

TESSA MELLAS

Beanstalk

Lucy's baby is born green, face splotched with yellow like variegated leaves, hair wispy white, corncob silk. All across his body, tiny buds are sleeping. On his arms, a dusting of moss. Veins spider from his chin to his temples and ears. Only his feet are the color of flesh, but not in that pink baby-soft way, more fallow like roots. A philodendron baby. A baby verdant and lush with chlorophyll stirring inside his skin.

After hours of labor, Lucy sees him only a moment while a nurse suctions his mouth and nose. She reaches out and touches his cheek, cool and glossy, the texture of wax. Philip stands by the bed, bewildered. The word "green" whispers its way around the room. Eyebrows rise and fall. Foreheads furrow. Then the baby is taken for tests.

A nurse stays behind to tend to Lucy. She presses her stomach, kneading it back to its pre-pregnancy shape. "Is he okay?" Lucy asks. "Why did they take him away?"

"They're just running some checks," she says.

Philip hovers, a skittish squirrel, watching the nurse's movements. Sweat lifts from his forehead like condensation and trickles down his chin. "According to Gallup's Health and Healthcare Poll," he says, "birth defects occur in 1 in 33 babies, around 3% per year."

"He's not defective," Lucy says.

"Of course not," the nurse answers. "He wanted to be a green baby. So that's what he is."

"What does that mean?" Philip asks.

Lucy glares.

The nurse touches her knee. "Sit tight," she says. "The doctor will be in to confer." Then she disappears into the hall.

"I didn't mean he was defective," Philip says. "I meant defects are rare. I meant he's probably fine."

Lucy doesn't answer, just turns on her side and strokes her swollen stomach. Philip paces, his loafers stretched so wide the stitching has popped along the sides. His monogrammed shirt has come untucked. His glasses are askew on his nose. He keeps his eyes on the floor until he hears the doctor's shoes.

Doctor Peters comes in with a clipboard. "What do you know?" he says. "A green baby. That's a first. We get blue babies all the time. Dime a dozen, those. Of course, they clear up once they get some air. But your guy is sticking with this green business. Stubborn. Must get that from his pops." He gives Philip a robust slap on the shoulder. Philip jumps.

"He doesn't need oxygen, then," Lucy says.

"Nah, his breathing's fine. Vitals stable. Noth-

ing serious."

"Except he's green," Philip reminds him.

"Oh, yes," the doctor says. "He certainly is that. Best we can tell it's some kind of algae. Probably from your water pipes. You drink water?"

Lucy nods.

"Well, there you go. Keep tap water away from the baby. No breast-feeding. You've probably got algae still in your system. Get bottled water. Feed the baby formula. We'll give you some sample packs."

"It's okay that he's green?" Philip asks.

Lucy frowns.

"We can't say it's okay," the doctor says. "We really don't know. The green should go away on its own, but we can't be sure. Either way, tomorrow you can take him home."

"That's it?" Lucy says.

"I'll send in a nurse for a crash course in newborn care. The staff will help through the night. Doctor Briggs will check the baby tomorrow. If he's good, you can go." He gives Philip a vigorous handshake, winks at Lucy and disappears into the hall.

Then the nurse is back with the baby. She places him on the bare skin of Lucy's chest. "It helps with the bonding," she says. "Babies like to feel skin."

The baby wraps his fingers around Lucy's silvery hair. He yawns, and his tongue, small and green like a lizard's, darts out of his mouth. He smells wild and sweet like rain-soaked soil. His silky white hair coils into delicate springs. On his

forehead, a bud has started to swell. He smiles at his mother. He is beautiful, she thinks, like no one has ever thought to be beautiful before. Even if it means he's defective, Lucy is glad he's green.

The nurse sweeps an errant tendril away from the baby's face. "Let's not hide those beautiful buds," she says. "They'll need light to open." She adjusts the sheet, and her braid swings over her shoulder. Lucy tries to remember when her hair was dark like that. In adolescence, her hair grayed strand by strand, so now at forty-six, she seems decades older, hair silvery-white, frame shrunk to bones. Skin hangs from her arms like valence curtains. The flesh around her eyes sinks in like forgotten fruit. Lucy's reflection reminds her of fairy-tale witches, lips pulled down to their breasts, breasts pulled down to their knees, noses crooked at peculiar angles to better smell children lost in the woods.

