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FICTION | **JULY 6 & 13, 2009 ISSUE**

CHILDCARE

BY LORRIE MOORE

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The cold came late that fall, and the songbirds were caught off guard. By the time the snow and wind began in earnest, too many had been suckered into staying, and instead of flying south, instead of already having flown south, they were huddled in people's yards, their feathers puffed for some modicum of warmth. I was looking for a babysitting job. I was a student and needed money, so I would walk from interview to interview in these attractive but wintry neighborhoods, past the eerie multitudes of robins pecking at the frozen ground, dun gray and stricken—though what bird in the best of circumstances does not look a little stricken—until at last, late in my search, at the end of a week, startlingly, the birds had disappeared. I did not want to think about what had happened to them. Or, rather, that is an expression—of politeness, a false promise of delicacy—for in fact I wondered about them all the time: imagining them dead, in stunning heaps in some killing cornfield outside of town, or dropped from the sky in twos and threes for miles down along the Illinois state line.

I was looking in December for work that would begin in January, at the start of the spring term. I'd finished my exams and was answering ads from the student job board, ones for "childcare provider." I liked children—I did!—or, rather, I liked them O.K. They were sometimes interesting. I admired their stamina and candor. And I was good with them, in that I could make funny faces at the babies and teach the older children card tricks while speaking in the theatrically sarcastic tones that disarmed and enthralled them. But I was not especially skilled at minding children for long spells; I grew bored, perhaps like my own mother. After I'd spent too much time playing their games, my mind grew peckish and longed to lose itself in some book I had in my backpack. I was ever hopeful of early bedtimes and long naps.

I had come from Dellacrosse Central, from a small farm on the old Perryville Road, to this university town of Troy, "the Athens of the Midwest," as if from a cave—like the priest-child of a Colombian tribe I'd read about in Anthropology 203, a boy made mystical by being kept in the dark for the bulk of his childhood and allowed only stories—no experience—of the outside world. Once brought out into light, he was in a perpetual, holy condition of bedazzlement and wonder; no story could ever equal the thing itself. And so it was with me. Nothing had really prepared me. Not the college piggy bank in the dining room, the savings bonds from my grandparents, or the used set of World Book encyclopedias, with their beautiful color charts of international wheat production and photographs of Presidential birthplaces. The flat, green world of my parents' hogless, horseless farm—its dullness, its flies, its quiet ripped open daily by the fumes and whining of machinery—twisted away and left me with a brilliant city life of books and films and witty friends. Someone had turned on the lights. Someone had led me out of the cave of Perryville Road. My brain was on fire with Chaucer, Sylvia Plath, Simone de Beauvoir. Twice a week, a young professor named Thad, dressed in jeans and a tie, stood before a lecture hall of stunned farm kids like me and spoke thrillingly of Henry James's masturbation of the comma. I was riveted. I had never before seen a man wear jeans with a tie. The Colombian cave, of course, had produced a mystic; my childhood, however, had produced only me. In the corridors, students argued over Bach, Beck, Balkanization, bacterial warfare. Out-of-state kids said things to me like "You're from the country. Is it true that if you eat a bear's liver you'll die?" They asked, "Ever know someone who did you-know-what with a cow?" Or "Is it an actual fact that pigs won't eat bananas?" What I did know was that a goat would not really eat a tin can: it just liked to lick the paste on the label. But no one ever asked me about that.

Before coming to Troy, I had never had Chinese food. But now, two blocks from my apartment, next to a shoe-repair shop, was a place called the Peking Café, where I went as often as I could for the Buddha's Delight. These odd Chinese vegetables—fungal and gnomic in their brown sauce—had for me the power of an adventure or a rite, a statement to be savored. Back in Dellacrosse, the dining was divided into "casual," which meant that you ate it standing up or took it away, and the high end, which was called "sit-down dining." At the Wie Haus Family Restaurant, where we went for sit-down, the seats were red leatherette and the walls were gemütlich and panelled, decorated with framed deep kitsch—wide-eyed shepherdesses and jesters. The breakfast menus said "Guten Morgen." Sauces were called "gravy." And the dinner menu featured cheese-curd meat loaf and steak "cooked to your likeness." On Fridays, there were fish fries or boils, at which they served "lawyers" (burbot or eelpout), so called because their hearts were in their butts. On Sundays, there was not only marshmallow-and-maraschino-cherry salad and something called Grandma Jell-O but "prime rib with *au jus*," a precise knowledge of French—or English or even

food coloring—not being the restaurant's strong suit. "À la carte" meant soup or salad; "dinner" meant soup and salad. The Roquefort on the salad was called by the waitstaff "Rockford dressing." The house wines—red, white, or pink—bore the requisite bouquets of rose, soap, and graphite, a whiff of hay, a hint of Hooterville, though the menu remained mute about all this, sticking to straightforward declarations of hue. Light ale and dunkel were served. For dessert, there was usually a *Glückschmerz* pie, with the fluffy look and heft of a small snowbank. After any meal, sleepiness ensued.

