

SHOW ME THE WAY

It's Mother's Day, actually Mother's Day night, and I lie in bed with Steve. The windows are open, a row of three side by side, and they are draped with linen sheers that dance on the air of May.

Just outside, the wisteria and the lilac bloom purple. Out front, the vines of the white roses tangle around the wood pillars of the porch. Under today's long show of sun, hundreds of those rosebuds burst open, bright white, as if they had a secret they could no longer contain.

As I fall asleep, there are two things: the cool wind with its smell of flowers and the feel of Steve, who breathes deep in his chest on his inhales and lets out little puffs on his exhales.

Then there is something else.

I open my eyes.

Steve's on his back, his puffy breathing shifting into a low snore.

I lie on my side with my legs and arms wound around a

pile of pillows and between my legs, there is a wet feeling like I just had an accident.

I roll out of the pillow nest and move the covers aside. I arch my back into the mattress and shove out of bed, stomach first.

I leave Steve and sleep behind, barefoot over the cool wood floors. A hairline of wet runs down the inside of my thigh.

2 In the bathroom, I close the door and snap on the light.

The white of the bulb makes my eyes burn.

I wad my nightgown in one hand and pull my underwear down with the other. I have to twist and bend to see past my stomach but down there, it's true. My underwear is soaked through.

I waddle-step myself to the toilet and sit down to get a closer look. The wet spot has no color I can see. I push my underwear off and kick it into the corner. I pull tissue off the roll, dab at myself, once, twice, three times and look at the wad in my hand. I dab again and look. There is no blood there at all, there's not even a shade of pink. It's just amniotic fluid, the bag of waters broken, the baby's indoor swimming pool with a hole in it and that's fine, except my baby isn't due for six more weeks.

I drop the wad of toilet paper into the toilet and rub my hands hard into my face, into my eyes. Black-and-white dots of nothing race wild inside my head.

3 FO 1 In the dark of another night, I am seven years old and the heavy shake of a hand opens my eyes.

"Get up, Juniper," my father says.

He lets me go, stands up, and shakes B.J. where he sleeps on the top bunk of our beds.

"Wake up, son," my father says. "We've got to take your mom to a doctor."

Down the hall of our apartment, light spills out of their bedroom and my mother calls for my father in a voice that sounds broken.

He walks long steps out of our room and talks back at us.

"Come on, kids," he says, "get up now."

I get out of bed quick and take up pants folded neat at the end of the bed.

B.J. stays up there in his top bunk and rolls to face the wall.

He's always like that when we get woken up at night.

I snap my pants together and my hands shake hard. I run down the hall, pushing my nightgown into the waistband of my pants.

18 In their bedroom bathroom, my mother's crumpled on the floor with her bare legs out from her nightgown. She holds the toilet with both hands like she can't let go.

"Momma?" I say.

Her face is shaped like a heart and her eyes are as black as Egyptian stones. On her mouth, I can't tell if it's lipstick or blood. She wipes the red away with the back of her hand and searches for me as if I'm not right there.

I move in closer and when she sees me in the light, she smiles like this is fine, like everything is just fine.

This is fine, I tell myself, everything is just fine.

I flush the toilet and it takes the wadded tissues away.

21 The walls in our bathroom are a deep green and when we first painted this room, I dipped a duster into silver paint and

whispered the edges of feathers over the walls. It was something I read about in a book, this way to blend the seams where plaster meets Sheetrock, but right now, closed in like I am, it looks like some poor bird went insane.

I put my hands on the sink and the porcelain is cold on my skin. In the mirror, my dark eyes are small in the pale of my face and they have no idea what to do next.

All the books I have read say that when it's time for a baby to come, there are contractions and pain, but I don't feel anything.

I push off the sink and thump at my stomach like you'd test a melon, my first finger firing off my thumb. The old sound of being hollow in the center is gone. I move my hand flat, touching the round shape that isn't so round anymore. The skin of me shapes tight to the baby's form and without water in there to help him float, his shoulders are all the way down in my pelvis.

I hold myself around the bottom of my stomach.

"Move, baby, move."

My voice is loud in the crazy bird bathroom, but nothing happens under my hands and quick, my mind swims to the idea of how so many things can go wrong. Babies are born dead or die minutes after or come with half a heart or only one leg. It happens all the time.

I push my fingers deep enough into my pelvis to jog both of us.

"Move!" I say.

There is nothing for a second, and then, he rolls against my hand like, "Hey, I'm sleeping in here."

I pat against my stomach.

"That's fine," I say, "everything is going to be fine."

5 I go out of the bathroom then and turn on the overhead in our room. Bright light chases the night off Steve's bare shoulders and I go to his side of the bed.

I look at him with this idea that I should make this a sweet memory he'll never forget. I should be happy, giddy, thrilled. I should say, "Honey, wake up, our baby is coming."

I poke one finger into the muscle of his arm.

"Steve," I say.

His lashes lift a little.

I poke harder and Steve opens one eye.

"What?" he says.

I put both hands under the curve of my stomach.

"I think it's time."

Steve opens both of his eyes and sucks in a deep breath, lifting up on his elbow. He blinks himself awake and on his face is a look like he doesn't trust me.

"Are you kidding?"

I want to laugh, but can't get the sound up. I shake my head and hear myself talking fast enough to make it right.

"My water broke a few minutes ago, but there's no blood—I checked—and then I got the baby to move so I think it's fine, it's just early, that's all."

When I stop talking, he pulls himself up and his face is full of questions.

"What do we do now?" he says.

*Remember*  
My father always knows what to do. He moves so sure and his voice is deep and strong, but I can tell he's scared too. It's there in how his dusty spice eyes move fast, how his voice is

out of breath and how he pushes his hand through the thick of his dark hair over and over again.

He comes in the bathroom behind me and pushes his hair back on his head.

"Janet," he says, "we gotta go."

"No, Bud," my mother says. "I don't want to go."

