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This thesis is a novel, which explores issues of identity, community, and race in a small town. It is set in Alden, North Carolina, a town between the mountains and the sea, in all kinds of transition. The novel begins with the discovery of an infant girl abandoned in a hospital waste container.

MIX

by

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For Jeff, Cole, and Jack Henry

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Something squalled in the medical dumpster. Sounded like cats scalded with boiling water, but it came from underneath a bunch of trash bags stuffed with stained paper sheets, vials of yellow fluids--things too dangerous to touch. The sound was muffled, but howling still. The last thing Brandon had to do was dump the orange bags, the waste for the incinerator. He threw it over. The smell of urine and rot overcame him. He held his breath. Red boxes of old needles, even autoclaved bags of human parts waited there. But the sound came again, and echoed off the metal, and this time Brandon was sure it was alive. He couldn't turn from that. Wanted to, but couldn't.

A man with earphones snaking out of his head stacked boxes on the loading dock, then went inside. No one else was around. Brandon climbed up the side of the dumpster on the door handles and looked over. Something moved beneath a leaking bag. He eased down among the dead smelling trash and walked toward the sound with man-on-the-moon steps, trying not to bust the bags. He almost stepped on a tiny face framed in black hair. It had a wide-open O of a mouth and a quivering tongue, working to make all the noise it could. "Shh!" Brandon said. He looked around. The baby didn't quiet. He picked the baby up and lifted it too high. He hadn't expected it to be so light. It felt like the

whole world could see him, even though the baby's head fit into the palm of his hand like a softball. How could he leave a thing with its own eyes and a tiny pink tongue? Those eyes might never forget his face and wonder what kind of man had left them to be burned in the incinerator. Joseph didn't ask for a baby. Neither did Pharaoh's daughter.

Brandon held the baby close and saw that it was a girl and that the umbilical cord had been loosely tied and was dripping blood. He tied the cord tighter, in a knot close to her skin. She didn't scream any louder. He held her to his chest inside his green canvas jacket and she calmed some.

A man came out to the loading dock with more trash bags in each hand. Brandon held the baby and squatted low, curving his body around hers.

"Hey Curtis, you forgot one," a woman called from inside. Curtis went back for the bag. Brandon breathed.

He climbed out of the dumpster with an unsteady foothold on the walls, clutching the tiny creature like a football in one arm and balancing his weight with the other. Layers of blue paint hung off the dumpster like old scabs.

"Shh, it's okay baby girl," he said. She was probably dehydrated. She did feel warm. The sun was strong and could have burned her. Goop almost sealed her eyes shut and her skin was blotchy and irritated. She had blood and Lord-knows-what matted into her hair, but at least somebody knew enough to cut off the placenta so it wasn't weighing on her. Brandon got to the side of the building and looked her over good, like there might be evidence of who she was. She was tiny and perfect, ten fingers and toes.

He ran a hand over his gray-flecked hair and goatee. Wiped the thin sheet of sweat from his face, smooth as polished walnut. He had been working this janitor's job since he was nineteen—almost half his life. Not playing at being grown like a ghetto boy talking about a seed when he meant a child. He had almost had a family, it had been promised to him in Tanya's round hips, her one-sided smile. Promised, but never delivered. He had no mama to offer this baby. Neither did the state. They would move her from place to place, passing her along, paying someone to stand in for family until she grew big enough to make her own problems. He wiped her crusted eyes to open them. She stretched in his arms. Her cry sputtered until it was gasps for air, then long, smooth breaths. If he took care of what wasn't supposed to be, whose business was it? She was little bitty, must have been a preemie—ripples of dark hair, seashell ears, and eyes too big for her head.

A truck backed up to the loading dock. The loud beeps startled her. Her arms thrust out in panic and Brandon tucked them next to her body and held her tight. She had a small bud of a mouth, but she hollered like a siren. Maybe he should take her inside, up to Pediatrics on the sixth floor, let them clean her up, run tests on her, find her a home.

The baby had messed on the blue towel she was wrapped in. Mama could be in another state by now. She was probably a young girl, nobody knew she was pregnant, so she told herself it wasn't true. Wore the boyfriend's jacket to cover up. Brandon saw little girl mamas on the news all the time. Denying what was inside of them and giving birth like a bloody dream in some fast food bathroom. Pushing their fists against the stall and crouching with quiet, wild eyes. Pain coming straight from God, like waves of

punishment for sin. Baby hitting the dirty tile in a slick puddle, screaming. The boyfriend's jacket muffling the sound, but the boyfriend nowhere to be found.

Little girl mamas probably didn't even recognize their own bodies in the pain of it. Stood beside themselves and watched it all, maybe. Thought if they never told, it would never happen, but a thought can't stop a body from growing or changing. A thought can't change time.

Something, maybe the voice of Jesus said, *Brandon, blessed are the children*. He could hear it plain as he could hear the cars pulling in and out of the parking lot where the surgical waste dumpster sat.

You couldn't treat a human being like trash and think they'd come back to you. Brandon could do better, with what little he knew. If he hadn't walked up to that dumpster, she might have disappeared into smoke and dust like her so-called mama wanted. "It's all right, sweet girl," he said. "No need to cry."

Brandon rode his new baby girl home on the floorboard of his car so slow, people honked and gunned the gas as they passed, but he took his time. He knew she felt the slightest bump of the pavement through the worn floor mat, but he worried that if he put her on the seat she would roll off when he came to a stop.

He bathed her in the kitchen sink. That sink would not fit a baking sheet, or a big iron skillet, but it swallowed Rosie-- that's what he called her. He was careful to get the water tepid. He used only a dime-sized drop of dish soap. It said it was gentle. He might have been painting china. His rough, full fingers cramped with the delicate work of

cleaning between tiny, curled toes. He poured a trickle of clean water into her mouth. She could live off of what her mama had left inside her for a day or two. The mama girl's milk would come in in a few days. It would drop into her breasts, hard as a load of bricks, and hurt her because she couldn't get it out. Brandon hoped she felt the pressure. She would bleed for weeks and have to remember where the blood came from and what she had called waste.

"I'd like to make an appointment for my newborn," Brandon said.

"Who is the referring physician?" the receptionist asked.

Brandon held the receiver tight, "I don't remember his name, but he said bring her to the clinic in a few days."

"All right. I'll put you down for one o'clock with Dr. Johnson, but you might want to come early. Things get backed up." The clinic was in Lewisville, the next county over, at the health department. Brandon didn't want people in his business. He wrapped his baby girl up like a burrito in the soft blankets, the way Mama had taught him to wrap his brother.

Mama never got a girl, just two boys--one dark and heavy and another brown-skinned and stringy--neither one a comfort to her. Brandon should have given Mama a granddaughter. He would name this little girl after her--Eugenie Rose, call her Rosie.

Rosie's color hadn't come in yet. She was born a pinkish-brown, and her eyes didn't know which color to turn. They looked green brown, like the insides of black

olives. He didn't see the point of letting them poke his baby with a bunch of needles to find out who she came from. Everybody had the same red blood.

Brandon got to the clinic at seven a.m. A line of people already curled around the low brick building. Behind him, a stooped pale woman with wisps of snowy hair pulled a sweater around her shoulders. A teenaged boy in a work uniform cradled his bandaged arm. A skinny, smooth-faced mother held one baby on her pointy hip, while a toddler ran around her as if she was a maypole. "Stop it Marcus, before I tear you up," she said.

Marcus began to cry. The line grew.

"It's all them Mexicans now," the man in front of Brandon said. His voice was raspy. He was getting a culture done. Sore throat.

"The clinic is slow," Brandon said.

The sore throat man shook his head. He turned to a woman behind him and said, "Adios! Go home, senorita!" She stared at him and wrapped her arms around her coughing daughter. Brandon stepped up with the line.

When the front of the line entered the building, the air wasn't hot yet. Dew weighted the grass and wet Brandon's shoes when he walked through it. He took a seat near the check-in desk, so he would be sure to hear his name called. Rosie slept in the little car seat he had bought. So many different models filled the store shelves, too many choices. He picked the most expensive one with the highest safety rating. "This is the one you want," the saleslady told him. He didn't argue. The car seat made a little bed wherever you went, so the baby always felt at home.

Programmed music provided a backbeat to the conversation in the waiting room, but it all slid through Brandon. Needles could have stabbed Rosie. Bacteria could have gotten inside her, not to mention what a person could have done to her if they ended up by throwing her away.

He looked at all the year-old lady magazines, read about good parenting, when to start solids. He put one of the magazines in the diaper bag he had fixed out of an old backpack. An old woman sitting across from him in the waiting room fell out and they rushed to revive her, so she went first. Two stout nurses lifted her up underneath her billowy purple sleeves. Then they took the boy who had his hand wrapped up, with blood soaked all the way through the gauze bandage. His face had blanched a yellow gray. People would end up in the E.R. and Brandon would have to clean up all the fluid and blood they left behind. Nobody else would dare to touch it.

He couldn't leave the waiting room to eat, or he'd lose his number and fall down to the bottom of the list. He had a bottle of formula for Rosie and a peanut butter sandwich for himself and they ate lunch in the orange vinyl waiting room chair with the room full of people squished up against them and a stuck-still line going out the door. He changed Rosie's diaper, but turned his back to the room to shield her, so nobody would see.

A pockmarked nurse read her clipboard, looked around the room and called, "Wilson, Brandon. Mr. Wilson?" She raised her perfectly arched brows, like, what is this man doing with a tiny baby, and it's got no mama, and maybe she thought he was the

grandpa. He nodded at the nurse to let her know that what she was seeing was just fine. Better than fine.

"Here," he said.

"This way, please." She motioned him through the heavy white door. She wore green scrubs with balloons embroidered on them. Rosie looked at the balloons.

"I'll get you a balloon," he said to Rosie and it looked like she smiled, even though it might have been gas. "What color do you want?"

"Be careful," the nurse said. "If a balloon pops and a baby swallows it, it can choke."

"I wouldn't give this child a balloon. Not ever," Brandon said. Matter of fact, why would that nurse wear them on her shirt? Make a child want something that's too dangerous.

"The doctor will be right with you," she said.

They sat in that bright exam room and Brandon washed his hands three times. People carried all kinds of germs. A man had come into the E.R. with some kind of staph infection. That could spread to anybody, healthy or not, and you couldn't do a thing.

He had Rosie smelling like baby lotion. He had bought her some Pampers and a pack of onesies. He was watching Rosie grow up in his mind when the doctor came in and she was a lady.

"Well, hello, Miss Just Born, " she said. The nametag on her white coat said Dr. Johnson. "Is Mama still recovering?" This sounded good, so Brandon went with it. He had seen all that mess in the O.R. after a C-section.

"Just us today," he said.

Dr. Johnson checked Rosie over, listened to her heart. It beat fine. "She's a healthy little girl," she said. "Looks like she's slightly jaundiced, but that's common in preemies. It should clear itself up. Make sure she gets exposed to daylight, but not direct sun." Brandon nodded. Dr. Johnson wore a brown suit under her white coat and her hair lay back in flat rows of short, neat twists. "I'll need you to sign this consent form so I can give her some shots." Brandon held the pen to the paper. It was more than a shot form, it said 'Brandon Wilson, do you take this child to be your daughter for the rest of your life?' He signed his name on the line in his prettiest script.

"Okay, Daddy, I'll get the immunizations and be right back," Dr. Johnson said.

Flora blew smoke into the air and watched a cloud of it break apart until there was no trace of it but the smell--like something that had once been alive. Not like the hospital,

that smelled dead. She didn't care if anybody saw her in her robe and slippers. She didn't care that the doctors wanted her in bed. Let them try it. She had snuck through the tunnel that connected the building to the parking garage, two cigarettes hidden in the palm of her hand, pushing the I.V. in front of her on the shiny tile. She shuffled from her room, to the elevator, through the glass tunnel, all the way to Deck Three, Row A: two hundred fifty-seven steps. She held the flame of the lighter in the air for a second after she lit her smoke, *Freebird*.

She looked out over the rainbow of cars in the parking lot and counted the red ones, then looked down at the loading dock. A man, a dark one in a green janitor uniform, climbed into the dirty-ass dumpster. That was so nasty! Couldn't nobody find him a meal or something?

A wild animal screamed like its insides were twisted. It was loud and high-pitched and it wanted something bad. Flora held still. She heard it again. That man wasn't dumpster diving for food. He was holding his breath and diving towards something alive. Flora leaned out over the concrete half-wall into the sunlight to get a better look. She took another drag from her cigarette.

He was a big man and clean cut, and his uniform fit like it belonged to him and he didn't get it from the Goodwill. Flora had cleaned and pressed enough uniforms to know that. The way the sun glared, she couldn't see his eyes or get a good look at his face. She tried to remember the size and the shape of him, so she would recognize him, even in the shadows.

Flora twisted to see better, but she had to drag the damn IV tree around. It was to keep her hydrated after surgery. She wasn't supposed to be smoking, but what the hell? *Dios mio*, she crossed herself, are you going to get hit with cancer twice? What kind of luck is that, unless you were cursed maybe from birth? The doctors got the mass in her uterus, took the whole thing and the ovaries, too. "Good news, " they said. "We got everything."

They said her life could go back to normal, but what did they know about what made a life? They took all of her eggs. One, two, three, probably a thousand chances. That's what they took. Now Flora was empty and Ramon was full of babies and he would find someone, somewhere to grow his family.

"Who's going to want me now that I'm missing pieces?" she asked the doctor checking her incision, looking for infection. He looked at her like she was crazy for saying anything but *Gracias al Señor*. She couldn't thank this pasty-faced doctor with the lines of stress plowed into his forehead.

"Your husband will be happy you're alive and healthy," the doctor said, "You're healing well." He tried to pat her shoulder, but his hand didn't linger long enough to collect the heat from her skin. She pulled her gown down to cover herself.

Flora knew how Ramon went to those clubs and drank Coronas every Friday night with his boys. How he rubbed up against those white girls in short shorts and bleached hair and called it dancing. More than rubbed, sometimes.

She thought the girl's name was Melissa, that's what she saw written down with the phone number. She called it once, but hung up when a high voice said, "Hello?"

Then, she threw the number away. Ramon wouldn't have the nerve to ask where it was. He must have found it again, though, or maybe another Melissa. Flora found a long, blonde hair on his jacket. She burned it on the eye of the stove. He came home smelling like sweat and perfume and the insides of Melissa's body. He could at least take a shower.

What Flora was going to give him, to make him stay with her and forget about those *putas* in the tight clothes, was babies. She prayed and prayed and her belly began to swell.

"*Amor*, you're going to be a Papa," she said. She thought it was true. Ramon looked a little confused but he kissed her. He hadn't touched her in a long time.

"Aren't you happy? Say something to him." Flora pulled up her shirt to show her belly button.

"Hello, little man," Ramon said to her belly. But there was no baby inside. It had been a tumor, eating away at her.

"It's probably hereditary," the doctor said.

"I don't think anybody else in my family ever had this. They all just had babies," Flora said.

The doctor scribbled something on her chart. "It's better that we got it sooner, rather than later," he said.

"Better for what?" she asked.

Mami was short and fat, like Flora, but she had five babies and all of them were living, except Chuchi. He died in a car wreck, but he was drunk and that wasn't Mami's

fault. There was nothing she could do about that. Nothing anybody could do. Flora remembered the slick red car, how it bent like a can. Chuchi loved that car.

"I will die with him," Mami cried. The words came from the back of her throat. Flora envied her.

Flora had Papi's eyes, amber lit from inside, but Ramon didn't look at them. It took looking to light them. He ate the *chuletas* she put on the table without talking and watched TV. He watched a movie with buildings blowing up at the end of the world. She tried to wait up with him, but he only looked at the food and the TV.

"Did you see that?" he said.

"What?" Her eyes had started to close. She finally went to bed around midnight and said, "You coming, *Amor*?"

"Yeah, in a minute," Ramon said. Flora was asleep by the time he slid in beside her. She opened her eyes long enough to see that it was two in the morning. She woke at five to get Ramon's breakfast.

When they first married, they would go to bed early, but not to sleep, and she never said, "No, I'm too tired." When had their bed become more like a parking lot? A baby could warm it.

Flora lit another cigarette. The man in the green uniform wallowed in the dumpster. He popped his head up over the edge to see if anybody was looking. Flora hid behind a post on the parking deck and watched him sort through the haunted trash. A bag burst and dark liquid leaked out, but that man kept searching.

He crawled out of the dumpster carrying a real baby. He looked to see if anybody was around. He walked a few steps to the left, then to the right, then decided on the left. He didn't think to look above him. Who thinks of that? But Flora was there, watching. She could tell by his uniform he worked there. The man ducked around the corner by the loading dock. She caught a glimpse of the baby. It had brownish skin and black hair, just like her. It didn't look a thing like the heavysset man. He was a thief.

He carried the baby through the employee parking lot, to a burgundy car. She tried to read the license plate but when she leaned over the rail to see better, she had a big cramp in her belly and felt blood flow out of her body onto the pad and through the mesh hospital underwear. Maybe she could get some more Percocet, so she wouldn't feel.

"Now, what in the world are you doing out here?" the nurse said when she found Flora. She had short graying hair and a calm voice and Flora wanted to do what she said, so she would stay happy. She put her arm around Flora's shoulders. "Honey, you need to rest or you'll pull your stitches out."

"Fresh air," Flora said. The nurse smiled and Flora knew she could smell smoke on her, but she guided her by the IV back to her room. Flora watched TV in the mechanical bed and dreamed about her baby. She could not stop thinking how crazy it was that God had worked things out so fast.

Rosie spit up all the way back from the clinic. Brandon reached his right arm into the back seat and tried to wipe her mouth, keeping his left hand on the wheel. They rode the black ribbon of Old Winston Highway, moving carefully over each rise and around every bend. He rolled the windows up and turned on the air, even though he would have liked to rest his forearm on the door and feel the sun. He thought Rosie would like watching the loblolly pines pass. She didn't like riding in the car, though. It made her cry. Maybe she thought she had been left alone again.

"I'm here," Brandon said. He tried to make eye contact with her in the rearview mirror, but her eyes were squeezed tight with screaming. "It won't be much longer, Baby."

Once Brandon finally got her home, she relaxed some. Without the doctor's appointment or a bath, or feeding, Brandon didn't really know what to do with her. He sat for a while with Rosie's car seat beside him on the couch, but that felt uncomfortable, like he was waiting for her to get up. He took her out of the car seat and held her in his lap on the couch while she drifted in and out of sleep. He sang to her like his mama used to sing to him, at least the words that he remembered.

Hush little baby, don't say a word, Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird, he started, but he changed it after that because who would want a mockingbird that couldn't even sing in its own voice? He made it that he would buy her diamonds and a house and a nice car and all the clothes she wanted and he would always take care of her and he would never let anything bad happen to her. By the end of Brandon's song, it didn't sound a thing like *Hush Little Baby* and then he decided he didn't want her to think she had to hush anyhow, because her so-called mama had already tried to hush her for good. He would let little Rosie make all kinds of noise if she wanted. Nothing was too good for his baby girl.

Brandon had directed pregnant girls to the ladies' room a thousand times. They always had to go. Maybe he had pointed the mama girl in some direction. He might have seen her before, or worse, known her family, and then he worried that Rosie might have loved somebody else before him.

Maybe that girl with the curly hair he had shown to the ladies' room because she looked like she was about to throw up? No, she couldn't be old enough to have a baby, could she? Maybe the one in the Braves jacket with the micro-braids who ran out through the automatic doors. He kept seeing the outline of a skinny, stick legged, round-bellied girl, wearing tight jeans and big t-shirt, skipping meals so she wouldn't look big and maybe the baby would miscarry. Maybe throwing herself down stairs or smoking pot-- could be any kind of terrible. He imagined her in the mint green tiled ladies' room on the first floor. Maybe she ran in there from the street and locked herself in the stall and

flushed the toilet over and over to drown out her moans. Maybe she just held the pain in all quiet, like a dog will, shocked into silence. Brandon's mind wouldn't give her a face.

He never thought much about the blood and mess he found in the bathrooms. You get used to any kind of job. People bled and messed all over the hospital, sometimes left chunks of scab and human hair behind for Brandon to gather and dispose of. People died and healed in pieces. Nothing was whole. The entire hospital smelled like a mixture of bleach and human waste. Life and death came in bloody waves around here. Brandon dreamed up all kinds of lives for the mama girl, but he pushed her out of his head. He had more important things to worry over.

Who could he trust to look after Rosie while he worked? He didn't want a young girl with too much of her own life to live. A daycare center would need documents. He didn't want Rosie to have to leave home. He didn't want to share her with strangers. He prayed on it for a while. It had to be somebody special who would understand that the Lord meant Rosie for him. It had to be somebody who knew how to love any kind of baby. He rocked Rosie in her car seat bed and cooked himself some chili with chips and cheese on the top. Bachelor food, his mama used to call it. He'd have to learn how to cook better by the time Rosie got teeth. For now, baby formula would do. Brandon thought about Mama's Sunday dinner, the kind that took her all day to get ready. Pot roast and mashed potatoes, chicken and dumplings, greens, fried corn, always pie for dessert. She would invite all the family and neighbors over because she made so much and didn't want it to go to waste.

"Get you a plate now. We've got plenty," she'd say. They crowded around the table that almost couldn't hold the weight of the food. Arms crossed over other arms to pass things. It was the warmest place Brandon had ever been.

The ringing woke Augusta. She waited to hear it again, to make sure it was real and not a dream sound. It came again. Augusta sat up in the bed and reached for the phone on the nightstand. "Hello," she said.

"I didn't mean to wake you, Miss Augusta. Did I wake you? Well, I meant to but I'm sorry. I just need you right now, to come over. I need some help."

Augusta found her glasses, put them on and focused. "Brandon? Do you know what time it is?"

"Yes ma'am," he said. The clock said seven.

Brandon had spent every afternoon and weekend at Augusta's when he and Joseph were in high school.

"Do y'all have your homework done?" she said.

"Yes, Ma'am. We're working on our musical career now," Brandon said. They started a band and practiced every night in her paneled living room. Brandon was the bass man for a week or two. The boys worked out a few numbers. She remembered one was *Brick House*. She never told them to be quiet. They had a future, she said. She would dance to their music as she cleaned up after dinner.

"It's just now seven o'clock, Brandon. Let me get my up and have my bath," she said.

"Okay. I have a favor to ask you."

"You'll have to give me a minute and then I'll be over. Put on a pot of coffee, too, if you don't mind." Brandon's mama, Genie, and Augusta never made a fuss over which kids they had given birth to. She was some kind of mama to him.

"Okay," he said.

Did he get in trouble with the law, Augusta wondered, or some girl, or did he need to borrow money, or did he just want to know what to do with his life – the problems her own kids called her with. By now, they should be taking care of her instead of calling once in a blue moon, saying "I'll try you later," on her answering machine and never trying, then or later.

Brandon took so long to answer the door that Augusta had to sit down on the porch swing. She swung gently, and didn't let her feet leave the ground. Maybe she

would put another coat of paint on the swing for Brandon. It was chipping. She studied her fingernails, coated with clear polish, and noticed a light brown spot on the back of her pale hand. All those years in the sun were beginning to show. She fanned the air around her face. She was sweating already, the air was so thick. It would storm this afternoon, about three or four o'clock. No relief until then.

When Brandon opened the door, he had to step back a little. Augusta was right in front of him, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

"Got that coffee made for you," he said. He looked tired and his smile was too big. He led her to the kitchen. The coffee pot sputtered, steam rose out of the top.

"What's going on, Brandon. You in trouble?"

"No, Ma'am. Cream or sugar?"

A baby's cry filled the room—panicked and breathless. That's something you can't help but react to once you've had children. It can pull you from a deep sleep, the body finding what it lost. Augusta stood up and followed the sound back to Genie's bedroom. Brandon hadn't changed the room since his mama died. It smelled like a medicine cabinet and the fuchsia sheers were drawn, but enough pink light shone through them that Augusta could see the lacy white bedspread with a pile of throw pillows pushed up against the headboard. Propped in between two pink pillows was a baby, small as a plastic doll. Augusta picked the baby up and held her, walked with a bounce to calm her down, then perched the baby belly-down on her shoulder and patted her back until she burped. She knew right then who she belonged to.

Brandon reached for the baby, but Augusta didn't let go. She walked a circle around the room.

"That's what I was fixing to tell you about," Brandon said. "My daughter, Eugenie Rose."

"Well," Augusta said. She looked from the baby's face back to Brandon's.

"You don't know the mama," Brandon said, " She's young and it was a fling and she got into drugs. I had to keep the baby so she would have a chance, now I know she's mine. You can tell by looking at her. I want to do right by her." Augusta couldn't remember Brandon having a steady girlfriend since that Tanya. Had he mentioned something about it? Nine months was a long time. She tried to think what he was doing last summer and fall. Working a lot, was all she could remember. She traced the baby's fine eyebrows with her fingertip—they were perfect. She was beautiful. Looked like the mama could be white, but Augusta didn't ask. The baby could look like Brandon. Maybe the nose? It all sounded like a lie with a creamy silk lining of truth. Augusta touched the silk and held onto it, because it's what carried the baby girl here. "You're a good man, Brandon," she said.

Augusta kept Rosie every time Brandon went to work and he worked three twelve-hour shifts a week. He dropped Rosie off before breakfast and picked her up after work. Augusta made him dinner, chicken casserole and lima beans. Something balanced. It was no trouble, it was what she knew how to do. Made her young.

Augusta and Rosie learned each other's scent. They anticipated each other's movements, each other's needs. Rosie would reach her arms up when Augusta stood beside her crib. Augusta would keep her. Brandon didn't have to know. Her kids, Joseph and Sarah, didn't need to know anything about Rosie at all. They'd just give her a hard time. They'd say, "Mama, you need to rest. That's too much for you, looking after an infant." If they had one, though, they'd be calling asking questions and begging her to come visit for a few weeks to help. They wouldn't worry then.

Augusta hadn't spoken to her own people in forty years. They held grudges forever, but they never lived long. Maybe eighty was the oldest, Granny Pridemore. The rest of them died of heart problems. Her brother keeled over with a heart attack at forty-seven. He was painting a neighbor's living room as a side job. Fell off the ladder and landed in the paint tray full of Skylight Blue. "He still had little streaks of that blue sky paint in his hair when we buried him," his wife Minah said. Augusta and Minah talked to each other. You pick out the ones who will help you survive.

Minah came over to the house to help out after each of her children was born. She took risks to get there, sneaking so nobody else would know. She told them all to go to hell when they said ugly things. "I swear, Augusta, you have the prettiest babies I have ever seen," she said. Never once made a mention of anything but how beautiful they were. All anybody else could talk about was were they black or white? Who did they really belong to? But Minah was right. They were the most beautiful babies in the world.

Every afternoon, Augusta took Rosie outside and pushed her in her blue umbrella stroller. Rosie looked at the pin oaks, with their thousand tiny lights and shadows. She probably couldn't focus on the swell of the far off mountains yet. The stroller made deep tracks in the dark soil. All the birds tweeting in the tops of trees really got Rosie going. She kicked her legs like she was trying to chase them. The late day sun glowed hot and the air was full. Even a baby had to sweat. She shaded Rosie and fanned her with her hand. She didn't want her to burn. They somehow looked alike, from the right angle. Same pointed chin and definitely the same mossy eyes. They would see things the same way. They both had heart shaped faces with small mouths, too.

Augusta pushed the stroller up the road toward the school, where the big kids were scattered on the playground. The children had worn the grass around the playground equipment to dirt. They squealed and screamed and ran fast. Must have been playing tag. "You're it!" a boy yelled. The boys who chased each other in circles and the girl with the beaded braids, laughing on the swings, amazed Rosie. Her eyes followed the swing's arc and the shiny buckle of the little girl's shoes every time she pumped her legs in, then out. In the last month, Rosie had gotten good at holding her head up on her own.

Augusta and Rosie always turned around before the trailer park a few blocks away. It was mostly Mexicans down there. Who knew if you could trust them? Rosie and Augusta liked to keep to themselves, too. They didn't need anybody else when they were together.

Brandon came in from work with his arms full of white plastic takeout bags that smelled of tomatoes and garlic.

"Good Lord, Brandon, what did you bring me now?" Augusta said. When Brandon was little, he would bring her all the pokeweed he found in the yard in early spring. He would pick the young, tender leaves and Augusta would sauté them in bacon grease. They would have what she called a spring dinner, just the two of them. She'd like to do that with Rosie.

She put Rosie in her car seat, took a few bags from Brandon, and sat them on the kitchen counter next to the stove. He bought groceries and takeout because she wouldn't let him pay her for keeping the baby. She had her husband Daniel's retirement. Maybe Brandon thought bringing food over made him the provider, the one in charge? This food was from Luigi's, over by the hospital, and it was more than she could eat in two weeks.

"You've got to stop this, Brandon," she said. "You're trying to make me fat and give me high cholesterol." His pants looked a little snug around the waist.

"You're helping me out a lot, Miss Augusta. Here, you got to try some of this manicotti."

"Don't worry about that. I love my baby girl." She leaned down toward Rosie's car seat and pecked her on the nose.

He scooped some of the pasta onto a plate and sat it on the table at what had always been her place, directly across from the window over the sink.

"I got you a plate he said." Then he filled his own plate and sat at the end of the table where Daniel used to sit. She left Rosie and began to eat.

"What would I do around here without Rosie?" she said. "I didn't have nothing to do before she came around. Now I'm going all the time." She took another bite. "Ooh, this manicotti's too good."

"You always had plenty to do. You'd keep busy," Brandon said. "Here, try some of these breadsticks." He passed the bread to Augusta. Rosie screamed and her open mouth seemed to take up her whole face.

"Now Rosie," Brandon said. Tears formed and clotted in her eyelashes. He reached over and rocked the edge of the baby seat, but she cried louder, in a faster cadence.

"Hush now," Augusta said. She got up from the table and picked the baby up. Rosie quieted. Brandon ate carefully, without saying a word.

Flora clicked through all the channels in a cumbia rhythm. Next, next, next. Next, next, stop. Sometimes she thought she saw something. There was good cable TV in the hospital rooms, hundreds of channels. There ought to be for as much as they charge, right? Ladies with helmeted yellow hair and men with permanent smiles full of glowing white teeth talked about sports and the weather. Flora wondered if they could close their lips around such big teeth, or if they had no choice but to smile. Cars chased other cars while bad guys with gigantic guns shot at them. People died in hospitals that looked nothing like this one. Other people said the right words and won thousands of dollars. No news of Flora's baby. Maybe that man didn't turn the baby in. Maybe he put it in the dumpster in the first place. Maybe the crazy monster had plans to sell it to a medical lab or something, for some kind of sick experiment. She searched through more channels.