Now, however, away and on my own, seduced and salted by brown sauce, I felt myself thinning and alive. The owners of the Peking Café let me linger over my books and stay as long as I wanted to: "Take your tie! No lush!" they said kindly as they sprayed the neighboring tables with disinfectant. I ate mango and papaya, nudging the stringy parts out of my teeth with a cinnamon toothpick. I had a handleless cup of hot, stale tea, poured and reheated from a pail stored in the restaurant's walkin refrigerator, and one elegantly folded fortune cookie—a short paper nerve baked in an ear. I would tug the paper slip from the stiff clutches of the cookie and save it as a bookmark. All my books had fortunes protruding like tiny tails from their pages: *You are the crispy noodle in the salad of life. You are the master of your own destiny.* My roommate, Murph—a nose-pierced, hinky-toothed blonde from Dubuque, who used black soap and black dental floss and whose quick opinions were impressively harsh (she pronounced Dubuque "Du-ba-cue")—always added the phrase "in bed" to any fortune-cookie fortune, so in my mind I read them that way, too: *You are the master of your own destiny. In bed.* Well, that was true. *Debt is a seductive liar. In bed.* Or, the less well translated, *Your fate will blossom like a bloom.* Or the sly, wise guy: *A refreshing change is in your future.* Sometimes, as a better joke, I added, *though not in bed*. *You will soon make money*. Or: *Wealth is a wise woman's man. Though not in bed*.

I looked daily at the employment listings. Childcare was in demand: I turned in my final papers and answered the ads. One fortyish pregnant woman after another hung up my coat, sat me in her living room, then waddled out to the kitchen, got my tea, and waddled back in, clutching her back, slopping tea onto the saucer, and asking me questions. "What would you do if our little baby started crying and wouldn't stop?" "Are you available evenings?" "What do you think of as a useful educational activity for a small child?" I had no idea. I had never seen so many pregnant women in such a short period of time—five in all. It alarmed me. They did not look radiant. They looked reddened with high blood pressure and frightened. I gave them my references and a written summary of my experience. My experience was not all that much—just the Pitskys and the Schultzes back home. I had once, as part of a class project on human reproduction, carried around for an entire week a sack of flour the exact weight

and feel of an infant. I'd swaddled it and cuddled it and placed it in safe, cushioned places for naps. But once, when no one was looking, I stuffed it into my backpack with a lot of sharp pens, and it got stabbed. My books, powdery white the rest of the term, became a joke in the class. I left this off my résumé. But the rest I'd typed up. To gild the lily-livered, as my dad sometimes said, I wore to my interviews what the department stores called "a career jacket," and perhaps the women liked the professionalism of that. They were professionals themselves. Two were lawyers, one was a journalist, one was a doctor, one a high-school teacher. Where were the husbands? "Oh, at work," the women said vaguely. All except the journalist, who said, "Good question!"

The last house I went to was a gray stucco prairie house with a chimney cloaked in dead ivy. Some desiccated mums were still in pots on the porch. Ice frosted the crisp heads of the flowers. Leaning against the house were a shovel and a rake, and tucked into a corner of the porch were two phone books still in shrink-wrap. The woman of the house opened the door. She was pale and compact, no sags or pouches, linen skin tight across the bone. The hollows of her cheeks were powdered darkly, as if with the pollen of a tiger lily. Her hair was cropped short and dyed the fashionable bright auburn of a ladybug. Her earrings were buttons of deepest orange, her leggings mahogany, her sweater rust-colored, and her lips a maroonish brown. She looked like a highly controlled oxidation experiment. "Come in," she said, and I entered, mutely at first and then, as always, apologetically, as if I were late, though I wasn't.

The woman closed the heavy oak door behind me, and I stamped my feet on the braided rug I was standing on, to shake off the snow. I started to take off my shoes. "Oh, you don't have to take off your shoes," she said. "There's too much of that prissy Japanese stuff going on in this town. Bring in the mud." She smiled—big, theatrical, a little crazy. I had forgotten her name and was hoping she'd say it soon; if she didn't, she might not say it at all.