Her smile is broken by a line of blood out the side of her mouth and blood swims in the toilet.

My father moves around me and lifts her off the floor.

She cries, "No, no, no," but he doesn't listen. He goes past me and out the bathroom door.

"Bring the blanket, Jenny," he says.

My father stops in the hall and yells.

"Bryan Joseph Lauck, get your butt out of bed."

I pull their throw blanket off the end of the bed and run after them.

"What about her robe?" I say.

My father takes her through the living room and his voice is so deep and so strong.

"Fine," he says, "bring her robe too."

*Reborn to*  
Steve is clean-cut like the boy next door. He's got blue eyes, the baby face of innocence, and this confidence that comes from a life that hasn't hit him hard enough to fill him with doubt. He's not arrogant but he's on the edge of cocky, and if you ask, he'll give you advice on almost anything. What makes it worse is that most of the time he's right. Sometimes it bugs me that he knows everything, but right now I'd love a little advice. He looks like he wants the same thing from me though, and since it is my body, I figure it can't hurt to fake it for a while.

I put my hand on the cool skin of his shoulder and talk in a smooth voice that says I know more than I do.

"Why don't you call the doctor for me, ask her what we should do now and if this is a problem," I say, "and in the meantime, I'll double-check the book."

It's not much of a plan, but Steve nods like he's thankful for it. He throws the covers off his legs and goes downstairs, his bare feet slapping fast on the steps.

I go to the other side of the bed and get the bible of pregnancy, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. I flip it open to the last chapter and the words read, "Water breaks. Go to the hospital. You're having a baby."

I let the book fold shut and toss it on the bed. I can't go anywhere without a bag.

Between my closet and the bathroom, I pull things together. There's a backpack for my stuff, extra underwear, clothes, a brush, my hair dryer, toothbrush, and a washcloth. I throw everything on the end of the bed and waddle myself into the nursery. In here, the crib is set against the wall, there's a mobile of dancing teddy bears over, and the window has teddy bear window shades to block out the light. I get a bag out of the closet and load it with a dozen tiny diapers, two outfits, a bib, another bib, a coat, a teddy bear, a jar of petroleum jelly, a tube of diaper ointment, and three blankets.

"Why are you packing all that stuff?" Steve says.

I almost jump out of myself, his voice is that much of a surprise, and I put my hands over my scared heart.

Steve stands at the door in his boxer shorts and on his face is the look he gets when he's pretty sure you're nuts, or at least doing something he can't understand.

The blankets I was trying to shove in fall on the floor.

I push my hand through my hair to calm myself since, honestly, I can't explain anything right now. I put one hand on the baby's dresser and pin a look on Steve instead.

"What did the doctor say?" I say.

Steve looks at the bag and rubs his hand over the whiskers on his face.

"We have to go to the hospital," he says.

"Did she say this is a problem?" I say. "Did she say it's too soon?"

"No," he says.

"No what?" I say.

I tilt my head to the side.

"No, it's not a problem?" I say. "Or no, it's not too soon, or what? Did you even talk to Dr. Bell?"

"I didn't talk to Dr. Bell," he says.

"Why not?"

"She's not on call."

"Who did you talk to?" I say.

"Another doctor, the one who is on call," he says.

"So why do we have to come in?" I say. "Is this like an emergency?"

"She didn't say that," Steve says.

"Well, what did she say?"

"To come in."

I stare him down hard as if more answers will come eventually, but he's a big fat blank. I throw my hands up in the air.

"Jeez, Steve," I say, "you didn't ask if it was too soon?"

"No," he says, "you just told me to call the doctor."

I wave him to get out of my way and he backs out of the doorway.

"I told you to ask if it was too soon," I say.

"No, you didn't," he says.

"Yes, I did," I say.

☿ I push past him and go into our room.

"Why didn't you call them yourself?" he says.

"Forget it," I say, "I'll just look it up."

I dig my book from the pile of underwear and toiletries and flip to the chapter titled "34 Weeks." I'm shaking so hard, I have to hold my arm at the elbow while I read.

"At thirty-four weeks, your baby is almost fully formed and could be born with very few complications," I read.

I toss the book back on the bed and put my hands on my hips, as if I've made a major declaration. Steve looks at me, at the book on the bed and then at me again, and shakes his head.

"What does that mean?" he says.

Honestly, I don't know what it means, but I can't say that. I'm still faking it. I lean long over the bed instead and pull the backpack out of the pile of stuff.

"It means this is fine," I say. "Thirty-four weeks is fine, don't worry, everything will be fine."

*K to 6* In my mother's room, I get her robe off the floor and it's a puddle of white silk with purple flowers in the design. No matter how sick she is, her nightgowns always match her robes. My mother is always in style.

*G to 6* B.J. is in the living room with his jeans pulled up but not zipped, and he wrestles with a wadded-up T-shirt. He goes

slow out the door, T-shirt over his head, and he pushes his arms through the arm holes, only he moves like it's Sunday morning and we have all day to play.

Behind him, my head is about to explode from how slow he goes.

"Come on," I say, "move it!"

B.J. stops cold and I stop just short of mashing up against his back. He puts a hand on the jamb to block me. His dark hair is over at the wide angle of his side part and his dark eyes stare me down.

"You move," B.J. says.

Outside, the car door slams and my father goes around his low-slung sports car to open his own door.

"Goddammit, you kids, let's go already," he yells from the street and I can see him out there through the gate of B.J.'s arm.

B.J. looks at me for a long time and right then, I want to be as big as he is. I want to kick the shit out of him, except part of me knows he's not mad at me. He's seen all of this before and more; hospital runs, waiting in the car, operations and pills for the voices she says she hears in the night. He's tired and he's given up, it's right there in the dark of his eyes that are so much different than mine. I've seen a lot too, I've seen almost everything that he has seen, but I'm not like that. I never give up.

I shove past him and the slick of her robe gives just enough slide to get by. He hits me up the back of my head, just barely, just enough to hurt, but it's fine. I'm free to run to the car where my father waits, free not to look back, free not to care.

