

Winner of the *Crazyhorse* Fiction Prize

MIRANDA BEVERLY-WHITTEMORE

Pertussis

We were forced to cancel Francesca's tenth birthday. She'd been planning a slumber party with greasy take-out pizza, potato chips, and rented videos for months. But now, she howled from behind her bedroom door, everything was ruined. It was as though the booster shot the doctors had pressed into her arm—"just in case her infant vaccine has weakened"—carried equal doses of Tdap and indignation. I explained again that her brother had contracted a contagious illness. We couldn't be sure which of her friends had been immunized. She had heard the doctor: we were to quarantine ourselves. It was a lonely, crisp word, from a nineteenth-century novel.

"Why did Dad get to leave, then? It's not fair!" she railed.

I forced reasonable words from my mouth. "It was an important opportunity for his career."

She opened the door a crack. I hadn't heard her coming. Her face was red, tear-streaked. Her voice was quiet. "If Dad was here he'd let us go outside."

It was probably true. "The quarantine is doctor's orders."

"Quarantine Jack, then!" She slammed the door in my face.

"We've all been exposed."

"Why didn't you immunize him in the first

place, if you're such a great mother?"

I leaned my forehead against her door and imagined where she was in her room. Probably perched on her bed, her fists curled in the comforter, her small ribcage seething in cascades. "I told you before. When you got the shot as an infant, you had convulsions. We couldn't take that risk again."

This was the wrong tack. "Do *not* blame this on me!"

I adjusted a crooked picture in the hallway, the one of Chris and me in Machu Picchu: him, beaming, golden and sweaty; me, with a snake-like braid, no tummy, willing and able to hike the Inca Trail. People are easy to love when they look like that.

Jack lay limp and sweaty on the couch. I learned early on that the only time he was awake and not coughing was when he was in front of the television. As a general rule, we were not people who watched much television. We believed in family dinners and bedtime stories. We kept the small set on a rolling cart in our front closet, wheeling it out on the rare nights when we'd picked up a documentary for after the kids were in bed. Chris would not be pleased to know that on my watch, his three-year-old was beginning his day on *Sesame Street*, ending it in the company

of *Darkwing Duck*, and spending the intervening hours learning songs from *Cinderella*.

"You okay, sweetie?"

Jack nodded his heavy blond head. His ringlets were frizzy and drenched, his cheeks flushed, his eyes bright. Weeks before, when we had no idea anything was wrong, he'd begun to look positively cherubic, a renaissance angel in a modern world. The illness made him even more beautiful, more beatific, than before.

"Can I get you something?"

Jack burrowed farther into his pillow. The doctors had left the choice up to me: leave him in a hospital incubator or bring him home. They told me he was most likely to stop breathing at night. They told me to let him sleep on my chest; they assured me I would startle to full consciousness the instant air stopped filtering through his tiny lungs, that I would know how to shake him back to breathing. I was maternally wired. "It'll be about two months. He'll be good as new by the end of the summer."

I lingered at the edge of the couch, taking him in. He put up his grubby hand and pressed it against me, pushing me away. He had been born at home, he had never broken a bone, and the diagnosis was the first time he'd set foot in a hospital. I had made the right choice. I went to the kitchen and hovered over the teakettle. Down the hallway, the mailman slipped a racket of junk mail through the metal slot in the locked front door.

The phone rang on the sixth day. Jack was up and moving, his bare feet slapping the floorboards

in a now familiar circle: around the living room, up the hallway, into the kitchen and down into the living room again. He sang to himself in a wheezy, weak voice: "Went to market, went to home, had some roast beef, had some none . . ." He carried the enamel bowl everywhere; white and chipped, it was the only receptacle we owned that fit under his doughy little arm and also held a wide enough arc to catch the spray of his sputum. Chris and I had bought the bowl together for our first apartment; the largest of a set of three, it was the only one that had made it through our zigzags across the world—college, Peace Corps, graduate school, adjunct professorship, associate professorship, tenure-track position.