"I'm Tassie Keltjin," I said, thrusting out my hand. She took it and then studied my face. "Yes," she said absently, unnervingly scrutinizing each of my eyes. Her gaze made a slow, observing circle around my nose and mouth. "I'm Sarah Brink," she said finally. I was not used to being looked at close up, not used to the thing I was looking at looking back. Certainly my own mother had never done such looking, and in general my face had the kind of smooth, round stupidity that did not prompt the world's study. I had always felt as hidden as the hull in a berry, as secret and fetal as the curled fortune in a cookie, and such

hiddenness was not without its advantages, its egotisms, its grief-fed grandiosities. "Here, let me take your coat," Sarah Brink said finally, and only then, as she lifted it off me and headed across the foyer to hang it on a hat rack, did I notice that she was as thin as a pin, not pregnant at all.

She led me into the living room, stopping at the large back window first. I followed her, tried to do what she did. In the yard, most of a sizable oak tree split by lightning had been hacked and stacked by the garage for winter firewood. Near its old stump, another tree—tenuous, young, with the look of a swizzle stick—had been planted, trussed, and braced. But Sarah wasn't studying the trees. "Oh, for the love of God, look at those poor dogs," she said. We stood there, watching. The dogs next door were being kept in their yard by an invisible electric fence. One of them, a German shepherd, understood the fence, but the other one, a little terrier, did not. The German shepherd would get a game of chase going around the yard and lead the terrier right to the electrified border and then stop short, leaving the terrier to barrel on ahead into the electricity. The stunned terrier would then come racing back, shrieking with pain. "This has been going on for weeks," Sarah said.

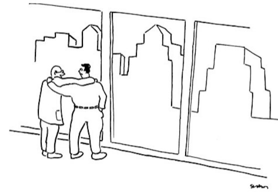
"Reminds me of dating," I said, and Sarah spun her head around, to size me up again. Heat flew to my face. Dating? What did I know of it? My roommate, Murph, had done all the dating and had essentially abandoned me so that she could now sleep every night with this new guy she'd met. She had bequeathed me her vibrator, a strange swirling, buzzing thing that when switched to "High" gyrated in the air like someone's bored thick finger going whoop-de-do. Whose penis could this possibly resemble? Someone who had worked in a circus, perhaps. Maybe Burt Lancaster's in "Trapeze." I kept the thing on the kitchen counter, where Murph had left it for me, and occasionally I used it to stir my chocolate milk.

Sarah turned back to the window. "The neighbors just put in that invisible fence," she said. "In November. I'm sure it causes M.S. or something."

Then she got down to business. "Have a seat. Here's the deal." She motioned with an arm tossed suddenly out in a spasm. "Childcare," she began, but then stopped, as if that were sufficient.

"Oh, my husband's fine in bed as long as he stays on his side."

I sat down on a chair that was upholstered in a kind of pillow ticking. "Childcare," like "healthcare," had become one word. I was about to become a dispenser of it. I opened my backpack and began fumbling through it,



looking for a copy of my résumé. Sarah sat across from me on a pale-gray sofa, the very brightness of her looking as if it might stain the cushions. She twisted her legs up and around each other in such a way that the lower half of one gave the illusion of jutting out of the upper half of the other, as if she had the backward knees of a crane. She began clearing her throat, so I stopped fumbling and set the backpack aside. "Already the winter air is getting to me," she said. She turned and coughed again loudly, in that parched fashion that doctors call "unproductive." She patted her flat stomach. "Here's the deal," she said again. "We are adopting."

"Adopting?"

"A baby. We are adopting a baby. That's why we're advertising for a sitter. We'd like to line someone up ahead of time for some regular hours."

I didn't know anything about adoption. I'd known only one adopted girl when I was growing up, Becky Sussluch, who at sixteen was spoiled and beautiful and having an affair with a mussed and handsome student teacher whom I myself had a crush on. In general, I thought of adoption much as I thought of most things in life: uneasily. Adoption seemed both a cruel joke and a lovely daydream—a nice way of avoiding the blood and pain of giving birth, or, from a child's perspective, a realized fantasy of your parents not really being your parents. Your genes could thrust one arm in the air and pump up and down. Yes! You were not actually related to *them!*

"Congratulations," I murmured now to Sarah. Was that what one said?

