

1967

THERE USED TO be an Easter Fair at the Presbyterian church every year. Early Saturday morning the long, gentle hill out front would be taken over by tents, painted booths, mechanical rides on lease from the Happy Days Amusement Company, and large wooden carts slowly filling up their windows with buttered popcorn. A white rabbit, six feet tall, would bow in a dignified way as he passed out jellybeans from a basket. In the afternoon there would be an egg hunt behind the Sunday School building, and the winner was given a chocolate chicken. Music floated everywhere, strung-out wisps of one song weaving into another. The air always smelled like cotton candy.

But the Baltimore climate was unpredictable. Sometimes it was really too cold for a fair. One year, when Easter fell in March, so little was growing yet that the egg hunt was a joke. The eggs lay exposed and foolish on the bald brown lawn, and children pounced on them with mittened hands. The grownups stood hunched in sweaters and scarves. They seemed to have strayed in from the wrong season. It would have been a better fair with no human beings at all – just the striped tents flapping their spring-colored scallops, the carousel playing “After the Ball,” and the plaster horses prancing around riderless.

At the puppet show, in a green and white tent lit by a chilly greenish glow, Cinderella wore a strapless evening gown that made her audience shiver. She was a glove puppet with a large, round head and braids of yellow yarn. At the moment she was dancing with the Prince, who had a Dutch Boy haircut. They held each other so fondly, it was hard to

remember they were really just two hands clasping each other. “You have a beautiful palace,” she told him. “The floors are like mirrors! I wonder who scrubs them.”

Her voice was wry and throaty, not at all puppet-like. You almost expected to see the vapor rising from her painted mouth.

The Prince said, “I have no idea, Miss . . . what was that name?”

Instead of answering, she looked down at her feet. The pause grew too long. The children shifted in their folding chairs. It became apparent that the ballroom was not a ballroom at all, but a gigantic cardboard carton with the front cut away and a gauze curtain at the rear. A child in the audience said, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Ssh.”

“Your name,” said the Prince.

Why didn’t she speak?

Really, the children saw, she was only a puppet. They sat back. Something had snapped. Even the parents looked confused.

Then Cinderella flopped on to her face in a very unnatural way, and a human hand emerged from her skirts and withdrew behind the scrim. The children stared. On the stage lay her dead and empty shell, with her arms flung back as if broken. “Is it over?” a child asked his mother.

“Hush. Sit still. You know that’s not how it ends.”

“Well, where’s the rest, then? Can we go?”

“Wait. Here comes someone.”

It was a grownup, but just barely. He felt his way through the bedsheet that hung at one side of the stage: a dark, thin boy in khakis and a rust-colored corduroy jacket, with a white shirt so old and well washed that all the life had gone out of it. There was something fierce about him – maybe the twist of his mouth, or the defiant way he kept his chin raised. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Boys and girls . . .”

“It’s the Prince,” said a child.

“Boys and girls, there’s been . . . an illness. The play is over. You can get your money at the ticket booth.”

He turned away, not even waiting to see how this would be taken, and fumbled at the sheet. But then he seemed struck by another thought, and he turned back to the audience. “Excuse me,” he said. He ran a hand through his hair again. (No wonder it was so mussed and ropy.) “Is there a doctor in the house?” he asked.

They looked at each other – children, mostly, and most of them under five. Apparently there was no doctor. The boy gave a sudden, sharp sigh and lifted a corner of the sheet. Then someone at the rear of the tent stood up.

“I am a doctor,” he said.

He was a lank, tall, bearded man in a shaggy brown suit that might have been cut from blankets, and on his head he wore a red ski cap – the pointy kind, with a pom-pom at the tip. Masses of black curls burst out from under it. His beard was so wild and black and bushy that it was hard to tell how old he was. Maybe forty? Forty-five? At any rate, older than you’d expect to see at a puppet show, and no child sat next to him to explain his being there. But he craned his head forward, smiling kindly, leading with his long, pinched nose and waiting to hear how he could help. The boy looked relieved; his face lost some of its tension.

“Come with me,” he said. He lifted the sheet higher.

Stumbling over people’s feet, sliding past the children who were already swarming toward the exit, the doctor made his way to the boy. He wiped his palms on his thighs and stooped under the sheet. “What seems to be the trouble here?” he asked.

“It’s her,” said the boy.

He meant the blond girl resting on a heap of muslin bags. She was small-boned and frail, but enormously pregnant, and she sat cradling her stomach – guarding it, looking up at the doctor out of level gray eyes. Her lips were so colorless, they were almost invisible.

“I see,” said the doctor.

He dropped down beside her, hitching up his trousers at the knees, and leaned forward to set a hand on her abdomen. There was a pause. He frowned at the tent wall, weighing something in his mind. “Copyrighted Material” he said finally. He sat back and

studied the girl's face. "How far apart are the pains?" he asked.

"All the time," she said, in Cinderella's wry voice.

"Constantly? When did they begin?"

"About . . . an hour ago, Leon? When we were setting up for this performance."

The doctor raised his eyebrows – two black thickets.

"It would be exceedingly strange," he said, "if they were so close together this soon."

"Well, they are," the girl said matter-of-factly.

The doctor stood up, grunting a little, and dusted off his knees. "Oh, well," he said, "just to be on the safe side, I suppose you ought to check into the hospital. Where's your car parked?"