"Let's see if he's hungry," the nurse says. She pulls a baby bottle out of her pocket. "We'll start him with water to check his digestion." She turns the baby so his head is in the crook of Lucy's arm and hands her the bottle. "See if he'll take it. Just hold it up to his mouth."

A few drops fall on the baby's lips. His tongue darts out, and he latches onto the nipple.

"That's quick," the nurse says. "It usually takes newborns a while to figure it out. He's hungry. That's it. Tip up the end, so he doesn't get air."

Philip leans over Lucy's shoulder. She can smell the tuna sandwich he ate at noon when her contractions were still twenty minutes apart and all she could do for the pain was squat on

her hands and knees on her living room carpet, her back arched like a cat. Meanwhile, her senile mother and Philip munched their tuna and eyed Lucy with curious glances as though she were a piece of performance art.

Now Philip presses against her shoulder and rubs the mossy fuzz on the baby's arm. His touch is light and cautious, as though the baby were likely to bite. "I've heard that 42% of infants lose the hair they're born with," he says, "in two or three months."

Philip is a Gallup Poll Caller, the only paid-by-the hour employee she knows whose job brings him absolute bliss. He logs the most polls in the state, calculates standard deviations on napkins, and shares the results with postal workers, bus drivers, cashiers, and Lucy, of course. It is a thing that has always intrigued her. But now she suspects she is an emblematic figure to him: a mid-range American woman, middle-aged, middle-class, averagely attractive, somewhat smart, sometimes happy, often depressed. Who would want to be that?

The nurse catches a dribble of water on the baby's chin. "You're right," she tells Philip. "Sometimes their hair grows back a different color. Some infants look entirely different by the end of their first year."

"More normal?" Philip asks.

"I'm glad he's green," Lucy says.

"Of course," the nurse says. "*This* baby isn't going to change color. This baby wants to be green."

"He has my features. A little Philip Jebediah

Junior."

"Is that his name?" the nurse asks.

"We're still deciding," Lucy says. The baby looks nothing like Philip, and she's grateful for that.

The nurse tips the bottle higher. "You can take your time with the name. You and your husband can even wait and decide at home."

"He's not my husband," Lucy answers.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I'm the father," Philip explains.

"We're neighbors," Lucy says.

She's known Philip almost a decade, since the day he followed her home from the park and sat on the stoop of her building, reciting a poll about pets. He talked until the sun went down and Lucy got cold and invited him in for a sandwich and tea. At midnight, he was still talking, quoting polls on the Pope, male pattern baldness, and mumps. She sat and listened, fascinated by this strange person who'd come into her home. She could see he was hapless and gentle, a bearer of little-known facts. At least, he'd be good at Trivial Pursuit, she thought. Salt and pepper hair wisped out of his nostrils. He chewed his sandwich loudly, condiments spilling onto his chin. But of all the people in the park that day, he'd picked her, as though he were some kind of scout. And she had thought that meant she was wholly distinct.

After their first meeting, he came by often with grocery-store pie. They talked and talked, and their conversations were lovely secrets that made her feel smart again. When the apartment

across the hall opened, he moved in. Thousands of conversations later, after hundreds of pies, countless rounds of Trivial Pursuit, three ice storms, two leap years, and one episode of sex, they'd ended up here.

Lucy hadn't meant for the sex to happen. That day, she'd woken up on the couch, the television murmuring static, the living room dark as though clouds had buried the sun. But the sky was bright beyond the window. A curtain of leaves had blocked it out. Overnight a vine had grown up the building, tentacle fingers digging into the brick. Lucy slid open the window and touched the bristle of roots that had clawed through the rusted squares of the screen. The leaves on the vine shivered under her finger, and a tremor ran through her scalp. She put her cheek to the screen and peered up the building. The vine reached up to the roof and arced out at the eaves, stretching into the air as though it intended to use the sky as a foothold all the way up. Lucy had an inkling to climb it, to dig her toes into the stalk and inch herself into the clouds. She imagined geese circling around her, their lungs filling up with noise.

She still had her face to the screen when Philip knocked. With the feeling of flight caught in her hair and a checkered pattern pressed into her cheek, she closed her eyes and kissed him. They stumbled to the couch, where he unbuckled his belt, and she slipped out of her skirt. She held a finger to her lips. "Shh. Mother's sleeping."