Sarah's face lit up gratefully, as if no one had yet said an encouraging word to her on the matter. "Why, thank you! I have so much work at the restaurant that everyone I mention this to acts peculiar and quiet, so meanly worried for me. They say, 'Really!' and then all this tension springs to their mouths. They think I'm too old."

I accidentally nodded. I had no idea, conversationally, where we were. I searched, as I too often found myself having to do, to find a language, or even an octave, in which to speak. I wondered how old she was.

“I own Petit Moulin,” Sarah Brink added.

Petit Moulin. I knew of it. It was one of those expensive restaurants downtown, every entrée freshly hairy with dill, every soup and dessert dripped upon as preciously as a Pollock, fillets and cutlets sprinkled with lavender dust once owned by pixies—restaurants to which students never went, unless newly pinned to a fraternity boy or dating an assistant dean or hosting a visit from concerned suburban parents. I knew that Petit Moulin served things that sounded like instruments—timbales, quenelles. God only knew what they were. I had once tried to study the menu in its lit case near the entrance, and as I stared at the words the sting of my own exile had moistened my eyes. The lowest price for an entrée was twenty-two dollars, the highest, forty-five. Forty-five! You could get a Taiwanese oil-and-water bra for that price!

I fumbled in my bag again for my résumé, and found it folded and bent but handed it to Sarah anyway. I spoke. “My father supplied a few of the restaurants around here. A few years back it was, I think.”

Sarah Brink looked at my résumé. “Are you related to Bo Keltjin—Keltjin potatoes?”

It startled me to hear my father’s potatoes—Kennebecs, Norlands, Pontiacs, Yukon golds, some the size of marbles, some grapefruits, depending on drought and digging times and what the beetles were up to—summed up and referred to that way right here in her living room. “That’s my dad,” I said.

“Why, I remember your father very well. His Klamath pearls were famous. Also the yellow fingerlings. And his purple Peruvians and Rose Finns were the first to be sold in those little netted berry pints, like jewels. I’d rush out to the farmers’ market at 6 A.M. to get them. Come April, I should put those back on the menu.” She was getting dreamy. Still, it was nice to hear my father spoken well of. He was not really respected as a farmer back home: he was a hobbyist, a truck farmer, with no real acreage, just some ducks (that every fall raped one another in a brutal fashion we never got used to), a dog, a tractor, a Web site (a Web site, for Christ’s sake!), and two decorative, brockle-headed cows of dubious dairiness. We had also once had an ebullient pig named Helen, who would come when you called her name and smiled like a

dolphin when you spoke to her. And then we didn't see her for a few days, and one morning over bacon and eggs my brother said, "Is this Helen?" and I dropped my fork and said, "This is Helen? Is this Helen?!" The next pig we got we never met, and its name was No. WK3746.

"Yeah, his potatoes have a rep—at least in certain places," I hastened to add. "Even my mother admires them, and she's hard to please. She used to call them *pommes de terre de l'air*."

"That's funny," Sarah said.

I feared that Sarah was one of those women who, instead of laughing, said, "That's funny," or, instead of smiling, said, "That's interesting," or instead of saying, "You are a stupid blithering idiot," said, "Well, I think it's a little more complicated than that." I never knew what to do around such people, especially the ones who, after you spoke, liked to say, enigmatically, "I see." Usually I just went mute.

"Potatoes are grown from the eyes of other potatoes," I said, apropos of God knows what.

"Yes." Sarah looked at me searchingly. "Your father seemed like a nice man. How old is he now?"

"Forty-five."

"Forty-five! Why, I'm forty-five. That means I'm old enough to be your . . ." She took a breath, still processing her own amazement.

"To be my dad?" I said.

Sarah Brink laughed, a quasi-laugh, a socially constructed laugh—a collection of predetermined notes, like the chimes of a doorbell.

"So here's the job description," she said when the laugh was through.

Walking home, I tried to remember everything that Sarah Brink had said to me. It was a mile back to my apartment, so I replayed long snippets of her voice, though the cold air was the sort that bullied a walker into mental muteness. *This is an incredibly important*

position for us, even if we are hiring at the last minute. If we hire you, we would like you to be there with us for everything, from the very first day. We would like you to feel like part of our family, since, of course, you will *be part of it.*

I tried to think who Sarah Brink reminded me of, though I was sure it wasn't anyone I'd actually met. Probably she reminded me of a character from a television show I'd watched years before. But not the star. Definitely not the star. More like the star's neatnik roommate or the star's kooky cousin from Cleveland. I knew that, even once she had a baby, she would never be able to shake the Auntie Mame quality from her mothering. There were worse things, I supposed.