"We don't have one," the boy said.

"No car?"

The doctor looked around him, as if wondering how all their equipment had arrived – the bulky stage, the heap of little costumes, the liquor carton in the corner with a different puppet's head poking out of each cardboard compartment.

"Mr. Kenny brought us," said the boy, "in his panel truck. He's chairman of the Fund-Raising Committee."

"You'd better come with me, then," the doctor said. "I'll drive you over." He seemed fairly cheerful about it. He said, "What about the puppets? Shall we take them along?"

"No," said the boy. "What do I care about the puppets? Let's just get her to the hospital."

"Suit yourself," the doctor told him, but he cast another glance around, as if regretting a lost opportunity, before he bent to help the boy raise the girl to her feet. "What are they made of?" he asked.

"Huh?" said the boy. "Oh, just . . . things." He handed the girl her purse. "Emily makes them," he added.

"Emily?"

"This is Emily, my wife. I'm Leon Meredith."

"How do you do?" the doctor said.

"They're made of rubber balls," said Emily.

Standing, she turned out to be even slighter than she'd first appeared. She walked gracefully, leading the men out through

the front of the tent, smiling at the few stray children who remained. Her dragged black skirt hung unevenly around her shins. Her thin white cardigan, dotted with specks of black lint, didn't begin to close over the bulge of her stomach.

"I take an ordinary, dimestore rubber ball," she said, "and cut a neck hole with my knife. Then I cover the ball with a nylon stocking, and I sew on eyes and a nose, paint a mouth, make hair of some kind . . ."

Her voice grew strained. The doctor glanced over at her, sharply.

"The cheapest kind of stockings are the best," she said. "They're pinker. From a distance, they look more like skin."

"Is this going to be a long walk?" Leon asked.

"No, no," said the doctor. "My car's in the main parking lot."

"Maybe we should call an ambulance."

"Really, that won't be necessary," the doctor said.

"But what if the baby comes before we get to the hospital?"

"Believe me," said the doctor, "if I thought there was the faintest chance of that, I wouldn't be doing this. I have no desire whatever to deliver a baby in a Pontiac."

"Lord, no," Leon said, and he cast a sideways look at the doctor's hands, which didn't seem quite clean. "But Emily claims it's arriving any minute."

"It is," Emily said calmly. She was walking along between them now, climbing the slope to the parking lot unassisted. She supported the weight of her baby as if it were already separate from her. Her battered leather pocketbook swung from her shoulder. In the sunlight her hair, which was bound on her head in two silvery braids, sprang up in little cork-screwed wisps like metal filings flying toward a magnet, and her skin looked chilled and thin and pale. But her eyes remained level. She didn't appear to be frightened. She met the doctor's gaze squarely. "I can feel it," she told him.

"Is this your first?"

"Yes."

"Ah, then," he said, "you see, it can't possibly come so soon. It'll be late tonight at the earliest – maybe even tomorrow. Why, you haven't been up about more than an hour!"

“Maybe, and maybe not,” said Emily.

Then she gave a sudden, surprising toss of her head; she threw the doctor a tilted look. “After all,” she said, “I’ve had a backache since two o’clock this morning. Maybe I just didn’t *know* it was labor.”

Leon turned to the doctor, who seemed to hesitate a moment. “Doctor?” Leon said.

“All my patients say their babies are coming immediately,” the doctor told him. “It never happens.”

They had reached the flinty white gravel of the parking lot. Various people passed – some just arriving, holding down their coats against the wind; others leaving with balloons and crying children and cardboard flats of shivering tomato seedlings.

“Are you warm enough?” Leon asked Emily. “Do you want my jacket?”

“I’m fine,” Emily said, although beneath her cardigan she wore only a skimpy black T-shirt, and her legs were bare and her shoes were ballet slippers, thin as paper.

“You must be freezing,” Leon said.

“I’m all *right*, Leon.”

“It’s the adrenalin,” the doctor said absently. He came to a stop and gazed off across the parking lot, stroking his beard. “I seem to have lost my car,” he said.

Leon said, “Oh, God.”

“No, there it is. Never mind.”

His car was clearly a family man’s – snub-nosed, outdated, with a frayed red hair ribbon flying from the antenna and WASH THIS! written in the dust on one fender. Inside, there were schoolbooks and dirty socks and gym bloomers and rucked-up movie magazines. The doctor knelt on the front seat and swatted at the clutter in the rear until most of it had landed on the floor. Then he said, “There you go. You two sit in back; you’ll be more comfortable.” He settled himself in front and started the engine, which had a whining, circular sound. Emily and Leon slid into the rear. Emily found a track shoe under her right knee, and she placed it on her lap, cupping the heel and toe in her fingers. “Now,” said the doctor. “Which is right?”

Emily and Leon looked at each other.

“City? University? Hopkins?”

“Whatever’s closest,” Leon said.

“But which have you reserved? Where’s your doctor?”

“We haven’t reserved anyplace,” Emily said, “and we don’t have a doctor.”

“I see.”

“*Anywhere*,” said Leon. “Just get her there.”

“Very well.”

The doctor maneuvered his car out of the parking space. He shifted gears with a grinding sound. Leon said, “I guess we should have attended to this earlier.”