Their bodies slid together. Hips jerked and heaved. His glasses fell to the floor. Then her

mother coughed in the bedroom. Lucy froze, and a shudder ran down Philip's back.

Her mother shouted, "Lucy, I need your help." So she crawled out from under Philip and scrambled into her clothes.

In the days after, she avoided him. Then the nausea started and the tenderness in her breasts.

"You didn't use a condom?" her sister Fay had scolded.

"I'm menopausal," Lucy said. "I haven't had my period in months."

After Philip heard she was pregnant, he came by multiple times a day. Before, she hadn't minded his visits. But the more the baby grew, the more Philip annoyed her. She couldn't listen to more statistics. She couldn't eat another piece of floury pie. When he knocked, she shut off the lights and feigned sleep.

She hadn't wanted him there for the delivery, but Fay said he was, after all, the father, so Lucy relented and called him when her contractions hit. She let him drive her to the hospital and hold her hand through the birth. But she made sure everyone knew they weren't married. She put a big X next to "single" on the insurance papers and when she introduced him to the doctor and nurses, she enunciated the word "friend" clearly. She said it slow. But this nurse here missed it. Lucy wants her to take it back.

"He's not my husband," she repeats.

"I'm sorry," the nurse says. "I just assumed when I saw the ring."

Philip holds up his hand. A gold band stamped with a G squeezes the flesh under his knuckle. "I

work for Gallup. I got it for superlative polling," he says.

Lucy is quiet. The G on his ring *is* for Gallup, but it wasn't earned. He bought it on his fortieth birthday. The men at work wore wedding bands, and since Philip felt he was devoted to Gallup in a similar way, he let his co-workers think he was married. Outside work, he told a different story, said the ring was a token of Gallup's appreciation for his allegiance to their team. He's explained it so often, Lucy imagines it now is truth in his head.

A silence falls over the room. For a long moment, no one speaks or moves or breathes. Then, the baby hiccups and everyone looks.

"Wow," the nurse says. "Done already. He was thirsty."

"Can I hold him?" Philip asks.

"Sure," the nurse says. "But let's have you take off your shirt. We'll put him right on your chest."

Philip blushes. "That's okay. I'm fine with it on."

"No, really, it'll make him feel safe."

"Maybe later."

"Oh, come on," the nurse prods. "Mama here's been naked all day. The least Papa can do is bare his chest."

He fumbles with his buttons, the red in his face traveling down his neck. Lucy wills the buttons to cling tight in their holes. She doesn't want him to hold her baby. She snuggles him under her chin. A bud on his forehead splits into a six-petaled flower. When she touches the blossom, his hair flutters. A smile spreads over his lips.

"Hello, my little baby," she says. "Hello, my little Jack."

"Little who?" Philip asks.

"Jack," she repeats, and the baby smiles again.

"What about Philip Jebediah Junior?" he asks, his shirt unbuttoned, belly exposed.

"He doesn't look like a Philip," Lucy says. "He looks like a little Jack."

In the morning, Lucy wakes in the hospital to the sound of rustling leaves, her breasts heavy, pelvis aching. She feels a tickle on her neck, the flesh of a flower brushing her ear. "Good morning, my baby," she says, and cups the flower in her palm. Another one opens on the vine that's crawled up the bed.

She swings her legs to the floor and looks over the plastic aquarium walls of the crib. A tangle of vines grows out of the silky mane of his hair. He smiles up at his mother and kicks his blanket. She gathers the vines and tucks them into the back of his sleeper. A few leaves come off in her fingers, tiny leaves with points like a crown. She slips them into her pocket and lifts him up. His mossy arms are soft against her shoulder. His hair flutters with a crinkling sound. "Shh," she whispers and turns her back to Philip, still asleep in the reclining chair across from the bed, his feet jutting out so all night long, when a nurse came with a bottle, the door bumped his feet. Now, his arms hang to the floor, and he snores, chin slumped against his chest.

The baby squirms. His hair twists and arches, reaching toward the water pitcher beside the

bed. Lucy dips her fingers in and drips water into his mouth. All through the night at feedings, he turned away from formula bottles. She knew he wanted water, but the night nurses wanted to get nutrients into his blood. After hours of fighting, Jack's body slackened. His arms and legs went limp. Finally, exhausted, he took the formula bottle and emptied it quick. An hour later he was awake and writhing, a sticky sap oozing from his pores. Lucy wet her pillowcase and wiped him clean, then filled his bottle with water and fed him until he shut his eyes.