Flora walked the halls in her flowered gown and red slipper socks, looking for the man in the janitor's uniform. People moaned in their beds with the shades drawn, the doors left open for the nurses. A thin man with little bits of salt and pepper hair and a worn watch plaid robe walked with long, slow, shaky steps. Flora accidentally brushed against his sleeve. "Sorry," she said. He nodded at her and smiled, showing his toothless mouth. Most patients moved like they were in pain, but they knew you had to work your way out of this place, you can't heal by waiting. A woman sat bound to a wheelchair, dressed in real clothes, a blue dress and panty hose, with the hospital bracelet still on. She was on the way home, but Flora tried to guess which part of herself she had left behind in the operating room.

Flora walked during the shift changes, so she could see as many employees as possible. She saw a few men in uniforms who looked a little like the dumpster man. She thought she saw him round the corner toward the OR once, but she couldn't move fast enough to catch up.

She followed about fifteen feet behind the man. He was maybe five ten, a little taller than her husband, Ramon. He had a rounded belly, but he was thick more than fat. His forearms were bigger than her thighs. Maybe he had been a football player. He looked solid and strong and his uniform had been pressed with sharp creases. His shoes were shiny, someone had taken care of him. He stopped and Flora got close enough to see that it couldn't be the man she had seen before. This man's face was weathered and lined and his hair had receded to the top of his head.

"May I help you?" he said.

"I'm okay," Flora said. "Getting some exercise."

The man nodded. Maybe that dumpster man kept himself clean too, and only dug in the trash when he really wanted something, like a baby. Flora had to rescue her *hijo* from him.

Ramon was working a job in another county. It was an office high rise or something. If he took off work, he would lose the job completely. He might not get another.

"Go to work. We need the money," Flora said, "It's only tests. I'll be okay. Call me when you finish at the job. Don't worry."

"Okay. If you're sure," Ramon said.

"I'm sure. Really, don't worry."

"I'll call," he said. "As soon as I can."

For the first three days after her surgery, Flora stared at the phone, but that didn't make it ring. She was drifting into sleep when he finally called. She sat up and grabbed the receiver.

"Ramon?" she said.

"Are you okay?" he said. "How did it go? I mean, you're going to be back to normal, aren't you?"

"I'm fine. Pick me up Friday," Flora said. Flora thought of the story she would tell when he picked her up-- how they thought it was a tumor, but it was really a baby. That she wasn't crazy after all. All those symptoms: the nausea, the weight gain, the cravings, they were real. Nobody ate ice cream and French fries together unless they were pregnant. That doctor, the one who told Flora she couldn't have babies because there was some kind of fibroids or something wrong with the inside of her, that she would never be a mother, he was wrong. It felt so good to be right. It was all true.

The only thing Flora was still worried about was her sister-in-law. Ramon's brother Juan had married a white girl named Christie. She might get pregnant with her own baby and then everybody would worry over her and her baby would look like the rest of the family. People always asked where the parts of a baby came from.

The trailer was small with thin sheetrock walls and there wasn't much insulation and if you were lonely anyway, you listened to the sounds of other people in the morning.

Every day Flora woke to Juan and Christie's moaning seeping through from the room next to hers, even if she covered her head with a pillow. Christie never took a break and told him leave her alone. Some old ladies say this is smart, that as long as you keep a man happy in the bed, no matter if you want to or not, you will be happy. But what if he didn't want to be in your bed and he stayed on his side so he didn't even touch you, not even on the foot? From under her pillow, Flora could hear Juan and not much of Christie and what he said when he wanted more, so that's how she knew it was a blowjob and not sex. Christie was eighteen and heavy. Her fat always squeezed out of her clothes. She did have blue eyes and straight blond hair, but her face was so round, it reminded Flora of a pig.

Flora knew anybody could take her place. Juan didn't even have to look at her face. He could look at the wall and come and leave her to clean herself up and all she was was his nasty alarm clock. Ramon could hear it, too, but he always just got up and took a shower and Flora went to fix everybody breakfast and nobody ever talked about what they did.

Ramon and Mami, even Juan and Christie would wait on Flora and her baby. Ramon would fall in love with her. Christie would have to cook breakfast and she wouldn't have time to think about Juan in the morning. It would all be happily ever after and Flora would be the queen.

"You call me if anything goes wrong. I mean anything," Brandon said.

"I half raised you," Augusta said. "I reckon you turned out." Brandon handed Rosie over. When she passed from Brandon's muscled arms into Augusta's thin embrace, she seemed to grow. Augusta held the baby close and smelled her head. She smelled like fresh peaches. Maybe she could capture the smell forever if she breathed deep enough. "Let's get you a bath," she said.

She supported Rosie with one hand under her shoulders and dipped water from the sink with a white plastic cup that had Mason's Bar-b-q printed on the side. Rosie sighed as the warm water covered her and fixed her eyes on the light above the sink. Her dimpled hand splashed the water. Augusta barely used enough baby wash to make bubbles. She dried Rosie, folded her into a hooded pink towel. She put a tiny dab of cocoa butter in Rosie's wavy hair to keep it smooth and soft. The cocoa butter was the same brand she used to buy for Daniel. She had first smelled it in his hair, later, on his skin. It was the smell of their first touch.

The night Augusta met Daniel, she and her girlfriend Shelia dolled up just to go to the movies. She wore yellow hot pants--everybody wore them if they could. Shelia had

on blue ones and they had their hair all set and teased a little and black eyeliner across the top of their lids and Shelia's Frost Pink lipstick on their matching lips. Augusta snuck out. Packs of kids cruised the parking lot, hovering around cars, some white and some black, but no mixed-up groups. There was nothing to do in the whole county but ride around or go to the movies, so people had to share. Time and space and everything you couldn't touch belonged to everybody. She never minded.

She got in the ticket line right behind Daniel and it was all she could do not to reach out and touch his cinnamon skin, or his light blue pressed shirt. She smelled the cocoa butter. A whole line of people waited in front of the ticket window, but it seemed like Daniel had some kind of special light coming out of him, to make him stand out just to her. He glanced back at Augusta with a slip of a smile, then asked the ticket counter girl for two tickets to the Western with Clint Eastwood-- Augusta could never remember which one it was, but it was one of them. He turned around and handed her his second ticket, without a word. The ticket was green and had *admit one* printed on the side. Augusta didn't want to give it to the ticket taker. They sat together in the middle of the theater, not too close to the screen. Without a word, or without even looking at her, Daniel took hold of her hand on top of the armrest. It felt like he had always held it.

"I felt pulled to you in that line," he said later. "Like I would die without you, or at least suffer." That is exactly how she imagined love should feel. After that night, Daniel picked her up every day after school in his old Chevelle. He'd meet her around the corner and down the block, near the Sav-Mor grocery and they'd sneak down to the river. They had picnics under a huge pin oak and dipped their feet in the current. Sometimes,

they sat so close, their clavicles touched. They talked and talked and lived off each other's breath. They lived off each other's bodies. When they felt bold they went back to the movies and watched more of the wild west. They told lies to their families, but everybody in Alden knew what they were up to and they stared.

"You go with that black trash, you ain't my child," her father said. "Make your own way like a whore."

They found a justice of the peace in Lewisville who would marry them for twenty-five dollars and a bottle of scotch. "Y'all are my first mixed marriage," he said. His hair was combed back slick with marks left from the comb and he smelled of Vitalis, but his pressed shirt had moons of sweat under the arms. They got married in blue jeans in the justice's dining room because it was the prettiest room in the house. His little crew cut boy was watching the Lone Ranger in the den, so the show's theme song was the wedding music.

"Turn it down!" the preacher yelled, but the little boy didn't. Augusta didn't know who was Tonto and who was the masked man himself. It was hard to be someone's whole life and even harder for one person to be yours.

Rosie had a special light and a pull, too. "I'm going to share you, Rosie," Augusta whispered into her velvety ear. "I'm not going to make you hold me up." She strapped Rosie into a baby carrier that she wore on her chest. They moved like one body with two heads and eight limbs. Rosie watched her weed in the garden and sweep the porch and cook dinner for Brandon. She talked to Rosie as if she could understand. "See, you only

pull out the plants that don't look right with the rest of them. Those are weeds." They worked together, Augusta and her baby. Rosie understood a lot for the few months she had been alive. "Your Daddy don't like things too spicy, Rosie," she said. "When he was little, I would always make him macaroni and cheese, even when everybody else ate chili. I'll make it for you, too," she said. "It'll warm you." Whatever she said, Rosie smiled or cooed. Sometimes she squealed. Augusta squealed back.

Brandon wouldn't stop calling her Miss Augusta, even though he was a man now. Most of her life, people just called Augusta the laundry lady, or the cleaning girl, without even looking to see if it was true. Or they said "you," or just pointed at her, then at the work to be done, like maybe she was deaf and dumb and could only understand hand signals. It made people uneasy to have a white girl taking in ironing and laundry and washing tell tale stains out of their clothes that they wouldn't want to show their sisters or mama. People didn't think about the stories their laundry told. But that was before Augusta got gray hair and retired. Now, even the checkout girls at the Sav-Mor called her Ma'am.

"You'll regret what you done when you're old," her mother had said on the night Augusta ran off. "You'll wish you had your own family, your own people. Let that boy go."

"I've never belonged to you," Augusta said. She slipped out the back door and into Daniel's car as soon as they turned out the lights.

Augusta's hip made a notch for Rosie so she never slid or fell. Her body adjusted for her baby. She could breathe better than she had in a long time. They breathed together.

"Come on Rosie, let's do some laundry," she said. Rosie's eyes followed every shape Augusta's mouth made. Augusta filled the washer and started it. Rosie balanced on Augusta's side as she leaned to put the clothes in and she followed Augusta's movements, as if she wanted to remember, to learn. The rhythm of the cycle made Rosie restless, so Augusta held her close and rocked her to the beat of the washer's spin.

Augusta dressed Joseph in his Sunday pants and a starched white shirt and combed his hair into perfect curls on the first day of school, 1973. All the other kids wore T-shirts. Brandon sat beside him, but the rest of the kids decided to wait it out, see where he would settle. They didn't want to claim him, he might go to the other side.

Augusta being white and Daniel black didn't make their babies half of anything. Twice as good. Or just human, without a way to file them away from the world. She ignored the phone calls and anonymous letters.

Dr. Stokes at the student assignment office acted like he couldn't remember her name. She sat in a hard, folding office chair in the waiting room outside his office every day, starting on the first of August. She would wait until Labor Day if she had to. She brought a sack lunch.

"The superintendent is in a meeting Mrs.....?" the secretary said. Augusta had gone to school with the secretary's mother, Carol Tibbets. The girl had her mother's pea-sized eyes.

"I don't mind waiting," she said and pulled out a Tupperware container full of cube steak, mashed potatoes and gravy that smelled so strong it made everybody hungry. She brought pie.

Dr. Stokes finally called her into his office on August nineteenth. She told him about the calls and letters—the ugly words.

"Do you really think this is the best idea for your child?" he asked.

"This is the best idea for everybody," Augusta said. It was one thing for black and white to sit next to each other, but to mix in the same body? Well, everybody had a hard time with that.

Augusta held Rosie and rocked her until her lightly fringed eyes started to close. Maybe Rosie would live in a different world.

"Shh, now. Don't fret, sweet baby," she whispered to Rosie. But the world hadn't changed that much. Augusta knew better. Even if the kids went with whoever they wanted. They walked tall and proud and pressed into expensive blue jeans holding different colored hands in the mall. They mixed on TV too, but that was just fashion and not real. Kids thought it had all changed and nobody would say anything about who they loved. But Augusta knew about small town meanness. People wouldn't let go of thinking they were better than somebody else and as good as Jesus.

Augusta knew what it was like to be the only white face in a crowded church, people staring at her from long wooden pews, like she was the Devil's own child even when she raised her arms up and shouted to the heavens Amen! The ladies always looked at her like she stole their man, when Daniel wanted her because he loved her.

"Lord, what a shame," the ladies would whisper so she could hear.

Rosie turned in her sleep and stretched an arm up, like the Statue of Liberty.

"You sleep, now," Augusta said. She covered Rosie with a thin flannel blanket and put her pinky inside Rosie's tiny hand. Rosie held it tight. Her sweet baby smell powdered the air.

Augusta's children were all gone. She closed the doors to their rooms to keep the heating bills down. Sometimes, she ate cereal for dinner in front of the TV.

"It's too isolated and not a big enough, you know, community, Mama. I'd suffocate in Alden," Joseph said. He meant there weren't enough black people who didn't call him half white, or city people who liked what looked different. "Mama, why don't you come to Philly and live with me instead of wasting away out here in the country?" he said. But, Alden was what Augusta knew. She didn't want to start over. Now, with Daniel gone, she'd just be an old white lady anywhere else. Which was different from being the woman she fought to be. Anywhere else, what she looked like and who she was didn't match up. Plus, Augusta didn't drive much. That had always been Daniel's job. Traffic made her nervous.

The mama girl came forward to claim Rosie. Sometimes Brandon saw it when he was awake, sometimes in his sleep. Time wasn't divided for him now. The girl said she thought about putting the baby in a plastic bag and tying it tight, but she didn't have the heart. Didn't want to watch her fight to get out. The girl never showed her face, but he knew she was beautiful—huge almond eyes, perfect teeth inside her rose petal mouth, like he imagined Rosie would look grown up.

Brandon thought he remembered the girl—maybe she was Mexican—walking through the cafeteria. She was short with long straight hair and wore a big sweatshirt with *Go Eagles!* on the front. She piled food on her tray. She had pie and cake and a dish of ice cream, but no meat, no protein. That couldn't be good for a baby. He tried to remember every young girl he had seen in the hospital in the past month.

In Brandon's mind, the girl talked about how she wanted her baby back and was marrying the father and would press charges against him. "A mother has rights," she said. She called his name on the news and everybody at work hissed at him in his dream, just like live snakes, saying, "Ain't it a shame how Brandon made the paper? Trying to take some little girl's baby." He couldn't handle those serpents. For protection, he blew up plastic trash bags like balloons and he and Rosie hid in the middle of them in the surgical

waste dumpster, except it was clean as the O.R. before surgery. Brandon tried to see the girl's face, but it was like they do witnesses of crimes and perpetrators, they put her face in shadow and distorted her voice. It sounded like a monster saying, "Give my baby back."

The clock blinking blue on the nightstand beside his bed said 4:07, so he got Rosie out of her car seat bed and put her in the bed next to him. He'd buy a crib soon, give her some space. She woke a little, but he cuddled her until she got sleepy again. Her eyes slid closed and her mouth opened as if to suck. Brandon tried to go back to sleep but couldn't, so he held Rosie and watched her dream in the dark.

Brandon took his body to work and it moved like it was supposed to. He willed it to sweep and mop, but he would not take out bags of trash. He made a deal with Curtis from the fifth floor. He would clean Curtis' OR, if Curtis would take out his trash. Anything to avoid the dumpster.

Ms. Taylor posted a flyer all over the hospital on the announcements boards, right next to the bus schedules and cafeteria menus. It said, "Please Report Missing and Exploited Children. Do Your Part!" This couldn't mean Rosie. Children went missing every day, but she wasn't missing. She was found. Still, Brandon tore the memo into tiny pieces and flushed those down the toilet. He made sure to say hello to Ms. Taylor when he swept around her in the hallway.

"Doing all right?" he asked.

"Fine. And you?" she said.

"Can't complain." Brandon was careful with every breath.

He couldn't worry about what people might do, or if they would try to take Rosie from him. He just had to keep ahead of them. That was easy. What was impossible was fighting what he couldn't see. The world was full of all kinds of diseases and harm and there was nothing anybody could do about that. It was just luck or no luck, or maybe it was God's protection that made the difference. So far, that Dr. Johnson at the clinic said Rosie didn't have anything wrong with her. "She's a beautiful, healthy child. You're doing a great job," she said. But Brandon stayed up nights. Blood was a muddy river and nobody knew what was at the bottom or dissolved in it, quiet and dangerous. He didn't want Rosie to have surprises like that. She could have been tainted right after her first breath. When Rosie woke up to eat or get a clean diaper in the middle of the night, Brandon didn't mind because it meant company for him. When he held her, he didn't have to think.

"A big, fat black man took a Mexican baby boy from your hospital," the woman's voice on the phone had said. "He had on a janitor's uniform." Then she hung up. It was an anonymous call, but Angie had to check it out. It could be a nightmare, if it was true. She sipped her fourth cup of coffee, to make it last. Any more would make her shake and then she wouldn't sleep.

She searched again, but there were no records, no blood tests. All the Hispanic baby boys born in the hospital that month had been accounted for. As far as she could tell, this baby didn't even exist. She searched one more time. Nothing. Why was it Angie's problem if there was no proof of this baby's life or his mother's? The woman who called sounded foreign. Maybe she didn't understand English.

Angie stacked the files in neat piles on her desk, locked the door to her office, walked past the dark open rooms of the sick, and went home. More time here wouldn't bring back what was lost. She had to eat, too.

She micro-waved a frozen dinner, watched TV with a glass of boxed wine, and went to bed. At least she didn't have anybody there trying to bother her when she lay her head on the pillow and spread out as far as she wanted to on her queen-sized bed. She didn't need the trouble that came with a man. She brought a drug rep, Travis, home with her once a month or so. She never let him spend the night.

"Hey, I have tickets to a show in Charlotte. We could go," he said. He was tying his shiny brown dress shoes. Angie couldn't wait for him to go.

"Yeah, maybe. I'll call you," she said.

All people had to do was breathe around Angie and the problems grew. This baby was definitely a problem. Angie would get to the bottom of it. She was good with guilt and she would make the liars confess. Everybody lied. Did they think since she was a woman she should go easy on them? She would never let it go.

Mother said, "A lazy child is an insult to her parents." She could prove a point with Angie. She would be successful for both of them. Mother always pushed her hardest. "You want to end up doing dishes and laundry your whole life?" she said. "Angela, do something with yourself." Mother wore her hair in a platinum French twist and kept her lips bright red, even before breakfast, so people thought she was glamorous. She bleached Angie's hair at twelve because she did not believe in mousy brown and it messed up her natural blonde story if Angie's hair was dark. "Now you look like Tammy Wynette," Mother said, but the platinum hair made Angie's skin look slightly green and her brown eyes float lost and lonely in her face, like orphans.

"Baby Stolen From New Mother" was the last thing she needed to see in the headlines. She would check with every O.B. and midwife in the county. She would do her job and then some. It didn't take much to turn people against you and all you had done.

This half-assed town couldn't even decide between hilly or flat. People focused on the small things they could name and control, like their lawns or high school football. They wanted somebody to blame for misfortune. She might as well let them mess up their own lives because they weren't grateful when she helped them out of binds. Would this

mother be grateful, or even love the child? People took and took like closed-eyed baby birds.

What she wanted was a corner office in a high rise. She visualized it because she could make things happen that way. Close her eyes and concentrate. It helped if she had seen a picture, or looked at the real thing, at least once. The office she saw was concrete and glass with no grass to mow, nothing to care for.

"You can't make things happen just by concentrating on them," Angie's sister Leslie said when they were small. "You're just making stuff up and that's really lying which will send you straight to hell. I'm going to tell Mother." But Angie never lied. She could get what she wanted. It was like looking through a catalogue and seeing something beautiful and then one day receiving a surprise package that was the exact thing she desired. Things like that happened all the time. This job, for instance. Now, Angie wished for the baby to reappear. She visualized handing it back to its mother, smiling for the newspaper, getting a promotion. She visualized leaving town.

The janitor man did not ever appear before the doctors discharged Flora. Maybe he left his body at night and flew around, haunting. So many people in green uniforms and squeaky shoes passed her.

"I'd like to talk to your husband to explain your recovery plan," Dr. Wallace said, "You'll need a little help for a while at home. You shouldn't lift things."

"No," Flora said. "No, I will do it. He won't understand you. He speaks Spanish, you know." It was against the law for the doctor to say anything to Ramon about Flora and her health. In Spanish or English, both of which he spoke. Flora knew her rights. Her body was nobody's business unless she wanted it to be.

"Blessed are the meek," the Father said at mass, and what was more meek than a mother who lost a thousand babies? Maybe more. Her ovaries were full of eggs. Now they were sitting in the garbage, or burned up in the incinerator. Blood and muscle and bone were only facts, it was what was inside her heart that made the truth.

Ramon pulled the truck around the parking lot to the sliding glass doors of the hospital entrance.

Flora waved as they slid open. "*Amor*," she said. Ramon said nothing, just carried Flora's bags to the truck and patted her back, like a dog, or a kid or something. A long white vinyl bench seat filled the truck cab, but Flora stayed to her side and pressed her face against the window until Ramon said, "Hey, what you doing! You're getting smudges on my window!" She moved a little closer to him, but not so much that they could touch. Ramon had cleaned and polished the inside of the truck and the bright blue

outside was so shiny with wax it made Flora's eyes hurt. He liked to drive up looking nice. You could tell where his money went.

Ramon turned the radio up with that *Norteño* music, so Flora couldn't say anything; she couldn't be heard over it. *No llores, no llores mi amor. No puedo vivir aqui sin ti.* He sang it out loud, but he wasn't singing the words to say that Flora shouldn't cry or that he couldn't live without her. She knew he was thinking of somebody else. Some Melissa. Ramon looked out the window past the cars and the road to someone Flora couldn't see.

"Ramon, I'm pregnant," she said when he stopped the car. "We have a little baby. See, I told you." She rubbed the arc of her belly. Flora watched Ramon's eyes follow the movement of her hand. She grabbed his hand and placed it on the warm skin of her stomach. He let it stay there.

"They had to monitor me and stitch me up so I wouldn't lose the baby, but they think I'll be okay. We're going to have our son and he will be just like you, a little Ramoncito." Flora smiled and she believed it. Ramon stared into her eyes, as though he was looking for the truth. How could something growing inside her turn from evil into good? Flora had said they were cutting out a piece of her. Now there was something growing.

"The doctor was wrong," Flora said. "He couldn't tell until they hooked me up to all the hospital equipment. They saved our baby." Ramon would have to be more of a man now, more of a husband.

"Are you sure, *Amor*? Are you feeling okay?" he said. "When?"

"Soon," Flora said, "I'm six months gone.

The doctors killed Ramon's Papa with surgeries and medicine. They didn't leave much of him to bury. Ramon wouldn't go near doctors, or inside hospitals. He had to believe her. He parked the car next to the trailer, but neither of them moved to go inside. Ramon leaned across the long white seat, kissed Flora, and put his ear to her belly, to try to hear the baby inside. It was too late for Flora to stop. "It's real," she said. "I can feel it."

With the TV blaring *Maria del Barrio*, Flora cleaned the trailer until even the bare parts of it shone. As if cleaning would re-grow the worn beige carpet and mend the plaid couch Ramon bought for fifteen dollars at the Salvation Army. As if it would make Ramon glow. The TV voices shouted and laughed at her. Maria and Francisco fell in love in her living room. Colors flashed on the wall. Flora polished and scrubbed, but she refused to vacuum, or lift furniture. She napped every afternoon, because everyone thought she should, in her condition. All of the women in the neighborhood had advice. They crowded around her at the Laundromat and told her what they knew—*don't reach too high above your head, or the cord will twist; don't eat fish; heartburn means he'll have a lot of hair; eat apricots for iron; don't have sex, he could hurt the baby; do deep knee bends when you want to go into labor; put a knife under the bed to cut the pain; he won't want you anymore after this.*

Flora didn't listen to any of them. Everyone wanted to touch her, they wanted to know how she felt.

Mi pequenito, Ramon's Mami said and patted the empty fat of Flora's belly. Ramon and Juan rubbed Flora's belly for luck. She was satisfied. Sometimes Ramon would talk to Flora's bellybutton as if it were a telephone line to her insides. "Hello? Anybody home?" he asked. No answer.

For three weeks, Flora had been wearing padding under her shirt. She had gone to the mall, to a maternity shop to try on tent shaped dresses and pants with elasticized front panels. The saleslady gave her a fake belly, shaped like the real thing, that strapped around Flora's middle. It was supposed to show how the clothes would fit when she was full term. Actresses wore them in movies and they looked really pregnant, even though Flora knew they weren't in real life. It did the trick. Flora wore the belly out of the store. She didn't feel the strap, or the nylon after a day or two. It felt like her body had filled.

"Wow, you're getting close now," Mami said when Flora came home. She patted Flora's new belly.

She walked around the trailer park to tighten her muscles and show everybody that she was doing the right thing for her child. If she worked at it, she could make a baby grow inside her. Why not? Didn't they come from love and God and nowhere? Didn't they come from wanting? She cleaned the world for her baby and made it new.

Every afternoon around five, a short white lady in a bright blue nylon jogging suit and her gray hair pulled through an Atlanta Braves baseball cap walked a baby down the street in a stroller, but she always turned around before Flora could get a good look out of the kitchen window. She could see that the infant was milky brown, with black hair, thick enough for a toddler. Flora tried to figure out how to make every baby she saw hers.

Suddenly there were babies everywhere, as if God was saying, Flora, take your pick. Do you want the curly haired one in the grocery, or the bald one in the dry cleaners, or maybe the one with big ears in the pew in front of you at church? She knew she would make the best mother. He agreed with her. She'd be full of grace. If she couldn't find the janitor guy with her baby, she could find a way to get another one.

Flora got the Sunday paper and turned to the classifieds. Healthcare was what she wanted; it didn't matter as long as she got into the hospital. *Would you like to work in the healthcare industry?* the ad asked. She would. *Do you want to help people?* Some of them. *Come to the Andrews County Hospital Job Fair!* Flora tore the ad out of the paper, folded it neatly and slipped it into her pocket. God had put it in the paper, just for her.

She applied for a job in the hospital cafeteria, so maybe she could find out who that man was and where he took her little one. She waited in Human Resources. The carpet had a pattern of red and blue swirls and it reminded her of a heart with arteries and veins. She signed where the form said to and peed in a plastic cup and sealed it. She would give them a leg if they wanted it. Cut it off herself.

"You're not really qualified for anything administrative," the lady said. "Would you mind working in the cafeteria? We have a few dishwasher and server positions."

"I would love it," she said. "I like helping people."

"Why do you need a job?" Ramon said. "I'm a man. I can take care of you and the baby. No." Flora didn't tell him about the application, or the pee, or the man in the uniform who would deliver their child.

The trailer was definitely too small, especially for a new baby. Walls grew everywhere. Maybe Juan and Christie would move out and Flora would be alone with Ramon and his Mama and their beautiful child. The only thing that would break the silence in the morning would be the baby's soft cries for his Mami. Flora could name the baby Moises, like a hidden king, and he would have everything and she would protect him. She could plant flowers in the yard and get hanging baskets and the trailer would be more like a home and it would be hers.

Ramon got up before everyone else in the trailer, around four a.m. He tiptoed through the darkness on the path he had memorized from the bedroom to the bathroom, because he didn't want to risk waking anyone. He left Flora huddled on her side at the far left edge of the bed, her knees pulled close to her chest. If anyone else woke, Ramon would be forced to share his quiet. He showered and put on his tan canvas work pants and

a black hooded sweatshirt. He liked having the blackest part of the day to himself in the kitchen, drinking coffee. He'd buy an egg biscuit on the way to the job site.

Ramon couldn't wait around for the daylight to come. That might take an hour and he could be on the roof of the building at South Park Plaza, hammering away by then. He would watch the sun come up over the rise of the mountains to the east and the rolling fields to the west. He would see it all from the top of the roof.

Now that he had a baby on the way—a son—he had to provide, no excuses.

"Getting up with the chickens, ain't you, Ramon?" Mr. Taylor said.

"Hey, Boss. Yeah, the rooster already crowed, right?" Ramon said.

Mr. Taylor climbed the heavy aluminum ladder that was leaned up against the frame of the building. Ramon followed three or four rungs below him.

"I was thinking, Ramon, maybe you want to be my foreman on this job, seeing how you work harder than all the rest of them."

"Yeah, Mr. Taylor. I want that job, if it pays more. I got a baby on the way."

They stood side by side on the slant of the roof. Mr. Taylor slapped Ramon on the back, but not hard enough to shake his balance.

"Well, look at what you done now. Good for you, Ramon. I guess a man with a new family needs a little better cash flow, don't he?"

Maybe with more money coming in, Ramon could rent a place for him and Flora and the baby. They could have their own new life and Juan could take care of Mami for a change. They would still go over to the trailer for dinner on Sundays. Ramon would load

up at the store on the way over with all the things Mami needed. This baby was already changing things for him and Flora. It was going to make things right.

Brandon made coffee thick enough to make a spoon stand up in it. It made him jittery, but it didn't keep his eyes from drooping. He woke up in the night every time Rosie made a sound, even the crackle of the vinyl-covered mattress when she rolled over in the new crib. The sounds might have something to do with her mama showing up on his doorstep, reaching for her.

He saw spots when he closed his eyes for even a minute, like his brain couldn't figure out if it was day or night. He burnt his toast because he forgot that he put it in the oven. Ended up throwing it away and eating nothing. When he got like this, he might hole up for days in his room with the shades drawn, or he might take it out on the first person who crossed him.

After Mama died, Brandon spent days not sleeping, staring at the white wall of his bedroom. The same house was so different. He couldn't see straight then, either. Jonetta, a nurse he dated from work, called and came by, but he never felt like talking. "You can't hide away forever, Brandon," she said. Brandon hung up on her.

His first day back to work after the funeral, Brandon saw Jonetta talking to Lamont Jacobs, who worked in Receiving. She was in her creased nurse's uniform and was leaning into him, like she was getting ready to tell him a secret. Lamont was smiling until he saw Brandon coming at him. His balled fist hit the edge of Lamont Jacobs' jaw, thick blood spattered from his lip. That felt good, even though Jonetta was screaming, "No! Brandon stop! I don't belong to you!" She ran to Lamont; he spit a clot of blood and a tooth out of his mouth. Brandon ran out of the hospital as people gathered around to see what was going on. Jonetta was the first girl he had allowed himself to date since Tanya.

"Fine!" Brandon said. "I don't want no part of you."

He saw Lamont at work sometimes now and they nodded at each other, but never spoke. Jonetta had left Lamont, too, for an intern. Brandon could just make out the faint line of a scar on Lamont's chin that proved Jonetta really had belonged to him, no matter what she said.

Brandon was drifting off at work, resting his eyes is all, when Ms. Taylor from the business office came by. She walked like a long-legged bird and tried to hide her accent behind painted red lips, but Brandon could tell she was Andrews County born and

bred. Matter of fact, he thought Edward was in her class at Alden High School, but he doubted she'd like to talk about that.

"Mr....Wilson?" she said. She read it off the plastic ID badge that hung from his neck. "You all right?"

"I'm fine, Ma'am, " he said. "A little headache is all." He took his cleaning cart down the hall to O.R. number five, which he knew was already clean, so he could lie on the operating table and get a private nap. Try to anyway. He had already done more work than Ms. Taylor would do all day.