“Yes, actually,” said the doctor. He braked and looked in both directions. Then he nosed the car into the stream of traffic on Farley Street. They were traveling through a new, raw section barely within the city limits – ranch houses, treeless lawns, another church, a shopping mall. “But I suppose you lead a footloose sort of life,” the doctor said.

“Footloose?”

“Carefree. Unattached,” he said. He patted all his pockets with one hand until he’d found a pack of Camels. He shook a cigarette free and lit it, which involved so much fumbling and cursing and clutching at dropped objects that it was a wonder the other drivers managed to stay clear of him. When he’d finally flicked his match out, he exhaled a great cloud of smoke and started coughing. The Pontiac wandered from lane to lane. He thumped his chest and said, “I suppose you just follow the fairs, am I correct? Just follow the festivities, stop wherever you find yourselves.”

“No, what happened was—”

“But I wish we could have brought along the puppets,” the doctor said. He turned on to a wider street. He was forced to slow down now, inching past furniture shops and carpet warehouses, trailing a mammoth Mayflower van that blocked all view of what lay ahead. “Are we coming to a traffic light?” he asked. “Is it red or green? I can’t see a thing. And what about their noses, the puppets’ noses? How’d you make the stepmother’s nose? Was it a carrot?”

“Excuse me?” Emily said. “Nose? She didn’t seem to be

concentrating. “I’m sorry,” she said. “There’s some kind of water all over everything.”

The doctor braked and looked in the rear-view mirror. His eyes met Leon’s. “Can’t you hurry?” Leon asked him.

“I *am* hurrying,” the doctor said.

He took another puff of his cigarette, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger. The air in the car grew blue and layered. Up ahead, the Mayflower van was trying to make a left turn. It would take all day, at this rate. “Honk,” Leon said. The doctor honked. Then he clamped his cigarette in his teeth and swung out into the right-hand lane, where a car coming up fast behind nearly slammed into them. Now horns were blowing everywhere. The doctor started humming. He pulled back into the left lane, set his left-turn signal blinking, and sped toward the next traffic light, which hung beside a swinging sign that read NO LEFT TURN. His cigarette had a long, trembly tube of ashes hanging from it. He tapped the ashes on to the floor, the steering wheel, his lap. “*After the ball is o-ver,*” he sang. He careened to the right again and cut across the apron of a Citgo station, took a sharp left, and emerged on the street he wanted. “*After the break of morn . . .*” Leon gripped the back of the front seat with one hand and held on to Emily with the other. Emily gazed out the side window.

“I always go to fairs, any fair in town,” the doctor said. “School fairs, church fairs, Italian fairs, Ukrainian . . . I like the food. I also like the rides; I like to watch the people who run them. What would it be like, working for such an outfit? I used to take my daughters, but they’re too old now, they say. ‘How can that be?’ I ask them. ‘I’m not too old; how come you are?’ My youngest is barely ten. How can she be too old?”

“The baby’s here,” Emily said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The baby. I feel it.”

The doctor looked in the mirror again. His eyes were more aged than the rest of him – a mournful brown, bloodshot and pouched, the skin beneath them the tarnished color of a bruise inside a banana. He opened his mouth, or appeared to. At any rate, his beard lengthened. Then it shortened again.

“Stop the car,” Leon told him.

“Well . . . ah, yes, maybe so,” the doctor said.

He parked beside a hydrant, in front of a tiny pizza parlor called Maria’s Home-Style. Leon was chafing Emily’s wrists. The doctor climbed out, scratching the curls beneath his ski cap and looking puzzled. “Excuse me,” he said to Leon. Leon got out of the car. The doctor leaned in and asked, “You say you feel it?”

“I feel the head.”

“Of course this is all a mistake,” the doctor told Leon. “You know how long it takes the average primipara to deliver? Between ten and twelve hours. Oh, at least. And with a great deal more carrying on, believe me. There’s not a chance in this world that baby could be here yet.”

But as he spoke, he was sliding Emily into a horizontal position on the seat, methodically folding back her damp skirt in a series of tidy pleats. He said, “What in the name of—?” It appeared that her T-shirt was some sort of leotard; it had a crotch. He grimaced and ripped the center seam. Then he said, “She’s right.”

“Well, *do* something,” Leon said. “What are you going to do?”

“Go buy some newspapers,” the doctor told him. “Anything will be fine – *News American*, *Sun* . . . but fresh ones, you understand? Don’t just accept what someone hands you in a diner, saying he’s finished reading it . . .”

“Oh, my God. Oh, my God. I don’t have change,” Leon said.

The doctor started rummaging through his pockets. He pulled out his mangled pack of Camels, two lint-covered jellybeans, and a cylinder of Roloids. “Emily,” he said, “would you happen to have change for a dollar?”

Emily said something that sounded like yes, and turned her head from side to side. “Try her purse,” the doctor said. They felt along the floor, among the gym clothes and soda straws. Leon brought up the purse by its strap. He plowed through it till he found a billfold, and then he raced off down the street, muttering, “Newspapers. Newspapers.” It was a cheerful, jumbled street with tree-trimmed sidewalks and a row of tiny

shops – eating places, dry cleaners, florists. In front of one of the cafés were various newspapers in locked, windowed boxes.