The rest of the night, he slept soundly. The stir of his hair lulled her to sleep. She is used to nights in her apartment punctuated by her mother's labored breaths from the bedroom, cries for help to get to the toilet, insults muttered at a husband two decades dead. For once, Lucy's sister has had to care for their mother. And although the nurses woke Lucy every three hours to feed the baby, she still got the best night of rest she's had in over a year, since her mother's eyes went foggy and she fell down the stairs and came to Lucy's apartment to live. For the first time in months, Lucy unclenched her jaw in her sleep. For the first time in months, she dreamed.

She dreamed she was pregnant in high school, walking the halls in a pleated skirt with vines growing out from between her legs. The vines grabbed at teachers, wound around books, bore through lockers and split the linoleum floor. The students stood against the wall and held mirrors. Lucy watched her reflection appear and disappear in the circles of glass. She saw high school

Lucy. Lucy before masturbation. Lucy before W-2s. Lucy who hadn't written a eulogy yet for her father or touched her mother's naked skin.

Back then, she had been thin like a bird with hollow cheekbones and knobby knuckles. Her nose was bent at an obtuse angle. Her breasts were hollow things. She had shriveled peach pit elbows and knees, eyelids purple from skimping on sleep. She stayed up late memorizing the dates of battles, chemistry tables, Latin conjugations, the number of flats and sharps in the major scales. She hated this information, the way it marched back and forth in her head in heavy boots and wool uniforms with thick fringe hanging off its shoulders. Sometimes the armies collided, C sharp mixing with Robert E. Lee, parabolas falling into physics equations, Macbeth's tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow speech creeping into metatarsals and the geography of Soviet states.

When graduation came, she refused college. No more information. Her head was tired. Her parents were elated. Their other daughter was sixteen and pregnant. Lucy could join the workforce and help with bills. She got a secretarial certificate, then a job at a realty office, where she typed leases and eviction notices, took rent checks, and answered the phone.

At first it was nice, the mindless typing. But after awhile, she wanted something else. She tried community college, but she'd forgotten most of her science and math. She couldn't memorize formulas and facts as she had in high school. The endurance to push through thick novels was

gone. She quit college before her first semester ended and went back to the realty office. With school behind her, she tried not to think of all those A's—though they were the last thing of merit she'd done.

But now she's grown an evergreen baby, and she feels like the world has changed. She goes to the window to see. When she parts the curtains, the buds on Jack's forehead stretch open. A tendril of hair wraps around her thumb.

By late afternoon, the bags are packed and sit with Lucy beside the curb. The baby has been checked and named: Jack Philip Knolls-Dalton, the birth certificate signed twice. The nurse with the braid, back for the day shift, holds the baby as Lucy climbs out of the wheelchair and Philip pulls up the car. Lucy opens the back door and lifts the car seat harness. "Sweet little baby," the nurse says, tucking a loose vine into his blanket and setting him into his chair. "Just like a little shamrock," she says. "He'll bring you luck."

Lucy pulls the harness over the baby's head, careful not to crush his floral crown. When Jack is settled, the nurse hands Lucy a stack of formula packs. "From the doctor," she says, "though I doubt you'll need them. Any fool can tell he's not that kind of baby." Lucy sets the formula on the floor under Jack's feet. Then, the nurse presses a baggie containing little blue pellets into her hand. "Miracle-Gro," she says. "From me. The hospital wouldn't approve."

Lucy slips the bag in her pocket. Her eyes catch the nurse's name tag, dangling from her

neck. "Rose?" she says and smiles. "Thank you." She shakes her hand.

"You take care," the nurse says, and kisses Lucy's cheek.

Lucy climbs into the car, and Rose shuts the door behind her.

"All ready?" Philip asks.

Lucy nods, and they head for home. In the mirror, she watches Rose wave as they pull into the street. The end of her braid whips in the wind.

As he drives, Philip is quiet. He goes slow, braking before every bump.

"I'm sorry about the name," Lucy says.

"I always wanted a son named Philip Junior."

"If it had been a girl, I wouldn't have called her Lucy either."