When Steve and I leave, it's past one in the morning and Mother's Day is over. My back hurts low down deep, but it's not terrible. It's more like being squeezed too hard.

In the car, we've packed the baby car seat, the baby bag, a CD player Steve gave me this morning for my first Mother's Day, and a whole stack of music for the right background sound. We've got extra water, extra juice in a cooler, and I even have my favorite pillow. As we leave, though, it feels like I've left something behind.

Steve backs down our long driveway and I watch out the window.

Our house lifts in the night, just right with its three coats of fresh paint, its windows that have been washed, and its driveway that's been swept clean. Inside is just as nice with more fresh paint, new pipes, and wood floors that shine like spilled honey. It's a safe-and-perfect-from-the-outside house to fit our safe-and-perfect-from-the-outside life to fit Steve who is safe-and-perfect-from-the-outside too. He's ready for all this, he's always wanted to be a husband, a homeowner, and a father. I thought I was ready too. I wanted to be ready, but deep down I don't think I'm ready. I'm not strong enough. I don't think I can do it. I want this baby, I do, but something is missing inside of me.

Steve pulls out of the driveway and onto the street.

A deep pain digs at my back and catches my breath. I want to keep looking back, but I can't anymore.

I move myself in the seat to face front and Steve puts his hand on my leg.

"Are you okay?" he says. "Is it a contraction?"

I shake my head no, I'm not okay, and nod my head yes, it's a contraction.

\* \* \*

11FB  
My father's car is so small, being in the backseat is almost like being in the front seat. In the back, I hold my father's seat with both my hands and I can see my mother slumped down. Her eyes are closed.

B.J. is wedged tight next to me and his leg and shoulder are pressed against mine. He keeps shoving against me and I shove back.

My father drives fast and the sound of the engine is deep into my body, like a very big man clearing his throat for a long time.

I ignore B.J. and keep my eye on her. Even now, like this, she's so beautiful it hurts. Her dark hair is curled around her heart of a face and there is something about the fine lines of her bones that make her a woman, but also a little girl, like me.

She's been sick as long as I can remember. She's walked with crutches, two, then one, then none. She's gone away, come back and gone away again, and had operations on places I can't understand. One time, she lifted her nightgown so I could see her whole stomach. It was a wicked mess of sliced and sewn lines, a tic-tac-toe where no one ever won.

"I hate doctors," she said, "they never seem to get it right."

I touched over those scars and traced her lines and I hated doctors too. I hated how they cut her so many times. I hated how they forced a tube between her legs that pulled urine into a bag she kept on the floor. I hated how they gave her so many different pills, poisons that made her sleep, and made her talk in circles and even made her mad enough to give up on her life on the day she tried to overdose.

My father makes a hard left into the driveway where a bright red sign reads EMERGENCY.

He stops the car hard, gets out, and runs around to her side of the car. He opens the door and kneels down to take her to his chest. He looks at B.J. and me in the back, dusty spice eyes back and forth between us.

"Stay put," he says. "I'll be right back."

"Okay," I say, except I can't hear my own voice.

He lifts her then and she's liquid in his arms, the white of her skin a strange white turning blue. He carries her into the hospital and the blanket drags on the ground. I watch until I can't see them anymore.

B.J. leans over the seat and shoves the latch to get it forward. He gets himself out, shoves the seat back hard, and sits down in the front.

I want to say that we're not supposed to move, but B.J.'s so mad, he'll sock me for sure.

I shift myself around to be just me in the back, getting myself situated the way I do in the middle, and I wipe the feel of B.J. off my arm and leg. My hands hurt from holding on to my father's seat so hard and I open them, close them, and open them again.

Down at my feet is her white robe with the purple flowers. I put my hands deep into the cold silk and try to feel her there, except she's gone.

My eyes sting the way they do when I'm about to cry and I put my face into the silk, pressing so hard I won't make a sound.

Steve turns into the driveway of St. Vincent's Hospital and backs into a regular spot close to the front door. It's a big rectangle of a building with those reflective windows that mirror the night, the trees on the grounds, and the cars in the parking

lot. From the inside, people can see out, but from the outside I can't see in.

Steve takes the keys out of the ignition and it's quiet in the car.

"You okay?" he says.

I nod at the windshield.

"Yeah," I say, "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" he says.

"Yes," I say, "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," Steve says, "you look a little scared."

He watches me the way he does, eyes digging deep. I hate how he does that, it's like being pushed at all the time and the truth is, I've already told him I'm scared about a lot of things, especially of being here.

I wanted a home birth, I wanted the quiet and calm that comes from home. I wanted my things around me and maybe some nice music.

Steve went white on that idea.

He said, "People have babies in hospitals."

He said, "Our insurance covers a doctor and hospital."

He said, "What if something goes wrong?"

He said, "What if we need a doctor?"

Steve talked me into a hospital. We even took a tour with a nurse disguised as a tour guide.

She took us to a room called a suite and showed off all the amenities. She was a pretty woman gone soft with a blond helmet of hair she had trained to flip out in one round curl.

"You have plenty of space," she said, "and there's a refrigerator under this counter too."

I stayed by the door of the room, ready to go, but Steve

was in there checking out everything. He took a remote control off the side table near the mechanical bed and waved it in my direction.

"Look, Jen," Steve said, "cable TV."

The nurse patted a makeshift sofa under the window.

"And there's a little fold-out bed for you, Dad," she said.

Steve hooked his head like I should come in and take a look.

The nurse chattered away, blond hair lifting and falling around her shoulders, and turned on a computer next to the bed.

I walked in with slow steps and opened a cabinet over the sink. Inside were sterile packages of tubes and needles.

The nurse said they had the latest technology and could monitor the baby's heartbeat with straps that hooked me to the computer.