Jack started coughing when the phone rang. His cough had become stronger over the past two days. The doctors had told me to expect this, but the course of this illness was unsettling. He doubled over, holding his little chest with one hand, while his other held the bowl out in front of his mouth. The sound he made was unimaginable coming from the body of a three-year-old. It was deep, resonant, productive, the cough of an eighty-year-old with emphysema, peppered with gasps for air—the "whoop" that gave the illness its name. Every time he came to the end of a spell, I expected tears in his eyes. I expected defeat. Instead, he'd start moving again, the bowl tucked back under his arm, the song back on his tongue. I glanced at the oxygen tank the doctors had sent home with us as I went for the phone.

"It's for me! It's for me! It's for me!" Francesca careened into the kitchen and swooped the

handset out of its cradle before I had the chance. "Hello?"

I masked my annoyance. The phone was a rare link to the outside world. Although Francesca and I were technically allowed to leave the house, Jack wasn't, and Francesca wasn't old enough to stay at home alone with him, especially when his upper respiratory system was under attack, so, through a complicated calculus, the three of us were forced together.

I had deemed our car an extension of the quarantine; after all, we had to buy food, rent videos, stop in at the liquor store. Francesca waited in the car with Jack while I stockpiled groceries and wandered the aisles, wondering at other adults. And now the booster had been in Francesca's body long enough to render her not contagious. I didn't know what I was going to do with Jack now that Francesca could start spending time with other children. She had already lined up four overnights at the homes of girls whose parents had been diligent about booster shots and immunizations.

"Yes, I accept the charges," I heard her say, her face taking on a solemnity as she pushed me away, and then, in the next breath, a squeal of "Hi Daddy!" I followed Jack into the living room.

"Mom!" It was a good seven minutes later. Seven minutes of foreign collect-call. I wondered if Chris was going to factor these kinds of incidentals into the Fulbright money, or whether we'd be paying out of our own pockets. I reminded myself to create a separate file for phone bills. "Mo-om!"

"Yes, Francesca, I'm here. There's no reason to yell."

She shoved the phone at me and stormed out of the kitchen.

"Jules? Can you hear me?" When we lived in Guatemala after college, our only form of communication with the States had been handwritten letters, nothing so intimate as a voice curling into your eardrum like it lives next door.

"Yes, Chris. I can hear you."

"How you doing? How's Jackie?"

I sighed. "Well, he's got whooping cough, Chris. I think that just about says it."

"I was there for the diagnosis."

"Then you know as well as I do that he's very, very ill."

"You sound upset."

"Why on earth would I be upset?"

"Come on, Julia. I miss you guys."

"The children miss you too."

"Jules—"

"I don't know what you want me to say. Jack is sick. Francesca is testy. I'm just trying to keep us going."

"You know I'd rather be there, with you," Chris said. "You have to know that. You're the one who urged me to go. Remember driving home from the hospital and telling me 'Chris, take the Fulbright, get on that plane tomorrow, we'll be fine?'"

"What I said was, 'If you still want to take the Fulbright'—"

"Fuck, Julia, what do you want from me? I'm only gone seven more weeks. You told me this is what you wanted." In the background of the phone call, I heard the growl of a truck. I imagined him standing on a street corner. "Look," he added,

"Can we hire someone to come and help you with the housework—dishes, laundry, that kind of thing?"

"Did Francesca say something?"

"Of course not. I just don't like to think of you stuck there—"

"I *am* stuck here."

He hesitated. "It's just . . . it's not your usual thing."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You're not used to being the house day in, day out. We both know it's not your strong suit—"

"I am perfectly capable of taking care of my children and my home." The rumble of the truck was gone. "Got to go," I added breezily, "Jack's having trouble breathing."

At dinner that night, in between Jack's coughing bouts, I asked Francesca, "What'd you talk about with your dad?"

"Actually," she said, over her spaghetti drenched in canned marinara, "he told me about a family he saw on the Ganges. They were bathing their dead son. He said it was a very moving ritual. All around them, everyone was just going about their lives, doing laundry and stuff. He took a picture."

