

Stillborn · Maribeth Fischer

“Nothing hurts as bad as they say it does,” she told me later. “And clear, pure memory doesn’t hurt at all. What hurts is forgetting.”

—Josephine Humphreys, *Rich in Love*

A FEW SUNDAYS AGO my mother phoned as I was eating dinner in front of the TV, her voice startling me because it wasn’t her usual time to call. The minute I picked up the receiver, she said, “I don’t want to talk, but I just had to phone you, Beth.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, nothing at all,” she told me. “It’s just that I found another book—” She paused. “It’s about a mother who leaves.”

She didn’t need to say anything else. I scribbled the title and the author’s name on the back of a mail-order catalogue and hung up after promising to buy the book as soon as I finished with classes the following afternoon. “It’s hardback,” she cautioned just before I got off the phone. “I’ll send you the money if you need it.”

After hanging up, I sat still for a moment, listening numbly to the voices on the TV and remembering that summer five years before when my mother first left our family to be with a man who was nothing more to me than a name and a photograph from her 1959 high school yearbook. I was twenty-two at the time, newly married and living in Iowa. It was a summer of drought, of endless bone-white skies and acres of dying cornfields. I could hardly imagine then, as the sun brutalized the landscape, that grief wasn’t simply something to get through, like a bad season or a dry spell.

I stared down at the new title in my hand. Ever since my mother left, I’ve been reading novels and short stories about women who leave their families. I know, of course, that the books won’t give me the answers, but that’s not what I want anymore. I am simply trying to find in fiction what I can not find in real life—understanding.

When I read Richard Ford’s short story “Great Falls,” my mother had only been gone for three months. It was September and I still believed that she’d be home in time for Christmas. The story was told from the perspective of an eleven-year-old boy named Joe, who made me think of my younger brother Mark, only a year older. Home in New Jersey, Mark

would have started school already and I tried to picture him in the mornings, waking up, realizing—as I did every day—she’s gone, and, worse, *she left*.

“And my mother herself—why would she do what she did?” Joe asks at the end of the story. “I have never known the answer to these questions, have never asked anyone their answers. Though possibly it—the answer—is simple: it is just low-life, some coldness in us all, some helplessness that causes us to misunderstand life when it is pure and plain, makes our existence seem like the border between two nothings, and makes us no more or less than animals who meet on the road—watchful, unforgiving, without patience or desire.”

I read that quote ten, fifteen times, the words “low-life” and “coldness” echoing in my head long after I’d put the book away. How I hated what those words suggested; how I still do: that ultimately our most painful decisions are borne *not* of grief or fear, love or regret or joy but, instead, of a terrible selfishness which lies beneath the surface of our lives like a cancer. I hated the implication that it was that simple, that arbitrary, that just as anyone could be struck with illness—so could any of us be struck by this “coldness,” this numbing inability to distinguish right from wrong.

There were other books. In one, the mother who left had dark permed hair and long blood-red fingernails. She drank too much whiskey and talked too loudly about the men—and the woman—she had loved. In another, the mother was sick, abusing her daughter sexually. And in the novel my mother phoned to tell me about a few Sundays ago—*Father Melancholy’s Daughter* by Gail Godwin—the mother who left her family dies before she has a chance to come home, before her daughter can understand.

Last week I read the novel *Rich in Love* by Josephine Humphreys. In this story, the mother leaves so abruptly that when her daughter comes home from school the door of her mother’s car is hanging open and her macramé purse, along with a bag of groceries, is still sitting on the front seat, where a container of butter pecan ice cream has melted. Two hundred pages later, the mother returns, her leaving “like a television serial that had gotten so complicated the plot could only be resolved by calling itself a dream, backing up and starting all over again.”

I realized, then, that for most people, most women, what my mother did five years ago truly is unimaginable. And yet I, her oldest daughter, not only have to imagine it, I have to understand it.

Recently I listened to a friend of mine, an artist, talk about how she wants to go to an artist's colony to work on some paintings. But she can't bear to leave her children—in ten years she has never been away from them for more than a few days. As she talks of leaving, something happens in her face, to her eyes. Although the children—a boy, ten, a girl, six—are not here with us in this restaurant, they are present in the tightening of my friend's jaw, in the way she nervously grips the stem of her wine glass. She is suddenly so anxious that her husband reaches to cover her hand with his own. Susan has heard my mother's story; she hasn't judged it, and wouldn't judge it, yet I know that she cannot imagine ever doing what my mother has done. I also know, however, that until the day she left, my mother herself could not have imagined it either.