I closed the cabinet door and opened the bathroom door. There was a stand-up shower with a seat for people who probably couldn't stand on their own and there was a stack of heavy-duty maxi pads on a shelf.

"How many babies are born here a month?" Steve said.

"About four hundred," she said.

"Wow," Steve said. "That's big business."

I closed the bathroom door.

The nurse tapped at the keys on the computer and nodded like she agreed.

In my head, I did the math of four hundred babies a month at about five thousand per baby. It was a lot of money. It was enough money to make them disguise the place as a hotel and cover up how it was really big business corporate bullshit messing with my body. I was getting myself pissed off enough



and working up the courage to say, "Forget this, I'm having my baby at home." I even crossed my arms under my boobs and rested them over the rise of my stomach, but then I saw it there. Nailed to the wall next to me was a crucifix, this tiny version of the savior's suffering cast in chipped bronze.

A crucifix within twenty feet made me straighten my spine and snap into the form of an obedient daughter. I uncrossed my arms.

The nurse stopped with the computer and tiptoed to a shelf, taking a bunch of papers down. She gave most of the pages to Steve, saying that we could read over the materials and call with any questions. One of the pages she handed my way.

"This is for your birth plan," she said.

I took the page of pink paper with baby feet faded into the background.

"Fill that out and bring it when you come to have your baby," she said. "It gives us a way to help you have the kind of birth you want."

Steve rolled his stack of papers into a cone and nodded in his big way that said he thought a birth plan was a great idea. Most of the time, I loved him for being so optimistic and for trying to make me optimistic too, but something in me just couldn't give in this time.

"If I fill this out," I said, "the birth will go the way I want?"

"You bet," she said.

I waved the page and the paper rippled in the air.

"If I write that I don't want drugs or any intervention at all," I said, "that's how the birth will go?"

The nurse pushed her hands into the front pockets of her top, this smock-style thing in a pastel color that matched the

birthing suite walls, and she looked at Steve for a translation.

"She wants to do this all natural," Steve said.

The tone of his voice said, "I have no idea what she's thinking." The nurse lifted her eyebrows like she understood him perfectly.

She leaned my way, her nurse shoes squeaky on the linoleum floor, and patted a cool hand on my arm.

"Don't you worry," she said, "we are here to help you have the birth you want."

In the reflection of the hospital windows, I can see Steve and me in our car. We look so small. We look even smaller compared to the size of the hospital. I wonder if Steve sees how small we are. I wonder if he's ever felt this scared. But that's not Steve's way and if I tell him how scared I am, he'll just shake me off, or worse, think that I'm weak. Steve's strong and he admires people who are that way too. I can do strong just as well as anyone else.

I pull the handle of my door.

"I'm not scared, Steve," I say. "Let's just get this thing over with."

My stomach leads the way out of the car and I slam the door, opening the back to get out my bag.

Steve comes around fast.

"I've got this stuff," he says.

"I've got it," I say.

I pull the bag by the strap, but he grabs it away before I can get it to my shoulder.

"Just let me do this, Jen," he says.

He moves the bag over his own shoulder and takes a couple more things out of the car.

I stand there for a second with nothing in my hand, but as he goes by, I snap an envelope out of the side pocket of my pack.

Steve's irritated, it's right there in how he walks ahead of me, taking long, sure steps to the front door.

I lag behind and hold the envelope on the curve of my stomach. Inside is my birth plan with simple words that add up to: No drugs, no intervention, no IVs, and no heartbeat monitors that will strap me down in the bed indefinitely.

In the hospital lobby, Steve stops at a desk made of dark wood and talks to someone. He's leaned on one elbow, feet crossed at the ankle and my bag slung over his shoulder so casual, he may as well be checking into a hotel.

I don't go in though. I stand on the plastic ramp of the automatic doors and they stay open with my weight pressed down.

It doesn't matter how casual Steve is about this whole thing, I know where we are. I know this is a place where life and death come through the same door. I know that when I come out, if I come out, I'm not going to be the same. Nothing is ever going to be the same.

Steve looks back like I'm right behind him, but no one is there and he finds me at the door. He shakes his head and opens his hand like, "What are you doing?"

One step at a time, I come the rest of the way in and that fast, the doors close behind me with a loud sucking sound, like God taking a deep breath.

On the other side of the EMERGENCY door, there is the white light of the hospital and people who walk back and forth in white clothes.

My father comes out of the doors and pushes his hand through his dark hair.

Her robe is still in my lap and the dried salt of tears make the skin on my face tight.

My father gets in the car, shuts the door, and looks straight into the night.

"It's okay now," he says, "they'll take good care of her."

He leans over the gear shifter and flips open the door of the glove compartment.

B.J. shifts his knees to make room while my father digs out his Pall Malls. After he gets them, B.J. shuts the glove compartment door.

My father sets himself straight again and shakes the pack a little, taking a smoke up between his lips.

B.J. pushes in the plug of the lighter and when it pops out, my father lights his cigarette. He hands the lighter back to B.J., who puts it back into that little hole in the dashboard by the radio dials.

My father smokes and starts the car, B.J. slouches low in his seat and looks out the window. I'm dying for talk, for words that make sense, for something that will explain what is going on, but the two of them are up there in their silent world of men. I watch the hospital as we drive away, and a hundred questions are trapped in my head.

At the front desk, the nurse is young and fresh. She talks in a high, little girl voice and has this habit of tucking her hair behind her ears even though it's short.

She puts together a pile of papers, clips them to a clipboard, and hands it over to Steve.

"You fill this out, Dad," she says, "and you come with me, Mom."

Steve puts our stuff on the floor near the check-in desk and takes the clipboard. I stay next to him, the envelope against my stomach and I smooth it flat as if it got wrinkled.

"Do I give you my birth plan?" I say, "or should I hold it for someone else?"

The nurse stands with this bouncy little move, tucks her hair behind her ears, and puts her hand out palm up.

"I'll take it," she says.

The paper is warm from my touch and I offer it her way. For a second, I almost snap it back, but she takes it out of my hand and puts it on the desk.