"Jack," I said, "next time Daddy calls, you can speak with him if you want to."

Jack poked a noodle into his mouth. Out snuffled the word "India."

What did it matter if I let things go a little? Who were we having over? Whether my sheets were clean or dirty, Jack's phlegm would still cover them. Whether the newspapers were piled up on

the front porch where the paperboy left them or neatly stacked next to the garbage can in the kitchen, they were going unread. Every night, I sent our obviously filthy clothes down the chute, and left the rest where they fell. When I went to the grocery store, I bought Francesca more underpants with The Little Mermaid on the waistband.

"Can I have a clean towel?" she demanded one morning.

"Check the linen closet."

"I did." She poured herself a glass of orange juice. "Look, Mom, can you do some laundry?"

"You know where to find the washing machine."

From then on, Francesca's room—and only her room—became neater. I found her clothes folded in her drawers, her shoes lined up along her baseboard. I wandered into her room when she was gone, to take in its tranquility, to smooth my fingers over her fluffed duvet. One afternoon, I rescued dozens of her paintings—sweet and careful and precise, stalwarts of her walls for years—from her waste bin. I called my mother in distress. "She threw away her own art!" I cried.

"She's growing up, Julia. You remember First Corinthians Thirteen: ' . . . but when I became a man, I put away childish things.' Give her some chores. She's ready for responsibility." My mother cleared her throat. "You sure I can't fly out, give you a hand?"

"I told you," I answered sharply, "older adults are at particular risk of infection."

The fireworks on Independence Day were to

Jack and me the rumble of distant thunder, while Francesca spent the weekend at a friend's lake house. She returned to us brown as an otter, her body one strong, sinewy muscle. The summer sun beat down; I cracked windows and set up fans, trying, in vain, to create a cross-draft through the heavy air. Jack wheezed at the window for hours at a time, watching the squirrels scamper up and down the tree. Day in, day out, mothers passed our front walk, pushing strollers to the park. I wanted to call out "Thank me! Bless me! I am saving your children from my son's disease! I am sacrificing for your betterment!"

"Mom," said Francesca one Friday, leaning her elbows on the dining room table, scrutinizing me over my paperback, "what's wrong with you?" Her lip curled as if she'd tasted something terrible.

"I think we should sign you up for an art class."

"No."

"You loved that sculpture seminar last summer. At the museum, remember? I'm going to pick up a schedule—"

"I don't want to."

"But you love art."

She snorted. "Are you kidding me? You have no idea what I love."

"Honey, I'm just trying—"

"I'm already miserable enough." Her voice was reined in. "You want to help me? Just leave me alone. For once, Mom. Just leave me alone."

I followed her as she stalked up the hallway, catching her door before she could shut me out. "Francesca," I said, "I think you should cancel

your plans tonight."

"No," she countered, without skipping a beat. "No. I'm going to Meredith's."

"I need your help. I need someone to stay in the car with Jack while I do some errands."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, Francesca, I'm not kidding you, and look, I really don't like that expression. Your brother is very, very sick. I can't take him into the store with me, can I? I can't risk infecting—"

"Just a sec," she said, pushing past me into the hall. I heard her open the door to the basement, flick on the light, descend the steps into dampness. Any second, she would scream. She was terrified of the basement. I listened with gleeful anticipation, but the scream never came. She re-emerged from the deep with a smug smile on her face and, in her hand, the facemask Chris had worn the previous summer when repainting the house. "Put him in this, okay? It's what they do in China when they've got the flu. Tiffany told me. Her family's Chinese."

I dropped Francesca off at Meredith's on the way to the grocery store. The facemask covered Jack from the bottom of his eyes all the way down to his chest. I had to ask a woman to watch my shopping cart while I took my son outside to puke on one of the parking lot's landscaped islands. People stared.