The surgery team pushed the swinging doors open with their butts, blue gloved hands held up as if under arrest. Brandon jumped off the table and pressed his body close to the wall. The wheels of the gurney squeaked and dragged on the floor tiles he had shined. The body on the gurney wore a blue paper shower cap and a threadbare hospital gown that had slid off its shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" the surgeon asked. The doors swung closed behind him. Brandon pushed through them with his cart. He looked straight ahead, as if the surgeon didn't exist.

"Should I call security?" a nurse said.

Brandon didn't hear the response. He was down the hall, his heart pounding all the way through his uniform.

"Germs love kids," the TV commercial blared, "Fight back! Sanitize 'em anywhere!" A woman squirted hand sanitizer into the cupped hand of a toddler on a playground. Flora was mesmerized. She could barely hear the phone ring.

"I got it," Christie said. Flora ran across the living room to grab it and almost lost her breath.

"Suit yourself," Christie said. She stubbed out her cigarette and took control of the remote.

"Hello, Flora speaking." She walked to the kitchen and shut the door behind her. It was the hospital human resources office calling. Flora heard the word job and the rest of the secretary's words buzzed through her ears like champagne bubbles. She danced silently around the kitchen as Ms. Taylor's secretary talked about uniforms and time cards and other things Flora could care less about. The words had become some kind of music. Christie turned up the TV volume so the sound flowed into the kitchen and Flora had to cover her ear with her hand to hear what the secretary was saying. Someone on TV was crying.

"Be sure to report to Ms. Taylor in Human Resources on the fourth floor," the secretary said. "She'll make sure you get your uniform and everything; she'll teach you how to fill out your time card."

"Okay, I'll check with Ms. Taylor. See you Monday. Thank you very much," Flora said.

On Monday morning at nine, Ms. Taylor gave Flora a tour of every floor of the hospital, including the labor and delivery wing, and handed her a navy blue uniform. It included a white apron, stitched with "Nutritional Services" and her name across the chest in an elegant script. Flora had bought a hairnet and had her long black hair twisted and piled inside it. She had found a pretty good job in the hospital cafeteria, but all she really wanted was to be a Mami. This was a stepping stone. It started the rest of her life.

Flora stood in the same spot in the cafeteria line all day, as if it were her job to hold down the worn beige floor tile. Heat came up off the beans and fogged the glass separating Flora from the people waiting in line. Flora saw visions of her baby in the steam shapes hovering over the aluminum bins. She said "beans?" "more?" "thank you" and "next?" over and over. She served heaping spoonfuls of beans and nodded when she was finished so the customers would know to move on.

It was Flora's job to ask what people wanted. What a question. It would take forever for people to answer if they really knew what she was asking. Why would anybody want the green beans that were cooked all day until they were squishy and then they put the greasy pork in? They couldn't even add too much salt or spice because most patients needed a bland diet. She would at least add some red pepper flakes and maybe a

little garlic. There was no flavor to this food, these people. The families of the sick with the eyes falling deep into their faces passed through the line all day long. It was hard to think of this food as somebody's last meal, but sometimes it was.

"You want green beans?" she asked the next man in line. He stared at Flora for a minute, like he just saw the beans and her for the first time because his mind was way back in his head somewhere and not there. He and Flora might have been in the same airless space.

"Sure. I'll have a scoop of green beans. Not too much," the man said, so Flora piled the beans onto his plate, next to the pot roast and mashed potatoes. The juices of all the food mixed into a muddy pool. He looked off toward the windowless wall like he was seeing something in a whole other place and maybe a whole other time, too. Flora looked closely at the man's face as he slid his tray toward the cashier. There was a long curve to his jaw and a trimmed up goatee. He was wearing the green uniform he had on when he came out of the dumpster, but it had been cleaned and pressed again. His nametag said "Brandon." He walked away with his tray and sat at a table by himself.

Flora stuck the big serving spoon deep into the green beans. She took off her plastic gloves and wiped her damp hands on her apron. "Hey Shawna," Flora said to her manager, "I need a break."

"No way, Honey. We're in middle of the lunch rush," Shawna said.

"But I feel like I'm going to throw up." Flora held her face closer to the beans so it would look red and sweaty. She thought of the pain after her surgery and the memory of it showed in her face. Shawna searched Flora's amber eyes, but couldn't find the lie.

"Okay, but you better be back here in five minutes." Shawna took Flora's place in line. Her hairnet strained under the weight of her permed red hair, a thousand freckles overlapped on her face like raindrops. She asked the next lady in line, maybe a terminal patient's family member sent downstairs to eat, if she wanted green beans. The lady said, "No thank you. I don't care for any." Her dark, heavy eyes hid in folds of bluish white skin. Flora's eyes were almost popped out because she was looking so hard for Brandon. He couldn't hide from her now.

Mounds of bills, correspondence with lawyers, and onion-skin purchase orders lay in six-inch stacks that made a fence on Angie's desk. She could breathe behind it. It was numbers on top of numbers. Not the confusion of words. Numbers only had one meaning. Two meant two and that was it. There was something solid in that. She was working with the accounts and billing, in the concrete world.

Shouts came from the hallway, a body shoved against a wall, something big and heavy knocked over. Angie turned up the radio she kept on her desk. She didn't want to hear the patients' arguments about life and death. Angie stayed in her office with the door closed, to keep the antiseptic smell out of her air. She lit oil candles that smelled like cinnamon, but even that couldn't cover the odor of sickness that always seeped under the door. Angie's assistant went down the hall see what was going on, but she came right back.

"You better come on, Ms. Taylor. They're getting ugly in the hallway, right in front of the patients."

The janitor Angie had found idling in the hallway was pinned to the wall by that new Mexican girl from the cafeteria. They should do a better job of screening people.

The girl screamed at the top of her lungs, "You stole my baby! I seen you! You hid him in the dumpster, like a bag of trash, then you took him back out and ran off with him!" She hit the man in the face with a dirty, ragged dishtowel she must have carried with her from the cafeteria. The man looked at Angie with his hands held up as if he didn't know where the girl had come from and she was some kind of pest, like a raccoon, that he didn't know how to get rid of without hurting. It was clear he didn't want to touch her. She beat him with her small fists. He wouldn't hit her back. She hit him harder. The top of her head came up to the middle of his chest.

"I don't know what she's talking about," he said. He stepped away from Flora, held his hand out in front of him to warn her to stay back. "I don't even have a little boy."

"You thought nobody seen, but I did see and I know you took my baby and what other things you did. Where else would he go? He's not made of magic!" She said. "I could sue this hospital for a million dollars!" Flora was stitched in curly black script over her left breast on her apron. Grease spots marked her hips where she had wiped her hands and a smear of green covered her belly, like she had leaned up against some vegetables.

Angie smoothed her gray skirt and looked at each of them. She counted to ten, savoring each number, so she wouldn't tell them to grow the fuck up, she had a hospital to run and didn't have time to break up fights. When she got to ten she put her hands on her hips and said, "Mr. Brandon, Miss Flora, I am sure this is just a simple misunderstanding. We will have to work this out, like civilized people, in my office." Angie felt her face flush, the crimson pushing through the tan of her makeup. She knew her ears and neck glowed. They felt hot.

Flora studied everything about Brandon. When she was little, she could draw-- teachers told her she could and she won contests. She thought about how she would draw his face: lots of lines around his neck to show the extra folds of skin where he was heavysset; shading to show the sheen of his skin. If it weren't for his little trimmed up goatee, his face would look like a boy's. If you really looked, you could see a white hair or two, but only if you looked hard, like you were taking inventory. He kept his hair cut short, so it lightly coated his head. Then there were those quarter-sized round eyes and the longest eyelashes Flora had ever seen in her whole life, swear to God. Mami used to say that long eyelashes meant you were sensitive and that's how you could tell if a man was moody, so watch out. But Flora's were really short and straight and she could be moody too, so who knows? Brandon, he was trying to do the right thing with his "yes ma'ams" and nodding and saying how it wouldn't happen again. He could let her feel like the principal. He barely looked at Flora.

Flora could tell Ms. Taylor wanted to believe her and she didn't like that Brandon, so she didn't want to believe him. Ms. Taylor's face had squished up like she had drunk rotten milk when she said his name, even when she tried to make it nice, saying, "Mr." in front of it. They sat together in Ms. Taylor's office and it was a lot like being in the principal's office in high school.

Ms. Taylor said, "If your professional behavior does not improve, there will be serious consequences." That white lady wouldn't lose even a minute of sleep, let alone a whole night if she fired them. Ms. Taylor was paying attention to her own words and how she said them more than their faces as she talked to them. She wanted to make sure she

sounded professional enough to be on TV. Like, she thought she should be driving a Mercedes right the hell out of this town. Flora hoped she would. But that Brandon, he was different. You could see that his eyes were worried, like you would just have to tip him over and tears might fall out, but then again, he looked like he was fighting something too and maybe it was Flora. There was no point looking at Ms. Taylor, since she was looking over Flora's head, studying the image in her head instead of what was real. Flora left that dark office, full of leather furniture and pictures of dogs and horses on the walls, knowing that somehow she had gotten a lot closer to her baby.

Now she knew she couldn't name the baby Ramon Jr. like she wanted. Maybe Ramona. She had to get used to the fact that the baby was a girl, because talking to Brandon was like an ultrasound. Flora went with her friend Luli when she had hers and it was hard to tell at first what was on the milky black and white screen. The old ladies told her she was carrying low like it was a boy, but in the picture on the ultrasound monitor, that little girl of hers had her legs spread wide, like "how do you like that! I'm a girl." Flora wasn't really disappointed. You know, as long as she was healthy. She rubbed her belly for luck.

She came home from work in her grease-stinking uniform. The sounds of people laughing, talking, watching TV, and drinking beer reached her before she even opened the hollow front door. She held on to the doorknob for a minute, put her head down, and walked in, moving as quickly as she could through the maze of people. The men, Juan's friends from work, still had on their uniforms or their work clothes— shirts with their

names in small ironed-on oval patches on the chest, white or mud colored canvas pants spattered with paint, plaid flannel shirts. But the women--some were really little girls with new hips and breasts on display--had on halter tops and tiny skirts and really big, colorful, high-heeled shoes. Everybody had forgotten it was a run-down trailer and not a club. Flora didn't have to look in the mirror to know that she looked horrible, she could feel them staring--her stained uniform, her hair pulled tight in a ponytail and still covered with a hairnet, her short, thick body and ugly, white platform sneakers that gave extra support for standing all day.

"Excuse me," Flora said. She brushed past them as quietly as she could.

"*Hola Mamacita!*" one of the men said and whistled. He reached his arm out and tried to grab her waist. She pulled away. All the cute little girls laughed. One rolled her eyes. Another with hair the color of a ripe plum sucked on a man's neck until she made a bright red spot.

Ramon was at work, or with his white Melissa in a rumped bed, or who-knows-where, not with her was all Flora knew. She slammed the hollow door to her room behind her, only she did it so hard that it bounced back open. She closed it again, slow and soft this time and locked herself in. Someone pounded on the door, saying "Come out, *Mamacita,*" but she ignored it. She lay on the bed and stared at the square ceiling tiles. She knew there were seventy-two of them, twelve rows of six, but she counted them again anyway.

A man in the living room yelled about going on a beer run and did anybody want food. "I do!" Flora wanted to shout. "For my baby!" But she kept it to herself. Maybe she should start eating more pickles and ice cream together, so everybody would know her little girl was on the way. Her family was growing. Next time God would give her a boy.

When Ms. Taylor took them to the office, Brandon studied the window behind her, how it was the only box of light in that dark room and then the dark shape of her blocked some of that. He ma'amed her and all, even though she was his age, maybe even younger. His job was more important than this wacked girl and he couldn't dip down into the shit or he'd start to smell of it, just like her. This crazy girl trying to claim what was his reminded him of his brother, Edward. Some people tried to take what wasn't theirs and didn't care if they left him lonely.

At first, his brother Edward didn't seem like he would do any harm, just like a doll baby. Mama and Daddy let Brandon hold him. They helped Brandon support the baby's head. He held the baby again when Mama rushed back to the hospital with Daddy in the back seat of the old Mercury. All the neighbors came over and waited until Mama came back the next day, alone.

"So young to have a heart attack!" everybody said. "And with a brand new baby, too." Mama held onto baby Edward for life, like she might drown if she let go. Brandon got sent to aunties and neighbors, half the time with Miss Augusta next door. He wandered down the street in the evenings, seeing how long he could kick the same piece of gravel, watching kids playing catch and freeze tag, yelling, "all-ie, all-ie, in-come-free!" He waved at families sitting on the porch after dinner. "Hey Brandon," they said, then returned to their own conversations. He could guess a casserole by the smell that seeped out the doors and open windows.

"Your Mama alright, Brandon?" Mrs. Richardson asked.

"Yes Ma'am. Just fine."

Once he spied on Mama, through the picture window, nursing Edward. He used to be that close to her; was the one who her look so peaceful. He wanted to be the one held near enough to hear her heart.

Edward was grown now. Had a wife and kids and a degree and seventeen years in the Army. Named his son Edward Junior, like he was so good, there should have been two of him. He ain't that good, Brandon thought. Edward came back home after his first tour. He tried to tell Brandon about the world beyond Alden, North Carolina.

"It ain't nowhere but in between things. Scrubby little wannabe hills. We don't belong in this hick town."

"We are hicks, Edward."

"You might be. I'm going to be an Army officer, a citizen of the world."

But where you supposed to go if home's where you've always been, Brandon wondered. Can't a black man be as landbound as a white man? Living in the foothills and sitting out in the cool nights, looking out toward the woman curve of the mountains? Same as generations of Wilsons. The Bible says, "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." It don't specify different for man, woman, rich, poor, black or white-- worms and beetles and God don't care. Everybody would become hard clay dust in Alden.

All Brandon could see was the red brown dirt. Color of a cockroach where the wet dirt was darker. He was face down in it. Edward was sitting on him, holding his arms down. He was thinner, but stronger than Brandon, even though he was ten and Brandon fourteen. He tried to buck Edward off, but Edward pushed his weight harder toward the ground. They were behind the house, finishing what had started inside. It began over a bag of potato chips, which was crazy because one thing they never had to fear with Mama around was going hungry. Edward wanted the chips and Brandon snatched them away and shoved the last handful into his mouth. Edward grabbed the bag back and ran outside, letting the backdoor slam in Brandon's face.

Brandon said, "You just like your skinny ass Daddy, and he wasn't man enough to stick around for you." Told Edward he was Mama's only mistake in her whole life, that she was paying everyday for that one wrong night. "Ain't a bit of Wilson in you," Brandon said. "Can't you tell by looking in the goddamned mirror?" Edward's face went slack. He lunged at Brandon, cut his legs out from under him and pitched him to the ground. The potato chip bag flew out of his hand and landed in the pink camellia bush.

"Say you're lying!" Edward said.

"No!" Brandon said, "It's the goddamned truth!" He arched his head up from the ground and turned it and tried to spit at Edward, but the spit landed in the dirt and that's what made it the cockroach color.

"Liar!" Edward said. Brandon threw an elbow backward that got Edward in his bony ribs. Edward doubled over, but pressed his body into Brandon's, so he couldn't move. Mama was coming toward them, the slam of the door and her running breath. Their shouting voices echoed off the house. They only had a minute more to fight before all hell broke loose.

Edward pushed Brandon's face into the spit-wet dirt and scrubby crabgrass and rubbed it back and forth, holding onto him by his hair. Mama stopped in front of them, eyes and jaw set tight. Her voice dropped an octave, like when she sang in church.

"What's this about?" she said. She was dressed up in her Kress Department Store clerk clothes, clenching her keys.

"Nothing," they said at the same time and let go, but Edward cut his eyes low at Brandon, showing just the dark part and no light. Something in them had gone out and

flattened. *Liar*, he mouthed behind Mama's back as she wiped the dirt off Brandon's face.

"Almost grown, you all should know better. This is what I have to come home to?" They had covered each other with bruises and scraped off each other's scabs from the last battle.

"Sorry, Mama," Edward said. "We won't fight no more." Mama turned to Edward and Brandon whispered to him, *Don't know who your daddy is*. Brandon could make anything about him true and Edward would believe it like he believed those Hardy Boys mystery stories he was always reading.

"You better not fight or I'll kill you both," Mama said. Her voice came out in a rasp that was a thousand times worse than her screaming. "Lord knows I've raised you better than that." Edward hugged Mama and his eyes welled. Brandon knew no matter how much dirt he wore, he had hurt Edward deep on the inside and that would never go away.

Edward believed that Mama could have been loose, which was what made Brandon think Edward deserved what he got. His little punk of a brother didn't love her enough.

The Wilsons came from here or maybe deeper into the real mountains. They had been buried here for a hundred years or more. They had become the dust of this place, the air. That's what Brandon wanted to give Rosie—proof that she belonged, that she was made of this old hilly town with its hard packed meanness. It would be hers to shape and own. He didn't want anybody beating her down like he did Edward. She would know who her Daddy was, without a doubt. He wanted her to know she was a Wilson and sure as his

Daddy was buried here, she would be too, in her own spot right beside Brandon. She had a place as long as he did. She had a family.

Flora found Ramon filling his tires and smoking a cigarette outside the Quick-E-Mart. The bright greenish light from the see through store drew attention away from the spot by the *Free Air* sign, but she walked toward the shadow of a man blowing smoke.

"You got a light?" she said. It was the dimple that appeared on the left side of his smile that got her for sure. Until then, she had only guessed that he could be hers. She was on break from the checkout counter and that's how it started, with a light.

"I'm Ramon," he said and held his flame to the cigarette she held in her lips.

"Flora," she said. "Thanks." She tilted her head to the sky, so he could see the pulled caramel curve of her neck, and exhaled.

After that, they always found each other. She walked slightly behind him wherever they went. That way, she could see how the shape of him cut into the space

before her. He faced everything first and she liked to think he protected her. That way, nobody would know about them until she wanted them to. Before he noticed, Flora was spending every afternoon with Ramon, at his Mami's house. Flora had graduated already, but all it got her was a cashier's job. He had dropped out of school and was working construction and he was already a man. He could build things for Flora—a house, a life--everything.

"It will be like nothing you ever seen before," Ramon said. They were lying on the burgundy brocade couch in the middle of rickety-legged chairs and an unvarnished coffee table, eighteen-year-old Flora and twenty-two-year-old Ramon, talking about the future, the house that he would build with room for five babies and a separate apartment for his mother. Mami was cooking tamales, so the whole house smelled like cumin and *masa* and chicken and peppers. Flora's mouth was watering from wanting to taste it. It was back when Flora still thought that at least some things he said weren't lies. Maybe then he loved her.

"If this boom keeps going," Ramon said, "I will work seven days a week for a year and save up the money building all these houses for Mr. Taylor, then he will give me a discount on the house for us if I do all the work. Right there in Sandy Farm subdivision. Right by the new mall, so you can go shopping, *Amor*."

"But what will the kitchen be like? You know I can't have no pit for a kitchen, even if the rest is beautiful," Flora said. "If the kitchen's no good, the food won't be no good, neither." Ramon frowned, but there was still half a smile underneath.

"What you talking about, lady? Don't you think I know the kitchen is the second most important room in the entire house?" Ramon said. He smiled and drew his fingers lightly across Flora's belly until goose bumps rose around her belly button.

"You trying to kill me, *Amor*?" she said, " Your Mami's in the kitchen! You said you could wait."

"We're practically married already." His hand moved into Flora's jeans and he leaned his face toward hers.

"Ramon!" Flora said. She heard Mami pulling pots and pans out of the cabinet. Flora pulled his hand away and scooted to the other end of the couch. She pretended to pout. Ramon would think she was special, like a prize, if they waited. *Abuela* Olivia said, "You only got one thing in your bag of tricks." Flora's grandmother didn't know she would get smart enough to pull babies out of the air.

They married in the big wooden church on Main Street with jewel-colored Bible scene windows. A painted wooden Jesus looked down on them at the altar. The Father wore long black vestments. He said *husband and wife* and Ramon held Flora and she held flowers. The pews were full of the friends and family who knew what a perfect couple they made. Mami wiped her eyes with a handkerchief embroidered with violets. Flora walked as slow as she could. She could see in Ramon's face that he ached with the waiting. Finally, she said yes.

They found an apartment and filled every minute in their rented space. The yard sale furniture didn't matter. Flora watched the clock over the TV in the living room until

Ramon's work was over and he walked in the door and kissed her. "What do you need, Baby?" he asked.

Only later Ramon let go of her, after a year or so, Flora didn't know the exact day. She felt the space between them stretch. Ramon noticed that sometimes her eyes puffed in the morning. "You been crying?" he asked. "No," she said. "Why?" He started staying late at work.

"Why don't you come home on time?" Flora said. "I could have found somebody who could at least take care of me." Then, Ramon began to think every other girl was special, too.

"I don't like being so far away from my family. We should all stay together. That way, when I'm at work, you won't ever be alone," he told her.

They moved into the white singlewide trailer with no underpinning. They shared it with Ramon's mami and his brother Juan and his wife Christie. They all bumped into each other in the narrow halls and couldn't even take a bath because there was only a shower.

"Your damn puta used up all the hot water again," Juan said.

"Flora, quit using all the damn water," Ramon said. "Who you cleaning up for?" His face was hidden behind the newspaper, so he couldn't see the way she glared at him. Flora showered longer.

The house Ramon had talked about evaporated. Mr. Taylor quit building the subdivision because the highway got shifted to the east. Ramon didn't have any work for three months. He even applied for fast food jobs, but he didn't find anything.

"I'm sorry, Flora," he said. "Something will come through soon." But it didn't.

He stayed out late with his friends, who were single, or had wives and families somewhere in Mexico, which was the same thing, really. They would go to El Rodeo to drink and dance, but he never asked Flora to go. When he came home, he didn't want anything. She waited quietly for him in bed with the covers pulled up to her chin. Mami snored softly in the next room.

Flora wanted to go south, to go home--even though she had only been to Mexico as a little girl. She remembered going to a party with her mother—colored lights and shiny decorations, lots of aunts and uncles sweating and dancing to the *tick-ticka-tick* of the music, sweets everywhere.

Augusta and Daniel chose the only halfway-integrated neighborhood on the west side of Alden when they set up housekeeping. Old Mr. Liddy down the street lived alone and never talked to anyone, but he was definitely white. He had moved back from ten

years working in California and constantly edged his grass to make a tiny moat around his entire yard. More than one person tripped in it, even the mailman. Everybody said Mr. Liddy came home to die and wanted to be left alone. Augusta was the other white person, but she had Daniel. This made her seem only half as peculiar as Mr. Liddy. The wooden bungalows built for the mill workers in the twenties and thirties sagged, but they had wide porches and strong foundations. Newly planted pin oaks lined the street. People who could afford to segregated themselves in the brick suburbs out by the mall.

Genie Wilson next door in the yellow house was Augusta's only friend in the neighborhood, and Thank God for her. Even if Augusta loved Daniel, he was still a man and she had to have somebody to talk to about him. He came home late and flirted with women in the grocery store and left his stinking work socks in the floor of the bathroom. He spent whole days mad and not talking to her, just because she told him he was bossy.

Genie helped Augusta get started taking in laundry and ironing, which meant she could buy a Heavy Duty washer and dryer and stay home with the kids and make a living. A woman needed her own money, so she wouldn't have to ask a man for everything and do what he said all the time. You never knew what would happen, even if you loved a person.

For years, Daniel worked in the Weldon Furniture Factory out near old highway fifty-three and had a union job, with benefits. All day long, he cut wood and sanded it into finials and square edged blocks, then passed those on to be varnished. He made thousands of colonial bedposts, but never knew who slept in those beds. He never even saw the whole headboard. He held that job for years, the same day streaming through

over and over and he never complained. That's what would have finished Augusta, the flatness of it. She kept babies and the house and other people's laundry. All of those changed day to day. She kept secrets, too, for anybody who needed to get rid of one. There was some matching part in the core of her and Daniel that kept them together all those years, raising three children that nobody else wanted to look at. Now, their house was full of baby love again. Augusta did not have time to dwell on the way Daniel's hazel eyes would have looked next to the dark green summer leaves, or how he would have liked hearing the song on the radio that they used to dance to. *Some-day-ay-ay, we'll be to-ge-ether. Yes we will, yes we will.*

Baby lotion scented the air and tiny pastel clothes and blankets filled the washer that used to clean heavy work clothes, dark with dirt and sweat. Augusta sang songs her mother had sung as she washed and folded. *She's my Filipino baby. She's my treasure and my pet!* She sang at the top of her lungs. Rosie watched intently as Augusta's mouth opened wide enough to show a silver crown. One of Augusta's uncles had brought that song back from the war and she kept it for her own. Mother and Daddy seeped into her mind when she did house work. It was crazy for a sixty-two year old woman to want her people to claim her, she knew, especially since they were dead. She couldn't forget what they had said.

She took care to keep Rosie in a fresh diaper and clean clothes and fed her so well, Rosie's thighs rose like dinner rolls.

"Now don't you worry if you have to work late," Augusta told Brandon on the phone. Rosie would know down deep that no matter what happened to her, she was loved

right. Augusta didn't go out of the house unless she had to. She kept a small spiral-bound notebook and wrote notes about how much time Brandon spent with Rosie versus how much time she did. She ignored the phone when it rang, even though she knew it was her children. She said, "We don't want to talk to nobody. Do we, baby?" Rosie brought her hand to her mouth and it looked like she was nodding, like she agreed.

Rosie was fussy in the morning, but by noon she would mellow, like when the sun burned off fog. She wasn't like most babies. Augusta's children would fall apart at about five every evening. The pressure of everybody coming home, and being in the same house, and everybody wanting something or needing it was too much. Joseph liked to throw food from the high chair and watch it slide down the wall when he was a toddler. Sarah would get colicky and scream until she squeezed tears from her eyes. Daniel would come in tired and expecting dinner.

Augusta heard Brandon's car pull in the driveway, the door slam shut. She put Rosie in the stroller and slipped out the back door. He could wait for them. Rosie didn't care whose turn it was to have her. She didn't worry about when dinner got on the table, or even if it did. Augusta pushed the stroller further and further away from Brandon. Rosie watched the clouds and turned to face the sounds of cars or dogs barking. When Augusta pointed to a bird, she looked at it, studied it. Augusta swore Rosie tried to make a "ba" sound, even though she was only around two months old. Like she was taking good notes about the world around her, making peace with it.

Brandon had Rosie on his day off. Augusta put on her navy blue pantsuit, sprayed her hair, and put on her *Love that Red* lipstick. Child Protective Services was in the flat-roofed building next to the courthouse. She walked slowly up to the entrance with pictures of Rosie and Brandon in her hand—trying to look the part of the concerned older neighbor. She would ask what she had to do to report child abuse. It would be a white woman's word against a black man's—she knew how that would go, even now.

But what if the state took Rosie and sent her to live with a young family? They might not see how she belonged with this old woman, how they were made for each other. She stood in front of the glass door, looked through it to the gray cubicles, the people waiting in line to be helped. A young man with long brown hair, torn jeans, and a black T-shirt with a picture of an eagle on it brushed past her.

"Excuse me, Lady," he said. Augusta stepped away from the door and let him pass through. She turned around and walked back to her car, drove back home. Maybe she could keep Brandon busy with other things, find him a girlfriend, take his mind off her baby. There was that girl who worked at the bank. He had talked about how beautiful her smile was. God always gave Augusta what she needed. She only had to claim it.

Rosie and Brandon sat on the porch swing waiting for a breeze and he sang to her, made-up baby songs. The air was still and full of lilac. Short, slender-trunked crepe myrtles bloomed in pom-poms of purple, white, and pink along the curb. The neighborhood children had grown up in their branches. His voice was smooth and deep and Rosie would grab at his mouth as he sang. He'd sing to her about anything, about how it was time to mow the yard, or change her diaper, or how he loved her as much as all the stars in the sky. The whole entire galaxy. It made her smile and make tiny sounds, sweeter than birdsong.

Augusta came over from next door. She wore jeans with floral print gardening gloves stuck in the pockets. If Rosie was not with her, Augusta worked in her yard. She had a little spring in her step now and she was always around. A little too much for Brandon. Her hair was gray and styled short, but her eyes seemed a brighter green. Like her old life got filled with a new one.

"Hey, Brandon," Augusta said. "What secrets is he telling you, Rosie-Rosalee?" She picked up one of Rosie's curled tight feet and kissed it. Rosie squealed.

"Hey," Brandon took Rosie's tiny hand by the pinky and waved it. Augusta reached out like she was going to take Rosie from his arms. Brandon scooted over on the swing, just out of her reach and then said, "Here. Why don't you set down next to us?"

He held Rosie's face to his face for a minute and kissed her on the nose, then passed the baby to Augusta.

"Brandon, a child ain't something a person owns."

"I know that."

Sometimes Augusta could act normal, and sometimes she could act like any other white lady, entitled like she was the only one who knew anything. She told him, "Make sure you burp her every time she eats now, Brandon." Things like that. She ought to be quiet, let him be a man. He had been through a lot of things in this life that she hadn't, that she'd never go through. She didn't have a semester of college like him either, and as far as he knew she never had a job where you had to clock in and keep your mouth shut, so you wouldn't be fired.

They took turns holding Rosie, bouncing her and lifting her up in the air until she laughed. They watched the cars swish by slow, waxed paint jobs flashing in the sunlight. Brandon kept the swing rocking with his foot, a slow gentle rhythm, like a metronome. Mama had taught him to play piano in elementary school.

"A gentleman needs to play a musical instrument, Brandon. It keeps the mind and hands busy," she'd said. Made him practice every day. She'd stand beside him, her palm flat on the side of the piano, so she could feel the echo of the notes. She sang, *Precious memories, how they linger, how they ever flood my soul. In the stillness of the midnight, sacred secrets will unfold.*

Brandon never played in church, even though that was her vision. He could play the notes, but had no heart for songs like *Precious Memories* or *Closer Lord to Thee*. Those were the songs that made Mama raise her hands toward the ceiling and cry. Brandon hummed Mama's songs softly into Rosie's ear.

Augusta's feet didn't touch the porch floor. She let her toes sweep it as they swayed and the swing chains creaked. A skinny boy of nine or ten rode by on his bike and popped a wheelie to show off.

"Look at that," Brandon said, pointing the boy's trick out to Rosie.

"I could keep Rosie at my house for a while," Augusta said. "You know, overnight. A man needs a break every now and then. To have a social life and what not."

"I don't need no break."

"Well, I just thought it might be nice. Help you out, is all."

"Thanks. I'll let you know. Right now, this is all the break I need. There ain't nothing in the world more fun than playing with a little baby. Have you seen her smile? It's for real now."