She doesn't open it or even look, she just drops the envelope and waves for me to follow her.

My envelope is so white against the dark wood of the desk, and I watch it even as I walk away.

"Are you having any contractions?" the nurse says.

She stands at the open door of a small examining room and I go in, pushing into the low of my back.

"I'm having a lot of pain here," I say.

The nurse closes the door and digs under the examining table.

"It catches my breath, but then goes away," I say.

She pulls out two folds of fabric and tosses them on a table covered with white paper.

"Go ahead and get changed," she says.

She pulls a big machine out from the corner of the room and plugs it into the wall. The machine makes this beeping sound and she taps on some keys on a keyboard.

The nurse looks up at me, a little surprised, and nods at the gowns again.

"Go ahead and get changed," she says, "we're going to look at the baby on an ultrasound and then we need to start an IV of antibiotics and saline."

Weak in my legs, I lean into the examining table, and hold my stomach.

"I don't want any IVs," I say, "it's on my plan. No drugs."

The computer flashes lights and the nurse does her little hair tuck behind her ears.

"Your doctor already called," she says, nodding as she talks, "she gave me instructions to start an IV of antibiotics."

"Why?" I say.

"For an infection," she says. "Your water broke early and that may be due to an infection."

I stand on both feet again.

"I don't have any infection," I say.

"You might," she says.

"I don't," I say. "I know I don't."

She sits with her hands on her knees. So young. So fresh.

"I want my husband in here with me," I say.

She tucks her hair behind her ears.

"All right," she says. "I'll get him, but maybe you can get changed?"

"Fine," I say.

She gets up bouncy but not as bouncy as before.

"Be right back," she says.

"Great," I say.

When she leaves, it's just me in the room and I let out a deep breath. I take off my sweatpants, my T-shirt, and a big

denim shirt, peeling the warm layers of me away to become a pile on the floor. I shake open what's supposed to be a gown, but it's so thin there's no way to feel warm inside it.

There's a knock on the door and Steve is in the door crack with questions in his blue eyes.

"What's wrong?" he says.

I tug the material of the gown over my behind and pull the door open. The nurse is back in the shadows of the hall. I pull him in and close the door on her.

"They want to put me on an IV," I say. "I don't want any drugs."

Steve nods like he knows and talks slow like I might not understand if he spoke more quickly.

"Jen," he says, "you have to think about the baby now, these people are here to help you."

I take his hand and hold his fingers tight.

"Honey, I don't have an infection," I say, "I just had a test for that."

"You did?" he says.

"Yes," I say, "on Friday and this is Sunday. There's no way I got an infection in two days. There's just no way."

My confidence shifts him back to my side and he nods like this makes sense.

After that, the nurse calls my doctor to ask about the test, but she has to leave a message with some service.

While we wait for the callback, the nurse squeezes goo on my stomach and moves a paddle around to see how the baby looks on ultrasound. He's curled up tight and low in my pelvis, positioned just the way he's supposed to be.

Steve has a happy, ready-to-be-a-dad smile on his face.

"This is a big baby for thirty-four weeks," the nurse says.

She looks over my file, her finger moving down some chart.

"It says here that you conceived in September? September nineteenth?" she says. "Are you sure it wasn't more like August?"

The date a baby is due is based on the first day of a woman's last period. You take that day, put it on a wheel, spin out forty weeks, and presto, you've got a due date. I know we got pregnant on September 19th, but I don't want to explain it here. Steve knows I don't want to explain too and he smiles his best smile at the nurse, the one that melts hearts.

"We got pregnant the first month we tried," Steve says, "we're very sure it was September."

The nurse giggles at Steve, charmed. She tucks her hair behind her ear.

"Okay," she says.

18 On September 19th, B.J. turns ten years old and he gets to wish for anything. His wish has two parts. First he wants breakfast at the International House of Pancakes and second, he wants to see our mother.

When he says his birthday wish out loud, my father's whole face frowns into deep lines around his eyes and into his forehead.

"You're still not old enough to go in," my father says, "you know that, don't you, buddy?"

B.J. nods like yes, he knows.

"I just want to be there," he says, "We'll wait in the car and you can go tell her it's my birthday."

My father moves his whole hand over his face and works his fingers around his jawline.

"She knows it's your birthday," my father says. "She'd want you to go somewhere fun, like the beach or maybe on a sailing trip."

B.J. shakes his head at those ideas.

"I just want to go to the hospital," B.J. says.

My father moves his jaw around like he's setting himself straight.

It's so odd, a birthday wish wasted on pancakes and an afternoon of sitting in a parking lot and it's even more odd because B.J.'s not that way. He's never talked about her while she's been gone and the whole thing makes me feel strange in my stomach.

My father pushes his hand through his hair then and his dusty eyes look sad.

"Okay, B.J.," he says. "We'll go see your mom."

My doctor calls back and says the test I took last Friday doesn't matter. She doesn't want to take any chances. She says I can have a shot instead of an IV, but no matter what, I have to take antibiotics.

The nurse says the shot hurts a lot, but I don't care, the shot will be over and I won't have any tubes stuck in my body afterward.

The nurse comes in with a tray and two huge hypodermic needles. They are big enough for cows.

"Are you sure you don't want an IV?" the nurse says.

I can't take my eyes off those needles but nod my head yes, I'm sure.

I turn myself around and lean over on the table. The nurse

moves my gown a little, rubs my skin with a pad of alcohol, and I lean all my weight on my elbows.

Steve sits in a chair by the door and I hold on to his blue eyes, to his innocence, to his confidence, as if those elements of him will have strength enough for me.

The needle pushes in and I close my eyes on Steve. There's a deep sting and then, down my leg, a run of pain so powerful, so intense, my knees give in. Steve is up to catch me as I go down and he grabs me under my elbows.

"Jen," he says, "hold on."

The drug moves slow and thick in my blood and it feels like something is ripping my leg off my body.