I nursed him that summer. I had weaned him six months before—I weaned both my children at two and a half by taking them out for a glass of milk—but I'd found, since his diagnosis, that

his breathing and general wellbeing were easier to monitor when he was latched on. The doctors weren't terribly surprised to hear about my reinvigorated milk production. It is a biological initiative for a maternal body to anticipate an offspring's needs. Jack needed diapers every night. The bed Chris had built for him, in the room I had decorated for him, remained empty. The doctors were happy to hear there were no signs of apnea, but they warned me to keep a vigilant eye. Sometimes I watched him while he slept, counting each breath with suspense, waiting to leap into action. But every time Jack exhaled, an inhalation followed.

One sludgy July night, Jack sprawled beside me, taking up the better part of the bed, I heard a sound I hadn't heard in years—Francesca's nighttime crying. I knew well the sound of her tears when she was frustrated with me, her whine when Jack had damaged something she deemed valuable, but I had not heard this keening—knifing out of the stagnant pitch-black—since before Jack existed. When Francesca was six, Chris had decided to read her *The Chronicles of Narnia*. They'd successfully finished the Laura Ingalls Wilder series, and, excited at the prospect of tackling another set of chapter books, Chris had brought home a stack of beautiful leather-bound tomes with gilded pages. In the middle of that first week, instead of going straight to his desk after reading her to sleep, he joined me in the living room and declared how creepily Christian the story was. I assured him it wouldn't do her any harm. We were raising her without religion; it couldn't hurt to infuse her

with an understanding of what children in the rest of the world were taught to believe. Chris sparkled into laughter. "It's just so damn cheesy, the whole Aslan-as-Christ thing. I should have done some research before I started. Now she's hooked. I don't know if I can stomach it." That night, Francesca, our great sleeper, awoke us with a scream so piercing we were sure the house was being robbed. "The witch!" she'd sobbed. "The icy witch! She's coming to kill us all!"

I knew it wasn't wise to leave Jack alone in bed. I felt I had no choice. By the time I got to Francesca, her cries were whimpers, but her brown mane was damp where it sprawled over her face. I felt for her forehead. "Are you sick?"

At the sound of my voice her tears came back in force, full-throating into sobs. She grabbed me around the neck and her breath jetted hot against my cheeks. "Mama," she cried, "Mommy."

"What's the matter?"

"Are you okay? Is Jack okay? Is Daddy okay?" Her words were nearly unrecognizable as language.

"Yes, we're fine." I hugged her to me. She hadn't let me this close since Chris had left. "We're fine. What about you?"

"I had a dream," she said, and at the word "dream," her face split open with grief.

"Shhh," I whispered, into her scalp. "It was just a dream."

"Is Jack going to die?"

"No."

"But he's so sick."

"Do you want to climb into bed with us?" She

nodded soggily into my neck. I picked her up. She was lighter than a bird.

I discovered I was much more effective at housework if I focused on one item—shoes, for example, or water glasses. It meant more exercise too, circling the house on a hunt for every dirty cereal bowl I could find. There were a lot of them, perched in unexpected places: the edge of the bathtub, the steps down to the garage, the front room's windowsill. Once I got the bowls into the sink, well, let's just say I have always found far more interesting things to do than wash the dishes. We started living in sets of three: three forks, three plates, three spoons, three mugs. Francesca rinsed our chosen items off after every meal and stacked them in the dish drainer, ignoring the layers of forgotten plates lining the sink bed.

I found the book wedged between the wall and Francesca's bed when I was hunting down some of Jack's toys. The book was a gift from the previous Christmas, inscribed from my mother. "*The Secret Garden*," I explained over the phone the following day, "is about a girl whose parents die from cholera when they're in India. It's gruesome. And after the entire household dies, the girl is sent back to England, to a gothic castle where an old man falls in love with her because she reminds him of his dead wife."

"It's a classic," my mother responded. We had a good connection.

"It's been giving her terrible nightmares."

"You loved that book when you were a little girl. And besides, Christopher had just found out

about the Fulbright. I thought she'd enjoy learning about India."