"I don't see what's wrong with my name."

Lucy turns to check on the baby. His car seat faces backward, so she can only see the top of his head. The setting sun filters through the trees and ripples over his hair. She reaches back and strokes the silky strands. A vine shoots out and catches her wrist. She tries to untangle herself, but her body's twisted. She releases her seatbelt and turns around on her knees. "Are you crazy?" Philip shouts. "Do you know how many passengers fly through windshields a year?"

She unloops the vine from her wrist and slides back around. "His hair was caught on my hand," she says. "I'm fine."

Philip stops at a yellow light. Lucy watches it change red. They stop at every light for fifteen blocks. "Philip, the last two were green," she ar-

gues.

"I'm just being careful," he says. "A car going the other way could run a red."

"Okay," she says. "I'm sorry. I'm tired." She leans back against the headrest and shuts her eyes. She feels leaves climb over her shoulder and tickle her neck. She smiles. Petals open against her cheek. A rustle of leaves fills her ears. She is almost asleep when the car jerks to a stop. Her seatbelt tightens over her chest. "What's wrong?" She jerks against the seatbelt.

"I can't see out the window," he says.

Jack's vines have spread into the front. Leaves press against the glass. Lucy laughs.

"It isn't funny," he says. "I could have hit something. A kid on a bike. Or a puppy."

She pulls back the leaves like a curtain. "No puppy," she says.

"I can't drive like that. It's not safe."

"I'll sit in the back," she says. She gets out of the car and goes around. Jack smiles when he sees his mother. "My little beanstalk," she says, and gathers up his leaves. She wraps them around her hand like a wreath and sets the bundle on her lap. As the car starts forward, she strokes the leaves between her fingers. They crawl over her thighs and enfold her knees.

At home, a sign hangs from Lucy's apartment window: "Welcome, Baby!" The letters are outlined in marker, filled with blue highlighted over in yellow, a makeshift green.

Lucy unbuckles Jack's harness and slips the wreath of leaves through the hole. She tucks

them into his blanket and folds the corners in to protect his feet from the early evening cold. Before she can climb out with the baby, her sister Fay runs down the steps. Her sheer-pink blouse matches her lipstick. Her high heels make a clip-clop sound. She takes the baby from Lucy. "Let's see my little nephew," she says. "Oh, how precious. Just like a little frog."

On the way to the hospital, Lucy called Fay to pick up their mother, so she wouldn't be alone all night. In the apartment, their mother usually watches talk shows while Lucy's at work. When Lucy gets home, her mother tells her the talk show stories. Fay brings a casserole once a week, and Philip comes with pie. When they leave, Lucy bathes and powders her mother, makes her tea, and tucks her into the apartment's only bed. These last few months, her mother has taken to saying, "Ah, what a time to be pregnant. At your age, you'd be better off with a dog."

Lucy had hoped Fay would take their mother away for the week, leaving her apartment quiet and empty. Instead, Fay is here, and Lucy can bet, her mother is just where she left her in the rocking chair with a cup of cold tea on her lap.

Fay is two years younger than Lucy. She had her son in high school, her daughter two years after that. Her husband George got a job at his father's paper supply company. Fay stayed home. When her kids got to high school, she dedicated herself to the Mary Kay Corporation, easing the anxieties of middle-aged women with foundation, mascara, and blush. She says she'd help more with their mother, but she's got her hands

full with the business and two unemployed kids. Lucy hopes she'll be a better mother than her sister. She worries as Fay slings Jack over her shoulder, one arm under his bottom, the other gesturing to the handmade sign. Lucy stands close as they head up the walk. She sees the panicked look in his eyes. Then a vine shoots out of his blanket and loops around Fay's hoop earring. Fay feels the tug.

"Trouble already," she says, laughing. "Just like my Jimmy."

Lucy unravels the vine, tucks it into the blanket and kisses his head.

"How you feeling, sweetie?" her sister asks. "How's the vagina? Doesn't it hurt like hell? I can't imagine it now at your age. God bless. You must be exhausted. We brought food."

"You and ma?" Lucy asks.

"And a few welcome-home guests."

Upstairs, Fay's husband George and her son Jim have taken over the loveseat and are watching football, hands buried in bags of Tostitos and plastic containers of dip. Sure enough, Lucy's mother, wizened and hunched, sits in the chair where Lucy left her, wearing the same clothes. She's asleep, mouth open wide like the dead. The mug of tea on her lap has been replaced by a sign that says "Congratulations" and a bowl of mixed nuts.