I lean so heavy into Steve he has to shift himself to hold my weight. I feel like I'm leaving this place, this black of nothing in my head.

"How often do you have to give her those?" I hear Steve say.

"Every four hours," the nurse says.

An hour later, I'm in one of the pastel blue suites, strapped to the bed by a baby heartbeat monitor and two IVs are in my arms. The tubes are attached to needles stuck into veins in my wrist and held in place with clear plastic tape. I guess the IVs aren't as bad as the shot, but they still hurt like hell.

My birth plan? I have no idea. It could be in that envelope abandoned on the front desk, or maybe by now it's been fed into a shredder somewhere, the sound of the machine drowning out the sound of nurses laughing at the stupid woman who didn't want any drugs.

Steve is gone somewhere too, checking out this part of the birthing wing, and I roll my head on the pillow. The machine

I'm attached to beeps and there are numbers on a red screen that are the baby's heartbeat. They read 144, 145, 146. The sound from the machine is steady and strong.

Steve comes through the door and he's got two plastic cups in his hands.

"This is great," he says, "they've got all the soda you can drink at a courtesy bar down the hall."

He puts a cup down next to the bed.

"I got you a Sprite," he says.

From the cup comes the bubbly sound of carbonation and he sips at his own cup, watching me over the rim.

"I got Coke," he says.

I wish I could throw the Sprite into his face and scream at him, but I don't. I just smile and nod like, "Great—soda."

There's a knock at the door and a woman pushes past the curtain that hangs in front of the door.

"Are you the Laucks?" she says.

Steve doesn't share my name, but he nods anyway, yes, we're the Laucks, and she comes in. She's got a clipboard under her arm, a stethoscope around her neck, and she's wearing blue pants and a blue top. There's a nametag pinned to her top, but I cannot deal with who she is. I just look at her face that's long and pointy like a greyhound dog.

She talks to us in a flat monotone of a voice, announcing she's from the intensive care unit and that she's here to prepare us for what could happen with a premature baby.

She holds the clipboard in her arms and the sound of her voice is lost in the beep of the baby's heartbeat.

"He might not be able to breathe," she says.

"His heart may stop," she says.

"You may not be able to take him home for at least six weeks," she says.

Steve puts his soda down next to mine and crosses his arms over himself to take the blows of her bad news. The more she talks, the more still he gets, the color gone from his face. Steve turns into a rock.

I feel like I'm not even in the room with them. I float high above the whole scene and watch these poor fools bumble around.

"Any questions?" the nurse says.

She stands there waiting and Steve's stunned quiet makes me come back, makes me clear my throat.

"What are the chances he'll be fine?" I say.

The nurse tilts her head like she doesn't understand me.

"Fine?" she says.

I push my hands into the soft of the bed and adjust myself to sit up a little taller.

"Fine," I say. "You know, normal and healthy, able to go home."

The nurse looks down at her clipboard for such a long time, perhaps at the shreds of my birth plan, and then she sets her sights on Steve, as if he's the more reasonable of the two of us.

"I wouldn't count on anything," she says, "it's best to be prepared."

Steve pushes through his hair, this slow move of a man who looks like he's in over his head.

I can't go where he's going, I can't even let myself imagine the kind of things she's talking about. I can't think that way and have a baby.

I look at the heartbeat machine instead and meditate on the numbers that go up and down between 144 and 147.

Steve asks a few more questions, more doom and gloom. I don't have any questions. It's quiet in the room for a long time and when I feel her leave, I look down at my own hands held together on my lap. I move my wedding ring around my finger and whatever labor pains I had are gone now, chased away by the shot and the IVs and by just being in a hospital.

"She's wrong," I say to my hands.

"What?" Steve says.

I shift off my hands and onto his scared face. "She's wrong," I say.

"How do you know?" Steve says.

"I know," I say.

"How?" he says.

This is how it is between Steve and me. We don't speak the same language. He's all about facts and what you can touch and see. I believe in those things too, but there's more. There's always been more. I know certain things in my heart. My problem is that I haven't learned how to speak my language very well, at least in a way that can convince a person like Steve, or that stupid nurse, of my meaning.

I move my hand over my stomach and the tubes pull pain against my wrist.

"I just know," I say.

Steve licks his lips and pushes his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

"I mean it," I say, "she's wrong."

I nod at the machine, at the numbers that stay steady and strong.

"Just look at his heart, look how strong he is."

Steve puts his hand on top of the machine and looks at the numbers for a long time.

I don't know what he sees in those numbers, I can't read his mind, but it doesn't matter. I know what I know.

I lie back in the bed then and pull the covers up over my legs. I close my eyes and the only sound is the beep of our baby's heart.

At the IHOP my father eats slow and orders cup after cup of coffee. When it's finally time, he pays the bill and the three of us go out to where the car is parked.

Outside, it's hot and sunny, but it's always that way. L.A. is sunshine and palm trees. It's like a vacation that never ends.

Before he gets in, my father leans his elbows on the roof of the car and talks over the top. He's got a toothpick in his mouth and it moves up and down with his words.

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the beach?" he says.

B.J. goes around to the passenger side, a toothpick in his mouth too.

"Yep," B.J. says.

The two of them consider each other and then my father takes the toothpick out of his mouth and tosses it on the ground. He opens his door for me and I climb in under his arm.

"We could drive over to Anaheim and take in Disneyland," my father says, "and then stop by on the way back."

B.J. climbs in front and slams his door.

"Nope," B.J. says.

My father shuts his door and he looks over at B.J., who's

slouched low in his seat, working his toothpick. He starts up the car and revs the engine a couple times.

In the tape deck, a man sings.

*I'm looking for a hardheaded woman, one who will make me do my best. If I find my hardheaded woman, I know the rest of my life will be blessed.*

We drive then, in the direction of the hospital, and I watch the palm trees out the window, lined up so perfect along the sidewalks.