My apartment was in one of those old frame houses close to campus, in the student ghetto that abutted the university stadium. Across the street, the gray concrete stadium wall rose three times higher than any building around, and overshadowed the neighborhood in a bleak and brutal way. In spring and fall, convening marching bands, with their vibrating tubas and snares, routinely rattled our windowpanes. On Sunday mornings, after the game, the sidewalk was littered with cardboard signs that read, "I Need Tickets."

In the hallway of my apartment, the phone-machine light was blinking and I pressed Play, turned up the volume, then went on into my bedroom, where I flopped down on my bed, in the Icelandic afternoon dusk, door open, to listen. A long, uncertain silence preceded the message. "Yes, hello, this is Sarah Brink phoning for Tassie Keltjin." There was another long, uncertain silence. I sat straight up to hear if there was anything else. "Could she phone me back sometime this evening? Thank you very much."

I got up and rewound the machine and played the message from Sarah Brink again. What was I frightened of? I wasn't sure. But I decided to wait until the morning to phone her back. I got into my nightgown, made a grilled-cheese sandwich and some mint tea, then took them back into my room, where I consumed them in bed. Ringed by crumbs and grease, newspapers and a book, I fell asleep.

I woke up in a blaze of white sun. I had neglected to pull down the shades and it had snowed during the night; the morning rays reflected off the snow on the sills and on the low adjacent roof, setting the room on fire with daylight. I tried not to think about my life. I did not have any good, solid plans for it long term—no bad plans, either, no plans at all—and the lostness of that, compared with the clear ambitions of my friends (marriage, children, law school), sometimes shamed me. Other times, in my mind I

defended such a condition as morally and intellectually superior—my life was open and ready and free—but that did not make it any less lonely. I got up, trudged barefoot across the cold floor, and made a cup of coffee, with a brown plastic Melitta filter and a paper towel, dripping it into a single ceramic mug that said "Moose Timber Lodge." Murph had gone there once, for a weekend, with her new B.F.

The phone rang again before I'd had time to let the coffee kick in and give me words to say; nonetheless, I picked up the receiver.

"Hi, is this Tassie?" the newly familiar voice said.

"Yes, it is." I frantically gulped at my coffee. What time was it? Too soon for calls.

"This is Sarah Brink. Did I wake you? I'm sorry. I'm calling too early, aren't I?"

"Oh, no," I said, lest she think I was a shiftless bum. Better a lying sack of shit. "I didn't know whether I'd left a message on the correct machine or not. And I wanted to get back to you as soon as possible before you accepted an offer from someone else." Little did she know—none of the five other women had even called. "I've talked it over with my husband, and we'd like to offer you the job."

Could she even have checked the references I'd listed? Had there been enough time?

"Oh, thank you," I said.

"We'll start you at ten dollars an hour, with the possibility of raises down the line. The problem is this: the job starts today."

"Today?" I sipped again.

"Yes, I'm sorry. We're going to Kronenkee to meet the birth mother, and we'd like you to come with us."

"Yes, well, I think that would be O.K."

"So you accept the position?"

"Yes, I guess I do."

"You do? You can't know how happy you've made me."

"Really?" I asked, all the while wondering, Where's the new employee's first-day orientation meeting? Where is the "You've Picked a Great Place to Work" PowerPoint presentation? The coffee was kicking in, but not helpfully.

"Oh, yes, really," she said. "Can you be here by noon?"

The appointment with the birth mother was for 2 P.M. at the Perkins restaurant in Kronenkee, a town an hour away with a part-German, part-Indian name that I'd always assumed meant "wampum." The social worker who ran the adoption agency was supposed to meet us there with the birth mother, so that we could all cheerfully assess one another. I had walked the half hour to Sarah Brink's house and then waited twenty minutes while she scrambled around doing things, making quick phone calls to her restaurant—"Meeska, the Concord coulis has got to be more than grape jam!"—or searching madly for her sunglasses ("I hate that snow glare on those two-lane roads"), all the while apologizing to me from the next room. In the car, on our way up, I sat next to her in the front seat, since her husband, Edward, whom, strangely, I still hadn't met, couldn't get out of some meeting or other and had apparently told Sarah to go ahead without him. "Marriage," Sarah said, sighing. As if I had any idea what that meant.