"The only part of that book that has to do with India is the beginning—when everyone the little girl loves dies gruesomely."

"If she has such a vivid imagination, Julia, then you should certainly be more watchful about the literature she consumes."

When I brought it up to Francesca, she shrugged it off. "It's just a book, Mom."

I sidled up beside her on the couch and clicked off the television. Jack napped in a puddle beside us. "I know it is. But you've been having nightmares. And there are parts of that book that seem . . . somewhat similar to your life this summer."

She furrowed her brow. "Like what?"

"For one, the main character is about your age. She lives with her parents in India, and your dad's in India this summer. And then . . . everyone gets sick in the book—"

"They die of cholera, Mom. Jack's got whooping cough." She started sleeping in her own room again.

I suppose I should mention how much we had come to rely on the hospitality of Francesca's friends' families. It was hard to keep track of all those American girl names—Tiffany, Meredith, Alyssa, Jessica, Jennifer—but I knew well, from the constant rotation of overnights and playdates and best friends, the names of the streets which held these girls' white clabbered homes—Marblecliff Avenue, Glenwood Drive, Silverhill Lane.

Francesca regaled me with tales of the evening's planned escapades as I navigated her to the given slumber party—"Tonight we're going to watch all the *Scream* movies, and Jennifer's mom is going to let each of us have our own bag of microwave popcorn." After I dropped her off, if Jack was sleeping, I'd park in the mall lot and see if I could guess the make and color of each shopper's car as she emerged from the air-conditioned building, her arms laden with bags.

"What do you have planned this weekend?" I asked Francesca the first Wednesday in August.

She shrugged. We were eating dinner later and later those days, even though it wasn't best for Jack. He drowsed in his booster seat while Francesca and I picked at our takeout Chinese. "I don't know," she said.

"That's a first."

"Can I be excused?" She cleared her dish.

As the kitchen door swung shut behind her, I called out, "Can you wash some of those dishes?"

She poked her head out. "Just because you won't doesn't mean I will." She looked at Jack with disdain. "He's grubby, Mom. He needs a bath."

On Thursday morning, she dodged the question again, sequestering herself in her room promptly after breakfast. It dawned on me to check the Unicef calendar hanging in the kitchen, which Chris kept religiously and which, at the beginning of June, Francesca had cheerfully covered with her scrawl, marking all her upcoming summer plans. I remembered her tight back as she hunched over the kitchen table, marking each date with precision.

It was a week later that she insisted, mournfully, on crossing out her own birthday party.

Here, on the first weekend of August, I discovered her crossing-out again. She'd used an indelible marker, which had soaked through to the photograph for September, marring the face of an African child. It was impossible to read what had been scheduled originally for the coming weekend. I knocked on her door.

"Hey, what's this?" I asked, pushing the calendar forward.

"Duh. It's a calendar."

"No, I mean *this*." I shoved my finger at her black lines. "It soaked through."

"Sorry." Her voice thickened with resentment.

"It's okay." I sat down on her bed. She'd begun pasting up ads of skinny blonde girls in skimpy outfits. Chris was going to have a field day. "What'd it say? Before you crossed it out."

"Nothing."

"Francesca—"

"You can't fix things that aren't your business." She delivered this koan with tempered restraint. As I left her room, I tried to think who she reminded me of; usually, she was the spitting image of her father. I was all the way into the living room when I realized it was me.

I made one phone call, to Alyssa's mother, who was the only other woman in the neighborhood judged more harshly than I; a single mom, she didn't own her house. Her skin was leathery and orange—she got a regular tan. She was easy to

imagine as a teenager, and not just because Alyssa's tight, early breasts proposed a similar promise of wildness. Everyone knew Alyssa's mother was the flavor of woman who went home with men she met in bars and got her nails done at the cheap place across town.

"Ooh, yeah, Lyssie tells me Chessy's really upset about the whole thing. That Karen woman's a real bitch, you know?" I heard Alyssa's mother take a drag off her cigarette.