I like that song. I like to think about me growing up to be one of those hardheaded women, a woman who will know things that other people don't know, a woman who has all the answers.

I stand in front of the baby heart monitor and watch the numbers that beat out the same song, 144, 145, 146.

It's Wednesday night, three nights after my water first broke, and Steve went home to get some sleep. A nurse came in a while back, put a fat new bag of antibiotics on the hook, and started up another of saline. She said she was going home. She said a new nurse would check on me in a couple of hours.

I have on two gowns now, one like a robe, the other like a nightgown, but I don't remember the last time I was really warm.

I move my hand over my stomach and it's tight and heavy.

Past the machine, another crucifix is nailed to the wall.

When we first got here, I wanted to take it down and put it into a drawer. I didn't do it though. Something like that has to be a huge sin.

I look at it now, really look.

The crucifix is small, maybe as big as my own hand, and the mini Jesus who hangs there is dead at this point, or pretty close. Even though he's tiny, I can still make out the detail of his long angled face, his beard, and the wavy hair on his head. His eyes are closed, he's got a tiny nose, and his lips are pressed together. I touch my finger to his arms spread wide on the cross, touch all the way to the tip of one hand and press into the tiny nail that holds him down.

In these three days, I have seen six doctors, that many nurses, and heard twice as many opinions.

They have given me drugs to force labor and then stopped the drugs, worried that my uterus would bleed out.

They have given me drugs to soften my cervix, but my body isn't doing anything.

Steve has lost all respect for this place.

"These doctors are like bad mechanics," he says. "They tinker around under the hood, but they don't know much about fixing a problem."

Again, he's right. Even the doctors admit they can try this or do that, but in the end it's up to the mysterious chemistry between my body and the baby.

My finger moves over the rise of tiny rib bones and whoever made this crucifix even put the two small slashes into Jesus' chest, the ones that were cut into him as he hung there on the cross. It's the part of the story that always got to me. The man was already nailed to the cross and dying under the brutal heat of the sun. Why cut his flesh? Why make him suffer so?

Our insurance company keeps calling, wondering why I haven't had the baby yet and somewhere the cost of all this is being added up. I have a feeling the insurance company will



be pushing for a C-section pretty soon. I have a feeling my time is running out.

I touch all the way down to the tips of Jesus' toes and my finger catches on the nail that holds him down.

Since I have been in this hospital, my blood has been drawn three times. Each time, the white blood count goes down, which means no infection, no infection, no infection. I've known it all along. I also know that I'm never going to have this baby with all this crap pumping into me.

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me, I think those were the last words of Jesus before he died. What kind of God does such a thing to His only son? Why is that love? And what about Mary? Why is she down there at her son's feet letting him die such a terrible death? Is that what being a mother is? Are we expected to let some God torture our child and call it love? Is this what I believe in?

I stop touching Jesus then and hold myself instead, my hands cupped around my own son locked inside. Across the room, I see myself reflected in the window, this woman heavy with a baby that just won't come.

I've been to church enough to be afraid of God and to learn the lesson that I'm nothing but a woman in a permanent state of sin, but what about this slice of heaven inside of me? If I can make life in my own body, can't I make a decision for myself, can't I trust what I know? But then, what if I make a mistake? How will I ever forgive myself if something goes wrong, but at the same time, how much longer can I go on like this, waiting for other people to show me the way?

When you look at a thing long enough, it can almost change form. That's how it is with the crucifix. It's really just a

tiny man nailed to a cross. That was two thousand years ago and this is now. I don't have to be obedient. I don't have to be good. I just have to do what I'm here to do.

I take a deep, deep breath and pull the strap of the heart-beat monitor. The Velcro makes a ripping sound and the monitor goes flat.

I roll the tubes and belt up, shoving everything on a shelf under the machine. I'm a little lost without the beeping sound and the run of numbers 144, 145, and 146. There's doubt in the quiet and even a little fear.

I hear the sound of nurses out in the hall, voices talking as they change shifts. I wheel the IV stand across the room and the plastic tubes swing between my wrist and the bags. I close the door of my room and go into my bathroom, closing that door too. I push the lock on the knob and it makes a small click.

The bathroom is small with brown tile on the floor, on the walls, even on the ceiling. I stand on tiptoe and take the bag of antibiotics off the hook. There's a small plug in the bottom of the bag and I hold the whole thing over the toilet and pull. The antibiotics spit into the toilet and I force all of it out, every last little bit, and then put the plug back into the bottom. I hang it up again and do the same thing with the saline.

In the mirror, I don't recognize myself. My face is fat and puffy from all the drugs and my skin is the pasty white of someone who hasn't slept or eaten in three days.

I turn the shower on, adjusting the water to be so hot that the room fills fast with steam. I get myself out of both gowns, twisting and turning to separate fabric from the tubes still attached to my arms.

In the mirror, the steam takes my image away or at least my clarity, but I am still there, big and naked and full. I move my hands down the sides of my stomach, down low to where I can feel his shoulders resting.

It's time, little man, let's go.

I step in the shower, hot water washing me down, and I pull the curtain closed.

26 25 I don't know why, but B.J. and I fight all the time. It's this thing in the air between us, this snap that waits until we are alone and when we are, he punches me and I kick to get away.

He's in front but turned around with his chest against the seat, arms swinging and I'm in the back, kicking against his fists.

My father pounds his hand on the roof of the car and I can hear him yell at us from outside. B.J. turns around quick and I pull my legs to be crossed.

"Knock it off," my father says, opening the door fast. "Stop hitting your sister. What's the matter with you?"

My father gets into the car and shuts his door hard.

"She started it," B.J. says.

"Did not," I say.

"Did too," B.J. says.

My father puts his hand up between us.

"Enough," my father says.

B.J. shifts around to face front.

"How is she?" B.J. says.

My father goes from being angry to happy that fast and makes his biggest smile, all teeth and squinty eyes.

"Great," he says.

"Did she say anything about my birthday?" B.J. says.