"Of course I have," Augusta said. "She's been smiling at me for a long time. Did she just start with you?" She sat Rosie up on her lap and bounced her, playing *Ride a Little Horsie, Go to Town*, and Rosie smiled, toothless, at the *don't fall down* part.

In the dark, Flora couldn't see out of the small windows of the trailer. She could only see what the light reflected back to her. She could only see Ramon.

"*Putita!*" Ramon said. He was so drunk, his eyes were red and his words were mumbled soft with a big loud one popping like a shot every now and then. Flora had learned to stay out of his way when he got like this and called her names like *whore*, but she knew not to hide. It upset him when she went away.

Once, she hid in the linen closet and tried to wait until he was sober.

"Flora!" he shouted. No one else was home. He opened every door, then slammed each one louder than the last. When he found her crouched in the closet, he pulled her out, shoved her against the wall, and threw every sheet and towel in the closet on top of her. Then, he pulled her close to his chest, sobbed that he was sorry, and held her.

Usually, Flora knew what he wanted before he wanted it. Like a glass of water, or another beer, or maybe some aspirin. Maybe sex, but usually the other things. It was like she could see the future, but she never knew when it would end. She let him fire words into the air and bury them in her head, where only she would remember them and she wouldn't say a thing about it in the morning. He forgot everything that happened. It was somebody's dream. Flora sat down on the old plaid couch and held on to its wooden arm for support.

"If you're so fucking pregnant, how come your belly isn't growing no more?" Ramon said. "You're just fat. People are talking. Christie told me. You ain't going to have no son for me. I should leave you and find a real woman. A real wife."

"Christie's the liar," Flora said. "*Amor*, you know how I've been feeling. The cravings. And my belly will grow. But what if it's a girl, *Amor*? Our own little *hija*? That's probably why I'm small. We'll have our baby soon," she said. Flora pushed her belly out and arched her back a little to look bigger. "Here, feel right here. I just felt a kick!" she said. Ramon's eyes grew wide and the anger drained from him. He put his rough palm on the smooth skin of her belly. "Where? I don't feel it." Meanness seeped out of him like a fever sweat. "Right here." Flora moved his hand. "There it is again."

"I still don't feel nothing," he said.

"She must be mad at you then, saying she wasn't there. This kid has been kicking me like crazy all night."

"Forgive me, Flora," he said.

When Ramon was sorry he became religious. He gave himself only the parts of the Church he thought he deserved. He wanted to punish himself, like Saint John the Baptist. He wanted to be rubbed raw and bleeding and not complain. He would say five hundred "Hail Mary's" in a row.

He made love to Flora carefully, like she was glass and might break, like he wanted to cover her and the baby with love, with the golden light glowing off of Jesus and Mary in the Bible pictures. Like he was Joseph and had to protect Mary and baby Jesus, because that was the job God gave him to do. She fell into his dream.

Flora called every Wilson in the phone book and hung up on them. She tore all the W's out of the phone book, folded the pages, and kept them in her pocket. She

touched the pages so much the ink wore off. There was one, an E. Wilson on her street. That could be it. Flora went walking out past the dusty trailer court entrance with its bare, neat yards, past the drooping white laundry-mat, past the convenience store with the blinking red sign, "Hot Coffee Now!" She passed the low brick elementary school, with its bright yellow doors and hundreds of windows reflecting the sun. Maple trees lined the main road, which had been recently re-paved. Flora loved the newness and the blackness of it, like the deepest ink of the night sky. Finally, she came to a small clump of old houses that must have been sixty or seventy years old, but they were painted fresh in bright pastel blues, greens and pinks. The porches had swings and there was every kind of flower you could think of in the yards and it smelled so good because they were growing in the ground and not living their last cut, odorless moments, like the ones people brought to the hospital. Flora looked for the burgundy car, or the stroller lady, or some sign of which house her baby girl was staying in because she could feel she was close. A man washed his silver sports car and waved at Flora as she stepped through the long rivulets of water he left on the pavement. She did not wave back, but kept walking. The street stretched long and she walked further and further away from her trailer.

Flora watched the sidewalk, careful not to step on lines or cracks. You could never be too careful. When Flora looked up, she saw the three of them: Brandon, the Lady, and Ramona, all there on the porch, not twenty feet away from her. She wanted to fall to her knees and thank God, but then they would know she was looking at them and she might touch a crack in the pavement, too. She had prayed to Saint Anne and this was the answer. Flora stopped walking and pretended to stretch. She touched her toes.

Ramona squealed like she was trying to get Flora's attention. They were taking good care of her, for now. Her cheeks were plump and rosy. It was all Flora could do not to run to the porch and grab her baby away, but she turned and headed back to the trailer, so Brandon would not see her. Her shoes left prints in the thick grass as she ran across yards and back down the street.

She had to be careful now at the hospital, but if she could find out Brandon's schedule, she could see Ramona any time she wanted. The old lady probably didn't know anything. Flora could really be a thinker when she wanted. She got an A in Trigonometry in high school. Who knows what she would have done if she had gone to college, but that wasn't God's plan. Jesus and the saints had led her to Ramona again.

"I'll kill that bastard," her Mother said. Angie was fifteen. Two distinct red lines had appeared on the white stick. She and Mother sat at the oak table in the kitchen, which had colonial blue wallpaper with little bouquets of pastel flowers, like a funeral home. Sympathy arrangements as far as the eye could see. This time, Mother didn't tell Angie to straighten up her face or it would wrinkle early.

"It will be all right," she said and held Angie so tight she could barely breathe. Angie clung to her, sitting like a little kid in her lap on the hard ladder back chair.

There were a couple of boys she'd slept with. They'd heard she would put out and how could she give up all that attention? Usually, it was in the backs of cars, or sometimes in the dugout of the baseball field at the high school, but that was uncomfortable, her shoulder blades pressing into the aluminum bench, even when they thought to bring a blanket. When they were doing it, Angie felt like somebody else, so it was sort of like acting. She didn't even live in this town, then. She was a movie star. She thought about how warm their bodies were, or the sound of their breath, or how they smelled like gin. They moved and touched her close. She liked it some.

Mother took her to the clinic in Charlotte. She let Angie roll down the windows in the car to get fresh air, even though it would blow her hair and she would have to get it re-set. "Let me know if you need to stop," she said. Her blue eyes looked worried. Mother sat in the dim gray waiting room while Angie stared at the white-hot overhead exam light until she had to look away toward the reflection of her own blood in the doctor's glasses. He was scraping her insides out, removing her layer by layer and stripping her clean of all that she had done.

The second time it happened, she knew whose fault it was. Mother was ironing a pair of pants, putting long, straight creases in them, spraying them with starch. "Um, Mother," she said.

Mother looked up, rested the steaming iron on its end.

"What do you need, Angela?" she said.

"Oh nothing. Can I use the iron when you're done?" She knew Mother couldn't forgive her twice.

Brian drove her to the clinic.

"I don't want you to come inside," she said. He waited in the parking lot and they got high in his truck after the procedure. Neither one of them said I love you, but they kissed and she bled too much and had to go to the emergency room and tell strangers what had happened.

Mother started taking Angie to church a lot and she never asked did she want to go. Angie owed her. She would tune in to the hum of the ancient air conditioner most Sundays, or check out people's clothes. Sometimes she would sleep and this felt holy. The one word the preacher said that got to her finally was *resurrection*. She could remake herself, maybe not like Jesus because he was pure and she wasn't, but maybe she didn't have to create herself out of her body. She could think her way out of here and talk people into forgetting. She could kill off her old self and start fresh. The new Angie went off to college.

Augusta had given up on cleaning the oven. By the time she got her yellow gloves out and the foam sprayed on, Rosie woke. That's how it was with a baby: no complete thoughts, but so many full feelings. Who cared about dirty ovens? She got Rosie out of her crib, then sat down to rock her back to sleep.

Maybe Brandon would get tired of the day-to-day childcare and Rosie would move in with her. Men didn't like looking out for all the needs a child had – dinner, bath, story, bed – every single night with no time for going out. Brandon had no business with her baby. That's how Daniel was. He'd just take off fishing or work on fixing something, so he could get time to clear his head, be alone. Augusta would take Rosie to school and plait her hair, or maybe Rosie would wear it in pigtails. Augusta would make sure she did all of her homework. Rosie's eyes slid closed, her breathing steadied, and Augusta lay her gently back down in the crib.

Augusta was cleaning the bathtub, on her knees on the side of it, scrubbing its pale pink porcelain, so she didn't hear the doorbell at first. She liked a bathroom to sparkle. She studied what needed cleaning, but she wouldn't look in the mirror. She liked

for the tub to be so shiny, she could see a faint reflection of herself in it, the outline of another human face that she could talk to.

The knocking at the door became a pounding and she could tell it must be somebody who needed something and couldn't wait. She wiped her hands on her thighs and opened the door.

"Good morning," she said. "Can I help you?"

A Mexican girl stood in the doorway, dressed in pressed blue jeans and a long purple tank top that was snug around her thick, rounded belly. Her hair was pulled into a low ponytail, and her eyes were light brown, almost metallic in the light.

"Hi," the girl said, "My name is Flora. I clean houses if you need some help. I just live down the street." Augusta still had her cleaning rag in her pocket and smelled of tile cleaner. She liked this girl's face. There was a softness to it that said she was kind and maybe even lonely. Here was a girl trying to make an honest living.

Augusta didn't really need the help, but remembered all that washing she had taken in to make a living and how sometimes people would give her laundry that wasn't even dirty.

"My name's Augusta," she said. "I was just cleaning the bathtub is why I smell like Comet. It hurts my back to bend low, sometimes. A sixty-two-year-old body feels ancient if it wants to, reminds you of all the stupid things you done when you was young." She smiled to make Flora feel welcome.

"You don't look like no sixty-two," Flora said.

"Well, I feel it. Come on in. I might could think of something for you to do. Do you drink coffee?"

"Sure," Flora said, "black."

They sat at the polished cherry dining table drinking coffee in china cups with saucers, and worked out that Flora would come every other Wednesday. Flora kept looking over at the highchair Augusta had found at a yard sale for Rosie. Augusta was trying to anticipate all the things Rosie would need.

"Oh, that's for my granddaughter," she said. "I keep her three days a week. Her name's Rosie. You have children?"

"I just have one little girl," Flora said. "Ramona. She looks like her Papa." She sipped her coffee so polite. Augusta watched the way she held her cup and whether she put it down on the saucer or the table. She put it on the saucer, of course, and Augusta knew the girl knew how to act and how to clean because she was real careful not to spill a drop.

"You know, I think Rosie looks a lot like me now, but she might end up looking like her Daddy," Augusta said. "She has his eyes, for sure. Kids will change, though. They take a little bit from everybody. Noses, for instance. My daughter had the cutest little button nose until she was about ten, then it got long and pointy, just like mine. Noses tell. I felt bad giving her a part of me that I never liked on myself."

"I know what you mean," she said. "I think my daughter's going to have my mouth, but not my accent. That would be a curse." She smiled and she had a pretty, wide-lipped mouth.

Flora started to clear the dishes. At first Augusta was going to protest, say that she shouldn't do it, but she could tell that Flora really wanted to help. It felt good to sit and help this young girl out. It might give her more time with Rosie if she had this girl to help with the house.

"Thank you, Miss Augusta," she said, "I could go ahead and clean the bathtub while I'm here."

"That's okay. I'm almost done. I'm getting ready to have my granddaughter overnight."

Tanya was warm, silky, and glowy brown, like the sunshine was reflecting off her skin, even on cloudy days. Every man with a pulse had to stare at her, and you couldn't blame them. Some didn't even know they were looking. It was like sunflowers leaning toward the sun, following it so they could live. Still, Brandon wasn't twisting and turning just to see the way she looked, to catch her scent. He brought her flowers. He stopped by

and sat with her and her mama on the porch. Finally, he took her out to dinner and told her made-up stories about himself on the way home.

"You're funny," she said. They kissed.

She moved her body against his, touching what was different. He meant something to her for a while. She close to loved him and he would have turned himself inside out for her.

Tanya couldn't leave town, so she tried spending time with Brandon to pretend her life was new. Popular girls did that when the pressure got too much. That was how he had any kind of love life. He wasn't bad looking or flat out ugly, or stupid, either. Brandon kept to himself. People didn't trust a man who wouldn't hang out and be one of them.

It was the spring of the year. Brandon was cutting yards for money and had his pockets full since he had trimmed the first spindly light green grass and weeds out of people's yards. Everybody started out trying to keep things nice. So many dreams in the beginning of things. That would only last until the heat came. Then people would get too hot and mad and lazy to care, or the grass would dry up brown and stiff, but that day it was the soft baby green fuzz that everybody liked to sit on their porches and look across and smell when it was cut. There was that spring hope in the air. Brandon cut Tanya's Mama's grass and did the weed eater on it to mark the edges and when he went up on the porch to tell Mrs. Connors he was done, there was Tanya. She was wearing a red tube top and white shorts and he had never seen so much suede-soft skin in his whole life. He had to look away for a second, so he could handle it.

"Mama's gone to the store," Tanya said, " but you can wait on the porch. You want some tea or something?" Conversation fell out of them and onto them and floated like a pretty cloud around them, but Brandon couldn't remember what was said. It ended up with plans for a date, he knew that. Those soft nights they would meet and drive around maybe and end up at some park on a quilt in the grass, sneaking to get what they could from each other. It was make believe private, like the night could make walls of a room or a house that they could live in, or even a mansion. Sometimes, he looked at Tanya and didn't touch her.

"What's wrong with you, crazy man? Stop staring at me like that," she'd say, but she would still laugh and toss her head back with the fun of it. She started to think of Brandon as really crazy because he didn't ever want to let her go. He didn't follow her to hem her in. He was only trying to keep her safe. Sometimes he would hide her pills, wanting her to slip up and have his baby so she'd have to stay with him, but she always found them.

"Thank God," she'd say. "We don't want any accidents."

"No, we don't." Brandon would say and he'd work his way up her body from her feet to her mouth.

At first, he didn't tell her he loved her. She would have laughed or said, "Every man I meet is in love with me, so get in line, you just a regular man like the rest, looking for somebody to bow up to."

After a few months of shimmery summer days, dark green blankets of leaves covered the trees and mazes of kudzu had grown thick. Brandon proposed.

"Do you know how young I am?" she asked. She started needing *time*, as she called it. Brandon drove by her house on the hour. Once, Mrs. Connors stepped out on the porch and shooed him away.

"Leave her alone," she said. He kept driving by.

In August, Tanya went off on a trip to Wrightsville with her girlfriends, a beach weekend.

"Why do you have to go off with them? I'll take you to the beach," he said.

"You don't like my friends," she said. "Everybody has to have friends, Brandon." When she got back, she wouldn't take Brandon's calls, but he could still hear the whisper of his voice in the background saying, *I'm not home!*

He sat in his car outside her house and watched some guy he didn't know help her pack for college. They drove away together. Mrs. Connors saw Brandon sitting in his car and waved him off.

Brandon raked leaves and crunched through the wasted deadness of it all. People thought he would follow Tanya and peep around, but he knew when he had been left. He hid inside the feeling of it and bubbled himself off so nobody could bother him. No other woman could pop that bubble, except a tiny baby girl.

What put Brandon in mind of Tanya was that they could have had a family. He could see it with her – a job, a house, little kids calling him Daddy. After her, he couldn't see it anymore. Things had to come to Brandon from God, directions on what to do that was important, who to be. Besides Tanya, the only person God ever talked to him about needing was Rosie.

Brandon took Rosie for her shots and to check that she was developing. He looked at all the fine looking women that came through the hospital, doctors, nurses, patients, but he couldn't imagine one he could share Rosie with. The doctor at the clinic said, "She's delayed, but that's what happens with preemies." Maybe she needed a woman in her life-- a mama and not a play grandma, like Augusta. But a lot of people got raised by their grandmas and didn't even have a daddy. That made Brandon feel okay about things. He could give her that. Rosie had been with him a few months and was starting to hold her head up on her own.

Sometimes Augusta acted like she was the mama. "Don't hold her like that, Brandon," she said, or, "You can't give a baby table food yet. Don't give her that bread." That got under Brandon's skin. It was his turn to build a family and add something to the world. He did the work of a mama and a daddy. Augusta was only a babysitter.

That new girl from the cafeteria, Flora, walked right into Angie's office. She said, "Ms. Taylor, I need to tell you something." She looked nervous, a little fidgety. She wouldn't let go of a long strand of hair. She kept twisting it as she talked. "I don't think this job is working out for me. I am going into business for myself." She looked into Angie's eyes like she was trying to guess how she would react. Angie tried hard not to smile.

"That way, I can have more time with my family. You know how much they need you," she said.

Angie smiled. "Thank you for all of your diligent work. Good luck." she said.

"That's it," Flora said, "no problem?"

"I think you are making a good move for your future," Angie said. "When are you due?"

"Due?" Flora said. Angie looked at Flora's stomach and flushed. Maybe she was thinking of another girl, maybe it was the Hispanic nurse on the second floor who was expecting, but she really thought it was Flora.

"Oh yeah," Flora said. She patted her stomach and arched her back a little, like she was showing it off. "Soon. Real soon. You have kids?" she asked.

"No, but I have a dog. That's sort of like a kid, isn't it?" Angie asked.

Flora laughed. "No, Ms. Taylor. A dog ain't nothing like a kid." She shook her head and said, "Thank you for the job," and walked out.

"Don't forget to stop by HR," Angie called after her.

Dogs' problems were easy to handle, like fleas. Kids could overtake you; weigh more than you and tower over you at six feet, after you carried them curled inside you like a tiny question mark.

Babies didn't give back. Not for a long time, anyway. Sometimes they were the secret. When Angie came in the door, her yellow lab, Lacy, was waiting to be fed. It was the best moment of her day. Angie wanted to be somebody's best moment.

Mami turned on the radio in the kitchen and started making dinner. "I need some help with the mole'," she called.

Flora put down the magazine she was reading and hurried toward the kitchen. Christie was already there. She stood in the middle of the narrow hallway, feet apart, ready to take Flora on like a linebacker. She was fat, especially for a young girl, with rolls of peachy flesh peaking out from the space between the bottom of her T-shirt, which

said *Race for the Cure*, and the top of her hip slung jeans. She didn't move her body, except to fuck, as far as Flora could tell, and she shopped at the Goodwill. Christie was no *guapa*. She was not beautiful. She bumped into Flora and sneered.

Flora kept walking. "Oh, sorry," she said. Christie followed her to the kitchen, grabbed a knife and a wooden cutting board and stood beside Mami, near the sink. The tiny kitchen had maple cabinets and brown countertops. They were worn to white in the places people had used most.

Mami looked tired. She tucked a loose strand of long gray hair behind her ear, then rinsed a tomato. Christie chopped onions. Her eyes were red and watery and she sniffed like she was crying. Everything about her was pretend. Flora sautéed chicken pieces in oil and the steam and smell of it filled the room—cumin and cilantro and garlic. Still, the air in the room felt cold. Mami was grating chocolate for the sauce and Christie threw the onions in the pan with Flora's chicken. One square of onion landed in Flora's hair. Flora ignored it, even though she knew it was on purpose. Christie went back to chopping. Her wide, flat ass hit Flora's belly when she turned around and it could have been an accident, until she gave Flora an extra shove.

"*Perdon*," she said loudly. It was one of about ten Spanish words she knew.

"Don't bump me. You could hurt the baby," Flora said.

"What baby? You're a lying, fat bitch and I'm going to make your life more miserable than it already is," Christie said. She smiled and flipped her straight blonde hair around, but it didn't get to Flora like she wanted it to because Flora knew the color came from a bottle. Christie had dark roots.

"What you talking about, you little whore?" Flora said, "Don't even speak to me with that cock sucking mouth." Peppers and onions greased the air. The chocolate smell deepened it. One match would have lit the whole room on fire. Mami didn't speak much English, except hello and please and thank you, but she could tell they were fighting by their faces and force of the words they threw at each other's heads. Their knives chopped a loud rhythm, while Mami made smooth, white tortillas with the fleshy pink palms of her hands.

"Yeah, Ramon wishes your mouth was like mine. Least that's what he told me." Christie said. She licked her pointy pink tongue over her thin, hot pink lipsticked lips. Flora fought her own hand as it tried to fly up and smack Christie. She grabbed a jalapeno and gutted its hundreds of white seeds. She wanted Christie to cry so the black lines of her eyeliner would smear. "I guess you don't know nothing about Juan's other girls," Flora said. Christie's face squeezed tight. Flora had hit something soft. "He likes them a little cleaner than you, though. You know, no diseases or nothing." Christie turned to her vegetables and Flora turned to hers. Flora imagined the tomato she cut was Christie's face and she sliced it carefully, so it would scar some ugly word or name in it that people would come to call Christie as a nickname.

When they were done making the mole', Christie turned to Flora and said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you. I'm pregnant. With twins." She smiled and her eyes squinted tight.

"Liar," Flora said. She spat as Christie left the kitchen with a swish of her yellow hair.

"Why you so nasty?" Mami asked. "Ramon don't know what kind of pain he caused me by marrying you. Why can't you leave your little sister-in-law alone?" Flora didn't believe Christie about the twins, but her little girl was real. She could prove it.

It wasn't the thud that made Augusta's pulse race. It was the few quiet seconds before Rosie started screaming. "Oh my God. Rosie!" she said. She dropped the knife and the cucumber she was slicing on the counter and ran to the bedroom. Rosie lay face down on the white rug, legs and arms splayed at odd angles. Augusta held her breath. Rosie was screaming as loud as she could, but it was muffled because she was facing the carpet. She turned fuchsia, she was crying so hard. Augusta scooped her up in her arms and kissed Rosie's head and all of her tiny limbs over and over. She moved the baby's arms and legs. A small red lump was forming on her Rosie's forehead . "I guess you're awake now, poor thing," Augusta said. "Mama's so sorry you fell." Brandon didn't have to know

about this. Augusta would remember. She wouldn't put Rosie on the bed again, now that she could roll over. Rosie had already moved on and was watching the blades of the ceiling fan turn. She wouldn't remember anything detailed until she was four or five. She would know by instinct whether she had been cared for. Augusta would let her know she had been the one to keep her safe and fed and loved.

Augusta was a mama again. This time, she didn't have to balance somewhere up too high for Rosie to reach, so a man didn't get jealous. The fall had only bruised Rosie. Augusta covered it with a little makeup so Brandon wouldn't freak out. Her face was starting to take its shape and she looked a little like Augusta. It was like with old couples, and people and their dogs—they started to look alike. Genetics only played a small part. At least Augusta hoped to God that was true because even though she had her mama's stubby hands and her daddy's lipless, pale pink mouth, she felt different. Rosie would never know she had fallen, or that she ever had another mama. She didn't care what Augusta looked like, and she wouldn't love anybody better, not Brandon, or anybody else.

People remade baby memories anyway they wanted—left out all the fear and frustration and anger and just kept the ripe melon smell of baby feet or the image of first gummy smiles, all the things they wanted a camera for at the time. Sometimes memory was better than film. Then the baby always sat still and angelic and cooed instead of spitting up on your new dress and running a fever and screaming. People forgot what was said, at least what the words were, even if the feelings stayed. Baby love, unconditional

love, whatever you want to call it, that was the reward. The kind of love you could only get from somebody without a memory. The kind of love you could give too much of.

Daniel's family never did accept Augusta, or forgive him – two of the main things Jesus said do--and then, they went to church every Sunday and talked about them to anybody with ears, but wouldn't speak to Augusta, or Daniel, or even the children. That's the part that hurt most. When Joseph was born, Daniel said, "Augusta, this child will be the healing balm. Children do that sometimes. They get your sins forgiven, just like Jesus." A baby's eyes didn't ever shift away from you when you looked into them. They weren't afraid to see what was inside, even the ugliest parts. They knew and didn't care. Joseph smiled at everybody.

One Sunday when Joseph was just a month old, they got dressed up as a family and went to the big stone church downtown. It was the first warm day of the year, early March, but the trees weren't brave enough to bud yet. Faces craned out of car windows and stared as the new family walked down the sidewalk. It still hurt for Augusta to sit and she leaked milk right through her bra onto her yellow silk church dress and it was the only one she could fit at the time. But she held her head up because everybody would look to see if she was strong, even if she was pale and too plain.

The sun shone through the stained glass windows and colored her red, green, yellow and purple, but that was not enough. She was light as a ghost, so nobody wanted to see her. She was invisible, even though everybody was looking. Daniel's daddy was a greeter, but he didn't greet them. He just looked past them, looked at Joseph, and shook

his head. He patted other men on the back, wrapped the ladies up in thick-armed hugs, but he wouldn't lay his hands on his own son or grandson. Daniel's mama said hello and held the baby, but only for a minute.

"He looks like you, Augusta," she said, like there might be some other man who was the daddy instead of her own son. Daniel's tongue got caught in his throat. He couldn't dishonor his parents right in the aisle of the church. He couldn't protect his wife and child. Augusta felt the heat coming off his body, seeping through his pores because he refused to cry or tremble. It was the First Lady of the church, the pastor's wife, who came up and made over the baby and got everyone separated before even God saw what really happened.

Daniel put all of his heart into the children and they broke it over and over. It didn't take much--a skipped fishing trip, or a dinner rushed so they could go out with their friends, a Saturday morning spent in their rooms with the doors closed--they didn't realize the stakes. The kids couldn't hold all the love Daniel had, so they brushed off the extra and it puddled all around. They lived in a swamp of it--thick and dark and full. Daniel courted his depression, liked having it around to keep him company. Daniel tied so much weight to everyday things, he felt abandoned whenever somebody walked out of the room.

Augusta held him and stroked his head and said, "I'll never leave you, Baby. You'll always have me." But she couldn't be a whole family or a whole town. She couldn't make Daniel a new world where everything would be all right.

People turned their heads and spit toward the street when Augusta walked through town with her babies, one toddling, holding her hand, the other in the stroller. She heard the wet clots land on the pavement, heard the whispers that followed, then turned back to see fake smiles of people who'd had a hand in her raising. When the children went out with her to the store or the swimming pool or the library, people always asked the same thing.

"What are they? Are they mix?"

"Just children," she'd say and she'd try her hardest to smile, like she didn't want to tear their hearts out of their bodies.

"They adopted?" would be the next question.

"No, they favor my husband's side," Augusta said. This would really puzzle people, then reality would spread over their faces like a grease stain on a paper bag and they might blush and maybe say, "Oh. What pretty babies," or maybe walk on.

It was a wild day in the E.R.: A man cut his hand with his neighbor's hedge trimmer and needed flaps of finger skin sewn back on—he bled on three different chairs. A kid spiked a fever and vomited all over the room, his mother grabbed Brandon by the arm. "Can't they get him in soon," she said. " We've been here over an hour."

"The lady at the desk can help you, ma'am," he said. An old man with chest pains broke his hip getting out of his car and a team had to rush out to the parking lot to bring him in. There were no empty seats in the waiting room. Brandon worked over the end of his shift without noticing the time.

"It's time for you to go home, isn't it Brandon?" Rita, a nurse's aide, said. "We started on the same shift and I'm out of this crazy place. Go on home!"

"Lost track of time," he said. He clocked out and washed up.

Rita said, "Go check on that baby, Brandon."

He grinned because Rosie was all he talked about. "You know I got to see my baby girl. She loves her daddy."

"I can see why," Rita said. "Don't know how that mama could have run off. That breaks my heart. You need to pick better women, Brandon."

That girlfriend had become so real Brandon hated her. He would break up with her if he could, slash her tires and throw her clothes into the yard. He'd love to burn something she treasured into gray floating ash.

"Is your baby girl getting big now?" a nurse at the station asked. "I've got some three-to-six month clothes if you think she can wear them. My baby's walking now."

It made them look at him different, like he was the first lightning bug of summer—rare and glowing and a prize to catch. He took a good look at the nurses' wide-open faces, especially Rita with her chipped front tooth, but he flew away from all of them.

He walked through the stale chill of the hospital to the waves of heat radiating off the parking lot pavement. It was a day made for driving around soaking the summer out of the air. He rolled the windows down and drove fast enough to make his own breeze. Neon orange daylilies crowded the median on Bower Street. People waited in lazy lines outside Freeze Queen Ice cream and Hot dogs. Three o'clock. No car accidents or motorcycle wrecks on the road to mess up the stainless steel operating table Brandon had cleaned. Somebody on the next shift could deal with that.

Brandon rode with his forearm out the window, feeling the shape of the June air, the sticky-sweet scent of gardenias leading him on. He hummed along to the oldies station, *Ain't nothing like the real thing, baby. Ain't nothing like the real thing.* God was good for making days like this. Weldon School Road, his street, was quiet. Brandon only passed one or two cars. He passed the elementary. School was out for the summer and the empty building seemed to droop. Rosie and Augusta might be out for their evening walk. They didn't expect him yet.

The tires crunched gravel and kicked up white dust as Brandon pulled into the drive. He got out of the car and walked up the stone path to Augusta's porch. He bent to pull a dandelion from the cracks and tossed it into the yard. "Miss Augusta," he called. He knocked on the glass storm door, but nobody came. He had a key to the house, always

had, and Augusta had a key to his, but he waited outside in case they were napping. No need to rush on this drawn out day, now that he was home. "Where you all at?" Brandon called to the house. Nobody answered. He waited on the porch steps, stretched his legs out and leaned back. They were probably out walking. The sun weakened as he sat and it bleached the color out of everything, preparing for dark.

After a while, Brandon got tired of waiting. He unlocked the door and went inside to get some water. "Miss Augusta?" he called. He walked through the house, checking every room, calling and calling their names, "Augusta? Rosie?"

He saw the stroller inside, so it wasn't an evening walk. Miss Augusta held Rosie like she was her own. They might have gone to visit a neighbor. God brought Rosie to Brandon and he wouldn't take her away. Would he take her away? Brandon left the front door wide open when he ran.

"Don't she look a little big for a newborn?" Ramon said. "When do we get to take this bandage off her belly button?"

"Not yet," Flora said. "Don't worry about that. Just hold your daughter."

He wasn't used to holding something so soft. He held his arms in a stiff oval, with the baby resting inside. She was working up to a cry. "Shh," he said. "You sure I'm not going to hurt her?"

"She ain't a banana or something. How you going to bruise her by holding her?" Flora said. He didn't know where to put his elbows. Ramona arched her back and pushed her tiny fists and kicked her feet and it made Ramon nervous to stand with her, so he sat down on the couch. He sank into the overstuffed cushions and looked into Ramona's face as if he had never seen a baby before and was amazed that a creature so beautiful could belong to him.

Ramon had driven home from a job in Raleigh when Flora called, broke the speed limit in two counties to get to back home to his wife and child. Any man would understand why, even a policeman. She wasn't supposed to be due for another month. He put his life on the line when he heard the baby had come.

"*Mi Amor*," Flora said when he walked in the door. He held Flora and covered her face in tiny, delicate kisses. She closed her eyes.