The doctor stepped on his cigarette and ground it into the pavement. Then he took off his suit jacket. He rolled up his sleeves and tucked his shirt more firmly into his trousers. He bent inside the car and laid a palm on Emily's abdomen. "Breathe high in your chest," he told her. He gazed dreamily past her, humming under his breath, watching the trucks and buses rumble by through the opposite window. The cold air caused the dark hairs to bristle on his forearms.

A woman in high heels clopped down the sidewalk; she never even noticed what was going on. Then two teenaged girls approached, sharing fudge from a white paper sack. Their footsteps slowed, and the doctor heard and turned around. "You two!" he said. "Go call an ambulance. Tell them we've got a delivery on our hands."

They stared at him. Identical cubes of fudge were poised halfway to their mouths.

"Well?" he said. "Go on."

When they had rushed into Maria's Home-Style, the doctor turned back to Emily. "How're you doing?" he asked her.

She groaned.

Leon returned, out of breath, with a stack of newspapers. The doctor opened them out and started spreading them under Emily and all around her. "Now, these," he said conversationally, "will grant us some measure of antisepsis." Leon didn't seem to be listening. The doctor wrapped two newspapers around Emily's thighs. She began to blend in with the car. He hung a sports section down the back of the seat and anchored it to the window ledge with the track shoe she'd been holding all this time.

"Next," he said, "I'll need two strips of cloth, two inches wide and six inches long. Tear off your shirttail, Leon."

"I want to quit," Emily said.

"Quit?"

"I've changed my mind."

The cook came out of Maria's Home-Style. He was a large man in an apron stained with tomato sauce. For a moment he watched Leon, who was standing by the car in nothing but his

jeans, shakily tugging at his shirttail. (Leon's ribs showed and his shoulder blades were as sharp as chicken wings. He was much too young for all this.) The cook reached over and took the shirt and ripped it for him. "Thanks," said Leon.

"But what's the use of it?" the cook asked.

"He wants two strips of cloth," said Leon, "two inches wide and six inches long. *I don't know why.*"

The cook tore again, following instructions. He gave the shirt to Leon and passed the strips to the doctor, who hung them carefully on the inner door handle. Then the cook propped a wide, meaty hand on the car roof and bent in to nod at Emily. "Afternoon," he said.

"Hello," said Emily politely.

"How you doing?"

"Oh, just fine."

"Seems like he wants to come on and get born," the cook said, "and then he wants to go back in a ways."

"Will you get out of here?" Leon said.

The cook let this pass. "Those two girls you sent are calling the ambulance," he told the doctor. "They're using my free phone."

"Good," the doctor said. He cupped the baby's head in his hands – a dark, wet, shining bulge. "Now, Emily, bear down," he said. "Maria, press flat on her belly, just a steady, slow pressure, please."

"Soo now, soo now," the cook said, pressing. Leon crouched on the curb, gnawing a knuckle, his shirt back on but not buttoned. Behind them, a little crowd had gathered. The teenaged girls stood hushed, forgetting to dip into their fudge sack. A man was asking everyone if an ambulance had been called. An old woman was telling a younger one all about someone named Dexter, who had been a breech birth with multiple complications.

"Bear down," said the doctor.

There was a silence. Even the traffic noises seemed to have stopped.

Then the doctor stepped back, holding up a slippery, bleak lump. Something moved. There was a small, caught sound from someplace unexpected. So fast it seemed that everyone

had been looking away when it happened, the lump turned into a wailing, writhing, frantic, indignant snarl of red arms and legs and spiraled telephone cord. “Oh,” the crowd said, breathing again.

“It’s a girl,” said the doctor. He passed her to the cook. “Was a girl what you wanted?”

“Anything! Anything!” the cook said. “So long as she’s healthy. Soo, baby.”

“I was talking to Emily,” the doctor said mildly. He had to raise his voice above the baby’s, which was surprisingly loud. He bent over Emily, pressing her abdomen now with both palms. “Emily? Are you all right? Bear down again, please.”

While he pressed, she couldn’t get air to speak, but the instant he let up she said, “I’m fine, and I’d like my daughter.”

The cook seemed reluctant to hand her over. He rocked the baby against his apron, thought a moment, and sighed. Then he gave her to the doctor. The doctor checked her breathing passages – the mashed-looking nose, the squalling cavern of a mouth. “With such a racket, how could she not be fine?” he asked, and he leaned in to lay her in Emily’s arms. Emily nestled the baby’s head against her shoulder, but the wailing went on, thin and passionate, with a hiccup at the end of each breath.

“What’d you do with those cloths?” the doctor asked Leon.

Leon was standing up now, so as to get a glimpse of the baby. Something kept tugging his lips into a smile that he kept trying to bat down again. “Cloths?” he said.

“Those cloths you tore, dammit. We’re nowhere near done here yet.”

“You hung them on the door handle,” someone in the crowd said.

“Oh, yes,” said the doctor.

He took one cloth, leaned in, and tied it around the baby’s cord. For all the blunt, clumsy look of his fingers, he did seem to know what he was doing. “*After the ball is over,*” he sang in his beard-blurred voice. While he was knotting the second cloth, a faraway cry started up. It sounded like an extension of the baby’s cry – equally thin, watery-sounding in the wind. Then it separated and grew more piercing. “The ambulance!” Leon said. “I hear the ambulance, Emily.”

“Send it back,” Emily said.

“They’re going to take you to the hospital, honey. You’re going to be all right now.”