I looked sideways at Sarah, who was hatless, with a long cranberry scarf coiled twice about her neck. The sun caught the shiny artifice of her hair as well as the stray tufts of white lint on her peacoat. Still, especially with the sunglasses in winter—something I had seldom seen before—she looked glamorous. I was not used to speaking to adults, so I felt comfortable just being quiet with her, and soon she turned on the classical-music station and we listened to Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" and "Night on Bald Mountain" for the entire ride. "They've told me the birth mother is very beautiful," Sarah said, at one point. And I said nothing, not knowing what to say.

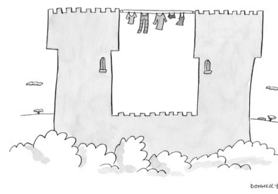
We waited in the second booth at Perkins, Sarah and I sitting on the same side, to leave the opposite seat open for the two people we were waiting for. Sarah ordered Perkins's Bottomless Pot of Coffee for the entire table, and the waitress went away to get it. "Oh, look, here they are," Sarah murmured, and I looked

up to see a heavily made-up middle-aged woman in a deep-pink parka holding the arm of a girl probably my age, maybe younger, who was very pregnant, very pretty, and who, as I could see, even from that distance, when she smiled at us, had scarcely a tooth in her head. We stood and moved toward them. The girl wore an electronic bracelet on her wrist, but was clearly unembarrassed by this because she energetically thrust her hand out of her sleeve in greeting. I shook it. "Hi," she said to me. I wondered what she had done, and why the bracelet was not around her ankle instead. Perhaps she had been very, very bad and had two.

"Hi," I replied, trying to smile companionably and not stare at her stomach.

"This is the mother, here," the woman in the pink parka told the pregnant girl, indicating Sarah. "Sarah Brink? Amber Bowers."

"Hi—it's so wonderful to meet you." Sarah grasped Amber's hand warmly and shook it for too long. Amber kept turning back hopefully toward me, as if she were as baffled as I was to be in the company of these mysterious middle-aged women.



"I'm Tassie Keltjin," I said quickly, shaking Amber's penalized hand again. The delicate knobs of her wrists and her elegant fingers were a strange contrast to her toothlessness and the hard plastic parole band. "I'm going to work for Sarah, as a childcare provider."

"And I'm Letitia Gherlich," the adoption-agency woman said, shaking my hand, though not letting go of Amber's coat sleeve, as if she might escape. Amber did have the face, if not currently the body, of someone who perhaps more than once had made a run for it.

"Hey, Letitia," Sarah said, and threw her arms around her as if they were old friends, though Letitia stiffened a little.

After that, things moved with swiftness and awkwardness both, like something simultaneously strong and broken. We hung up coats, we ordered, we ate, we made chitchat about the food and the snow. "Oh, there's my probation officer," Amber said, giggling; her face brightened, as if she had a little crush on him. "I think he sees us. He's sitting right over there by the window." We looked up to see the probation officer, his blue jacket still on, his bottomless Diet Coke stacked with ice. A going-to-seed hunk in a windbreaker: the world seemed full of them. We all just stared to buy ourselves time, I suppose, and to avoid the actual question of Amber's crimes.

Letitia began to speak to Sarah, on Amber's behalf. "Amber is happy to meet Tassie as well as you, Sarah." Here Amber looked across at me and rolled her eyes, as if we were two girls out with our embarrassing mothers. I had been noticing Amber's face, which was as lovely as advertised but sassy, with a strange electricity animating it; with the missing teeth she seemed like a slightly sophisticated hillbilly or an infant freak. Her hair was a gingery blond, shoulder length, as straight and coarse as a horse's tail.

Letitia, perhaps nervous about the sticky parts of a deal, went on cheerily, "The birth father is white. I did mention that to you, didn't I?"

Sarah said nothing, her face momentarily inscrutable.

Letitia continued. "Tall and good-looking, like Amber."

Amber smiled happily. "We broke up," she said, shrugging.

"Do you have a picture of him, though? To show Sarah?" Letitia was selling the idea of the handsome white-boy dad.

"I don't think I ever had a damn picture of him," Amber said, shaking her head. Now she looked at me, grinning. "Except in my mind. My mind's a regular exhibition." The phrase was oddly reminiscent of the Mussorgsky we'd listened to in the car. And her mouth, with its few and crooked teeth, bits of shell awash on a reef of gum, seemed a curious home for her voice, which was slowly surprising, with its intelligence and humor. There was a lull now. Amber suddenly leaned back, physically uncomfortable.