Christie and Mami watched Flora's face as she told the story. It was calm when she talked about labor, like she had known how things would happen, no surprises.

Christie scowled, but Mami smiled wide, her eyes wet and shiny.

"I got up in the middle of the night with the birth pains chasing each other down my back and around to my belly. They were pushing my insides hard and I knew I had to go to the hospital. There wasn't time to talk or to get ready. What else could I do with Ramon away?" Flora said. "I called a cab. Juan and Christie were gone. I didn't want to wake you, Mami, just so you could sit up and worry."

"But the pain?" Mami said. "*Pobrecita se duele con nadie.*" Poor thing, you hurt with no one there. She kept one soft hand touching Flora at all times now, like she didn't want Flora to go by herself again, like her touch would keep Flora safe and protect her from hurting. Flora loved the weight of Mami's hand on her arm, or rubbing her back. Mami's touch spoke the Spanish of Flora's own Mami, her sisters, her *Abuela*, her hands belonged to all of them and to Flora, too. Not to Christie, or even Ramon. But to Ramona. Yes, to her too. Flora would help Mami forgive herself for not being there to help.

Flora's plan had been simple, but it relied on Juan and Christie's habit of staying out drunk from the end of the afternoon until the middle of the night. It depended on the fact that Mami was hard of hearing. Flora had waited for a day when Augusta planned to work out in the yard, going in and out of the garden shed. She knew what the baby would nap from one to three. Sometimes Augusta let her hold the baby, they had already bonded through the skin.

Flora knew all of the corners and edges of Augusta's house and the sounds it might make. It was like Ramona knew her Mami was coming to get her so she left the door open. Flora didn't even have to use the spare key Miss Augusta kept under a big

rock next to the back door. She didn't do anything illegal, just picked up her baby from daycare like any other mother. She slipped in quietly. She didn't want to frighten Ramona, so she lifted her delicately out of the crib and tiptoed out the back door. She could hear Augusta hoeing, humming some Jesus song in the flowerbeds on the side of the house, working the dirt. The screen door was all that kept her from her future, so she opened it, praying it wouldn't squeak. She had oiled the hinges the week before.

The cab was waiting two blocks away and the old man driver didn't say anything when Flora got in with the baby. She had called the company that morning and he was right on time. He didn't get a whole lot of business. Most people in Alden had nowhere to go. He was fat enough to take up most of the front seat and his face was red and sweaty, even though he had the air conditioner on high. He was listening to a radio talk show and only looked at Flora in the rearview window when he stopped down the street from the trailer park. "Five fifty," he said. Flora gave him a wadded ten-dollar bill and didn't wait for change.

Maybe when Ramona was bigger, they could visit Augusta and she would be happy for them. She had no business with this baby anyway. Ramona didn't look nothing like that old white lady. Didn't look a thing like Brandon, either. She was one hundred percent Flora's. They would get those matching mother and daughter dresses and people would say, "Wow, she looks just like you, Flora, like a tiny version of her Mami."

Flora snuck to the back door of the trailer, which was right next to her room. Once she got inside and got to her room, she turned the radio up loud so no one would hear her.

Ramona had slept through the whole thing, only wiggling a little in her arms, but Flora's heart was pounding and her breath was loud and unsteady. Mami was the only one home, napping in front of the TV. Flora lay on the bed next to her baby and tried to close her eyes, but she couldn't stop looking at this miracle. Everybody in the trailer was used to blocking out sounds, sinking into a pool of thoughts to escape from the tight space. Nobody heard.

Flora told them, "I took a cab to the hospital—I think it was three in the morning and they wouldn't let in no family but the husband, anyway." That part was true. Flora took a taxi to the hospital with the baby in the early morning, then called home from a pay phone in the hospital lobby. She said she couldn't have visitors. She went to a hotel and waited over night, then went back to the hospital and had them pick her up at the Emergency Room entrance. It was tricky, but she made it look okay real. They didn't want to ask questions. They were happy to hold a little baby. She had left a note on a piece of paper bag that she had found in the kitchen. It said, "It's time. The baby's coming early. I'll call. Love, Flora."

People went in and out of the revolving door of the hospital, staring into nothing as they entered. Flora was waiting by the doors for Ramon, holding Ramona, when she saw her manager, Shawna, come in on her way into work. Flora looked around—maybe she could find a wheelchair to hide in, but they were all filled with wilting, gray skinned people. Ramona started crying, so Flora sat in a blue plastic waiting room chair and rocked back and forth. She quieted.

Shawna waved and called out, "Oh Flora, congratulations! I'll check on y'all soon. I'm twenty minutes late."

"Go! Go!" Flora said and waved Shawna on with a big smile. She was so relieved, but didn't worry too much because Jesus was watching over her and her little Moises baby. Flora would raise Ramona to be the queen of her people. She had stolen some baby blankets from the hospital laundry when she was working in the cafeteria and they came in handy. Everybody took a little something before they left a job, didn't they? She took what was hers.

Ramon came home early every night now. He did whatever Flora asked, including changing some diapers. "Whoa! I thought babies smelled good," he said. "How come something so little can smell like shit?"

"Ramon!" Flora said. "She doesn't smell bad. She's perfect, one hundred percent."

"Don't you think she's a little on the big side, though? Is there something wrong with her?" he said.

"Amor, you don't know nothing about babies," Flora told him, "Look at you, you're a big man, so why wouldn't your baby be born big? Your Mami said you were the size of a melon, that she could barely carry you. You tore your way out." This would quiet him. "Plus, I think I went past my due date." Flora had worked out the answer to every question anybody might ask. She had planned for weeks, only she didn't think it would be so easy. This was the work of God, bringing this baby to where she was meant to be.

"Can I hold her again?" Ramon asked. He still looked uncomfortable, like his hands were too big for his body and he had nowhere to hide them, but he was trying and Flora loved him for it.

"She loves her Papa. Just hold her head a little," Flora said, even though she could see that Ramona could already hold her head up a little and was probably close to three months. It had been two months since Flora saw Brandon get her out of the trash. She was a preemie, so people could believe if they wanted. Some newborns were bigger than this. Flora's cousin Aurelia had a ten-pound boy. Thank God, Flora never had to go through that. *Madre de Dios!* Ten pounds. The only problem was, she cried a lot. Babies were simple--eat, sleep, scream and shit, right?--but this kid was all lungs and Flora couldn't figure out the problem.

Ramon said, "Is she okay, *Amor?* She's pretty loud."

Juan and Christie were leaving the house to go to a club and Juan said, "Shut that fucking baby up!" before he slammed the door. Finally, Mami took her and bounced her as she walked and Ramona began to get sleepy. Flora cuddled next to Ramon on the couch and they watched Mami and Ramona pace back and forth in front of them. Ramon put his arms around Flora. He wouldn't let her do a thing because he was so proud to have a daughter and a wife. Flora dozed off in the middle of this dream.

Ramon whispered in her ear, "Next, we'll have a son. Then another daughter, then two more sons, and a little girl to be the baby." He kissed Flora on the neck and the mouth. She kept her eyes closed, but smiled and said, "You got big plans, *Amor*, but we only got Ramona right now." He held Flora until she fell asleep and when she woke up,

he was drifting off and Ramona was asleep on his warm chest and everything was perfect, just like Flora wanted it to be.

Brandon came flying down the street in his car, just a streak of burgundy, and Augusta saw the hollow of the empty car seat when he hit the brakes and pulled up beside her, almost on the sidewalk. At first, the sight of Brandon gave Augusta hope, but if Brandon didn't have Rosie, she was gone. All Augusta could say was, "Call the police! Call the police!" But Brandon stared her in the eye like he would kill her just by looking at her and said, "No." Augusta caught a chill, even though it was at least eighty-five degrees outside.

"We can handle it ourselves, Augusta," Brandon said. She stared at him. He drove her to the house in silence and they went inside. In the living room, Brandon put his arm around her and steered her to a chair. "Ain't no need to call the police. All they'll do is mess things up and point the finger at us. I been thinking. I'm going to find my baby girl.

You mark my words." She believed he would, even if she had no idea how. If he had hidden Rosie from the world, what else had he kept from Augusta? Still he had brought Rosie to her and he would bring her back.

Augusta would never weed again in her life. Of all people, why had she cared about the way things looked in her garden? Sin of pride, she guessed and now she was punished. The baby had fallen asleep in her crib and Augusta thought she would be able to hear her through the screen door, but she didn't hear a thing. She thought the quiet was a sign of peace and sleeping soundly. There was not a sound and she didn't know, didn't feel when her life was torn open. How was that possible? Those tomato plants would have been fine with the Bermuda creeping into their cages, fingering through the wire mesh. But Rosie would not be fine or anything else. Somebody crept into Augusta's home and stole her baby. She would have killed them if she had seen them.

In the garden, Purple Hull beans vined up the chain link fence and choked the diamond-shaped holes. Augusta had dropped the paper bag full of them on the kitchen floor when she saw Rosie was missing. Whoever took her might as well have shot Augusta dead. She took off on foot through the neighborhood, with her hands still in garden gloves and dirt on her jeans, crazy eyed and sweat-wild silver hair. She had never run that fast

Brandon Wilson came fuming into Angie's office and demanded that she give him an employee address. Walked right past the front desk, like he was the hospital CEO or something and not just a first shift janitor.

"I need to speak to you right now," he said.

It would be a severe breach of protocol to give out an address--you could get fired for something like that. Angie said, "You'll have to call information. I am not the operator, nor am I authorized to give out personal employee information." She wouldn't let him intimidate her, just because he was big and loud and a man. She stood behind her desk and put her hands on her hips.

"But she's a thief and a liar. Don't that mean nothing to you?" he said. He was trying to keep his voice down, but it wouldn't stay.

"Mr. Wilson, if you have a problem with someone, you should contact the police. I am sure they will take care of it." Angie said. Her voice was shrill.

"This is my daughter we're talking about. A baby girl, and you want me to leave it up to the cops?"

Angie picked up the phone. "I'll call security if you don't calm down. The police are the proper channel for finding a missing person. They can start the investigation after forty-eight hours."

"In forty-eight hours, that girl could take my child to Mexico, Puerto Rico, whatever damn country she's from. Forty-eight hours? You got to help me, now!"

Brandon had inched up until his hands were on Angie's desk and his chest leaned over it. She stood her ground on the other side, still as a tree.

Angie's assistant stuck her head in the door. "Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Fine," Angie said. Brandon Wilson looked at the assistant and his face fell.

"Police won't do nothing for me. You got to give me that Flora's address." He was quiet now. He sat down in the padded chair across from Angie.

"That is private information, by law," Angie said. The law part made Angie feel powerful.

"Fine," he said. "I'll try four-one-one. Or I'll find it myself." Angie was going to call security, but what would she tell them now? She would just look like a helpless little girl if people knew an employee barged right in on her, threatening. She had to be careful not to compromise her authority. Nobody really wanted a woman in charge. One slip and you looked weak, incapable as any other white girl. Angie would deal with this. She had no idea what he wanted from Flora. She couldn't care. She said, "Mr. Wilson, please leave this office until you can discuss this problem in a civilized manner." He got up slowly, staring her in the eye, then walked out, slamming the door behind him.

"I just want to talk to the girl," he said. "I want to work things out with her."

"Let me know once you have contacted the police," she called through the door. She sat in her leather desk chair and breathed deeply to calm herself. It was probably all some relationship thing. Her employees couldn't keep their hands off each other. Couldn't keep to themselves. Flora from the cafeteria was always bothering Brandon, but she had quit her job, so how she could be bothering him now?

The glow of the fluorescent lights reflected off the white tile floors and looked heavenly to Flora, like angel light. Flora smiled and pulled Ramona closer to her body. They were in the drugstore down the street, a block from the trailer park—there was a special on diapers and Flora wanted to stock up. You never know when the price is going to go up and those things weren't cheap. Ramona was strapped to Flora's chest in a navy blue sling, warm and sleeping. Flora snuck up behind Christie in the Personal Care aisle. "Boo!" she said. Ramona laughed.

Christie's face flushed bright red and made her platinum hair look whiter.

"What you need tampons for if you're pregnant, *puta* liar?" Flora said.

"Don't you know nothing about privacy!"

"Say the truth," Flora said. "That ain't no pregnant belly, it's fat."

"Okay, so I don't got twins, yet," Christie said, "but that don't mean I won't next month." She threw the tampons in the cart, along with an ovulation predictor and a jumbo chocolate bar. "Don't talk to me no more. I hate you," she said.

Flora patted Ramona and watched Christie huff away down the shiny tile. The baby moved her mouth like she was dreaming of milk and Flora bought her an extra pack of diapers.

"Is that everything?" the checkout girl asked.

"Yeah," Flora said, "that's all I need."

Christie didn't come home until late that night, and she was so drunk, she hit the furniture like a pinball on the way to her room.

Ramon was a big help, a really good Papi. Flora caught him staring when she was holding Ramona, like they were something beautiful. "What? You want to hold her?" she said."

"No, no, stay there. I was just looking at my two little *bonitas*."

Flora pretended to nurse, held Ramona's face to her flat breast. "Ramon, this nursing isn't working. She's not latching on right. They said I would be able to tell in just a few days. It ain't going to work." It was obvious Ramona had been taking bottles for a while--she didn't want anything to do with Flora's breasts. Flora had bought a pump because she read about wet nurses and how you can make yourself make milk if you try really hard and are disciplined. A baby can make you into its mother so it can survive. Suck life into and out of you. Still, nothing like milk came from Flora.

Ramon went to every store in town and bought out all the formula he could find. "Don't worry, Flora. We got plenty of formula now," he said. "We'll fatten our little girl up."

"Ramon, we should take Ramona to Mexico, to meet your family, so she knows where she comes from, her history." Flora was changing the baby's diaper, lifting her gently by her tiny feet, so she could slide the diaper underneath her.

"This is her history, now. North Carolina. She's American," Ramon said.

Flora would convince him. Ramon would quit his job as soon as they had enough money to go. They would have everything they needed and they would never come back. Their new life, the one that Flora made up in her head, had already started.

Brandon wouldn't answer his telephone, and when Augusta went over he wouldn't answer the door, either. If she banged on the door long enough and yelled his name through it, he eventually shouted out, "Go away!" Then she knew he was okay and hadn't done anything stupid. Besides take a baby and then lose it.

The day that Rosie evaporated, Brandon was calm as you please.

"She never was mine, Augusta," he said.

"What are you talking about? She's your daughter. Our daughter, now."

"There wasn't no girlfriend. I found her. Somebody threw her away at the hospital. I didn't do nothing wrong, see? I claimed what the Lord set before me."

"Threw her away?"

"Left her in the dumpster, covered in nasty medical waste. What could I do?"

Augusta didn't know what Brandon, or anybody else could do. She forgave him, forgave herself too because she should have seen the lie, but she didn't want to. "You did the right thing, Brandon."

"But I should have signed some papers, made it official instead of sneaking. I should have..." Then he stopped talking and locked himself inside his house, drew the shades.

Brandon had a bull headed love of hurting, like Daniel. He couldn't stop pulling away from the people he loved. Nothing can help a sorrowful man. When Daniel took to his bed after Joseph was born, he lay there for two weeks, only eating bread. Augusta tried to bring him out. She cooked him steak, but he wouldn't touch it. She even made him a Hummingbird Cake. "That's so beautiful, Augusta," he said, but he never took a bite of it. He would stay blue for days--nothing she could say or do would bring him out. Took to his bed like Brandon. Had to wait for the spirit to move, to heal him. It was too hard for him always, that huge heart trying to fit and pump inside a regular man's body. It was made for a bigger person--too much for anybody to fill.

Brandon went looking, desperate, in a trashcan for something to build a life around. And he found her. If the world were fair, Augusta would have kept her forever. They were all lost, hidden from the world, as if Rosie would never grow and could stay

their baby forever. Her baby. Augusta held onto what she knew was right. Wasn't that why babies were called gifts? Treasures for the meek? It wasn't like Brandon stole her, anyway. She needed him, needed a family. She would have died in the heat and the filth of where she was left. What would the state have done but put her in a home paid to keep her, meet her basic needs, then pass her on? Nothing but an exchange of goods and services. Rosie deserved more than that.

Who knew if praying helped or was just a way to whisper what you needed to shout. What could she say to God, but please help us make things right? She did pray for Rosie, it was easier to ask for her.

Brandon's room felt better with the dark shades drawn. He writhed on his bed and shook. The striped sheets got tangled at the foot of the bed. Brandon's white T-shirt stank, it had been three days since he called in sick to work and he hadn't changed clothes. He cried until his eyes were nearly swollen shut. He was exhausted, couldn't sleep. He stared

at the pillow and its unending stripes. Only white slats of light came in through the blinds to let him know which way he was going when he got up to go to the bathroom.

The person he wanted to see wouldn't come walking through the door. She couldn't even crawl and already she had been let down more than once. He wanted to die. Would die if he didn't think he might find her and get a chance to make it up.

He couldn't go to the police. He would end up with the charge. Black man found a newborn baby and took her to raise by himself? Nobody wanted to believe that. Not reporting an abandoned infant, keeping her, with no way to prove who she belonged to? He'd lose his job that way. Then what? If he found her, he had to be able to take care of her. Not if, when.

He fell out for a day or two, could only remember the numbers changing on the digital clock. He made Rosie's baby oatmeal and ate it until he felt strong. It stuck to the roof of his mouth like a paste and caught all the words he wanted to say to her. He swallowed it. He didn't know how to live without Rosie. What if he didn't find her? He checked everywhere in the hospital. He looked in empty beds, operating rooms, trashcans, especially. He checked at the trailer park down the street too, until some Mexican dudes stared him down, turned their heads and spat on the ground.

He cruised real slow, peeped in the windows, asked people sitting on their trailer porches, or hanging clothes on the lines strung from porch to porch, "Excuse me, Senor, do you know where Flora lives?" Brandon never knew her last name and didn't speak much Spanish. Run down trailers, narrow boxes lined the parking lot, but the yards were

neat and raked. People were proud to at least have something. They looked at Brandon like he was crazy and he knew they understood every word he said, but they just shrugged like they didn't know anything and leave them the fuck alone. They wouldn't like it if he got out of the car and walked up to them, the way their eyes cinched tight, so he idled and stuck his head out the window and tried to sound calm when he talked.

"Y'all know some girl named Flora?" Brandon asked. "*Una mujer, se llama Flora?*" he tried. He took some Spanish in high school, but most of it was gone. Three shirtless teenage boys poked their heads up from under the hood of a dilapidated Ford Tempo and stared at him until he stopped talking and drove on. They ducked back under the hood, which was primer brown, when the rest of the car was silver.

Maybe it had nothing to do with Flora. What if it was the mama girl who took her? She could have been spying on him the whole time, seeing Rosie, catching her smile, the way she batted at the mobile of butterflies hanging over her crib. Maybe it was that girl with the long curly hair who looked at him funny, with cocked eyebrows as she checked him out at the Sav-Mor. Her nametag said Susana.

Maybe you could track something that once lived inside you by its heartbeat. Brandon's mama would have found him anywhere, felt his blood pumping by putting her ear to the ground, known if he was doing right or wrong. She still knew. Augusta knew too. She knew Brandon was trying to do right by doing wrong. But she did it, too. She had done plenty wrong. She had to know what the truth was. Had to. What was the truth? Which way was the wrong one with Brandon's baby girl gone into the clay dust?

Maybe Brandon's heart wasn't pure enough to keep Rosie. You don't get to do wrong when God gives you someone. He can take anything away. Took her away. No one could deny that good went to good. And the bad ones like Brandon, the ones who stole and lied? They got nothing but emptiness. Maybe Rosie wasn't real. Maybe Brandon conjured her up in some fever-burned dream, some dry-mouthed loneliness.

Everything was perfect until the temperature started. Even Christie almost smiled at Ramona.

"It won't be long now until she has a little cousin. We're trying every day," Christie said. She grabbed Juan around the neck and slid her tongue into his ear. Flora looked away. Ramon looked at the television. Ramona filled up a room with her baby laughs. Holding her made a person feel chosen.

Ramon went to the flea market, all the way in Raleigh, because it was the best one, and he filled the back of the truck with baby things: a crib, a changing table, a stroller, even a rocking chair. The room got so crowded you could barely walk; the bed filled most of the room to begin with. But this baby, Ramon's *hija*, she had everything she could ever need. Flora did, too.

"Ramon, let's take her to Mexico," Flora said. "It's important. Aren't you proud to introduce your daughter to the rest of her family?" She cuddled up to him in the bed, stroked his black hair out of his eyes.

"Okay, Okay," he said. "I'll take off next week." Flora put her arms around him and kissed him. He slid her gown off of her shoulder. Ramona started crying in her crib at the foot of the bed and Ramon pulled out of Flora's embrace to get her.

Flora packed all day, going through toys and clothes, deciding what she could live without. It was Ramon who felt of Ramona's head that night after dinner and said, "Flora, she don't feel right." Flora touched the baby's forehead with the back of her hand because you can confuse yourself with your palm, and her head was so small Flora's fingers hung off it like a visor. How could she say the baby was hot? No. God and cool water would cure her. Ramon took her temperature, 103, so Flora put her in the sink and sponged her and Ramona didn't even cry, just stared with big eyes—like she was a doll and those eyes were made of layered glass. Her brown skin turned red underneath, trying to flush the fever out.

"She'll be better tomorrow. We can still leave for Mexico in the morning," Flora said.

"Flora, you are crazy if you think I'm going to drive to Tamaulipas with a sick baby in the back seat of the truck. It's hot down there and no a/c, and all the bumpy roads? You better take her to the doctor, maybe even the E.R. Don't you care about our baby?"

"We have to go tomorrow," Flora said.

"We're not going!" he said.

Ramon grabbed the baby out of Flora's arms and tried to make her take a bottle. She only screamed. He looked at Flora like she was the crazy one. "No," he said. "Don't even touch her. If she doesn't cool down, I'm taking her to the Emergency Room."

Flora couldn't even do the right thing then, which was to cry. That's what Ramona did.

Ramon gave the baby some sticky purple medicine he bought at the drugstore around midnight. He had to squirt it into her mouth with a dropper. After an hour, she cooled some, down to one hundred degrees.

"I'll take her to the doctor myself in the morning," he said. He acted like she belonged to him. But a doctor might know that she didn't, might have seen her with Brandon, know her other life. Flora didn't come this far for nothing. Ramon watched TV while he waited for the fever to break, then drifted off on the couch, with his arms wrapped around the baby.

Mami cleaned and cleaned the already spotless kitchen, scrubbing her nerves away. "Is anybody hungry?" she asked. "I could make something."

"No thanks," Flora said. "Go to bed, Mami. I'll look after her."

Christie and Juan went to bed and made curved noises that rose and fell and slid under their door, taunting. Flora waited. Ramona's fever had gone down enough for her to sleep. She rested, hugged close to Ramon's chest as he slept on the couch. Flora turned off the TV. When Ramon's breathing fell into smooth rhythm, she slid Ramona out of his grip, left him holding onto air. Ramon didn't move, but the baby flung her arms out, startled by the change. She frowned at something in a dream, then settled into the softness of Flora's shoulder, her mouth sucking an invisible milky breast. Ramona didn't feel that hot to her.

The black dark was pocked by streetlights. Flora sat with pillows to prop herself up in the driver's seat of Ramon's truck, then she could see clear. She changed the radio station to something soft so the baby might sleep. Her voice rose and fell in a happy lullaby to follow the lyrics, like nothing was wrong. She strapped Ramona's car seat next to her. Ramona was still a little warm, so Flora had her in only a diaper. She loaded the three cases of formula Ramon had bought into the back of the truck with the stroller and a small suitcase of clothes. That's all Flora could take without waking everybody up. That's all she really needed. A week ago, Ramon would have killed her for taking his truck. He'd still be mad about the truck, but he now he would kill her just as much for taking Ramona. Flora hated to hurt him this way, but it was the only way if she wanted to keep her baby. She didn't leave a note. They would figure it out. But without a note, they would wait first, worry and pray, and God would give Flora time.

On Sunday, Mother cooked supper at her house and expected Angie. Angie could not find a way to let her down. She sat in her car in the driveway, willing herself to walk inside. It worked. Daddy sat and sipped his iced tea while Angie's sister, Leslie, Mother, and Angie moved in a constant flow from table to kitchen to table, avoiding real conversation and food. It was predictable and pleasant to watch from the outside, like the pattern of migrating birds. They formed a v, with Mother at the point, leading somewhere unknown, but unquestionable.

"There's my career girl!" Daddy said. Angie wasn't sure if it was a compliment or an insult. Daddy wrapped his huge arms around her. She doubted if anyone could have seen her body, had they been watching, just thin legs and blonde hair poking out of the top and bottom of his embrace.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Here, Angela, help me set the table," Mother said. She handed Angie a stack of plates and kissed her on the cheek, then rushed back to the kitchen to tend to the roast. The smell of pork and rosemary filled the house.

"Hey, Mother."

They sat in an order of oak ladder-back chairs claimed years ago, so long ago that their placement was never discussed and never altered. Leslie's son, Eli, sat in a highchair at the head of the table and banged a spoon on his tray. They passed the food.

"You busy, Daddy?" Angie asked. He finished the pork he was chewing, then motioned across his plate with his fork.

"Covered up," he said. "Got a new shopping center out toward the four lane and a couple of houses going up near the high school. Then, I have to keep an eye on the trailer park. Got half of them Mexican boys down there working for me. They work hard, too. Don't waste time and they listen. Don't matter if they don't speak English, they can understand me. Ain't that the damndest thing?"

"That's good."

"Your cousin Abby's getting married," Mother said. "It'll be a fall wedding. I told her we'd all make it." She took a tiny bite of a potato and moved the rest around her plate with her fork, then set it down.

"One of them told me, said his wife works for you at the hospital, name's Florene?" Daddy said.

"I had a Flora, but she quit," Angie said.

"Well, that's been a while back," he said.

Angie had almost put Flora out of her mind, almost forgot about the scene Brandon had caused. She jumped up. "Oh, I forgot the rolls!" she said. "Let me get them before they burn."

"I already took care of it," Mother said. "I knew you'd forget."

"Drive on, Brandon," a quiet voice said. He drove and looked and listened. It might have been Mama talking to him, or the voice of another spirit. It was like he wasn't even driving, just thinking his way around, following a vision of Rosie. He circled through town, driving slow and studying every inch of pavement, every face for proof that she had been here. Nothing. Main Street was quiet. The digital bank sign ticked away the minutes at eighty-four degrees. It didn't send any messages. Brandon drove out to the new subdivision by the highway and back to Warner's Creek, to search the run-down barns and sheds. He walked through the mall, looking at teenage girls, would-be mamas showing skin and shape. They huddled together with their faces pulled tight, but Brandon wasn't trying to make any moves on them. He was looking for his baby.

Brandon wrung out the town and the green waved county roads. Every baby looked like Rosie until he got close. They were mirages, meant to trick a thirsty man to his death in the desert. What would it feel like to burn up from the inside? Brandon kept on, cars and trucks were blurs unless they had a baby seat in the back.

Brandon felt the slowness of the town. He couldn't go fast enough. He wanted to push the gas pedal to the floor, instead, he stayed five miles per hour over the limit of the law. He couldn't risk being stopped. A State Police car passed him, then turned on its red

and blue swirling lights. Brandon ducked a little in his seat, slowed some more. The cop pulled over a white van with Georgia plates. He sat up straighter, kept up with traffic, so he would blend. He wanted to go fast enough to get back to the day when he drove up expecting Rosie and she would be here, waiting for him in her crib, wearing footy pajamas.

The car took itself to the highway. Brandon was on down Interstate 40, headed toward the pull of the ocean, the moon tide, when it hit him where he was going - to Edward. Blood seeking its match. Somehow making things right with Edward might bring Rosie back, maybe even Mama, too.

Brandon watched pines and billboards pass. He studied the bumpy gray texture of the pavement, the reflective markers, the shape of the land lengthening to straight lines and patterns of squares and rectangles—rational, thought out places. He lost the protection of the hills and valleys, the feeling that something other than man was in charge. After a while, he looked so hard he couldn't see anything, just felt that the miles were passing. He got into the dreamy haze of driving on a mission. Nothing mattered but the beginning and the end. He would never know the middle, or care. Highway ninety-five reeled him in and Fayetteville slipped up on him in the dark. Neon fast food logos and lit up highway signs beacons toward Edward. He hadn't stopped but once for gas on the way here. Couldn't stop or time might slow, might even stop and then where would he be? Brandon thought to call, but no, why give Edward a chance to shoo him off? Surprise attack was always best. Disorient him in the nighttime. A sign said, "Fayetteville, NC. History, Heroes, and a Hometown Feeling." Brandon was looking for some of that.

He drove through the neighborhood of brick ranchers to Major General Drive. He stopped and stood on Edward's wide front porch, trying to decide if he should knock or turn around and drive home. Edward had always done the right thing—school, the military. He gave A street light flickered and cast a sick greenish light on his skin. No sound came from inside the house. It was too late to knock. He sat down on a wrought iron chair and decided to leave a note instead. He hadn't seen Edward since Mama's funeral. He found an old receipt in his coat pocket and wrote on the back, "Sorry I missed you. Brandon." The neighbor's German Shepard barked at him, so he went back to his car and sat in the dark. He couldn't think of anything else to say "Shut up, Wolf!" A man yelled at the dog through a window. Wolf circled to the back yard. Brandon wadded up the note, shoved it into his pocket and drove away.

Edward had wanted his share of the house. He only cared about the money, not what the place meant. "I need the house, Edward. We can't sell it. Mama said as long as one of us wanted to live here, we both had to respect that."

"Fine. It's yours. I don't want any part of it then. I'm never coming back to this place."

"They'll bring you back there when you die. You'll be mixed in with the roots, pulling water and food through limbs to the leaves, just like everybody else."

"I said I'm never coming back here, Brandon. I didn't lose nothing here."

That was the last time they spoke. Edward planned to be cremated and sent around the world – a little bit of him every place he'd ever been deployed. He had told his wife and son. No use in leaving him a note.

Brandon slept in his car at a rest stop until the glare of the morning sun woke him. He started back the way he came, light rising behind his back. Then he turned and drove toward the ocean instead. He drove fifty extra miles, just to touch the water and know that it hit somewhere far away, far from what they each called home. Brandon parked in a beach lot, took off his shoes, and walked through the powdery white sand. A sun-withered old man walked down the beach ahead of him, collecting shells. Brandon liked smelling the salt, cleaning his lungs when he breathed, disinfecting what was rotting. The world soaked into a body in the sea—little bits of sand and water that traveled thousands of miles to end up in your mouth or ears. Made you part of something huge. Brandon walked to the water's edge. The white foam of the breakers wet his pant legs, even though he had rolled them up. He tore the note up into tiny pieces and threw the bits into the water. They dissolved and blended with the ocean. They would all end up at the bottom, eaten by fish and crabs. He wiped his feet, put his shoes back on and drove home, through the heat of the day.