“But it’s over! Do I have to go?” she asked the doctor.

“Certainly,” he said. He stepped back to admire his knots, which looked something like the little cloth bows on a kite tail. “Actually,” he said, “they’re coming in the nick of time. I have nothing to cut the cord with.”

“You could use my Swiss Army officer’s knife,” she told him. “It’s in my purse. It’s the Woodsman style, with a scissors blade.”

“Remarkable,” said the doctor, and he rocked on his heels, beaming down at her. His teeth seemed very large and yellow behind the tangled beard.

The siren drew closer. A spinning red light wove through the traffic, and the ambulance screeched to a halt beside the doctor’s car. Two men in white leaped out. “Where is she?” one asked.

“Here we are,” the doctor called.

The men flung open the back doors of the ambulance and brought a stretcher crashing to the street – a wheeled bed, too long and narrow, like a coffin, with too much chrome. Emily struggled to a sitting position. The baby stopped in mid-cry, as if shocked. “Do I have to do this?” Emily asked the doctor. And while the attendants were helping her out of the car (chairing her on to the stretcher, newspapers and all), she kept her face turned toward the doctor and waited to be rescued. “Doctor? I can’t stand hospitals! Do I have to go?”

“Of course,” the doctor told her. He stooped for her purse and laid it on the stretcher.

“Is Leon coming too?”

“Certainly he’s coming.”

“Are *you*?”

“Me? Oh.”

“Best if you would, Doc,” the driver told him, unfolding a sheet over Emily.

“Well, if you like,” the doctor said.

He closed his car door and followed the stretcher into the ambulance. There was another stretcher, empty, next to

Emily's. He and Leon sat on it – both of them gingerly, just on the edge, with their knees jutting out. “Pretty fancy,” the doctor said to Leon. He meant, presumably, the interior of the ambulance: the deeply carpeted floor, the gleaming tanks and gauges. When the men slammed the doors shut, there was a sudden, luxurious silence. The street noises faded, and through the tinted windows the people in the sidewalk seemed as soundless and slow-moving as creatures on the ocean floor. They slid away. A café and a pawnshop glided past. Even the siren was muffled, like something on an old-fashioned radio.

“How're you feeling?” the doctor asked Emily.

“Fine,” she said. She lay still, in a tangle of loosened braids. The baby stared severely at the ceiling.

“We really appreciate all you've done,” Leon told the doctor.

“It was nothing,” said the doctor, turning down the corners of his mouth. He seemed displeased.

“If Emily didn't have this thing about hospitals, we'd have made our arrangements sooner, I guess. But the baby wasn't due for another couple of weeks. We just kept putting it off.”

“And I suppose you were on the move so much,” the doctor said.

“No, no—”

“But the style of your lives: I don't imagine you can plan very far ahead.”

“You have the wrong idea about us,” Emily said.

Flattened on the stretcher, with the crisp sheet covering the newspapers and her sodden skirt, Emily seemed untouched, somehow – pristine and remote, with her gaze turned inward. “You think we're some kind of transients,” she said, “but we're not. We're legally married, and we live in a regular apartment with furniture. This baby was fully planned for. We're even going to have a diaper service. I've already called to set it up, and they said to let them know when she came and they'd start delivery promptly.”

“I see,” said the doctor, nodding. He appeared to be enjoying this. The disorderly beard flew up and down, and the pom-pom on his ski cap bobbed.

“We've planned out every detail,” Emily said. “We didn't

buy a crib because cribs are extraneous. We're using a cardboard box for now, with padding on the insides."

"Oh, wonderful," said the doctor, looking delighted.

"When she gets too big for the box, we'll order this aluminum youth-bed rail we happened to see in a catalog. You can fit it on to any mattress. What's the point in all that equipment – cribs and strollers and Bathinettes? Besides, the youth-bed rail will even work in hotels and other people's apartments. It travels well."

"Travels, yes," the doctor echoed, and he clamped his hands between his knees, leaning with the ambulance as it sped around a curve.

"But we're not . . . I mean, it's only that we travel to give shows sometimes. There'll be someone wanting 'Snow White' or 'Cinderella' somewhere outside the city. But we're almost always home by night. We're never *shiftless*. You have the wrong idea."

"Did I say you were shiftless?" the doctor asked. He looked over at Leon. "Did I?"

Leon shrugged.

"We've thought of everything," Emily said.

"Yes, I see you have," the doctor said gently.

Leon cleared his throat. "By the way," he said, "we haven't discussed your fee."

"Fee?"

"For your services."

"Oh, emergency services aren't charged for," the doctor said. "Don't you know that?"

"No," said Leon.

He and the doctor seemed to be trying to stare each other down. Leon lifted his chin even higher. The light caught his cheekbones. He was one of those people who appear to be continually ready to take offense – jaw fixed, shoulders tight. "I'm not accepting this for free," he said.

"Who says it's free?" the doctor asked. "I expect you to name your baby for me." He laughed – a wheeze that ruffled his beard.

"What's your name?" Emily asked him.

"Morgan," said the doctor.

There was a silence.

“Gower Morgan,” he said.

Emily said, “Maybe we could use the initials.”

“I was only joking,” the doctor told her. “Didn’t you know I was joking?” He fumbled for his Camels and shook one out of the pack. “It was meant to be a joke,” he said.

“About the fee,” said Leon.