On the couch, a row of ladies sit together in loud blouses and heavy makeup, their hair sprayed into unnatural waves. Deviled eggs and bruschetta lie on silver trays before them, next to a pot of tulips with plastic stems. The ladies

hold gift bags lined with green tissue paper. They smile wide at Lucy. She's never seen them before, though she can tell they're Mary Kay ladies, ever ready to play gal pal to a forty-six-year-old new mother whose sister says doesn't have friends of her own.

Fay scoots Lucy to an armchair and hands the baby to a lady with a shiny gold blouse. She turns down the TV volume, says, "Jim, say hello to your aunt."

Jim turns toward Lucy, gives a casual wave and stares at Jack.

"He's gorgeous," the Mary Kay lady says, beaming at the baby.

"Yes," says another. "Just like a little elf."

Philip stands in the doorway until the conversation pauses. Then he walks into the room embarrassed, like a student late to class. He sits on the floor by Lucy and crosses his legs. She can picture him sitting this way in grade school, his legs too round to tuck his feet in. She feels a wave of affection for Philip and rests her knee against his back.

"I remember when Sheila was this little," the gold-blouse lady says. "She's in Wyoming now with her boyfriend. He's Buddhist. Sometimes I wish she was a sweet little baby still."

"I know," a woman in leopard-print says. "They're never this innocent again."

"And you just look great," a woman in polka-dots tells Lucy. "I'll tell you, after I had Frank, I was a balloon. My doctor scolded me for getting fat, but I got even fatter when I had Tina. Bill divorced me when I hit two-hundred pounds.

But you look fantastic. Look at those thighs. And your stomach has just shrunk back in."

"You'll be a terrific mother," says the gold-blouse lady. She passes the baby to the next lady in line. "You have that nurturing look."

"Thanks," Lucy says, and stares at the pot of plastic tulips. Fay's always been good about centerpieces and hors d'oeuvres.

"What's his name?" the leopard-print lady asks, stroking the baby's cheek.

"Jack Philip Knolls-Dalton," Philip announces. "The Philip part is for me."

"Ah, yes, I can see he resembles his father. His ears?"

"He has my features," Philip says.

A commercial comes on, and Jim grabs a beer from the fridge. He stops at the couch and stares at the baby. "He doesn't look like a Philip," Jim announces. "He looks like a fern."

Fay slaps at the air. "Oh Jim," she says.

The leopard-print lady passes the baby along. In the passing, his blanket slips open, and all the vines spill out.

"Oh my," the woman says. She tries to tuck the branches back in, but they unravel onto the table. The gold-blouse lady grabs the bruschetta. Another picks leaves off her lap. A vine wraps around the pot of tulips and drags it to the edge of the table. Fay's hand flies out and snaps the stem. Jack's hair rustles in furious spasms. His arms and legs curl into his body. Lucy's heart drops in her chest. She grabs her baby.

"I'm sorry," Fay says. "It was instinct." She rubs his back.

"Get out of my house," Lucy says.

The leopard-print lady sweeps the clipped vine under the couch with her foot. Another collects the deviled eggs. Jim grabs his case of beer from the fridge. George takes the chips. Fay strokes Jack's head. "He'll be okay, Luce. Really. Babies bounce back. I'll stop by at the end of the week?"

Philip shuts the door behind them. He paces the kitchen. "I'll call the doctor."

"No," Lucy says. "He's okay. He just needs purified water. Go quick to the store."

When Philip is gone, Lucy takes the bag of Miracle-Gro pellets out of her pocket. She dissolves them in a bottle of water and feeds the baby. When half the bottle is gone, he stops shaking. His flowers stretch open and the rustling slows. Lucy walks him back and forth across the kitchen. When he falls asleep, she sets him down in the crib.

"So you had a baby," her mother says, startling Lucy. "I didn't think you would."

"His name is Jack," Lucy says.

"And he isn't retarded?"

"He's perfect."

"Babies are never perfect."

"This one is."

Lucy helps her mother to the bathroom, holding her under the armpits while her mother pushes a walker and shuffles. As she walks, her mother farts. "Oh dear," she says. She's soiled her pants. In the bathroom, she lowers her mother onto the toilet and peels off her clothes. Her underpants are caked and dirty. Her shoes are wet.

