from their afternoon walk. Every day they met up with dogs and other children and neighbors, Hannah touched by the goodwill the child afforded her. Home afterward, Baby P was always asleep, exhausted by ambassadorship.

"What happened to his skanky mom?" Justin asked.

Hannah appraised him. He had flung himself gracefully into a chair, one arm thrown over the back rung, one leg crossed over the knee of the other. He had always been a pretty boy, but now had adopted gestures that Hannah's father would have called "swishy." Hannah wouldn't have minded those, but his unabashed snottiness made her angry. Angry, and sad. Would he ever again be someone she understood?

"Aren't you worried he'll turn out as messed up as us?" Justin asked.

"I don't think you're messed up."

"You wouldn't." He nodded at her glass of wine. "Can I have some?"

"Okay." His portion finished the bottle, which Hannah laid gently in the garbage. Justin sipped, then winced.

"I prefer white zinfandel," he said, and Hannah couldn't help laughing. For that moment she missed Thomas, sharply: he was the only one who would have been properly amused and touched by their twenty-year-old son's preference for pink wine.

"What's so funny? At least I don't polish off a bottle or two a day. At least I have a job."

Hannah rose to find a pen. He'd come to have his form

signed, she'd sign his form. If he didn't care for her anymore, well, what could she do about that? Science, she reminded herself, concerning love. "Justin," she said, after scrawling her signature in the proper place, "Those things you mentioned are, more or less, victimless crimes. And in a way, I don't really think they're any of your business."

"This family is so my business!"

The baby jerked awake, so suddenly fierce was Justin's voice. But he did not cry. He blinked, looking from Hannah to the stranger. Justin was breathing heavily, his slender shoulders moving with his chest. He had always been sensitive, his feelings easily hurt, his emotions close to the surface. It had never seemed a useful trait, especially for a boy, but Hannah had cherished it, encouraged it, loved it about him.

"I can't believe you're in charge of that baby. I can't believe that's the best option available."

"I'm very good to that baby."

"He doesn't even have a name." Justin didn't look at her, but at Baby P, shaking his head disgustedly. His respiration was mechanical, like a machine. No, not like a machine. Like an injured animal, an inarticulate being whose life was at risk.

"What's wrong?" she asked him softly, reaching for his hand.

He snatched it out from under her touch. "You're so mean to him!"

"Who? Who am I mean to?"

"Dad. You're mean to him."

"Thomas?" she said, stunned. "I'm not mean to Thomas. I was never mean to Thomas." What had he told Justin? It wasn't like him to fabricate or dramatize.

"He loves you," Justin cried, making two fists before him as if to wring a garrote in them. "He fucking *loves* you!"

At this, Baby P's lower lip began to wobble. Hannah stood to unstrap him and put him to her shoulder, grateful to have somebody to hold, to comfort. "It's not mean not to love somebody," she told Justin, wondering if this was true. "It's kind of tragic, I guess, but it's not mean."

To this, her son had no answer. He jerked his gaze away, as if the sight of her was unbearable, as if she had slapped him, hard. But she saw him swallow, again and again, fighting tears. Twenty years wasn't very many, she reminded herself.

"I should go," he finally said. But he didn't get up.

"You want to hold him?" she asked, eventually.

He took the baby awkwardly, as if she were handing him a vase of too many flowers or a bulky parcel marked "Fragile!" treating the baby as if it were dangerous. Bomb threat, indeed, thought Hannah. "Leo knows how to do this?" he asked.

"Leo's pretty good at it." Leo, dad and dishwasher, off at Red Lobster earning a little more than minimum wage. He hadn't completely mended his ways, her boy Leo—his driver's license was suspended after he'd declined to pull over when an officer clocked him doing forty-five in a school zone—but when Hannah dropped him off at the restaurant every afternoon, he never failed to lean through the back window and kiss his son on the forehead.

Soon Justin deposited Baby P back with Hannah, eager to unburden himself. The room had grown dim, the baby was hungry, evening was upon them. It would be more difficult than usual not to pour another drink, tonight. Justin smoothed his shirt and sniffed, past his anguish.

He picked up the scholarship form and headed for the door. "You wouldn't have cared if I forged your signature, would you?"

“No, not really. It just seems like red tape, officious hoop jumping.”

“Dad wouldn’t let me do it. He made me come here and do the right thing. That’s the kind of person he is.”

“Yes, that’s the kind of person he is.” Hannah wasn’t unhappy about agreeing, closing the door behind him. She, however, was a different kind.