"Sure did," my father says. "I'll tell you everything when we get home."

He starts up the car then and there's something in the way he talks. It's different for him.

"Is she coming home?" I say.

"Is she coming home today?" B.J. says.

My father shakes his head like that's not it.

"I'll tell you when we get home," he says.

27 An hour after I pour out the antibiotics, I go into real labor.

Before, it just felt like some squeezing around my back, but that went away after the shot from hell. Later, when I was on something called Pitocin, I felt like I was getting kicked in the back. Now, I'm being pulled into a hole of pain that can't breathe and the only way up and out of the hole is to make myself suck air in. It helps to make a deep sound too. I make the sound from the deepest center of my core, this low, hard moan. If I heard it outside of myself, I'd think some poor animal was dying somewhere.

I rock in a chair, moaning that way, and fall into a kind of sleep where I dream I'm not in pain. When I wake from the dream, there is the hospital room, the rocking chair, and Steve, who sits close and gives me a cup of water with a straw.

If I'm not rocking and moaning and sleeping, I'm in the shower being sprayed low on my back. Steve holds the nozzle on me while I stand with my hands pressed into the wall, my face into my arm.

The nurse keeps coming in, telling me to get out of the

shower to check the baby's heartbeat, and I do it as long as I can and then I get back in the shower.

People keep trying to talk to me, asking me questions about what I'd like to do.

"Do you want a narcotic for the pain, or how about that epidural?"

It hurts to think. It hurts almost as bad as the pain that's low in my groin and I say no through the hours until I can't take it anymore. Twelve hours later, I finally say yes to anything that will get me out of this pain, but then the nurse looks inside me and says it's time.

I'm ten centimeters dilated and that's the magic number.

27  
C17-100  
The suite is unfolded to become one hundred percent hospital room. The bed breaks into two pieces, the bottom half wheeled away and two metal bars for pushing are folded up by my hips. From behind a mirror, a table is folded down and a nurse sets it up with sterile instruments, gloves, and masks. Someone turns a switch and these high beam lights that were hidden in the ceiling shine white between my legs. A doctor comes in then, a woman I've never met, and sits in a stool that's waiting at the end of the bed.

She says something to me, but her voice is trapped behind her mask.

"What?" I say.

"Olsen," Steve says, "she's Dr. Olsen."

"Oh," I say.

As if I still have any say, I lean up on my elbows and look her square into her eyes, the only part of her I can see.

"Don't cut me," I say.

"You don't want an episiotomy?" she says.

"That's right," I say, "help me do this without cutting me."

She nods like she understands.

Two nurses are behind her, strangers from the intensive care unit, and Steve takes his place on one side; a nurse named Jackie waits on the other.

The doctor looks around at all of us, like the coach of a team ready to play the big game.

"All right," the doctor says, "let's have a baby."

Steve has set up the CD player and it's Seal singing smoky and deep, a song called "Show Me." The lyrics are, *Show me the way to solve your sorrows and I'll do what I can.*

My father won't say anything until we get all the way back to our apartment and when we get there, we have to go inside too.

We live up a steep hill and our living room window faces the ocean. You can see all of it from up here. You can see the wide blue water, the white caps, and even the little sailboats way out in the distance.

"Let's sit, guys," my father says.

He points us to a round purple sofa.

27  
K  
"Jennifer," Dr. Olsen says, "you have to hold your breath for ten seconds and then let it go."

"Okay," I say.

I take a deep breath and Steve and Jackie press me forward.

I hold my breath and Dr. Olsen counts while I push.

"One, two, three," she says.

27  
When we sit down, we face out to the ocean. B.J. is on one side of my father and I'm on the other. My father puts his arms around both of us and the weight of him is heavy on my shoulders.

\* \* \*

"Eight, nine, ten," Dr. Olsen says.

Steve and Jackie lay me back, but I don't want to be back, I just want to push again.

"Take another deep breath," Dr. Olsen says, "you are very close."

I suck in all the air I can and sit up, bearing down against the press of Dr. Olsen's hand between my legs.

Everyone in the room says, "Push, push, push."

"Your mother died this morning," my father says.

I push so hard it hurts and burns between my ears and I hear myself scream, "Get this baby out of me!"

"It's better this way," my father says, "she was in so much pain."

He says more, but I can't hear his words. Instead, I bend against my knees and over there, B.J.'s face is gone to shadow like a cloud passed in front of the sun. He knew. He knew all along and he didn't even know he knew.

"One more push," Dr. Olsen says.

I hold my breath like I will never breathe again and push.

Through the center of me, a baby comes into our world, a tiny old man with his arms crossed over his chest.

The ocean rises and falls, so big and blue and forever out there, and I sit back. I never felt her leave. I felt her coming home instead. I feel her close right now. I smell her almond lotion and her Parliaments. I could even touch her hand that

reaches my way if only my father's arm wasn't so heavy on my shoulders.

I shift under him, try to get away, but he holds on tighter and talks and talks and talks.

"She's with God now," he says.

"It's a boy," Dr. Olsen says, "and he looks great."

I lie back on the bed and reach for my baby at the same time.

"Give him, give him, give him to me," I say.

Dr. Olsen barely has time to wrap him up and she lays him on my chest.

I move my arms around his tiny body, pulling him to be against my heart. He is so small, but he feels sturdy in my arms. He makes this wobbly cry sound.

I laugh and cry, touching his body slick with that white goo that helps him slide safe into this world. There are his arms, his fingers, his chest, his legs, and his toes.

His cry sucks in and then it comes out again, a little stronger, a little louder.

I touch over his face, this perfect heart of a face with eyes as dark as Egyptian stones.

Life and death come through the same door.

He puffs his chest, sucks in another deep breath, and cries so loud this time everyone in the room laughs at the sound of him.

No one has ever looked so beautiful to me.

I press my lips against his head and whisper, "Welcome, baby," except I can't hear myself over the sound of his powerful cry.