"Is that what the girls call Francesca these days? Chessy?" My voice was reedy.

"Yeah, sure. Isn't that what you guys call her? It's how she introduces herself."

I smiled primly to myself. "What happened? With the girls?"

"How's your little boy, by the way? You must be worried sick."

"He's doing better. Well, he's doing the same, but he should be better by the end of the summer."

"Poor baby."

"He's very brave."

"You're a good mom. And a good wife. Men, you know? Fucking men. Your husband has no idea what you're sacrificing. Chessy told me you aren't teaching any of your summer courses."

"Yeah, well, my husband's the one who got the Fulbright," I offered weakly.

"But you know as much about being trapped in your house as he does, don't you? Meanwhile he's halfway across the world living it up? I don't think so. He's going to waltz back in with presents for the kids and a shit-eating smile on his face, and

you won't be able to say boo." She took another drag and let it out with: "But here I am rambling on. You want to know about poor Chessy."

"If you don't feel you're breaking anyone's confidence."

"You think I give a fuck what that Karen woman thinks of me?"

"And Karen is . . . ?"

"Jessica's mom. Some former fucking homecoming queen. Blonde. Big house. Bigger tits. She's the one who throws that ridiculous Christmas party with the fucking Santa Claus. I bet next year they hire midgets to play the elves."

"I'm afraid we're back east for most Christmases—"

"Poor you, with your sick kid. Out of the loop. And you can't be blamed, can you? You're in quarantine, for fuck's sake."

"So Jessica's mom . . ."

"Jessica's having her birthday party this weekend. It's gonna be a blowout. First it's a pool party, then they're inviting boys, then there'll be a DJ and dancing, then, get this, the woman is renting a fucking limo so the girls can see that god-awful romantic comedy starring Reese Witherspoon. Then they all limo it to dinner at the Spaghetti Factory. After that, they're spending the night in the pool house. I'm surprised that woman isn't hiring strippers."

I was surprised to laugh. I peeked my head into the living room where Jack lay on the couch. Francesca wasn't due back from the park for another forty-five minutes. Alyssa's mom coughed,

then continued. "Back in June, Jessica told the girls they were invited to her birthday party. All the girls in the group were invited. Then, two weeks ago, at Jennifer's, Jessica handed out paper invitations—professionally designed and printed—they look like frigging wedding invitations. Engraved, you know? It's obvious Karen gave the invitations to Jessica to hand out at Jennifer's. Which is all well and good, as long as everyone's invited." She paused dramatically.

"And weren't they?"

"Chessy didn't get one."

I felt as though I'd been slapped across the face. "But they're only ten."

"When your mom's a bitch you get invited to the club early."

"But why? Why wouldn't they invite her?"

"Look," said Alyssa's mom, "I feel terrible for your poor little girl. But this is just the way it goes."

"What should I do?"

"Do?" Alyssa's mom's voice flooded with amusement. "You can't do anything."

"Maybe if I talk to Karen"—

"That woman is a pit bull dressed up as a porn star. And under no circumstances are you allowed to mention to this Chessy. If she wanted to confide in you, she would."

There was a white fuzzy film covering the dishes in the sink. It looked like hundreds of spider webs, but thicker. I turned on the water and watched the mold dissolve.

"I thought we could do something fun this

weekend," I announced that night at dinner.

"Yeah?" Francesca snorted. "Like what?"

"Like an art project. All three of us could work on it together."

"Woohoo." Francesca rolled her eyes. "Sounds like a blast."

"Come on, you love that kind of thing. We'll make something great for when Daddy comes home."

"Like a sign?" asked Jack. "I know how to write a *J*. *J* is for Jack."

"What's the sign going to say, Jack?" Francesca set down her fork.

He was pleased at her attention. "'Happy Birthday!'"

"There's no *J* in Happy Birthday. And besides, it's not Dad's birthday."

"Oh," said Jack.

"That's a great idea," I said. "I love it when you write *J*'s."