"I didn't think you were coming back," she

says. "I thought you went to another country."

"What country did you think I went to?" Lucy asks.

"You were always talking about Nepal. I thought you went there."

"Didn't Fay tell you I was at the hospital having the baby?"

"She did, but she didn't want me to take a bath, and she couldn't find my gown."

"Didn't you tell her your gown was under your pillow?"

"I didn't know," her mother says.

Lucy runs the water until it turns hot, then helps her mother into the tub. She gives her a washcloth and soap and sits on the toilet, watching her mother dab at her breasts. Bubbles float up in the water. "Oh dear," she keeps saying. When she's done, Lucy washes her back and rinses her hair. She pulls her up by the armpits, her mother's feet squeaking against the tub. Lucy towels her hair dry, slips her gown over her head, and tucks her into bed.

Then she checks on the baby. Leaves spill out through the wooden slats. Jack is asleep, a soft rustle whispering through his hair. Lucy sinks down on the couch. Her body aches. Her breasts are heavy. She rubs them to ease the pain. A milky liquid leaks onto her shirt. She pats at the wet spot with the edge of the afghan, then pulls it around her and shuts her eyes. When Philip returns, she's almost asleep. He drags in a water dispensing system on a dolly. It clunks over the lip of the doorway. "Is he okay?" he asks.

She nods. "He's sleeping."

He looks into the crib. The armpits of his shirt are damp. His face is red.

"He's fine. Really," she says. "Show me what you got."

In the kitchen, Philip rips open the box and gets to work setting the water dispenser up.

"It's nice," Lucy says, and kisses him on the cheek. While Philip is busy, she gathers her mother's clothes in the bathroom and sets them in a bucket to soak. When she comes back, Philip has finished. His shirt is wet. He lingers in the doorway, stretches his arms, and yawns. "Long day," he says. "I think I'll head to bed. We can sleep at my place."

"The crib's here," Lucy says.

Philip nods. He turns the knob and heads across the hall. When he's gone, she feels a sudden wave of panic, and this feels strange. But in a minute he's back, wearing flannel pajamas, carrying his toothbrush, a pillow, and a glow-in-the-dark Gallup Poll clock. He drags the coffee table to the side, tosses cushions off the couch and yanks at the metal handle until the pullout bed unfolds with a snap. The mattress is creased into thirds under crumpled sheets. He throws the afghan over the covers and fluffs his pillow. When he lumbers onto the mattress, the wire frame creaks and sags. He lies on his back, his hands on his chest. Lucy stacks the cushions against the TV console and picks Tostito crumbs out of the rug.

"The water stains on your ceiling look like Abraham Lincoln," Philip says after a while.

"I never noticed." She goes to the kitchen and

drops the chips in the sink.

"Come see."

He pats the bed and she sits on the edge of the mattress. She leans back to view the brown mark on the ceiling. His shoulder is warm against her cheek, and she rests her head there. His pajamas are soft. When Mrs. King in apartment 12C takes a bath, the ceiling drips. Lucy tries to find Lincoln in the sepia stain. But to her, the shape looks like a monkey. She doesn't tell him this.

"According to a February 2007 Gallup Poll," he says, "Americans consider Lincoln the greatest U.S. president ever, though in 2005 Ronald Reagan beat him out."

"I voted for Carter," Lucy says, and nestles into his neck.

"According to a 2001 President's Day Poll, 76% of Americans know that Lincoln's wife was Mary Todd."

Lucy lifts her head. She can see where he's going. She sits up. "You'll need another blanket. The room's a bit chilly. I've got more in the closet."

"A recent Gallup Poll found that 91% of American adults have either been married or plan to get married in the future."

Philip loosens the ring on his finger. He yanks it over his knuckle and holds it out on his palm. The G is upside down.

"Philip, I can't."

"You didn't even let me ask."

"I know," she says.

Philip squeezes the ring back on his hand. He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

"I'm sorry," she says.

Philip pulls the afghan over his stomach and turns on his side, and Lucy slips away.

In the bathroom, she locks the door behind her and turns the water knob in the tub to hot. She strips off her clothes and studies herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the door. She looks old and tired. Her arms are boney, her stomach swollen and sagging like elephant skin. She looks nothing like a new mother. She touches the bags under her eyes, then hangs a towel over the glass to block her reflection out.