Augusta couldn't help staring at the clock when she startled deep in the night, like the red glowing numbers would pull her into reality, set her back in the world that moved ahead. She woke in the middle of a dream, but wished she could have stayed in it. Daniel was there, holding Rosie, bouncing her on his knee, both of them laughing. He let her arch back until her face turned red, but he kept her from touching the floor.

When Augusta got right in the head, she knew exactly where she was and what was real. And Rosie was not. She never really was Augusta's, but then again, in a way she was. Rosie was in the dream with Daniel because she put her in mind of him. The black olive eyes and thick lashes of course, but personality, too. Both so sensitive to changes in temperature, light, and other people's moods. The same heart-shaped face. Rosie knew when Augusta needed to see her hair-trigger smiles. She grabbed her finger with her tiny hand and held on, like she would fall if Augusta let go. Daniel always knew what Augusta needed. He would rub her back and kiss her forehead. Tell her how beautiful she was. Augusta got up and put on a pot of coffee.

She looked out the kitchen window over the sink. The sun rose on Brandon's house. He had gone off looking for Rosie. Car had been gone for two days, but he was on the wrong track. As soon as he left Augusta called the police. Two of them—a white man and woman, came to the house and sat in the living room.

"Do you take cream in your coffee?" she asked.

"No coffee, Ma'am. We need to complete the interview.

"Of course," she said. "You sure I can't get you a glass of water?"

"What's the child's date of birth?" they asked.

"June fifth, no sixth," she said. That was her Mother's birthday.

"Height? Weight? Blood type? Social Security number? Who had access to the child, Ma'am? What is your relationship to the infant? Where do you think she might be? Where are the infant's parents?"

"The parents are gone," Augusta said. That was the end of the interview. She showed them to the door.

"We'll contact you if we find anything," the woman said.

Flora probably had Rosie now and Augusta felt double hurt by that. You couldn't help people anymore. The world wasn't built for that. The last name Flora gave Augusta was false. Ramirez, she had said and Augusta took her word because it sounded right and Mexican. The police questioned every Ramirez family in town. There were seven of them. They said Flora didn't exist. Said they had to have more information than she was a short Mexican lady with long brown hair and brown eyes. Said her name probably wasn't even Flora, either. "Could you give us some distinguishing features, Ma'am?" they asked. She couldn't. "We'll be in touch if we have any new information," the police said. They drove away in their squad car and they didn't turn on the blue and red lights, even though a crime had been committed.

Whenever Flora was around, Augusta let her clean the house and she went straight to playing with Rosie. Augusta heard her call out, "See you next week" and the door slamming when she left. She would call back, "Okay, see you later then," as Flora walked down the street and got out of earshot. She always checked to make sure Flora

didn't steal any silver or jewelry. She didn't think of her baby as something somebody could take from her.

Augusta had let Flora hold Rosie, mix the baby's bottle while she took a shower. Flora had seemed harmless. The devil was a liar. He told Augusta not to worry. She shouldn't have trusted so easily. Flora was made of skin and air, heartless.

Augusta walked the neighborhood, but not for too long. She couldn't decide which direction to go in. She sat on the porch and waited, but she never was good at waiting. A drizzle of rain started and Augusta sat swinging on the porch, staring at the road.

Daddy listened to the police scanner in the living room after supper. Angie cleared the plates, rinsed them in the sink and started the dishwasher. Daddy let the TV play with the volume turned down and the scanner scratch and hiss filled the room, louder than it needed to. A game show flashed blue and yellow and black on the screen and the TV audience applauded. Angie sat on the couch and daddy put his arm around her. On the scanner, cops pulled over a Nissan Frontier pickup with Tennessee license plates. It made Angie feel safe. Mother thought it was white trash to listen to other people's misery like a soap opera. She'd rather listen to it live.

Angie had bought the scanner for Daddy at Christmas because his friend James Colgan had one and said it was better than TV and sometimes even better than sex. They were sitting in the living room watching and listening and not really talking, when one thing rose out of the staticky, coded chatter that made Angie lean in to listen. Something about a stolen truck: *Blue Ford F one-fifty, North Carolina license BNR-372, taken from Mountainview Trailer Court.* Daddy flipped through the TV channels. Mother straightened up the room.

"If people around here would just pick up after themselves, like I ask them to do-" Mother said. She was making a point to pick up each sock that Daddy had shed, each piece of the newspaper he had dropped on the floor by the couch. She filled the space in front of him with her small body, but he was practiced at ignoring her.

"Shh, Mother. I want to hear this," Angie said.

"Hear what? Y'all aren't listening to me again." She huffed out of the room. Now Daddy was listening, too.

Suspect has hazel eyes and brown hair, Hispanic female, approximately five feet two inches tall, one hundred fifty pounds. May be traveling with an infant, the dispatcher said. The scanner beeped, then faded.

"Ain't that something," Daddy said. "Some lady stealing a truck and a baby. What's wrong with people? You want some of these chips?" He held the bag toward Angie, offering, but she waved it away.

"That is something, " Angie said.

"Why don't you turn that thing off, Angie, I want to watch this show. Lady won ten thousand dollars the other day."

The dispatcher was calling for somebody to check out possible vandalism now, running through a litany of people's sins. Angie turned the scanner off. If she listened long enough, the dispatcher might just get to hers.

Every time Flora passed a mile marker, she would say its number out loud like, "one fifty-three," touch it in her mind like a rosary bead, and ask God to help her, to lift the fever off of Ramona like he pulled clouds away from the moon. She reached her right hand into Ramona's car seat until she felt her face--the tiny bulbs of her closed eyes, the bump of her nose. Sometimes she let her finger slip in Ramona's mouth to see if she was feverish on the inside. Her little tongue felt dry. The wild heat of the fever pushing through Ramona's soft skin made Flora drive faster.

In the middle of the night, deep into South Carolina, Ramona started to sweat and her hair stuck to her face. The fever broke because Flora prayed for it to. And it was God's will. Things like that made Flora sure she done the right thing, cleared all the doubt from her heart. She wasn't a devil. Ramona slept hard. She didn't move for hours, except for the rise and fall of her chest. Flora drove with the windows down, so the wind would blow in her face and keep her awake. She pulled to the back of gas stations to change the baby's diaper, so no one would see. It wasn't that wet, maybe because of the fever? There was a red, bumpy rash. Flora wasted two diapers because she put too much diaper cream on, but she figured Ramona needed a lot if they weren't going to stop. Ramona wouldn't take a bottle. When Flora tried, it made her scream. She bought bottled water and poured some in Ramona's mouth and some over her chest. It made her cry and shiver, but Flora hoped it was the right thing to do. It seemed like it.

She was not sure exactly which way to go, so she followed the signs south. Ramona still didn't want to eat, so Flora didn't stop again until she hit a rest stop in Georgia. She parked in the shade, far from the vending machines and bathrooms, away

from other cars and people walking their dogs. She studied the map Ramon had folded carefully in the glove box, but it was of North Carolina and nothing beyond that. It all looked the same from the highway—trees and trees and the same fast food and gas station signs in red and yellow and orange. The road was getting flatter now and it was hot. The breeze felt like a heat vent, even in the darkest part of the night.

Flora would go west soon, because Mexico was still far away, but for now she had to sleep and figure out how she would get more money for gas and food and formula once she got there. She napped for an hour in the truck, but woke up disoriented, her heart pounding.

She pulled back onto the highway. Everybody on the road who looked her in the eye seemed like a spy, or maybe a cop. She tried to look straight ahead. She wished she didn't have to worry Ramon, but he would forgive her when they were settled in Mexico with his family and she sent for him and his Mami. After all, she was the mother of his child.

Augusta heard footsteps out on her porch, pacing, but no one knocking. It was too early for salesmen, or even Witnesses. She opened the door thinking it could be the mailman. It was Brandon. Looked like he had lost weight; his face was ashy and gaunt. His hair needed trimming. Maybe she could do that for him.

"Brandon? Where you been? How come you didn't knock?" she asked. He sat down on the porch swing and stared.

"Let me get you some coffee. Ain't you supposed to be at work?"

"I took a few days off," he said.

"To do what?"

"I've just been driving."

"Come inside. Come sit down."

Augusta steered Brandon by the shoulder to the dark coolness of the living room with its overstuffed couch and vacant gray TV screen. He sank into the thick beige cushions. She brought him a cup of coffee and sat it on the table in its gold-rimmed saucer. They watched it steam. Brandon sipped his coffee and Augusta sipped hers. When he finally started, she tried not to make a sound.

"I never was a father, or a brother, I guess I ain't even a son. What kind of person does that make me? You can't be nothing all by yourself. "

"You're all right, Brandon," she said.

They sipped their coffee. She cleared the dishes and when he decided to go, she hooked her arm around his elbow and walked him from the couch to the door.

"What if we don't ever find her?" he said.

"Brandon, I called the police," she said.

He pulled away from her. "Who told you to do that? Who told you that was what you should do? The cops? What would they do for me?" He pounded his fist on the coffee table.

Augusta stood still, feet planted. "I told them my granddaughter went missing, that the cleaning girl took her, but they can't find them. Said they'll call when they do. What else could I do?"

"The cops, Augusta? You don't know nothing." He walked off the porch. He didn't look back.

"I had to do something!" she called after him. He held his palm out to tell her to stop, but he didn't look into her eyes, or even turn his face toward hers. He walked into his house and slammed the door behind him. Augusta walked back inside her own door.

If it was possible to worry yourself to death, Ramon would have already died. And maybe that would be better, to die, to be still inside and out instead of feeling like your blood is shaking and bubbling all the time. To lose words in two languages. He prayed to find his *hija*. He wanted his damn truck back, too. He had so much money tied up in that. So much time.

"Stay here," Mami said. "She'll be back soon. She probably took the baby to the hospital."

Ramon walked around the trailer park, asked the men hanging around outside. "*Has visto a ellas?*" Have you seen them?

"*No, no ha visto a nadie.*" They were gone. Without his truck he couldn't follow them. Flora planned it that way. She must be a devil to tear his heart into pieces. Crazy *bruja*. It would have been better if she had killed him before she left, cut his heart out like some kind of sacrifice.

Everybody tried to tell Ramon before he married that Flora was a *loca*, but he didn't believe it. He only saw that she was beautiful and she wanted him. He wanted everything for Flora—a nice house, kids, visits to Mexico. With Ramona they had finally become a family with new generations. Ramona could even be the President. Or a movie star. She could have owned huge houses and two or three cars.

He wanted to go back to his father's house as a rich gringo with a wife and a child, but the streets here weren't paved with nothing but asphalt that some Mexican *hombre* probably laid for eight bucks an hour.

Ramon knew Mami had dreams for him. He had finished high school, got a job like she hoped for, but here they were in a stinking little trailer, full of all that never happened and probably never would. Full of everything crazy that did happen. The future drove away in his truck. *Put a loca*. He should have found a bride in Mexico, a pretty one who would do exactly what he said and cook for him and have lots of babies and not complain when he went out to the clubs with his boys.

Mami didn't say anything about the way they lived. It was still better than she grew up. Working and working and working. Finally landing a job as a waitress in a diner in Statesville. Sweeping the dust into neat patterns in the yard.

To her, the place was sacred, even if Ramon's Papa went back to Mexico without her because he didn't understand how to be here. Mami would never go back. She worked too hard for this life that Ramon hated. Now, she muttered prayers to herself and cooked and cooked, to her that was life – God and food-- but she couldn't fill Ramon or save him with prayers, and now he couldn't eat. He had given up on all of that. Not until his little girl was safe. Not until he got his truck back so he could leave this place. Ramona was trapped in a truck in the heat of her fever. Why did life go in circles instead of lines? Flora? Ramon wasn't sure what to do with her, but she wouldn't forget it. She would have to pay for her sins.

Angie was trying to do billing, hiding in the cave of her office, but her mind kept wandering to Flora, in her cafeteria uniform with the grease stains at the hips and the hairnet and the loopy script of her name at the breast, yelling at Brandon Wilson, "You stole my baby! You stole my baby!" Maybe it was his baby, or maybe it was hers, or even theirs. So many secrets are hidden inside at birth.

Angie had checked over and over, but every baby born in the hospital in the past six months had gone home with its birth parents or some other official party.

She would make a better foster parent than either of them, officially, even by herself. Neither Brandon, nor Flora was listed. That baby did not come from her hospital. Maybe it was born in Charlotte. She went back to Accounts Receivable.

Daddy took Angie to lunch at the Meadow Restaurant because it was Monday. Start out the week right, he said. It was their weekly ritual. They served meat and three vegetables and different pies every day. Monday was coconut cream. The Meadow sat at the bottom of a hill at the intersection of Bank Street and Main and if somebody missed the stop sign, they would have run right through the plate glass windows and lacy curtains and into the table by the window that Angie and her daddy sat at every time. There would be a car in their laps, if they still had laps. Nobody ever did break through,

though, not yet. Most of the regulars who dined in were white people Angie had known her whole life. The take out customers were blacks old enough to remember what it used to be like. Angie was always the youngest person in the restaurant. She knew each gray head that poked up over the booths and every waitress. Judy Pearson usually waited on them. She brought unsweet tea without asking. Nobody wanted you to be unpredictable or change your mind. There was the same print of the Last Supper above the cash register that had been there as long as Angie could remember. Next to that was a hand written sign that said, "Cash Only."

"Daddy, is that Mexican guy still working for you?" Angie said. She sipped at her tea.

"Which one?"

"You know, the one married to Flora, who worked for me." Daddy took a bite of his pea dumplings, washed it down with tea.

"You mean Ramon? He ain't been to work in a few days, but I guess he had some family celebration or something. They're all the time going back to Mexico. Seems like if you moved here, you'd just stay. That's a real long drive. More than a thousand miles, I think. Why you asking?"

"I haven't seen Flora in a while and that thing on the scanner, I thought it might be her."

"Lots of Mexican girls around here, Angie. All kinds."

She picked at her tuna salad plate. The walls of The Meadow were once white, but years of grease had yellowed them. Cigarette smoke drifted over from the booth behind. The smell of it mixed with the smell of grease and something sweet baking.

"You're right. Probably somebody else. Just bored and making up stories, I guess."

"You want a bite of these new potatoes?" Daddy asked, "They are so good."

"No, thanks." Angie's mind kept going back to Brandon with the four-one-one and Flora saying, "You stole my baby! You stole my baby!" and she couldn't figure out who was telling the truth, or who belonged to whom.

Flora drove as fast as her blood was pumping and it seemed like she would make it to Mexico in record time, but after her heart quieted down long enough for her to think, she slowed down a little. She couldn't afford get pulled over. She had money for gas and to buy coffee and she ate chips when she got really hungry. She didn't know how long her money would last. She blocked out Ramona's crying by turning up the radio. Finally, the baby went back to sleep.

She drove through twisting snake roads in the mountains, then flat, straight, never ending lines. She drove toward the brightest neon signs when the gas gauge hit empty and left the baby sleeping in the truck when she went inside, so no one would say they had seen her.

The road was stretching, getting longer and longer and the states got bigger. Some were long and some were wide, hours east to west, like North Carolina. They were made up of too much black highway space and glowing gas stations that looked like far away fiestas and Flora couldn't move fast, or she would get caught. It felt like she was driving through mud. Mexico was running ahead of her and she couldn't catch it.

Ramona screamed and spit up, a thick milky fluid that soaked her T-shirt. "Shit," Flora said. "Now, *mi hija*?" She stopped at a rest stop in Arkansas and put down a blanket in the grass and let Ramona roll around and rest on her tummy. She stopped crying.

Ramona didn't care about the trailer, or miss Ramon like Flora did. She ate and slept and messed her diaper. She slept more, now that she had cooled off. It would be so wonderful to forget every day like a baby and start fresh on the next, hungry for food and

life and any love you might find. A man walked toward his a red van, smoking a cigarette.

"Hey, you got a light?" Flora asked. He lit her cigarette. "Long drive?" she said.

"All the way to California," he said. "Better get back to it." He threw his still-lit cigarette to the pavement, twisted it out with the sole of his boot.

Ramon would probably catch up with them soon in some rented truck or a friend's car and then she could sleep in the passenger seat and meet the rest of his family when she woke up in Mexico, and they would all love her and Ramona. Flora was sure her true love would follow her and take her to his magical land. Flora was Mexican, even if she had always lived in North Carolina and her family grew up eating barbecue more than tortillas and trying to look as white as they could. In high school, her sister Ana used skin bleach, but Flora greased herself with baby oil and browned in the sun.

Flora went back to the other version of herself that might have been if her grandparents had stayed in Mexico. If her grandparents and parents hadn't moved to Michigan for factory work and big cars. She might have never learned English. She might still have all of her family around her, like a fortress. Ramon was the key to bringing her back to her ancestors. Ramona was her ticket.

So far, Texas was two days long and she was only half way through it. Sometimes she thought it would never end. It grew as she drove. Miles and miles of dead land and heat. Lots of Mexicans, though, so she relaxed because she didn't stand out. She belonged. A million girls answered to Flora here, with dark hair and caramel eyes. They

could have been her sisters. Flora talked to the baby and sometimes she smiled, but it had been four days since Flora had had a conversation with a speaking person. And she worried maybe Ramon would be mad if he didn't know where they were. Pharr, Texas was the last stop on the U.S. side of the border. She would have to make an international call if she didn't do it now. She stopped at a pay phone in Pharr. The phone rang once.

"Hello?" Ramon said. He sounded like he just woke up.

"*Amor*," Flora said.

"Oh my God, Flora! What did you do? Ramona, is she okay? If I find you, oh my God, where the hell are you?" He was awake now.

"Don't be mad, Ramon. I had to get out of there. The baby's fever broke. Our little girl is just fine. She just wants to see her family in Mexico. Can you meet us?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm not sure. Somewhere in Texas. Pharr, I think."

"Flora, You have to come back. Come back right now, Flora! I don't even know where my *abuela* lives. I don't know who's still there. My family is here. I never been to Mexico since I was a baby. Mami left so long ago. They don't have no cable TV for sure. No jobs, maybe no food. You don't belong in Mexico. Bring my daughter back. You could have killed her."

Flora hung up.

She would never hurt Ramona.

She smoked a cigarette and sat in the truck for a while. She knew Ramon was cursing her, himself, probably even God. But she was the Mami. Flora took Ramona out of her

car seat. She needed a bath. So did Flora. She wasn't sure what else she needed, if she could give everything to Ramona. Flora called Ramon back.

"Ramon, I had to go."

"Why are you running, Flora? Christie says you stole Ramona, that she doesn't belong to you."

"Christie don't know shit," Flora said. "This baby belongs to me and to you. We are a family."

"I don't know, Flora. I don't know what we are."

Flora could see the lights of the border checkpoint a few miles in the distance, but she didn't cross the line. She turned the truck around without touching the border. She couldn't go to Mexico if Ramon wouldn't go with her.

If you go back on the exact same roads you came on, you don't really have to look. The road will do the work for you. Flora followed the mile markers, prayed with each one. Ramona screamed like she hurt, or like she wanted to go to Mexico and she was mad at Flora for changing the plans. Flora tuned it out, turned up the music and kept driving. Finally Ramona gave up and slept.

If Brandon knew anything, he would have caught up to her. Still, Flora always checked her mirrors to see what she was leaving behind. She stopped in Georgia to have a good meal and she washed Ramona in the restaurant's bathroom sink. Flora washed her face and her armpits. She even put on a little lipstick for the thought of Ramon. Then, she combed Ramona's hair down and fed her a bottle in the booth and she slept. Nothing troubled her face and her body was still.

Flora would tell Ramon everything when she got back. She had to tell him something so he could see she wasn't the one who was crazy. So he would take her back. Or, maybe she would tell him the part about a man who wanted to steal their *hija* and forget about the rest. She would figure out what to tell him by the time she got to the next rest stop. Ramon would know that she had done what was right--claimed their child from the place that took the ones they would never have. Those doctors owed Flora something.

Later, they could get more babies from Mexico or Guatemala that belonged to them. They would find their family. Ramon would always love her, wouldn't he? He had to love her if he loved Ramona. Flora had made his blood new.

Augusta's garden tomatoes dried up on the vine and the fruit dropped to the ground because she refused to water. Even the Better Boys, and they were supposed to last through hardship. She felt like she was floating around lost in the vapor trail Rosie had left behind. She made herself a pan of brownies, but let them sit out, uncovered until they were hard. She had to roll her pants at the waist so they would stay up. The skin of her stomach wrinkled into her bellybutton.

All the people she had ever loved, except maybe Brandon, had disappeared. Her mind wandered when she tried to read the paper, licking her finger before turning each page. Each face in the local section was someone who might have seen Rosie and done nothing to get her back. She watched people living on TV.

Augusta called Brandon and stopped by to check on him, but usually he was out. He left early in the morning. Augusta sat on her porch with her coffee and waved him goodbye. He never tired of looking.

At first, she had gone with him. They pulled into truck stops along the highway, with cars and eighteen wheelers flashing by, but all they did was drink coffee that tasted like Styrofoam and watch truckers come in and out the automatic doors. It was not a place for children. They went by migrant camps, drove slow past the sagging shacks, but in the middle of the day, no one was around, just empty cars up on blocks. Once, Brandon sent Augusta into the clinic. No seats were empty, so she waited in the four deep line, while Brandon waited in the car with the air conditioning running. "Do you have an appointment, Ma'am?" the receptionist asked.

"No," was all Augusta could think to say. She thought she would think of a question before she got to the front, but she couldn't find the words, so she walked out of the sea of snot-nosed children and bleeding adults. No way would Rosie be here. Augusta didn't see the point in all this looking and driving around. Fact was, Rosie was gone.

Finally, Augusta persuaded Brandon go back to work. "You'll have to have some way to provide for Rosie when we find her," she said. She couldn't stand to see him moping around his house. Daniel did that. She wanted to do something, even if it was wrong, but Brandon and Daniel both said wait. Daniel had waited too long.

"Daniel! The Roberts are leaving, Daniel. Won't you come see them out?" She walked to the bedroom, for the Roberts' coats, but she didn't get a chance to look through the pile.

"Daniel!" Augusta screamed, "Daniel!"

He was in the floor of the bedroom, coiled on the rug. Looked like a question mark. They were celebrating; everybody was home. The house smelled like butter. Augusta touched Daniel's face first and saw that it had turned to ash; his skin was cold.

"Daniel," she said. She grabbed him and shook him. Her voice rose, escaping her heart. She said his name over and over, but he kept quiet, like his name didn't belong to him any more. Daniel had died there by himself, when they had all been laughing and eating at the long oak table, asking did anybody want coffee with their pie. Talking about football and holiday sales.

Daniel had gone to find a picture of his brother to show Joseph. Said Joseph looked just like Albert had as a young man. Just the spitting image of his baby brother. Augusta knew this brought up a struggle in him of how to feel, but she wanted to know the last thought or feeling that pushed through his veins so hard, it made his heart lock up. She hoped it had nothing to do with her.

At first, when Augusta saw Daniel on the floor and so still, she thought he had done it to himself with too many pills, but the doctors said no. That had been her fearful dream for a long time. He had tried to swallow a bottle of Valium when Sarah was in ninth grade and in the marching band. Augusta had taken the children to the football game.

"Don't you want to see your baby march?" she asked Daniel.

"I need to sleep," he said. When they got home, he was on the floor of the living room with a slow pulse. Augusta and Joseph piled him into the back of the station wagon, next to Sarah's French Horn, and got his stomach pumped in the E.R. Sarah sat there in her gold epaulets and tall hat and prayed for her Daddy. She quit the band the next day.

Daniel had said he didn't want any more of anything. If he took the medicine the doctors wanted to give him, he was afraid he would lose those good days. Said he could just feel the excitement and happiness rise up inside him those days, like homemade bread. Then too, those were the days he felt closest to God and the most in love with Augusta. On low days, he would sink into the bed and shroud himself, or if he had to go to work, he wouldn't speak or eat.

That Thanksgiving could have gone either way. What bothered Augusta most was that she fussed at him for watching TV while she got dinner ready. He was supposed to be watching the rolls while she dressed, but he let them burn. And the last thing she ever said directly to her husband was, "Please pass the butter." And she took it from his long, smooth hands without touching him, or even saying thank you. Augusta still felt the shape of Daniel's body, like a ghost, in her bed. Still hoped it would turn out to be real.

At least with Rosie, the last thing Augusta said was, "Good night, sweet baby girl." But she wished she had sat in the rocking chair holding Rosie while she slept. The thought of her smiling still made Augusta smile. And the hope of finding her again made Augusta weep. If she had kept touching Rosie's flower petal skin and kissing her head and had never let her go, she'd still be holding her now.

Sarah called Augusta on the phone and said, "What's the matter, Mama? You seem blue." She called every other Sunday. She liked to have a schedule.

"No, I'm fine," Augusta said, "Sometimes I get to thinking about your Daddy and Genie and everybody that's passed. Gets me stuck in another time."

"Oh, okay," she said. Augusta could tell she was distracted, looking at the TV or out the window or something. "I miss Daddy too."

Then she went on to tell Augusta about her job and all the stress she was under, how she wished her life was simple like her mother's.

Augusta and Brandon ate dinner together without talking. She made hot dogs, or pasta, or soup she could pour out of a can and heat up. Brandon clocked in and out of work and that marked time. It made the day pass quicker, but he still felt like he should be driving around, looking for Rosie. There were just too many roads. He worked so hard he didn't have time to think. He cleaned the shine off of things. He stayed away from Ms. Taylor.

On his break, Brandon went to the cafeteria. Maybe something there sound good. He slid his tray down the long, stainless steel bars and recognized that red headed girl, Shawna, behind the counter. He would try to eat the meatloaf she was serving. It took him until he got to his table to place her. She used to work right beside Flora all day long. His heart pumped faster than it had in the whole week since Rosie had gone missing. Said, wake up, Brandon, or you'll miss something. Shawna would know Flora's last name, maybe. Or at least they had probably talked about where she lived, who her man was, if she had any family around.

He went back through the line like he wanted some potatoes.

"How much you want?" she asked, not even looking at Brandon. She dumped a big spoonful on his plate and the gravy eddied into it and he nodded to let her know that it was right.

"Hey, didn't there used to be a girl name of Flora that worked here?" Brandon asked.

"Used to," she said. Then, she looked at him like, who wants to know? "You want some peas, too?" she asked. Brandon nodded again and took back his tray.

"What was her last name?" he asked, "I think I found something on the third floor belongs to her. Do you know where she stays?"

"Alvarez is her last name, but I got no idea where she stays. Somewhere close to here, I think. She walked home once or twice. You could try HR," she said.

"Thanks," he said. "For the potatoes, too."

Nobody like that mama girl would ever come back. Brandon made her future bleak as her punishment, but still he hoped for her. Tanya was her name now-- he could love her and hate her at the same time. That way it was easier to give up on her, let her go. Rosie would be the baby they had together – the best parts of her and him, mixed. Sometimes, all the women Brandon had loved and Rosie's mama girl merged in his head and heart until he didn't know what to feel. He hoped the real mama girl wasn't dead. He hoped Rosie had a mama sending love to her in dreams.

Brandon went downtown to the police station. It was four stories of cinderblock and metal with leaking window unit air conditioners that dripped rust stains down the outside of the building drowned out all thought inside.

"Who is the child's mother?" the officer asked. He was in his thirties, built like a quarterback, with close cropped hair and black eyes. Officer Dawkins was his name.

"Her name is Tanya. I haven't heard from her in months," Brandon lied. "She came to my house while I was working and took my baby girl." He couldn't say he wasn't sure who the mother was, that it could be more than one. Not like a woman could.

"If the child's mother did not put your name on the birth certificate, sir, she is under no obligation to bring the baby back. You would have to file a paternity suit and submit to testing." Officer Dawkins said. The law ran through the mother's line, even when she wasn't really the mother.

Brandon got a card from the clinic, reminding him of Rosie's shot check up. It made him cry until he shook. Funny how it took the signs of a life a while to peter out. People sent mail to dead people and lost people and they kept existing until somebody said stop.

Ramon walked around the whole town, even on the side of the old highway by the mall, cars honking when he veered too close to the road. He was searching for blue trucks and black haired girls with round faces, but there was no sign of Flora and his baby girl. He walked home, head down, kicking anything on the ground that got near his foot—a beer can, a fast food bag, rocks. He didn't want to go inside, so he sat on the stoop and tried to see how far he could spit. It was all he could think to do.

He heard the truck before he saw it. She had said she was coming home, but he hadn't believed it. The metallic peacock blue all covered with red Texas dust - the thing looked tired. Ramon knew he was. Tired of waiting and holding his breath hoping his baby girl and his truck would be okay. Tired of living with a crazy lady. The truck swerved, screeched to a stop and threw up gravel and a white plume of dust. Flora flung open the door and a fast food bag rolled out onto the ground. She was sweating and her hair hung greasy in her face.

"*Amor!*" she said. She came out of the car running toward Ramon, only he crossed his arms instead of opening them to her. The truck's engine was still running. She looked at Ramon like he was the crazy one. She had left the baby in the truck and country music still warbled out of the radio. Ramon shook Flora off of his body, walked right over to Ramona and took her out of her car seat. She smiled. It had been a week now since he had seen her. She wasn't all better, but at least she wasn't hot anymore. He held her to his chest.

"I'm so glad to be home," Flora said. Ramon let her hug him and Ramona. He kept his arms closed around his baby girl and he didn't touch Flora. She had died.

Ramon wished he could bury her then, so she wouldn't bother him and his baby anymore. Finally, she let go and stepped back to study Ramon's face. He pulled it tight and closed. Her body got his message.

"This ain't your home no more," he said. "It's Ramona's." Ramon turned and looked at Flora with rocks for eyes and she stared at him with her eyes round and wet. She didn't move. He took the baby inside the trailer and Flora stood there in the yard, like she was melting, saying, "*Amor, Amor, Amor.*" Ramon hated that bitch now.

She beat on the door, but he locked it and turned the deadbolt. He would take care of his own child. He and his Mami would raise her. At least Flora had given him that. She could go to Mexico any time she wanted to now. They had no legal marriage certificate. They had only signed the book at the church and God knew Ramon couldn't live with Flora now, that he couldn't keep a crazy as his wife. God would erase it for him if he went to the church and knelt down and asked. As far as the government was concerned, their marriage never existed anyway. Maybe Ramon could wipe the whole thing out of his life. He threw a shoe at the door to stop Flora from banging on it.

Shawna was taking her fifteen-minute break, smoking a cigarette and drinking a cup of coffee. Flora came up from out of the parking lot and hugged her, right there on the loading dock outside the cafeteria kitchen.

"Shawna!" Flora said.