"If it was a great idea, which it's not, we could make it say something like 'Welcome Home From Your Very Important Trip,'" Francesca suggested.

"Does that have a *J* in it?" Jack asked.

"No," said Francesca, "practically nothing has a *J* in it. Or we could make it say 'Did You Enjoy India While We Sat At Home and Took Care of a Sick Baby?'"

"Francesca—"

"Where's India?" Jack asked.

"Francesca, that's not very kind."

"I could draw a *J* on that one," said Jack. "Where's India?"

"That's great idea, Jackie," I said, ignoring Francesca.

"It's dumb idea," Francesca spat. "The whole fucking thing is dumb."

"What did you say?" It was the first time I'd ever heard her say that word.

"You heard me." She was quivering.

"That's not a word we use, Francesca."

"I'm not allowed to say the word 'dumb?'"

"You know that's not what I mean."

"What word then, Mom? Say it. What word do you mean?"

"Go to your room."

That night, she cried out again in her sleep. I picked her up and brought her into bed with me and encircled her in my arms.

The next day, I tied a scarf around Jack's nose and mouth and put my children in the car. We had stopped going to the craft store six months before. Francesca always wanted something that I wouldn't buy her—fabric paint so she could "decorate" her T-shirts, a bouquet of polyester roses for our dining room table, a pattern for a princess costume she swore she knew how to sew by herself—and every time I said no, she managed to throw a tantrum right in front of the cash register line. I hadn't declared a formal embargo; our minivan had simply started taking a different route home from school.

As we pulled into the mall parking lot, I smiled beneficently at my offspring and I told them where we were headed. "And here I thought you were taking us to the movies," Francesca quipped.

We bought a roll of newsprint, three yards of fabric, a set of wooden letters and a set of stamps, three stamp pads, and both acrylic and tempera paints. I looked like I had a plan. "We're not going to make a 'Happy Birthday' sign," Jack told me solemnly. Francesca rode resignedly on the back of the cart, her head leaning on her hand.

When we got home after a lunch at McDonald's, Jack helped me gather some of the newspapers from the front porch; we spread them out to cover the living room carpet. I lined up the art supplies and waited for inspiration to strike. I watched Jack paint his forelock blue. "Where's India?" he asked me.

"Where's your sister?" I asked him. I knocked on her door. "Would you like to make something?"

She was lying on her bed, her hands folded on her stomach. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." I leaned against her doorframe.

"Why did Dad make you stay here with us?"

I didn't know what to say.

"I mean," she continued, looking at me squarely, "you could have hired a babysitter. You could have taught your summer classes."

"I wanted to be with you."

"No you didn't," she said dismissively.

"He didn't make me do anything," I tried to explain. I came to sit beside her on the bed.

She turned her face to the wall. "I can tell when you're lying, you know."

"I'm not lying."

She was quiet for a few minutes. Then she said, "It's because of you."

"What is?"

"Why Jessica didn't invite me to her birthday."

I put my hand on hers. "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing, mom. They just don't understand."

"Understand what?"

"Look, I'm not going to make anything. If that's why you bought that stuff. I don't want it. I'm not even sure I'm an artist anymore."

"Tell me what they don't understand."

"You'll be mad."

"No," I said firmly, "tell me."

She sighed. "How much you need my help."

Only two weeks until Chris came home, I awoke out of a pressing dream about an overflowing latrine I'd helped dig in Guatemala. I crept down off the bed between the chute of my children's bodies. I closed the bathroom door. I found the toilet and sat in the darkness and yawned, inhaling the ammonia stench of Jack's diaper pail.

Francesca's voice rang out: "Mom!" I remember a distinct feeling of annoyance. Her inability to sleep alone, to sleep without screaming, was one more example of the way we had fallen to rot in Chris's absence.

I washed my hands. I shuffled back into the bedroom. It took me a moment to distinguish the shift in the air. My daughter was not asleep. She was kneeling, in the spot where I had just been dreaming. She was crouched over Jack, her small hands on his shoulders. "Breathe," she was chanting, "breathe breathe breathe, come on,

breathe."