The doctor took his cigarette from his mouth and peered at the sign on the oxygen tank. “The fact is,” he said, replacing the cigarette in its pack, “I had nothing better to do today. My wife and daughters have gone to a wedding; my wife’s brother is getting married again.” He clutched Leon’s shoulder as they turned a corner. The ambulance was rolling up a driveway now. They passed a sign reading EMERGENCY ONLY.

“My daughters are growing up,” the doctor said, “doing womanly things with their mother, leaving their father out in the cold. Each one when she was born seemed so new; I had such hopes; I was so sure we’d make no mistakes. Enjoy this one while you can,” he told Leon. The baby started and clutched two bits of air.

“I had sort of thought she would be a boy,” Leon said.

“Oh, Leon!” said Emily, drawing the baby closer.

“Boys, well,” the doctor said. “We tried for a boy for years, ourselves. But you can always hope for next time.”

“We can only afford the one,” said Leon.

“One? One child,” the doctor said. He fell into thought. “Yes, well, why not? There’s a certain . . . compactness to it. Very streamlined. Very basic,” he said.

“It’s a matter of money,” Leon said.

The ambulance bounced to a stop. The attendants flew out their front doors and around to the back, letting in the din of a gigantic, sooty machine just outside the emergency room, and the smell of hot laundry water and auto exhausts and wilted cafeteria food. They grabbed Emily’s stretcher and rushed away with it, wheels shrieking. Leon and the doctor clambered to the pavement and trotted after it.

“Do you have dimes?” the doctor shouted.

“Time for what?”

“Dimes! Money!”

“No, I’m sorry,” Leon said. “Could you use a dollar bill?”

“For you, I meant!” the doctor shouted. They passed through a set of swinging doors. He lowered his voice. “Not for me; for you. For the phone. You’ll want to call about the baby.”

“Who would I call?” Leon asked, spreading his arms.

The doctor stopped short. “Who would he call!” he repeated to himself. He wore the open, delighted expression he’d worn in the ambulance when he’d been told about the youth-bed rail.

Then a nurse lifted Emily’s sheet, clucked at the blood-soaked newspapers, and ran alongside the stretcher as it rolled down a corridor. Another nurse took Leon’s elbow and led him toward a typist in a glass compartment. Everything spun into action – polished, efficient, briskly clacketing. The doctor was left behind.

In fact, he was forgotten, for the moment. When Leon and Emily next thought of him, he was nowhere to be found. He’d just melted away. Had he left any word? Leon asked Emily’s nurse. The nurse had no idea whom he was talking about. Another doctor had been called in, a resident in obstetrics. He said it was a fine delivery, healthy baby. All things considered, he said, Emily should be thankful. “Yes, and Dr. Morgan is the one we should thank,” Leon told him. “Besides, we hadn’t settled the fee.” But the resident had never heard of Dr. Morgan. And he wasn’t in the phone book, either. It seemed he didn’t exist.

Later on (just a few weeks later, when their daughter’s birth had faded and they felt she had always been with them), they almost wondered if they had imagined the man – just conjured him up in a time of need. His hat, Emily said, had made her think of a gnome. He really could have been someone from a fairytale, she said: the baby elf, the troll, the goblin who finds children under cabbage leaves and lays them in their mothers’ arms and disappears.

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YOU COULD SAY he was a man who had gone to pieces, or maybe he'd always been in pieces; maybe he'd arrived unassembled. Various parts of him seemed poorly joined together. His lean, hairy limbs were connected by exaggerated knobs of bone; his black-bearded jaw was as clumsily hinged as a nutcracker. Parts of his life, too, lay separate from other parts. His wife knew almost none of his friends. His children had never seen where he worked; it wasn't in a safe part of town, their mother said. Last month's hobby – the restringing of a damaged pawnshop banjo, with an eye to becoming suddenly musical at the age of forty-two – bore no resemblance to this month's hobby, which was the writing of a science-fiction novel that would make him rich and famous. He was writing about the death of Earth. All these recent flying saucers, he proposed, belonged to beings who knew for a fact that our sun would burn out within a year and a half. They weren't just buzzing Earth for the hell of it; they were ascertaining what equipment would be needed to transfer us all to another planet in a stabler, far more orderly solar system. He had written chapter one, but was having trouble with the opening sentence of chapter two.

Or look at his house: a tall brick Colonial house in north Baltimore. Even this early on a January morning, when the sun was no more than a pinkish tinge in an opaque white sky, it was clear there was something fragmented about Morgan's house. Its marble stoop was worn soft at the edges like an old bar of soap, and heavy lace curtains glimmered in the

downstairs windows; but on the second floor, where his daughters slept, the curtains were made from sections of the American flag, and on the third floor, where his mother slept, they were lace again, misting the tangle of ferns that hung behind them. And if you could see inside, through the slowly thinning gray of the hallway, you would find the particles of related people's unrelated worlds: his daughters' booksacks tumbling across the hall radiator, which also served as mail rack, sweater shelf, and message bureau; his wife's League of Women Voters leaflets rubber-banded into a tower on the living-room coffee table; and his mother's ancient, snuffling dog dreaming of rabbits and twitching her paws as she slept on the cold brick hearth. There was a cribbage board under the sofa. (No one knew this. It had been lost for weeks.) There was a jigsaw puzzle, half completed, that Morgan's sister, Brindle, filled her long, morose, spinsterish days with: a view of an Alpine village in the springtime. The church steeple was assembled and so were the straight-edged boarder and the whole range of mountains with their purple and lavender shadows, but she would never get to the sky, surely. She would never manage all that blank, unchanging blue that joined everything else together.