"So, where's your husband?" she asked Sarah.

I examined Sarah's face for the stiffened look of the accused.

"He's, oh, he's at a meeting his lab is having with the university. I run my own restaurant in town, so I can make up my own schedule as far as meetings go. But, well, he's at the beck and call of others—at least today he is."

"Do you think you really have time for a baby, owning a restaurant and all?" Amber was not shy. If she had been shy, not one of us would be at Perkins right now.

Sarah refused to be flustered. She'd clearly heard remarks of this sort a dozen times. But before she could speak Letitia spoke for her.

"That's why Tassie is here. Tassie's the backup. But Sarah will always be around. She'll be the mom. And she can do a lot of her work right out of the house—isn't that right, Sarah?"

What work could Sarah do from the house? Yell at Meeska about the coulis?

"Absolutely," Sarah said. "Oh, I forgot. I brought you a present, Amber." She took a CD from her purse. "It's a mixed CD of my favorite classical music."

Amber took it and stashed it in her bag with the most fleeting of glances. Perhaps she'd had a slew of these lunches as a means of collecting goodies, which she would later sell on eBay. "And I have a present for you, too," she said, and handed Sarah a foil-wrapped pat of butter she plucked from the bowl on the table. "*Mine's* wrapped!" Amber said, smiling wickedly. The CD hadn't been. A scalding boldness gripped Amber's face, then a kind of guilt, then drifty blankness, like songs off a jukebox list, flipped through unchosen.

"Thanks!" Sarah said gamely. You had to hand it to her. She opened up the butter and applied it to her mouth like lip gloss. "Prevents chapped lips."

"You're welcome," Amber said.

When we all walked out to the parking lot, the probation officer followed. An American flag was flapping noisily next to the Perkins sign; the air was picking up wind and snow. The probation officer walked to his car and got in but did not start it. Amber's face was completely lit up. I saw that she was fantastically in love with him. She was not concentrating on any of us, and something about this provoked Sarah.

"Well," she said, studying Amber with an artificial smile.

"Yes, well," Amber said.

"All right, then," Letitia said.

"Can I give you some advice, Amber?" Sarah asked, standing there, as Letitia clutched Amber even tighter. The windbreakered parole officer gave a wave and drove off.

"What?" Amber said to Sarah, but to me she smiled and said, "He was definitely following me."

"When I was your age, I had some rebellious ideas," Sarah continued her unsolicited advice to Amber. "I got in trouble now and again, here and there, but I realized it was because I was doing things I wasn't any good at. Look at this." She tapped Amber's electronic bracelet with a gloved index finger. "You're eighteen. Don't sell drugs. You're no good at it. Do something you're good at."

Sarah meant this tough-love speech compassionately, I could see, but Amber's face flushed with insult, then hardened. "That's what I'm trying to do," she said indignantly, and tore herself from Letitia's grip, walked over to what was apparently Letitia's car, and got in on the passenger side.

Baby, it's scold outside, Murph would have said if she had been there.

"We'll talk later," Letitia called to Sarah, waving goodbye and hurrying off to Amber.

"Well," Sarah said as we both got into her car. "That was, for all intents and purposes, a complete disaster." She started up the engine. "You know?" she continued. "I always do the wrong thing. I do the wrong thing so much that the times I actually do the right thing stand out so brightly in my memory that I forget I always do the wrong thing."

We rode home mostly in silence, Sarah offering me gum, then cough drops, both of which I took, thanking her. When I glanced over at her, driving without her sunglasses, her scarf wrapped now around her head like a babushka, she seemed watery, far away, lost in thought, and I wondered how a nice, attractive girl—for I thought I had glimpsed on the way up the girl she once was, her face still and thoughtful, her hair in the sun ablaze with light—how a girl like that became a lonely woman with a yarny schmatte on her head, became this, whatever it was. After a childhood of hungering to be an adult, I no longer felt much hunger. Unexpected fates had begun to catch my notice. These middle-aged women seemed very tired to me, as if hope had been wrung out of them and replaced with a deathly, walking sort of sleep.

Sarah's cell phone played the beginning of "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," its vigorous twang not unlike a harpsichord, and so not completely offensive to the spirit of Mozart, who perhaps did not have to roll about in his grave as much as so many of his colleagues did, since the advent of electronic things.