She nearly dropped her cigarette and she smudged a little lipstick on Flora's cheek when she kissed her, but she wiped it off with her thumb, so Flora's face was clean, but her own thumb was bright pink.

"It's so good to see you!" Flora said.

"Well, what in the world?" Shawna said.

Flora's face was puffy and red, but she was trying her best to smile. The air hung so thick and wet that Shawna's cigarette smoke didn't fly off, but hovered like fog around them.

"What's the matter, Honey?" Shawna asked.

"Oh, Shawna. *Dios Mio*. My husband took my baby girl and kicked me out. He is so crazy. He's abusive. I got nothing. I got nowhere to go." Her amber eyes and thin mouth shrank to slits.

"Do you need a doctor, Honey? Dr. Hobbs has done me a lot of favors. He might could help you, too."

"No, I'm fine. I just can't go home. And I quit, so I don't know if they'll take me back."

"They always need help. Two cooks have come and gone since you left."

"But..."

"Do you need a place? You could stay with me until you get the baby back," Shawna said. "There are too many sick, no-good men in the world, Flora. I've been married to two of them. I'll help you out. Don't worry, Honey, the courts always side with the Mama. That's how I got to keep my two boys and neither one of their daddies can bother me no more. The money don't even matter. You can't count on that. "

Flora shook her head. "We can't take it to no court. I got to get her by myself. The courts will just take her away from me. I can't have no police. Shawna, you got to help me."

Shawna looked at Flora like she knew the situation was shady. Flora stared at the floor, tried to make herself look smaller.

Shawna said, "I would do anything in this world to help a baby get to its Mama, No matter what. Do you got a picture of her?"

Flora didn't have pictures of Ramona—why take a picture of someone you were with day and night? Now she wished she had taken a thousand and wallpapered the house with them. "She got a little tiny dimple on the right side of her chin and hazel eyes, just like me," Flora said, "but the rest of her looks like her daddy."

Flora's mouth quivered, but Shawna said, "Now, why don't you come on inside with me and we'll go straight to HR and maybe we can get you your old job back.

Shawna put her arm around Flora and led her inside.

Angie left her office to get away from the phone. It never stopped ringing, ever. She was dodging calls from her mother, but she called until Angie answered.

She started with, "Angela, you won't believe it, but..."

"I'm busy Mother. I'll call you later," Angie said.

"I see how it is," Mother said. "You never did want to give anybody the time of day. Maybe if you had a baby."

"Mother, I have to go."

"I'm sure you do."

The only way to get away from the phone was to leave the office. "I'll be back in twenty minutes," Angie said as she headed down the hall.

She went downstairs to the cafeteria, sat by herself at a small table by the window, and ate a huge piece of chocolate cake. Afterward, she walked the halls of the hospital. She liked the ICU ward the best because the patients were quiet and she could hear the oxygen pushing and pulling its way through thin plastic tubes and pumping limp bodies full of life. It soothed her. This time, the halls were quiet, a tenuous calm hung in the air, punctuated with the beeps of oxygen sensors.

Every now and then, Angie could hear a family member crying, too, but it was soft and quiet, so it didn't bother her. She poked her head into the room to tell them it will be all right and that the patient was receiving the best care available in the area. She told them they had excellent doctors—the best in the state. Angie only touched people on the ICU floor if someone had died. And then she only patted the grieving family members on the back. She avoided them altogether if they moaned or cried out. She didn't like grief that called attention to itself.

She especially liked to go to the Pediatrics floor because it was brightly colored and everyone tried to be on their best behavior so the children wouldn't get scared. She stared through the thick glass in the nursery at the tiny bundles wrapped in white blankets, alone in plastic bassinets after months of dark warmth. She wanted to hold the one that pushed its fist into the air and wailed. The card on the bassinet read "Bradford, Boy." A nurse picked him up and waved his little hand at Angie. She waved back, then felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Ms. Taylor?" It was Shawna from the cafeteria. There was a Mexican girl with her. Flora. "Look who I found," Shawna said, as if Flora had been lost in the hospital, wandering around in a gown on the wrong floor.

"Hi, Ms. Taylor," Flora said. "I was wondering if you had any openings in the cafeteria. I want my old job back. That other thing, it didn't work out." She looked at Angie's feet and Angie couldn't tell if Flora was ashamed, or if she was checking out her shoes because she didn't know what else to say.

"Come with me," Angie said. " We'll see what we can do." Maybe she would call Brandon Wilson in and they would straighten up any misunderstanding. It was hard to find reliable cafeteria help. Maybe this girl deserved a second chance.

"Thank you, Ms. Taylor," Flora said. "Thank you so much."

Augusta fell back into her routine. She washed every sheet and blanket in the house, scrubbed the shoe molding on her hands and knees, but she didn't work in her yard. She liked watching the plants ache for water and turn yellow from the inside out. She called her children, but they didn't make her feel better. They asked her what was wrong.

"Nothing," she said.

"Mama, maybe you need to get on anti-depressants," Sarah said.

"Oh, I ain't depressed," Augusta said. "Just a little blue over losing a friend." She convinced Brandon to take on extra shifts at work because she couldn't stand looking at him and feeling the guilt rise out of him in waves. "Get out of here and make yourself useful," she said. It was better to feel alone by yourself. She couldn't describe her pain. Not in a way someone else could feel.

She saw Rosie in every stroller that passed and in every car that drove by with a baby seat in the back. She was absolutely sure she saw her baby in the grocery store. It was early evening, when the store was busy and full of all kinds of people. The fluorescent lights and cool air and piped in music took her out of the quiet, dark house that was filled with missing Rosie. The store shocked her into feeling something, even if she didn't know what it was. She felt like a bumper car, moved along by other people's desires for meat and milk and bread. She looked for Rosie, in the vegetable aisle and in the frozen foods. She thought she caught a glimpse of Rosie, but it didn't turn out to be. When Augusta got too tired to look anymore and just filled her cart with foods she'd never eat, Rosie was there.

A short, round-shouldered man carried Rosie into the store. He wore faded jeans pressed with straight creases down the front and a snowy white T-shirt. He had straight black hair and a thick mustache--could be Mexican. He stood three carts ahead of Augusta in the checkout line. She was boxed in by two carts behind. He was holding

Rosie with one hand and pushing the cart with the other and he knew squat about holding a baby or taking care of one. That's the thing that made Augusta notice him. He was buying diapers and formula and tiny jars of baby food, which meant he had started Rosie on solids. Augusta would have cooked soft vegetables from the garden for Rosie and mashed them up –not all that processed junk. It was too early for that anyway.

When Augusta looked at the baby, the baby looked back at her and smiled like she knew her. She did know her. It was Rosie. Augusta saw the baby's eyes, dime sized irises, tortoiseshell brown with flecks of green and yellow. Augusta had memorized them. The baby wore a pink onesie and someone had stuck a tiny pink bow in her oiled hair. Her fingers stuck straight out when she held her hand in the air.

"Rosie!" Augusta called, but the man kept on walking just the same, like he didn't even know her name.

"Rosie!" Augusta called again. The baby girl looked up at her, over the man's shoulder, then started crying. The man rearranged her on his shoulder and bounced, but it didn't calm her. Augusta knew that Rosie wanted to be with her. She tried to make her way past the carts in between them to get to Rosie, but she couldn't get through.

"Well, excuse me!" a short, heavy woman in front of her in line said. She glared at Augusta and claimed the space between their carts with her thick elbows. Augusta couldn't push around her. A boy with tangled blonde hair and a superhero costume hung off the back of a cart overflowing with food. She was stuck.

"Um, Ma'am?" the doughy woman said. Her cheeks had flushed and the small stripe of neck under her chins was blotchy, tiny dark hairs lined her thin upper lip.

"I believe I was here first." Augusta ignored her, looked past her, leaning to get a better look at Rosie. Rosie reached for her, cried, tiny fingers grabbing at the air, but the man just kept bouncing, like he didn't know what was wrong, or that he had Augusta's child, or that what Rosie wanted was her.

"Rosie, it's me!" Augusta was almost yelling now. She tried to push her cart forward, in spite of the carts in front of her. People were staring, trying to figure out was it early Alzheimer's or what. The man with the mustache and the black hair who was holding Rosie looked up, but only to see what everybody else was staring at, which was Augusta. She couldn't imagine what she looked like. Crazy white lady, she guessed. She didn't care. She wasn't aware of her body. She looked to the ceiling, where birds caught inside the store roosted on metal beams. She found nothing to help her there. The automatic doors slid closed behind Rosie and the man and the plump woman turned away from Augusta.

"Would you like paper or plastic?" the checkout girl asked the next man in line. Augusta looked back and saw that the line had grown behind her. It seemed to stretch for miles.

Brandon wouldn't go into the first floor ladies' room at work, even though it was supposed to be his job to clean it. He did every other job before he faced that place.

Finally, he knocked on the door, opened it and yelled, "Hello? Housekeeping. Hello?"

Nobody answered, but some girl might be hiding in the stall, giving birth now, her tiny frame hunched over the toilet, pained face hushed and reflected in the shiny green tile. Some mother might be sitting alone with the metal stall door closed and locked, deciding to give her baby away.

"I'll come back later," he said to the air, so anybody passing by could hear. He left the bathroom for the next shift.

Brandon's heart beat too fast, but he kept quiet as a dead man. He wandered up to labor and delivery on the sixth floor, pretending to sweep, watching the big-bellied women come in panting and crying and others leave calm, with new babies.

A woman with her hair in a shiny, auburn ponytail got out of her wheelchair as soon as the nurse stopped at the door.

"Now you can walk," the nurse said. The mama wore jeans and a red T-shirt and a plastic hospital bracelet around her narrow wrist. She hugged a swaddled up, sleeping baby. No man was around her.

"I'll carry your bags to the car for you," Brandon said.

"No, thanks," she said. "We're taking the bus home."

It was being so close to his baby and still losing her that broke him.

He found himself on the sixth floor again at break time, staring into the nursery at the newborns in the see-through bassinets. A bald one, Baby Girl McKee, had a teeny

pink bow taped to her head. She yawned and the toothless hole of her mouth filled her face. A nurse in scrubs covered with pastel teddy bears wheeled a new baby in and knocked on the glass.

"Go on, now, Big Daddy," she mouthed and shooed Brandon away. She must have thought he was sweet on her. All the nurses in the nursery laughed as Brandon moved away, but he could not hear them through the glass.

Augusta bought bushel baskets full of strawberries to make into jam. She would never be able to eat all she made. It would take her all day. She boiled the jars on the stovetop and set them, steaming, on the counter to cool. She watched the berries cook with the sugar until they popped into sticky red goo. Stirring was mindless, crucial work.

Augusta and Genie spent hours every summer canning. The girls would help, important in aprons and rubber gloves. Augusta opened the window above the kitchen sink to let out the steam and the sweet.

The summer Genie's husband died, they were canning tomatoes, jam, anything they could think of. They even made pickles. Bread and Butter, Dill, didn't matter. It kept Genie from thinking too much. Augusta stirred the berries, trying to get the jam smooth and even. Genie was cleaning fast, scrubbing the counters over and over like she had to move quickly to keep her body from flinging itself apart.

"Get out from under foot," Augusta said to Joseph and Brandon. "Go play ball in the yard." They were in kindergarten that year, new to school and the world away from their street.

"Race you!" Brandon called. They were gone. Genie watched out the window as they ran all the way out to the border of azaleas that separated the back yard from the Clays' yard. Genie stared out the window, watching the boys play like dizzy bees.

"They want him, Augusta," Genie said.

"Who wants who?" Augusta said. She stood rooted at the stove, stirring. Maybe her stillness could calm Genie down. Maybe the jam could cast a spell.

"Brandon. My brother, Pete, and his wife. They want Brandon now his daddy died. Say they can take care of him better than I can. She can't have children, so they want mine. Edward's still nursing, so they know they can't take him. They want my

Brandon. Say it will be God's way of helping all of us. " Genie rinsed jars with water so hot, her hands turned red. The kids ran in the backyard, shrieking and laughing.

"They can't take your child, Genie." Augusta pulled a chair out and patted its seat. "How could they take your child? Sit down, now," she said. Genie slid into the chair.

" Maybe they could give him a better life. Maybe it's the best thing."

" I'll help you." Augusta said.

The screen door to the back porch slammed again.

"Mama, where's my baseball glove?" Brandon yelled. He ran into the kitchen, breathless. Genie grabbed him and held him tight.

"Your baseball glove?" she said.

"I know!" He said. "It's under my bed." He wiggled out of her arms, retrieved the glove and ran back out to the yard.

"I didn't lose it!" he said. "It was right where I left it! "

Genie and Augusta finished tightening the metal lids and sat the ruby jars on the windowsill where the light shone through them.

"I can't think of myself," Genie said. "It's his future."

"As long as he's with family," Augusta said. She shook her head. "I don't know what you should do." They made sandwiches on white bread, in silence. When the plates were laid on the table, Genie went to lie down on the couch. Augusta stuck her head out the back door and called the children in.

"Come on babies, time for dinner. Come on inside," she said. The kids ran as fast as they could, racing to the door. They ate peanut butter sandwiches with warm strawberry jam.

Mama washed all of Brandon's clothes, bleached his socks and undershirts. She clipped his hair close to his head, taking care to make neat lines on the edges. Brandon stood on his tiptoes to see himself in the bathroom mirror.

"Hold still," she said. "I don't want to cut you, Baby."

The night before, she let the baby cry himself to sleep and read Brandon *Good Night Moon* three times, because he wanted her to. "In the great green room, there was a telephone," she read. He was five.

"Read it again," he said. She did.

In the morning, she made pancakes. Brandon ate two big ones, soaked in a pond of syrup. Mama drank a cup of coffee, but she didn't eat.

"Brandon," she said. "You're going to stay with Uncle Pete and Aunt Judy for a while."

"Edward, too?" Brandon said, his mouth full.

"No. Just you, baby. You're the lucky one."

"But I don't want to," Brandon said. "I can help you here. I can take care of the baby."

"No, Baby. You'll have a great time. They make pancakes all the time."

"All the time?"

"Be good," she said, then she kissed him on the head and left the room.

That afternoon, Mama went out to the driveway as soon as she heard the car. She held baby Edward in her arms. Augusta had come over from next door. She walked Brandon to Uncle Joe's green Mercury Cougar. He watched Augusta and Mama waving as they drive away, but they became blurs.

"Well, now, Brandon. What would you like to eat?" Aunt Judy said. She was turned around in the passenger seat, smiling at him.

"Nothing," Brandon said. "I don't want nothing."

"You mean *anything*," she said.

Two weeks later, Genie was still not getting out of the house, even for work. Edward spent hours in the playpen, until Genie smelled his diaper. Augusta came over in the afternoon.

"You need to open up a window in here, Genie. Air the place out," she said.

"Sure, get some air in here. I can't breathe good," Genie said. She took a new diaper, began to change Edward. She was propelled into motion.

"I want him back," she said. "I don't care what happens. I want him back."

Augusta helped Genie write the letter. She licked the envelope and mailed it for her, too. She drove with Genie to get Brandon in Morganton and he didn't say a word all the way home. He was wearing a pressed button-down shirt and shiny new penny loafers. Brandon figured the pennies must have been picked up when they were found on tails—bad luck. He knew he had been the one given away. Genie's brother and his wife never spoke to Genie again. Judy cried on the stoop when Brandon left, then went inside their brick house. He didn't know whose side he was on.

A few months later, Pete and Judy adopted a daughter whose Mama was a junkie. She was theirs for life.

Spirals and circles of everything that had happened wrapped around Brandon, pulling tighter and tighter.

The Social Services office wanted so much information that Angie didn't have-- the mother's name, the child's date of birth. They wanted to know how Angie was involved and she didn't know how to answer. Because she couldn't stand to see somebody faking motherhood? Because she felt sorry for the daddy? Because she wanted a better life for the little girl? Or, maybe because she wanted to feel like she had done something good to balance out all the bad she had done before. All the bad things people before her had done.

Angie said she was a concerned neighbor who suspected abuse. She didn't have to be a mother to care about people, to give things up. She wasn't like Mother. The worker assigned to the case asked if she had seen the child. "Well, no," she answered. "I've heard her crying, though." Angie believed she existed. She believed that she was in the wrong hands. "Ms. Taylor," the caseworker said, "Maybe you should call back when you have more information. Do you know how many cases we have?"

Of course she knew.

She kept it cool with Flora, gave her her job back to keep an eye on her. She searched the files for Flora's name. All she found was Flora's hospital admittance form from three and a half months before. The doctor was an OB-GYN, there was a surgery, but that didn't prove anything. The details were confidential.

"That's okay," she told the smoky-voiced woman at Social Services, "I could have made a mistake." If Social Services didn't want to do anything, the police would be useless.

She hung up, then called Brandon Wilson into her office.

He looked at Angie with a raised brow, as if she was wasting his time. He put his hands into his pockets. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, have a seat."

"I'm alright," he said.

"Okay, stand if you want to," she said. "I think I went to school with your brother Edward. He sat right in front of me in Algebra and I used to ask him to help me with the quadratic equations."

"Is that why you called me in here, Ms. Taylor?" he said. His face was clenched, holding back waves.

"No. I want to know about your baby. I want to know about Flora, too."

Ramon promised Mami he would not make her go back to Mexico, just somewhere in North Carolina, or maybe Tennessee or Georgia – away from Flora and her craziness. Christie and Juan said they wanted to stay in Alden, but Ramona, Mami, and Ramon would go away for a while, to be safe. Ramon saw Flora once in town and watched her cross the street with a basket full of clothes, headed toward the laundry-mat.

She looked thinner, almost like when they met. She knew better than to come by the house. Ramon might kill her, and who would go looking for her body?

Mami said, "Don't worry Ramon. I will cast the *bruja* out with my prayers. She won't touch Ramona." Mami kept the baby while he worked. He didn't like to take those big jobs far away anymore, so there was less money to spend, but he was afraid Flora would sneak in and take the baby and go to Mexico and this time he wouldn't get her back. Never. Today he was installing a dispose-all in somebody's kitchen. Throwing good food down the drain. It was a waste.

Ramona, she was growing and changing a little every day and she looked a little like Mami, with the big eyes and he could see his missing family in her, too. Ramon was trying to teach her to say Papa or at least Daddy and so far, she said Da and Pa, but thank God, not Mami or anything like that.

Ramon said, " Mami, we could move to Raleigh, because there is so much more for us there. Ladies for me to meet who would be good mothers and not crazy. I could take you to the flea market on Sundays."

"I'm fine right here, Ramon," Mami said. "I want to stay here." Ramon had Ramona and she loved him and he had Mami and he didn't need anybody else. At night, he sat in his recliner and held Ramona in one arm so it was like she was sitting up, leaning against his belly, and they watched sports shows on TV. Ramona smiled and laughed when the people cheered. She was not afraid of all the commotion. Ramona had already forgotten about Flora. Probably blocked the whore out of her tiny mind.

Curtis stopped Brandon in the hallway, outside the entrance to the cafeteria, "Hey man," he said. "Where you been hiding? You got a new woman or something? Give me a call and we'll go shoot pool."

Brandon nodded so he wouldn't seem rude. "Sure," he said. "Let's do that." He put all of his strength into scrubbing. If he could make himself sweat, he could get rid of the bad inside him. He was mopping the white tile, with day-glow orange cones keeping people away, when Ms. Taylor came down the hall. She stopped at the first cone.

"Mr. Wilson?" she said. Brandon kept mopping, pretending he didn't hear her.

"Mr. Wilson, I'd like to help you find your daughter."

Brandon looked up, leaned his mop against his hip. This was the woman who called him in, fussed him out for trying to find his baby. How could she help?

"Why?" he said.

"It's my job to take care of my employees," she said. "I care."

It was the only offer Brandon had. He didn't know if he trusted Angie Taylor far as he could throw her, but this must be the mysterious ways people talked about, if

anything was. Maybe his prayers would be answered and his baby girl would come home and make his life real again.

Ms. Taylor said don't talk to Flora, she would work it out, but he did spy on Flora when she was working in the cafeteria. He had to keep an eye on the devil when she was in his own house. Sometimes, Brandon felt sorry for Flora, the way her hair slipped into her eyes when she was real tired and she didn't even bother to push it back. She always had wasted food on her apron. Looked like she was walking dead. She never said a word to the people in the line, only scooped up food without looking into anybody's face. Ms. Taylor had heard police reports. She thought Flora's husband had Rosie now, but that's all she knew. She was going to help Brandon get Rosie back. He hadn't told Augusta yet. Didn't know what to say about it. He didn't want her to get hurt hoping for something that might not come.

Flora couldn't stay with Shawna forever, but it was better than having no home at all. It was good to have a friend in the world, so she was not floating in the open, easy to attack, like a field mouse among hawks. Shawna's tiny apartment was more crowded than the stinking little trailer with Juan and Christie and their every day sex show, but it was not as mean. Shawna kept it clean, but it was old and there were layers of ancient dirt and grease and smoke in the walls and carpet from years of people who lived in their own filth—you could smell it. People always left a residue.

Shawna had one bedroom and two little boys who slept with her, or on the couch when her boyfriend came to stay the night. He had spiked blonde hair, crooked teeth, and eyes the color of a lime. He looked at Flora like they had a secret between them, which they didn't. Shawna gave him a comfortable bed and hot meals; he didn't suffer. The TV was always on so loud that Flora couldn't ignore it. It yelled, or cheered, or laughed non-stop. Time passed quicker when she watched TV, though. It kept the days from stretching. Flora had conversations with cartoon characters and newscasters.

The kids fought constantly, tearing at each other's freckled skin like dogs and then they cried. Flora said, "Stop it! You're hurting your brother!"

The older boy with the long nose that veered to the right at the tip sneered at her and said, "You're not the boss of us." He was right. She was not the boss of anybody, even herself. She never could even get a hold of what she was thinking. She caught tiny glimpses of it, like the sun burning through thick clouds in blinding rays.

Flora slept on the couch unless Shawna's boyfriend was there—then she went out to the all night diner to drink coffee and smoke until she thought they were done and when she came back, he was usually gone. She gave Shawna twenty-five dollars a week for rent, plus she bought her own groceries. When Flora felt good, she made *sopapillas* for the boys. "More!" they said. Some nights, Shawna and Flora sat on the stoop and smoked cigarettes together and talked. It had almost been two weeks.

"You ought to call the cops on him," Shawna said. She blew her smoke and it drifted off like a small balloon, "So what if he gets deported?"

Flora didn't tell her that Ramon was a citizen. "But I want us to be together," Flora said. "I know I can fix it so he will take me back." She took a sip of warm beer.

Shawna shook her head, "Sweetie," she said, "If he wanted you back he would have already come to get you."

"I know that," Flora said. She emptied the beer in one gulp. "You don't got to tell me."

Flora could try to take Ramona in the middle of the night. She had proven she could do it, but she wanted Ramon back too and even Mami and Juan, but not really Christie. Flora didn't belong to anybody anymore. She was Shawna's friend and a cafeteria worker and that was all. Maybe she had nothing inside but darkness and now hate.

"Brandon!" Augusta called. "Brandon, you in there?" She was on her tiptoes shouting through the three tiny square windows at the top of his door. The glass was cool to the touch and thinner than the wood, so sound might carry through it. No answer. Since the grocery store, it felt like they might have a chance of getting Rosie back if they hurried and did right. She had gotten Brandon back for Genie.

She pounded on Brandon's front door until her fist was red. When he still didn't answer, she sat down on the concrete steps. Couldn't do a thing but wait, but she couldn't wait. Brandon might take an extra shift and then he wouldn't be home for hours. He couldn't keep his phone on at work.

Augusta walked down the street toward the trailer park. At the elementary school, the parking lot was full of cars. Teachers were getting ready for the new year. The dried grass smell of August filled the air. Mornings were cool now, but in the middle of the day there was still a need for shade. The bright blue doors of the low brick building were propped wide open, welcoming. Augusta wanted to walk into the school and smell the industrial cleaner and poster paint and old books. She could serve on the PTA. She

wanted that life again. The thought of all the children that would be inside soon made her walk faster. She would find the man that had Rosie, or she would find Flora.

Augusta planned to take Rosie to kindergarten and walk her home from school in a few years when this was all forgotten. Rosie would wear brand new dresses with patent leather shoes. Augusta would make her lunch and nothing bad would ever happen to her again. She could protect Rosie. Hadn't she protected her own children from all kinds of meanness? She knew she had seen Rosie in the grocery store--any mother knows when she sees her own child. She would have known Rosie was there, even if she was blind. It was like the umbilical cord was still attached. She remembered what it felt like to give birth. That man had no business with her baby.

Augusta walked down the side of the road to where the pavement broke into grass, through the rusted chain-link gate, to the North End Trailer Court. She was the only white person there until a young, pale, heavysset girl came out of a trailer and started hanging T-shirts on the line. She was focused on stretching the shirts taut and wide, so they would dry quickly. She smoked as she hung them. A cigarette dangled out of the right side of her thin, clenched lips. The trailers were sagging and almost touching, holding onto each other for support. Augusta ignored the kids playing with plastic superheroes in the yard, shooting each other with imaginary guns, and the sun-worn old woman peeling potatoes on her porch. She made a beeline for the one she thought was an ally. Alden was still a small town. They might be some kind of kin. Maybe blood would save her.

"Excuse me," Augusta said. The girl looked past her, like she didn't speak English, her light blue eyes cold and rimmed in thick black eyeliner. "I just wanted to ask you some questions," Augusta said. The heavy girl turned and flipped her cigarette filter into the scrawny bushes that edged the trailer, then walked back inside without a word, slamming the door in Augusta's face. She didn't know anything about respect, probably was all drugged up or something. Augusta could hear a soap opera in English warbling through the thin walls, the dramatic music and the cut to a commercial for potato chips. She knocked on the door, but the girl didn't answer.

"Hello?...Ma'am?... I need to talk to you." Augusta knocked so loud, it shook the door. "Hello?... I need your help. My child is missing. I just want to know if you've seen her." She yelled through the door. No response.

"Please." she said.

Augusta knew the girl was inside and could hear the need in her voice, but she ignored her.

In the silence, a panicked thought struck her: What if someone brought Rosie back home and she wasn't there to meet her? She couldn't split herself. She turned and ran all the way home, sprinting like she had missed a bus. Sweat plastered strands of her bangs to her forehead. When she got home, a silver car was in the driveway. Her daughter, Sarah. Augusta hadn't asked her to come. How odd to see the child she had birthed so long ago standing on her porch, a true blend of Augusta and Daniel, her own eyes looking back at her like she was a troubled stranger. Daniel's full mouth in a frown.

"Mama?" she said.

Ramon could feel Christie's icy eyes on him all the time, but he knew not to look back at her. He didn't want anything she had. Maybe he should go to the mountains, take the baby with him, stay close to the ground. He was holding Ramona on the couch, lifting her up in the air and then swooping her back down to his chest. This got her laughing a breathless, automatic fire laugh that made everybody in the room grin. Christie stopped sweeping the floor and sat down beside them.

"Let me hold her," she said.

"We're playing," Ramon said, as if he and Ramona had discussed it. He lifted her into the air again. Christie reached for her. Ramon pulled her back in and sat her in his lap, resting her back on his chest.

"Go find your husband," Ramon said. "Make your own baby."

"Oh believe me," she said, "we work on it every day."

"*Put a chingada*," Ramon said, then went back to playing with Ramona.

"What did you say?" Christie asked. Her lips tightened until she had no mouth.

"You heard me," Ramon said. "I'm sure you know all the nasty words. It means, fuck-ing whore." Ramon glared into Christie's eyes and smiled.

"You're going to think fucking whore," she said, " You just keep on. See what happens." She stormed out of the room and slammed her hollow bedroom door.

Ramon laughed and bounced Ramona on his knee. "*Put a, puta, puta, chingada!*" he chanted as he bounced, then lifted her into the air. She squealed.

Brandon stood outside the O.R. with his mop and watched the surgery through the narrow rectangular window in the metal swinging door. It was something abdominal, maybe the liver. Blood covered the surgeons' blue plastic gloves. He tried to imagine putting a broken body back together and sending it out to live again as a man.

He had worked fast, to burn off stress in the beginning of his shift. Then, he spent the rest of the time watching and making like he was busy. It took his mind off things. Brandon's cleaning cart made him invisible, a normal part of the operating room scenery and not a person spying on life and death. The man who was splayed on the table with the bright lights shining on him coded and the doctors and nurses pumped his chest, throwing the weight of their bodies into his, trying to force him back. Let him go. Brandon had

watched this one before and he knew what they should do. He wanted them to let the man float to the next world. It had to be better than this one. No need for all that foolishness to keep a man from his reward. The body knew what was best for the spirit, and maybe this man would be better off if they left each other.

"Clear!" the doctors said and shocked him. It hurt Brandon to see the doctors and nurses trying to jolt that man into a life he probably didn't even want. Looked like his eyes rolled back. The hair stood up on Brandon's arms.

Sometimes, Brandon thought the mama girl had known best. There wouldn't be any real happiness in Rosie's life, not the permanent kind, so she might as well let her dry up. A body can be too much weight to carry. And two bodies? One has to feed off the other, doesn't it? What if neither one had nourishment? Maybe that girl started a new world down the road that was lighter and didn't hurt so bad. Brandon wondered if she missed the weight of her baby, pulling life back and forth between them.

Brandon watched the nurses pull their shiny hair from paper shower caps and wad up masks as they wheeled the coded man's half dead body to the ICU. He had a line of spit coming out of the corner of his mouth that nobody bothered to wipe. Like all the doctors and nurses were required to do was get a pulse back in him and the rest was up to him. The doctors started talking about this and that, was anybody going to the beach with the family or whatnot, and it looked like none of them had thought of the man as anything but a body that could be parted and pieced back together. Nobody mentioned his long road ahead or looked to find his drawn up family in the waiting room and see if they were okay. They'd draw straws for that job in a minute. Loser had to talk to the sobbing

mother, keep a grim face, tell the facts. The doctors brushed past Brandon, pulling off gowns and gloves and tossing them into the trashcan on his cart, not noticing whether he was a broom, or a mop, or a man.

Angie ate at her desk, mostly pushing lettuce leaves and croutons from side to side and reading an article on employee management when the call came. Her assistant buzzed her on the intercom and said, "Ms. Taylor, there's a call from Mecklenberg County General. Should I put it through?"

"Yes, put it through," Angie said. She calmed herself by imagining her new office as she talked to the director and made an appointment for her interview. She tried to visualize accepting the offer, but instead, saw vines wrapping around her ankles, tying her motionless to this spot.

When she told Daddy, he said, "Go on, Angie. You would be crazy not to. Think of the money. This place won't go nowhere."