In the glass-fronted bookcase by the dining-room door, rows of books slumped sideways or lay flat: Morgan's discarded manuals reflecting various spells of enthusiasm (how to restore old paintings and refinish secondhand furniture; how to cure illness with herbs; how to raise bees in his attic). Beneath them sat his wife Bonny's college yearbooks, where Bonny appeared as a freckled, exuberant girl in several different team uniforms; and under those were his daughters' tattered picture books and grade-school textbooks and Nancy Drews, and his mother's tiny, plump autograph book, whose gilded title had been eaten away by worms or mildew or maybe just plain time, so that all that remained was a faintly shining trail of baldness as if a snail had crossed the crimson velvet in a tortuous script that coincidentally spelled out *Autographs*. (And on the first, yellowed page, in a hand so steely and elegant that you'd only see it now on a wedding invitation: *Louise dearest, Uncle*

Charlie is not a poet so will only write his name hereunder, Charles Brindle, Christmas Day, 1911 – that awkward little shrug of inadequacy descending through the years so clearly, though the man had been dead a quarter-century or more and even Louisa herself might have had trouble recollecting him.) The bottom shelf held a varnished plaque of Girl Scout knots, a nearly perfect conch shell, and a brown cardboard photo album pasted with photographs so widely spaced in time that whole generations seemed to be dashing past, impatient to get it over with. Here was Morgan's father, Samuel, a boy in knickers; and next to him stood Samuel full-grown, marrying Louisa with her bobbed hair and shiny stockings. Here was little Morgan in a badly knitted pram set; and Morgan at eleven holding his infant sister, Brindle, as if he might have preferred to drop her (and look! was that the same pram set? only slightly more puckered and with some new stain or shadow down the front). And then suddenly Morgan at twenty-four, shorter-haired than he would ever be again, raw-necked, self-conscious, beside his plump, smiling wife with their first baby in his arms. (No telling where *their* wedding photo had got to, or that famous pram set either, for all Amy wore was a sagging diaper.) Now they stopped for breath for a moment. Here were fifteen solid pages of the infant Amy, every photo snapped by Morgan in the first proud flush of fatherhood. Amy sleeping, nursing, yawning, bathing, examining her fist. Amy learning to sit. Amy learning to crawl. Amy learning to walk. She was a sturdy child with her mother's sensible expression, and she appeared to be more real than anyone else in the album. Maybe it was the slowness with which she plodded, page by page, through the early stages of her life. She took on extra meaning, like the frame at which a movie is halted. (The experts lean forward; someone points to something with a long, official pointer . . .) Then the photos speeded up again. Here was the infant Jean, then the twins in their miniature spectacles, then Liz on her first day of nursery school. The film changed to Kodachrome, brighter than nature, and the setting was always the beach now – always Bethany Beach, Delaware, for where else could a man with seven daughters find the time for his camera? To look at

the album, you would imagine that these people enjoyed an endless stream of vacations. Bonny was eternally sunburned, bulging gently above and below her one-piece Lastex swimsuit. The girls were eternally coconut-oiled and gleaming in their slender strips of bikinis, holding back handfuls of wind-tossed hair and laughing. Always laughing. Where were the tears and quarrels, and the elbowing for excessive amounts of love and space and attention? What about all those colds and tonsillectomies? Where was Molly's stammer? Or Susan's chronic nightmares? Not here. They sat laughing without a care in the world. At the edges of their bikinis, paler flesh showed, the faintest line of it, the only reminder of other seasons. And, oh yes, Morgan. One picture a year, taken aslant and out of focus by some amateurish daughter: Morgan in wrinkled trunks that flared around his thighs, whiskered all over, untouched by the sun, showing off his biceps and probably grinning, but how could you tell for sure? For on his head he wore an Allagash jungle hat from L. L. Bean, and mosquito netting in sweeps and folds veiled his face completely.

Now the light had reached the stairwell and sent a gleam along the banister, but the carpeted steps were still in darkness and the cat slinking up them was only a shadow, her stripes invisible, her pointed face a single spear of white. She crossed the hall floorboards without a sound. She strode to the north rear bedroom and paused in the doorway and then advanced, so purposeful that you could see how every joint in her body was strung. Next to Bonny's side of the bed, she rose up on her hind legs to test the electric blanket – pat-pat along the edge of the mattress with one experienced paw, and then around to Morgan's side and pat-pat again. Morgan's side was warmer. She braced herself, tensed, and sprang on to his chest, and Morgan grunted and opened his eyes. It was just that moment of dawn when the air seems visible: flocked, like felt, gathering itself together to take on color at any second. The sheets were a shattered, craggy landscape; the upper reaches of the room were lit by a grayish haze, like the smoke that rises from bombed buildings. Morgan covered his face. "Go away," he told the cat, but the cat only purred and sent

a slitted stare elsewhere, pretending not to hear. Morgan sat up. He spilled the cat onto Bonny (a nest of tangled brown hair, a bare, speckled shoulder) and hauled himself out of bed.