Sarah pulled the phone from her bag, slowing the car slightly as she did. "Excuse me," she said to me. "Yeah?" she said into the phone. All this despite the bumper sticker on her car that read, "Perhaps You Would Drive Better with That Cell Phone Shoved up Your Ass." She also had one that said, "If God Speaks Through Burning Bushes, Let's Burn Bush and Listen to What God Says." It was interesting to me that such a woman, one with such rhetorical violence affixed to her car, had got past the adoption agency's screening procedures, whatever they were.

"Sarah, hi, it's Letitia," I heard.

I don't know why I could hear so clearly—perhaps Sarah was a little deaf and had the volume turned up high.

"Hi, Letitia." I believed I wasn't supposed to listen, so I looked out the window at the bleak snowy landscape; the sun was low and feeble, dissolving whitely like a lemon drop. Each town we passed through had a Dairy Queen, with customers lined up, even in winter. When I looked back at Sarah I saw her powdered, thinning skin like a crêpe, with the same light freckles as a crêpe, her gnarly-knuckled hand, arthritic from chopping herbs, going through her spiky russet hair, knocking back her scarf.

Education had not entirely elevated my concerns in life. It had probably not even assisted my analyses of these concerns. I was too fresh from childhood. Subconsciously, my deepest brain still a cupboard of fairy tales, I suppose I believed that if a pretty woman was no longer pretty she had done something bad to deserve it. I had a young girl's belief that this kind of negative aging would never happen to me. Death would happen to me—I knew this from reading British poetry. But the drying, hunching, blanching, hobbling, fading, fattening, thinning, slowing? I would just not let those things happen to *moi*.

Sarah switched ears, making it harder for me to hear, but then switched back and slowed to let a convoy of trucks pass. I could hear Letitia: "If this doesn't work out with Amber, there are babies on the international market. We've had a lot of luck with South America. Paraguay has opened up again, and other countries, too. And they're not all brown there, either. There's been a lot of German influence, and some of these kids are beautiful, very blond, or blue-eyed, or both."

"Well, thanks for the info," Sarah said brusquely. "Get back to me on Amber." Letitia then said something I couldn't make out, and Sarah said quickly, "Gotta run—there's an ice patch ahead," and snapped the phone shut.

"The babies of Nazis," Sarah said, shaking her head. "They're hawking Nazi babies. Racially superior. Unbelievable." She raked her fingers yet again through the bright desert grass of her hair. "Blue eyes!" she cried. "The human race has really come a long way!" She shook her head again, this time with a horsey, nasal exhalation of disgust.

"Yeah," I said dopily.

"You may be too young to know this yet, but eventually you will look around and notice: Nazis always have the last laugh."

Then we were wordless through the towns of Terre Noire and Fond du Marais, places named both whimsically and fearfully by French fur traders, before the subsequent flattened pronunciations by Scandinavian farmers made the names even more absurd: "Turn Ore" and "Fondu Morass."

"You'll find I say about eighty-nine per cent of what's on my mind," Sarah said. "For the other eleven per cent? I use a sauna."

She put a CD in the car player. “Bach’s first French suite. Do you know it?” After some clicking and static, it began, stately and sad. “I think so,” I said, not sure at all. My friends had already begun to lie, to bluff a sophistication that they felt they would authentically possess by the end of the ten-second bluff. I was not only less inclined this way but less skilled. “Maybe not, though,” I added. Then, “Wait, it’s ringing a bell.”

“Oh, it’s the most beautiful thing,” she said. “Especially with this pianist.” It was someone humming along with the light dirge of the Bach. Later, I would own every loopy Glenn Gould recording available, but there in the car with Sarah was the first time I’d ever heard him play. The piece was like an elegant interrogation made of tangled yarn, a query from a well-dressed man in a casket, not yet dead. It proceeded slowly, like a careful equation, and then not: if *x* equals *y*, if major equals minor, if death equals part of life and life part of death, then what is the sum of the infinite notes of this one phrase? It asked, answered, re-asked, its moody asking a refinement of reluctance or dislike. I had never heard a melody quite like it.

Outside my house, Sarah put the car in park. She patted me on the shoulder, then let her hand run down my coat sleeve. “Thanks,” she said. “Phone me when you get back into town after Christmas.” Her face looked fantastically sad.

“O.K.,” I said. “Sounds good.” *Sounds good*. It was the Midwestern girl’s reply to everything. It appeared to clinch a deal, was somewhat the same as the more soldierly *Good to go*, except that it was promiseless—mere affirmative description. It got you away, out the door. ♦

LORRIE MOORE