"What happened?" My children seemed a continent away.

"He stopped breathing," she said. She grabbed my wrists and forced them onto Jack's tiny frame. "I'm going to call someone." She shook his shoulders with my hands. "Pick him up," she commanded as she scrambled from the bed. "Make him breathe." I heard her in the kitchen dialing the phone. Jack's body seemed boneless. I pulled him to me as I flicked on the light. His lips were an impossible blue.

I didn't want to think about it, the dehydrated infant who had gasped in my arms a lifetime ago. Someone else's baby, brought to the Peace Corps clinic far too late. The waxy film of death over its eyes, the lightness of its chest in the instant its bird heart stopped whirring. The moment I promised never to bear children of my own.

"Mom," said Francesca firmly, suddenly before me, "The paramedics are on their way. 911 is staying on the phone. But you have to get Jack to breathe again. Do you know what to do?"

I was going to cry.

She put her hands on either side of my face. She didn't say a word. She locked my eyes in hers and nodded, once, twice, three times, until I nodded with her. I stood up. I pulled Jack over my shoulder. I walloped his back, once, twice, three times, my right hand like a wooden paddle against his smooth skin. Then we were in the kitchen. Francesca picked up the phone again. 911 spoke through her: "Hit him hard."

I smacked him. I rocked him. I shook his

breathless body.

The night of Jack's birth, when oxygen first filled his lungs, he'd made a sharp, red sound. He made that same sound now as I pounded on his back. It was the sound of life entering a body. He kicked and fought. My hand caught his mouth as he squirmed and bucked. In my palm I caught a plug of mucus the consistency of rubber cement. I did not know what to do with it. I laid him down on the floor as he howled, blind and angry. Francesca squatted right over him. She said in a sharp tone: "You have to hold still, Jack." He held still for her. She placed the oxygen mask over his mouth and sang to soothe him. "I'll sing you one-oh, green grow the rushes-oh, what is your one-oh, one is one and all in love and ever more shall be-oh."

The EMTs were strong, chiseled boys who moved over us like wildfire. I held Jack's tiny wrist in one hand and reached for Francesca with the other. She collapsed into me, a hot ball of adrenaline. I gathered her in. Her scalp smelled woody. I understood, more than anything I'd ever known, that she was right.

From the driveway, the house gleamed. It looked as though my mother had somehow managed to repaint it. It was the impeccable white of tooth enamel.

"Is Daddy back?" Jack asked while I struggled with the lock. His breath was almost back to normal. The doctors had assured me, after four days in the ICU, that it was safe to bring him home.

"No," I answered, "He's still in India. He'll be back soon."

"Where's India?" Jack asked, as Francesca opened the door. She was a few inches taller than she'd been at the start of the summer. Her hair had grown like weeds. Her T-shirt pulled at her shoulders. Jack held out his arms and she took him.

Beyond Francesca, the house glistened: it smelled of meatloaf and laundry and Lysol. The newspapers were gone from the front porch, the rugs had been unearthed by my mother's hand. It was as though a new family had just moved in.

"You want to know where India is?" Francesca asked. She caught my eye and winked as if we were conspiring together. I followed her into the gleaming house. My mother was waiting for us there, a proud smile bannered her face.

"Where?" my son asked again, burrowing into my daughter's neck.

"I'll show you," she said, as we stepped from the front hall into the living room. There, in the middle of our home, was her creation. A great, round mass of painted papier mache. It was blue and green and came up to her chest.

"What's this?" I asked.

"I made it, Mom," Francesca said. "I made it in the garage. Grandma helped."

Jack squealed and clapped his hands as she carried him over to the orb and pointed. It took me a moment to understand.

"Here," she said. "Here's India," gesturing to a mass of green paint. "And here," she explained, as she brought Jack around to the other side of that great big ball, pointing to the squiggly line of the west coast, "is where we live. Home." Her eyes fluttered over mine. "I made us the world."