In the winter he slept in thermal underwear. He thought of clothes – all clothes – as costumes, and it pleased him to stagger off to the bathroom hitching up his long johns and rummaging through his beard like some character from the Klondike. He returned with his face set in a brighter, more hopeful expression, having glimpsed himself in the bathroom mirror: there were decisions to be made. He snapped on the closet light and stood deciding who to be today. Next to Bonny’s wrinkled skirts and blouses the tumult of his clothes hung, tightly packed together – sailor outfits, soldier outfits, riverboat-gambler outfits. They appeared to have been salvaged from some traveling operetta. Above them were his hats, stacked six deep on the shelf. He reached for one, a navy knit skullcap, and pulled it on and looked in the full-length mirror: harpooner on a whaling ship. He took it off and tried next a gigantic, broad-brimmed leather hat that engulfed his head and shaded his eyes. Ah, back to the Klondike. He tugged a pair of crumpled brown work pants over his long underwear, and added striped suspenders to hook his thumbs through. He studied his reflection awhile. Then he went to the bureau and plowed through the bottom drawer. “Bonny?” he said.

“Hmm.”

“Where are my Ragg socks?”

“Your what?”

“Those scratchy, woolly socks, for hiking.”

She didn’t answer. He had to pad barefoot down the stairs, grumbling to himself. “Fool socks. Fool house. Nothing where it ought to be. Nothing where you want it.”

He opened the back door to let the dog out. A cold wind blew in. The tiles on the kitchen floor felt icy beneath his feet. “Fool house,” he said again. He stood at the counter with an unlit cigarette clamped between his teeth and spooned coffee into the percolator.

The cabinets in this kitchen reached clear to the high ivory ceiling. They were striped with tan and white. The silver tea services

and dusty stemware that no one ever used. Jammed in front of them were ketchup bottles and cereal boxes and scummy plastic salt-and-pepper sets with rice grains in the salt from last summer when everything had stuck to itself. Fool house! Something had gone wrong with it, somehow. It was so large and formal and gracious – a wedding present from Bonny’s father, who had been a wealthy man. Bonny had inherited a portion of his money. When the children stepped through the attic floor, it was Bonny who dialed the plasterers, and she was always having the broken windowpanes replaced, the shutters rehung when they sagged off their hinges, the masonry put back in chinks where the English ivy had clawed it away; but underneath, Morgan never lost the feeling that something here was slipping. If they could just clear it out and start over, he sometimes thought. Or sell it! Sell it and have done with it, buy a plainer, more straightforward place. But Bonny wouldn’t hear of it – something to do with capital gains; he didn’t know. It just never was the proper time, any time he brought it up.

The three smaller bedrooms, intended for a tasteful number of children, barely contained Morgan’s daughters, and Brindle and Louisa shared an edgy, cramped existence on the third floor. The lawn was littered with rusty bicycles and raveling wicker furniture where Bonny’s father had surely imagined civilized games of croquet. And nowadays apartment buildings were sprouting all around them, and the other houses were splitting into units and filling up with various unsortable collections of young people, and traffic was getting fierce. They seemed to be deep in the city. Well, all right. Morgan himself had been reared in the city, and had nothing against it whatsoever. Still, he kept wondering how this could have happened. As near as he could recall, he had planned on something different. He had married his wife for her money, to be frank, which was not to say he didn’t love her; it was just that he’d been impressed, as well, by the definiteness that money had seemed to give her. It had hovered somewhere behind her left shoulder, cloaking her with an air of toughness and capability. She was so clear about who she was. Copying her, Morgan had specifically

bought a yachting cap with an eagle on the front, and white duck trousers and a brass-buttoned blazer to wear while visiting at her family's summer cottage. He had sat outside on the terrace, securely defined at last, toying with the goblet of tropical punch that Bonny's father had insisted on mixing for him – although in fact Morgan didn't drink, *couldn't* drink, had never been able to. Drinking made him talk too much. It made him spill the beans, he felt. He was trying to stay in character.

Staying in character, he had asked her father for Bonny's hand. Her father gave his approval; Morgan had wondered why. He was only a penniless graduate student with no foreseeable future. And he knew that he was nothing much to look at. (In those days he wore no beard, and there was something monkeyish and clumsy about his face.) When he took Bonny out somewhere, to one of her girlfriends' parties, he felt he was traveling under false pretenses. He felt he had entered someone else's life. Only Bonny belonged there – an easygoing, pleasant girl, two or three years older than Morgan, with curly brown hair worn low on her neck in a sort of ball-shaped ponytail. Later, Morgan figured out that her father must have miscalculated. When you're rich enough, he must have thought, then it doesn't matter who you marry; you'll go on the same as ever. So he had nodded his blessing and given them this house, and expected that nothing would change. Luckily for him, he died soon after the wedding. He never saw the mysterious way the house started slipping downward, or sideways, or whatever it was that it was doing. He didn't have to watch as Bonny's dirndl skirts (once so breezy, so understated) began dipping at the hems, and her blouses somehow shortened and flopped bunchily out of her waistbands.

"Your father would have sold this house long ago," Morgan often told her. "Capital gains or no capital gains, he'd say you should get a new one."

But Bonny would say, "Why? What for?" She would ask, "What's wrong with this one? Everything's been kept up. I just had the roofers in. The painters came last May."

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