Mother said, "Come on in here and help me hang the new lace sheers I got for the living room. Hold them up a little higher, Angela. You're letting them drag the ground and get dirty." Mother's lips were drawn in a perfect double arch, like a hard plastic baby doll's mouth. Lipstick bled into furrows that radiated from it. Angie had never noticed her age before.

"Do I need tie-backs?" Mother asked. Angie wasn't sure if she'd even heard her about the job offer.

"That would let in more light, but then the neighbors could see in better, too." Angie said. Mother let the curtains hang.

"What have you got to stay for?" Daddy said.

Angie wasn't sure she knew the answer. "I know. I already made an appointment for the interview," she said. Daddy busied himself with the TV.

Angie drove the county roads, but she didn't know anybody who lived outside of town now. Farmhouses had aged into shacks and were either full to the seams with newcomers, or abandoned. If she left Alden behind, it might cease to exist. Everyone Angie knew lived in town now, or in the newly sprouted neighborhoods reaching like fat fingers toward the highway. Still, the shape of the land hadn't changed much and she could see the hazy, jagged outline of the mountains to the west, not yet worn down completely, showing their core.

Angie told the lady on the phone she was interested and made hotel reservations, but the curves of the road she knew without looking told her she would cancel. This place was the middle of nowhere and of everywhere.

Flora watched Ramona from outside the trailer window in the dark. The light from the inside of the living room was yellow with a blue TV glow to one side. It was like a movie screen at the drive-in. Flora got a cab to take her from Shawna's and drop her off at the corner, then walked quietly to where she could see through the window without being seen. The light blinded everyone in the living room to the outside. Ramon propped the baby up on his lap and Flora could watch them playing, but she couldn't get close enough to see what they were watching. She could tell Ramona had grown because

she was sitting so strong, like she didn't even need Ramon to hold her. The diaper she was wearing looked too small. Would Ramon know to buy the next size for her?

From what Flora could tell, Ramon hadn't said anything to the neighbors. Why would he tell them his wife was gone? It would look like he couldn't handle his woman. He would be too embarrassed for that. Flora waved at the neighbors on their stoops and acted like she was coming home from work when they passed and she fumbled in her bag for imaginary keys until they went inside their own homes and locked their doors and she was safe. She was close enough to smell beef and peppers cooking behind the door.

Ramon came out once to take out the trash, but Flora hid behind a bush and he didn't see her. She went back to the corner to wait for the cab, and Juan and Christie pulled into the gravel lot in Juan's rusted old truck. The bald tires spun and kicked up dust. Flora turned so they would not see her face, but she was taking too many chances and couldn't always count on chalky gray clouds. When they parked, Christie straddled Juan in the driver's seat and Flora could tell they were doing it, even though Christie still had her clothes on. The truck groaned with the rocking of their bodies. Christie's eyes were closed and her face looked pinched in pain, but her body was too relaxed to be hurting. Flora ran to the street to find her cab. She had told the driver an hour, but he was usually late. A few minutes could ruin everything.

"I wanted to surprise you, Mama," Sarah said. "You worried me over the phone. Sarah had driven straight through from DC to Alden, six hours. Now, with Augusta running in crazy looking, Sarah must have thought she had lost it.

"Your brother told me you were coming and the time got away from me. I didn't want to miss you," Augusta lied. "Had to rush back from my walk." She was flushed and sweaty. She tucked her hair behind her ear.

"I would have waited, Mama," she said. "I told him not to tell." She handed Augusta a dishtowel to wipe her face with. "I'm starving. Have you got anything to eat?"

"Whatever you want, Baby."

Cooking for somebody else calmed Augusta. She focused on browning the pork chops in their sizzling fat, slicing the tomatoes and cucumbers in clean, even circles, then skinning and mashing the potatoes. The rhythm of it steadied her. If she didn't pay attention, she would burn everything. Kill her appetite. She didn't have one much anyway and had lost a few pounds. After Sarah ate, they watched TV on the couch and she talked about her job and the new man she was dating. Sarah drifted off when the news came on. Augusta thought of Rosie once or twice, to wish that she was well fed and sleepy, too.

Flora crouched low and peeked through the lacy Nandinas as Juan and Christie loaded something into his truck and closed the doors. The sky was still violet, on its way to black. They went back inside for a minute and came out again, carrying suitcases. Flora knew she shouldn't risk it, being there again, but Ramon's truck was gone. Juan's truck was idling, loud music working its way through the metal and glass. Flora ducked down as Juan reached the truck.

"We'll stop in Vegas and then, with all the money we win, we'll buy a new truck with tinted windows," Juan said. "I've got it all planned out."

"Let's just get there."

Christie closed the trailer's front door and locked it.

"Did you make sure Mami was really out?" Juan asked.

"I gave her two Benadryl. That should keep her quiet for hours."

"Maybe that was too much. I don't want to hurt her."

"She's fine. Ramon'll be home in a few days," Christie said.

Mami would be alone for a while before Ramon could come to her. She had air conditioning, but Flora worried about Mami suffocating in her room. The temperature was rising and breaking records every day. Vomit rose in Flora's throat, but she forced it

back down. She could separate her mind from her body. It might not be stress. She might be pregnant for real this time. It could be another miracle. Juan drove away and the sun came up as they pulled onto the road and accelerated. When they were gone, Flora banged on the door for Mami, but the door could not be unlocked from either side without a key.

"Who is it?" Mami called. "Juan? Christie? Get the door."

Brandon heard Angie Taylor was leaving town, taking another job. Maybe she was bored. Maybe she wanted to stir things up before she left. He didn't know what she stood to gain by helping him. They weren't friends, to know all about each other and talk about the darkness in their pasts, but they understood some part of each other.

"I feel for you about your baby," she said. "There must be legal means."

"I don't know what that could be. You can't do a paternity test without a sample from the baby," Brandon said. "But I know that baby's mine." Angie didn't question Brandon's story about the baby-mama, or why he couldn't go to the cops. She kept an eye on Flora in the cafeteria. She came up with ideas.

Sometimes Brandon forgot the exact shade of Rosie's eyes and he had to take out a picture of her that Augusta had taken just to see was he right in his mind's mixture of green and brown and gray. He was. When he was working, other things got on his mind and pushed Rosie to the back, but he pulled her to the front again.

Since Sarah came home, Augusta had been inviting Brandon around for dinner, tempting him with grilled steak and roast chicken.

"You got to eat sometime," she said. "You might as well be social." He knew she wanted him and Sarah to get together and make a new grandchild for her. Like they could make up a family out of air. Sarah was like his sister and his mind wasn't on sex, or food, either. It was on getting back what had gotten stolen away. Besides, Sarah didn't know enough about people to know that something was wrong with her Mama—that Augusta's smiles were made up only for her. She thought she already knew everything because she worked for the federal government. She didn't know real.

Augusta sent Sarah home with a story about loneliness, but it was just the one she wanted to hear about Augusta missing Daniel. She wanted her mother to stay the same so she could be the one to change. She needed a line to hold. Something nailed into the ground.

Augusta said, " Don't worry, Baby. I'm fine. I've been doing some babysitting and then the child had to move away—the cutest little thing. She reminds me of you. That brought back when your daddy died." That could explain the way her eyes had flattened and why she had no appetite. Augusta saw in the car's rearview mirror how she looked different, drawn. The story she told Sarah was truth underneath. She was good at telling the parts she wanted people to hear, making herself the person they expected. Sarah looked at her. "If you're sure you're alright," she said.

"Go on home, now. I'll be fine. Be careful on that highway,"

"Mama, you really should try anti-depressants," she said, "or therapy." She turned the ignition.

"Oh, honey, that's what I go to church for." Augusta said. She hadn't been to church in over a year.

"Love you," Sarah said and drove away.

Augusta walked along the road to the trailer park and hoped for miracles. Some of the old ladies watching over the children in the yards started to wave to her like old friends and she couldn't resist waving back, even though she knew she should lie low. She hadn't seen the white girl, or Rosie, but the grocery store man came back the other day. She recognized his blue truck. It was the one she saw him drive out of the grocery store parking lot.

She thought of asking Brandon to go get a paternity test, so they could get some help out of the police, but they'd have to have Rosie's blood to match it. You can't get blood from the air, or even a baby blanket. She had checked everything for tiny hairs or fingernail clippings, but there was nothing. And then what would DNA tell? It wouldn't say anything about Augusta being a mama to Rosie, or about the way Rosie could play and laugh with her, or just sit still and watch birds together. Rosie loved the cardinals. She might have only been a vision if Brandon hadn't held her, too. It took both of their words to prove she was real.

Augusta walked to the trailer park that evening and saw a police car parked at the grocery man's trailer. She couldn't tell if they were taking somebody away or bringing them home. The blue and red lights swirled, regardless. She lingered at the gate until the cops came out of the trailer and drove away. She pretended to stretch and waved to the officers as they left. The one in the driver's seat waved back. An old white woman like her didn't look like a threat, just part of the scenery in Alden. The man came out of the trailer then and smoked a nervous cigarette on his stoop. It didn't seem to calm his breath.

He smoked two cigarettes, fast, the second one lit from the first one's end. Then, he went inside and slammed the door behind him. Augusta hadn't seen anything exchanged.

Shawna's children fought and yelled and watched TV so loud that Flora constantly thought about dish detergent and cartoon music. Her head was full of bright colors. She wanted to buy things at the store that she would never use, like *Roundup* or *Zout!*

She thought of Ramona, too, but her baby was sliding further and further away. Flora could barely imagine her tiny fingers with the pink moon nails, or the fine hair that edged her face. The day-to-day curtain of work and Shawna's apartment was covering Flora, wrapping her up. She couldn't stay here. She had to squint to picture Ramona's entire face. But always, she could see her flower bud mouth, smiling. The pink slip of a tongue curled to the roof of her mouth.

All day Flora stood in the cafeteria with a steamy film of food all over her, sending meals on trays up to patients who were almost dead or wished they were. Feeding their families. The nasty food could put anyone out of their misery, for sure. Everything was foggy. She knew for one hundred percent sure, though, that Ramon would kill her if he really wanted to. He was a powerful man. He let his demons run like dogs. Flora was already dead though. Now she had to become someone else with no husband, or mother-in-law, or baby.

She saved her last paycheck from the hospital to buy a bus ticket to Pharr, Texas. Her Mami had talked about living there as a girl—how it was the last part of the United States before Mexico. Squat, whitewashed buildings, battered old American trucks roaming the streets, brown dust everywhere and not a blade of grass, or a tree in sight. The sun that never quit. It sounded perfect. Flora felt at home there. It was hot and dry and determined. It was not really leaving the country, but close enough for her. She had to think before crossing the border. There were so many people there in more than one place--their heads here, hearts somewhere else. Maybe she would cross the border in a truck that was going to pick up a load of illegal aliens. She would work for the coyote. Maybe she would tell the people, *Don't go. You are better off here. See the way people gather in the square at night and you know all of them? Everyone will feed your children here. You can't buy a place, or a life.*

Or, maybe she could get a job in a restaurant and fill her mouth with Spanish and pull the English out of her head and find a man who already had kids and wanted a woman to love him. Maybe she could start new and even change her name. She packed

one of the boys' small Spiderman backpacks with her uniform and the clothes and shoes she and Shawna had bought at the Goodwill on their days off. She left fifty dollars and a note taped to the front of the TV that said, "Thanks. Goodbye. Love, Flora."

The bus steps knelt down to let Flora on, then lifted her up. She sat with her face to the window, smudging the tinted glass with her nose, fogging it with her breath. Nobody said anything, or noticed she was there.

Juan's truck had broken down just outside of Knoxville, Tennessee, in a town called Strawberry Plains. That's where the cops found it—in a scrap yard, but they didn't find Juan, or Christie or Ramona. Ramon had registered the car, so he was the one they called. "Mr. Alvarez, We found your vehicle, but frankly, there's not enough of it to drive. Somebody parted it out. "

"I'll come get the pieces," Ramon said.

He liked the soft sound of the name of the town where the truck was, Strawberry Plains, so he decided to go there and see if he could figure anything out from the truck parts. Maybe he could fit it together like a puzzle. Maybe Juan felt bad and crammed a note in Spanish into the dashboard. Juan should have known that rusty piece of shit truck would never make it through the mountains. He should have never trusted that white trash girl. Ramon had given Juan twenty bucks the day he disappeared with Ramona.

"I'll get you back," Juan said.

Ramon drove his shiny blue truck up into the mountains. The road lifted him up into the trees and rocks, switching back along the curves. He got above the houses and stores and stopped at the Continental Divide. He got out of the truck and looked over. He couldn't tell by looking which hills belonged to North Carolina and which to Tennessee; it was a vast, unbroken river of green. If he found Ramona, he would bring her here to live, where everything was tangled and growing. He rode down the mountain, into the Tennessee side. When the land softened to small rises and buildings and billboards sprouted on the side of the road, he hit Strawberry Plains, but he didn't see any strawberry plants, or plains either. It was in the foothills, just like Alden, but the rivers ran the other way, to the Mississippi instead of the Atlantic. Everything was familiar and backward. He could see the land flatten out to the west from here. It was the farthest he had been from Alden since he was a boy.

Ramon got a motel room that overlooked the highway.

"How many will be staying in the room?" the girl at the desk asked.

"Only me," he said. He stayed for three days because he didn't know what else to do. He leaned on the old metal railing in front of the room and smoked, betting with himself on whether it would hold his weight.

Ramon waited in cars for Mama with Juan when they were little, while she cleaned other people's houses. Ramon would turn on the air conditioning or heat and the radio for company, but that would run the car out of gas, or sometimes run the battery down. They would fall asleep and wake up hours later with their hair stuck to their faces with sweat. Cars were fortresses, what was locked inside stayed safe.

At night, Ramon sat outside in a white plastic chair with the door to his sagging hotel room open to let in the weak breeze. He watched the trucks and cars whoosh by on interstate forty toward California. Ramona could be in one of them. All she had to do was sit in a different car and she would have a whole different life. She could be anywhere, with anyone.

Ramon walked over to the hick bar next door to the motel, The Corner Pocket, and had a couple of watery draft beers and some stale chips that sat in baskets on the bar. People were scattered like a long marble shot—close at the bar, then thin around the tables. Blondes, brunettes, but no one who looked like him. Country music was turned up too loud to hear anybody talk. He had a couple more beers and started to feel good. His life would change, the music proved it.

He walked back to his motel room, the parking lot lit up greenish from a huge fluorescent light that buzzed. Bugs shadowed around the glow. Ramon could feel that his baby had been there, maybe waited in the truck while Juan and Christie went inside. Did they think they could blackmail him? Get a reward? Or, did they just want to keep her, to start fresh where no one would question them? He banged his fist against a car's hood and it didn't even hurt. Made a tiny dent. Cars' headlights streaked down the highway. He wondered where those lights had guided Juan, Christie and Ramona.

A skinny man with a stringy brown ponytail and mustache, and a grease-stained baseball cap stood behind an old Formica counter that might have once been white. The body shop smelled of engine grease, pine cleaner, and years of cigarette ash.

"It was a guy looked just like you sold me these body parts and the engine," the man said. "Engine needed a new crankshaft—he'd burned that out—but I sold it already. To a man from Knoxville, works on engines and resells them. You want the hubcaps, man? I'll give you those. Free of charge."

"Sure. I want all of it. Anything that's left. " Ramon said.

He checked out of his motel room, filled up, then drove back to the side of the mountains he knew, where the water flowed out to the sea.

"Angie," Brandon said. "Is it okay if I call you Angie?" It was strange to be in his car with her. It was like the leather and wood in her office propped her up. She seemed larger there and stiff, almost like a statue. In Brandon's car, with no air conditioning, a little sweat came up on her lip and she wiped it with the back of her hand and it made her real.

"Of course you can call me Angie," she said. She pulled her seatbelt across her — she was small and light against the burgundy velour seat. Brandon waited for the click before he drove. He tried not to feel hopeful, but after so long feeling vacuumed out, a little hope felt so thick and warm, he couldn't let it go.

"If I get her back, I don't know how I could thank you." They were driving to the trailer park. Angie had dug up hospital paper work that said Flora had a hysterectomy, just about the time Brandon got Rosie. Flora didn't have a baby, just a tumor. It was all supposed to be private, but since a crime had been committed, the law wouldn't mind.

"Don't thank me, yet," Angie said. "It's just a start."

When they got to the trailer address they had for Flora, there was a man on the steps, dazed drunk. Brandon could have taken him in a fight if he had to. The man was short and slight. Angie and Brandon walked up to the stoop and stood together.

"Mr. Alvarez?" Angie started, "We're looking for your wife."

"We're looking for my child," Brandon said. The man stared past Brandon with red-rimmed eyes.

"I don't got no wife," he said. "Told the fucking cops my daughter was gone, too. What you want? Go ask my brother and his whore. Motherfuckers. You want to tell me where they are? I don't know nothing about your child. I don't know nothing about mine." He threw his cigarette butt into the dirt and slammed the door behind him.

Brandon heard the barrel of the lock turn and click.

Angie and Brandon looked at the closed door and didn't say a word. They walked back to his car and got in. Started the engine without talking. She folded the papers and put them into her purse. There was nothing left to find. With the windows rolled down, Brandon heard the tires dig through the gravel, then whisper onto the hardtop. He could see the faint outline of the mountains in the distance, until another car's brights blinded him.

Twenty-one days made a habit, Augusta had read. Or broke one, but she couldn't stop herself from walking down to the trailer park to stare at the empty aluminum shoebox that Rosie had lived in. The windows were open and gauzy white curtains fluttered out in the breeze. A pile of black trash bags lay abandoned at the edge of the yard, tied at the top with their red handles.

Rosie had stayed there, but Augusta wasn't able to bring her home. She would have grown up speaking Spanish in that trailer, too, and cooking that food. Augusta liked to eat Mexican in a restaurant, but every day? And she had planned to teach Rosie how to make a decent piecrust. It was all in the ice water. And a pot roast--every girl needed to know how to do that. You had to cook it slow, keep an eye on it. None of her grown children cared to cook. They, not one of them, were good at taking care of the basic needs. She would have taught Rosie about her heritage, about lots of things. She would have passed her down Genie's recipes, kept important things in the family line.

Flora's family was gone from the trailer court now: the grocery store man, the old lady, even the white girl with the black lined blue eyes. Nobody in the neighborhood knew where to except toward the south. Augusta could have walked into the empty trailer if she wanted.

She used hand motions and asked in clear syllables, "*Don-de?*" pointing to the trailer, but the old grandmothers only smiled and nodded to her, giving her nothing.

"*Buen-os di-as*," she said. She walked back home and put the trailer park behind her.

Somebody down at The Meadow Restaurant had seen that blue truck headed down Interstate Forty, but that could go lots of places. It could take you over the mountains, and then you were really gone, headed anywhere you wanted to go and to cities that would swallow you whole, so you could never be found. Augusta hid inside her house.

Brandon came in blank faced and sat at her kitchen table. "Flora left her man," he said. "Left her job too. There's no more Rosie. Maybe she knows where my baby is," he said. "Maybe somebody else—maybe the white girl with all of that makeup on—anybody could have her."

"I don't know what you mean," Augusta said. "You can't hide a baby. Somebody would have had to seen them." She hated the whole family for taking her baby, but the white girl especially.

How could she have lost Rosie like a nickel slipping out of her pocket? No way to find her now. That white girl ran off at some truck stop in Tennessee, last anybody heard. That family was split wide open and probably wouldn't get sewn back up and that's what Rosie had to live with. They could have sold her for drugs, left her on the side of the road, anything. They wouldn't love her.

Alden was still a small town. A freckled, green-eyed girl who worked at the hospital cafeteria had told Brandon she knew for sure Rosie was Flora's baby because she saw her come out of the hospital with her. Like that old nine-tenths law was supposed to work with people, too. Said she knew he had tried to steal Flora's baby and that only a crazy man would take a baby from its mama.

"You want supper, Brandon?" Augusta asked. She tried to cook things, like mashed potatoes, that were comforting and might feel good and warm when they filled him.

"No need," he said. "I still got the pot roast you brought over last night. That's enough for me."

"Okay," Augusta said. "But when you get tired of the same old thing, let me know. I can make chicken casserole. You want that?"

"No thanks, Miss Augusta. Like I said, I'm fine. I don't have no appetite."

When Augusta couldn't cook for anybody, she went to the library and read all the newspapers from different places in North Carolina and other states nearby. She checked the crime logs, so she knew about break-ins and drug busts and murders all around the south, but nothing about a missing baby. The police had called out an Amber Alert, but babies were harder to find than grown people, or even big children. Grocery stores had special bulletin boards full of pictures of smiling missing children. She tried not to look up when she passed them.

Flora's man must really think that Rosie was his baby, but Augusta didn't blame him. How could a man ever know for sure? Anyone could claim a baby and anybody could give it away.

On the new job out by the old highway, Ramon shot the nail gun, taking aim at the floors and ceilings, even the walls. They would never fall. He was working on building a shopping center, so it would take a while. The worksite was a field that still had piles of cow shit in it. Ramon and the other workers would make it into a shopping center, with no cows or life. It would be a place that people got dressed up to go to, wearing clean shoes. The people who worked inside Ramon's building would look at him sideways when he came in, not knowing they wouldn't have a job or store to work in without him. They would talk to him slow, wondering if he even spoke English, and say,

"Can I help you?" loudly, meaning: *Get your Spic ass out of here if you're not going to buy anything.*

Ramon imagined Flora and Christie and Juan all lined up against the wall and the nails he shot going into their faces and hearts instead of the walls, and they would suffer and beg him to forgive them before they died. He didn't forgive them and he watched them bleed. Then, he felt guilty and said a prayer with every nail that went into the wall that Ramona would be found and she would come to him and the rest of them would go away to places with names he would forget, or never know.

The Boss said, "You're a damn good worker, Ramon." They were sitting on the newly tar papered roof, eating ham and cheese sandwiches. Greasy waves of heat rose up from the tarpaper and made everything blurry. The other guys had skipped work.

"Too fucking hot, man," one of them said, "I ain't in hell yet. I don't got to burn up like that." Ramon and the Boss didn't come down to the ground for lunch so they could save time and get the job done. If they pushed it, they could finish before the sun peaked. The Boss had gotten his wife to buy the sandwiches and hand them up the ladder with a rope and a bucket.

"Hey, 'Mon," he said. "Where can I find me about six more Mexicans like you?" He slapped Ramon on the back.

"Don't know, Boss," was all Ramon said.

Ramon had Mami set up in a real house now. It had yellow wooden siding and black shutters and a back yard for Ramona to play in when she came back. Mami cooked too much in the big black-and-white tiled kitchen, but she wouldn't eat, so she was losing weight.

"Come sit at the table with me," Ramon said. He didn't have an appetite, but he could not work if he didn't eat.

He took a bite of roasted pork, drenched in Tabasco. "Delicious," he said, as if he could taste anything. Mami piled mounds of pork and rice and beans on her plate, moved it around a little with her fork while Ramon ate, then scraped it all into the trashcan.

"You're going to disappear, Mami, and then who will take care of me?"

She took a tiny bite of bread, but didn't say anything. She baked cakes and cookies and bread every day and they all broke out in green rashes of mold inside Ziploc bags on the countertop. She was preparing for a wedding or a party. She didn't want to face the fact that there was nothing to celebrate and there wouldn't be, maybe ever. No baptism, no quinceanera, nothing.

"We have to be ready when Ramona and Christie and Juan come home," she said. The contractor owned the house they rented. It had a sidewalk in front of it, and was close to downtown, so Mami could walk to the store but she still waited for Ramon to drive her on his days off.

"Tonight, I will make tamales," she said. "But it will take a long time." She would stuff Ramon to death with party food.

"You in a hurry?" Ramon asked. "There's nobody here to eat." She frowned, then turned back to the kitchen and her plans.

"I'm cooking for you. You are my baby."

Brandon tried to focus on his work, on getting home. He got his sunglasses and keys out of his locker, then closed it. He clocked out.

"Don't you ever take a break?" his friend Curtis asked. "When we going to go shoot some pool again?" Curtis clocked out, found his keys in his pocket.

"Soon," Brandon said.

"Suit yourself. I'm going tonight. Sure you don't want to come? It's ladies' night."

Brandon shook his head, "Nah. I'm beat."

"Catch you next time then, Man."

Brandon had work and he had Angie to talk to about what he should or shouldn't be doing about Rosie. He liked the way Angie talked, soft, but strong and honest, a little bit of mountain in her voice.

She said there was a good chance of getting Rosie back, but he could tell that his baby girl had broken off from him. He could feel her leaving his heart. Someone else had a hold of her. Maybe they would raise her good, maybe not.

He felt at home in the hospital waiting rooms and halls where people's lives changed forever so fast. Working so much had gotten him a promotion, some kind of reward. He was the manager of the housekeeping department now—this would be the cleanest hospital that ever was, a shining place to come into or go out of this world.

Brandon didn't answer the phone when Augusta called. She wanted to talk about everybody who was gone, when all he wanted was to forget. She wanted to keep looking for Rosie, get the police in on it. She still thought there was a chance they could put things back to the way they were, to prove something. But love wouldn't hold up as evidence.

Angie made an offer on a house near what used to be Elm Creek, but now was a development on the edge of the highway. Might as well own a piece of this land before every acre of it was used up and filled with buildings named after what the developers replaced. It owned parts of her. She chose a brand new townhouse, three bedroom, two bath--tall and angular, never been lived in by anybody else. She stopped by every evening and watched it go up, charted its progress. She picked all the colors. She kept it cool and soothing and didn't fill it with a lot of furniture, either. She considered planting dogwoods, or maybe roses in the yard. Might be good to watch things grow.

Mother said, "I have all kinds of stuff to give you. I could fill two or three houses with all of this left over junk. Your sister thinks she's too good for it, but it's all still good. What do you need?" She exhaled the smoke of her cigarette and Angie knew that everything she had would smell like Mother.

"Give it to the Goodwill. I want to start with everything new."

"Suit yourself if you want to waste your money," she said. "You can't blame me for trying to help. I guess it's my own fault for spoiling you." She emptied the glass ashtray she was using into the trashcan. She sprayed it with blue window cleaner and wiped it to shiny, then ashed in it again.

Daddy was still satisfied with listening to the scanner. The hissing and scratching must have been warming. "I thought I'd grill out tonight," he said. "You know, for a change of pace."

"You're getting wild now, Daddy. Next thing you know, you'll be baking cakes, too. "

"Hush, Smart Alec," he said. "Don't know why you didn't go for that Charlotte job." He put his arm around Angie and patted her shoulder, like he was sorry for both of them.

"Well, it's the best thing, anyway. You never know when you might need me around here. I'm not sure who they could get that would be willing to do my job."

Daddy nodded. "You are different," he said and grinned. "You'll do alright. Or, you might find somebody and have me a grandbaby."

"Don't hold your breath."

They listened to calls on the scanner for car accidents and even a high-speed chase, but there was nothing about a baby. The words were hard to make out, so Angie fell into the lilt of the dispatcher's voice. It made her want to sleep. She stretched out to fill the couch. Sometimes, she wondered if Brandon's baby really existed. Maybe he had made that baby up and they had gone on a wild goose chase. Flora made her baby up and Lord knows what else. Who knew what truth was?

Augusta made plans to visit Sarah in Washington, D.C., for a week. Change of pace would do her some good. They would visit the Capitol building and the Smithsonian. She could overlook the schools of children passing through—only look at the history. She wanted to go to Arlington National Cemetery, too.

"Mama, there's this great Ethiopian restaurant we'll have to go to. You'll love it. We'll all share this spongy bread."

"What kind of food is that? I thought they were having a famine in Ethiopia," Augusta said. "Why don't you let me cook for everybody?"

Both of her children would be there for the week, just to see her. Augusta was pulling them like tacks to a magnet. She still had a draw. They would always be hers, even if they were grown and barely knew her. She would cook them lasagna, with all the cheese like when they were little and loved it, even though they couldn't pronounce it then. She would throw them all off their silly diets. She hadn't gotten to mama them in a while.

Sarah still didn't know about Rosie. Neither did Albert. Augusta didn't know now whether Rosie was living or dead, so she put Rosie in her memory right next to Daniel. Sometimes, she imagined them together, laughing and playing, but missing her. She would see Daniel and Rosie again when she disappeared into dust. In a place where no questions were asked.

She spent two whole days organizing her kids' baby pictures. They had been stuffed in a drawer in the dining room buffet for years. She bought two binders to make memory books for each child. In the pictures, the images were especially red. Sometimes, even their eyes were. They looked like the same baby, even though she knew they were different. What was and what could have been seeped back and forth and settled in the low places in her mind. They made up the world that she wanted to live in.

Brandon went to the police station and took out a missing persons report out on Rosie. You don't have to prove you're the daddy for that. Just that you're missing somebody. The small, concrete waiting room was over air-conditioned. Brandon wished he had a jacket, something to warm him. He waited in the rigid, black plastic chair, next to a man who had been assaulted. The man's lip dripped blood down his chin and he caught it with a wad of tissue.

"He came out of nowhere," the man said. He held the tissue to his lip and his eye was swollen shut. "Beat me like this for saying hello. Took my wallet." The man kept talking, but Brandon couldn't listen. Couldn't look into that smashed up face.

The desk clerk called Brandon's name and he went to the window.

"What is the missing person's height and weight?" The cop asked. He was gray-headed, old enough to be Brandon's father, and wore square, plastic-framed glasses. He looked heavy and content.

"I'm sure she's grown by now," Brandon said. He spread his hands apart as if he was measuring her. "Maybe two feet long and ten pounds?" He imagined holding Rosie, feeling her weight in his arms.

"Age and distinguishing features?" the officer asked.

"About four months," Brandon said. "Eyes that couldn't pick a color—gray, green, brown."

"Pick one. I have to check a box—green or brown?"

"Okay. Green, I guess," he said.

"Last known location?"

"Next door. At the babysitter's. 204 Weldon School Road."

"Mother's address?"

"There is no Mother."

The cop looked up through his glasses at Brandon.

"She didn't stick around," Brandon said.

The cop looked back at the paper and signed it. "Fill this form out, son, and take it to processing."

A tall, thick-armed cop and a man in handcuffs brushed past Brandon as he went out the door. Brandon stared at him.

"Keep it moving," the cop said. "This ain't no show."

"I didn't do nothing, Man," the handcuffed man said. He had short blonde hair and a thin hoop earring through his eyebrow. "I wouldn't hurt nobody."

Brandon turned away from them. He took his filled out form to a vacant window down the blue cinder block hallway. An olive-eyed girl sat behind the bulletproof glass.

"May I help you?" she said. She pushed a strand of hair that had fallen out of her ponytail behind her ear.

Maybe he would get Rosie's picture on one of those milk carton ads or those papers in the mail that have a coupon for carpet cleaning on one side and a picture of a missing child on the back. Maybe, he would put her face on a billboard. Brandon slid the paper, thin as a ticket, under the glass.