She climbs into the shower and pulls the water release. Hot water streams over her head. She leans into the tiles. Water has never felt so good. She slides down to the floor of the tub and crouches on her hands and knees, letting the hot water pummel her back. Her head drops between her shoulders. Her body crumples. She puts her cheek to the porcelain surface and weeps.

When Lucy comes back from the shower, Philip is snoring. He lies on his back, his limbs sprawling over the mattress. Lucy checks on Jack in the crib. The buds on his forehead are closed. She strokes his glossy cheek. Then she crawls onto the foldout couch beside Philip. His body is turned to the wall. Despite the shower, her feet are cold. She tries to tuck them under his leg. She nuzzles into his back and puts her arm over his waist. But she can't find a place for her other arm. She tries it behind her, then over her head. Then Philip turns on his stomach. She rolls onto her back and tucks her knees into a pretzel position

to warm her feet. She listens to the rhythm of his snoring and falls asleep.

In the night, the same dream replays itself over and over in her head. She's in high school walking the halls, vines growing out from between her legs. She gathers them in her arms. The bundle of branches gets bigger and bigger and still the vines come. The halls are empty. She's late for class. Her feet move quick. Then she's running as fast as she can. The hall gets longer and longer. Then suddenly she's in a bathroom with hundreds of stalls. She ducks into a stall painted green, squats on the floor and pulls up her skirt. The vines unthread from somewhere deep inside her. The leaves are white and printed with numbers. She plucks them off and piles them up in a stack. She tries to study the numbers, but they don't make sense. She yanks at the vines, pulls faster and faster. They rip her skin, and she feels the wetness of blood. Still the vines get longer. Enough notes. No more. Where is the baby? She pulls, and she pulls. Nothing comes but leaves. Leaves covered in numbers. Numbers she's never seen. Then there's a crash like cymbals, and Lucy jolts awake.

She tries to sit up, but there's something heavy over her chest. Philip's arm. The room is humid and hot, and she can barely breathe. She tries to shift. The metal bar under the mattress digs into her ribcage. She's pinned to the sheet. She pulls her arms out from under his grip. Her nightgown's wet. Her breasts are leaking. She smells like sour milk. From outside, a streetlight shines on the crib. It looks empty. She listens for leaves.

Nothing. She holds her breath and tries to look close. No baby. She scrambles out from under Philip and crosses the room in the dark.

The mattress is covered with leaves. She pats them with her hands, and they fall through the slats. "Jack?" she whispers. "My little bunny, where are you?" She lifts up the edge of the mattress, and runs her hand along the slats. She gets on her knees and feels under the crib. Her fingers collect lint from the rug, leaves, but nothing else.

Philip stirs. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she says. "Go back to sleep."

"I'll help," he says, scrambling around in the blankets. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine. I just dropped a diaper." Lucy pats the floor, crawling her way along the baseboards, her pulse beating inside her ears. Where could he be? He couldn't go far. She perks her ears, listens for the sound of leaves. There's a crinkle under her knees. A trail weaves its way toward the kitchen. She follows it. The edge of the carpet by the kitchen is wet. A curtain of leaves grows over the doorway. She steps through. On the linoleum, water pools around her feet.

"Jack? Baby? Make a sound so Mommy can hear you." She slides her feet over the floor. Her foot clangs against the teapot. Red microwave numbers shine in the dark. The water dispenser's empty. Vines climb the walls and wind through cupboard handles. Leaves cling to the curtains. The fridge is buried in moss. Jack lies in a puddle, branches growing out of his body, roots clawing into the floor. She puts her hands under him, but he's attached. She sits in the water and touches

his head. His hair weaves through the tines of her fingers and sets off that rustling sound.

Then the bed creaks, and Lucy hears footsteps. She lies on the floor and wraps her arms around her son.

"Lucy?" Philip says. He is just beyond the doorway. She can see the top of his face through the branches. But mostly the leaves block him

out.

She buries her face in the peaty sponge of Jack's belly, closes her eyes and lets the scent of forest rush into her lungs. Flowers crawl over her body. A lattice of vines surrounds her. Leaves rustle in a whispering choir. Water soaks into her skin.