I wish I could explain to Susan how it happens so quickly. *Nobody* thinks she can do it. Maybe that's why, of all the books I've read, the only insight that rings true for me is the detail about the ice cream melting all over the front seat of the car. I know it really does happen this way, as you are carrying groceries into the house or ironing your son's favorite soccer shirt or standing in front of your closet wondering what to wear. I know the unimaginable becomes imaginable in a moment just that ordinary.

Until the day my mother walked out, I naively thought that it was only a certain kind of woman who would do such a thing; a woman who shouldn't have had children or never really wanted them in the first place; a woman whose daughters spoke of her with contempt and shame. And if she was a good woman and she just happened to have made a mistake, well then, she'd come back, wouldn't she? Just like Meryl Streep in *Kramer vs. Kramer*. She'd come back full of regrets and promises never to leave her son again.

Two weeks before my mother left and flew to Montana with Nick, her former high school sweetheart, my husband and I came home from Iowa to visit. It was then, my first morning back, that my mother confessed to me her longing to leave. Dan, my stepfather, had left for work over an hour before; my younger brother was at school; my husband was asleep in my childhood bed. My mother and I were sitting in the kitchen, picking at a plate of hot blueberry muffins. Rain clattered against the bay windows, which were steamed from the heat of the oven.

“I think I’m in love with someone else,” my mother said quietly, staring down at her hands. She spoke the words so quickly that I couldn’t understand them at first. They sounded like pig Latin: *mai nai ovelay ithway omeonesay*. I remember feeling frustrated, wanting to shout at her, What are you talking about? Even now I’m not sure if she repeated what she’d said or if the words themselves unscrambled. All I know is that I heard them as an echo, blurred and distorted, as if she’d shouted them across a distance. *I’m in love with someone else.*

Outside everything looked very shiny and very green: Bottle-green. Apple-green. Sea-green. Olive-green—as if my sister and I were still kids and had just gone down a row of Crayolas and scribbled long streaks of that color over and over across the window. Nick, my mother had called him, this man she apparently loved. *Nick*. The name was familiar and I recognized the way she said it, the same way that I could identify songs I hadn’t heard in years. Vaguely, I remembered kneeling on the living room floor with my mother when I was still young enough not to be in school. It was raining then too, a slow, silent drizzle like lines of static across an old black and white movie. Twenty-eight years old, already divorced from my father, she was showing me her scrapbook and high school yearbook, pointing to a photograph of a thin, dark-eyed boy I didn’t recognize. I wondered if this was when I first heard my mother say Nick’s name. “This is the boy I dated before I married your father,” she might have confessed. Five or six years old, I would have looked at her in amazement, shocked to think of her dating or going to parties, incredulous to realize that once my mother had been young—as young as the high school girls who lived across the street from us.

Whenever I asked my mother why she and my father had divorced, a divorce they had always described as “amicable,” she would turn away and answer quietly, “Your dad and I are good friends now, Beth. That’s all that matters.” Or, “Our marriage was pretty painful,” she would say, “I really don’t want to talk about it.” The minute I heard about Nick, though, I questioned that “painful marriage.” I wondered if he was the real reason I couldn’t remember my father ever living with us.

Sitting in my mother’s kitchen two weeks before she left with Nick, I heard her say that she had practically been engaged to him when she was twenty and that her parents had convinced her to break it off. “They never gave him a chance,” she said. She sounded distant as she spoke of it, a

cadence of sorrow in her voice that I'd never heard before. I thought of how, when my older brother and I were kids, we used to tie rubber bands around empty shoe boxes and pluck them as if they were guitars. But we could never control their deformed, squeaking twang; we could never make real music. My mother's voice had that same wire-tweaked quiver. I wanted to lay a steady palm against the shuddering cords of her throat.

"I don't mean to make this sound like a soap opera," she said. "It wasn't. It was just the fifties. But we wanted different things then, Beth. I wanted a nice house and good clothes for myself and my children—I don't think there's anything wrong with that either—and my mother kept telling me that I'd never have that with Nick, that Nick would never amount to anything, that if I married him it would be the biggest mistake of my life." She shook her head, brushing the memory away like a strand of hair fallen in front of her eyes. "When I look back, I don't understand it," she whispered. "I was twenty years old then. Why didn't I stand up to my parents?" She spoke so softly that I could barely hear her: "I was afraid." Her face was lacquered with tears; I felt as if I was staring at her through a window. Without looking at me, she continued: "So, I ended it. I sent Nick a Christmas card and told him I'd decided to marry your dad. I wanted to write a letter, I wanted to explain, but didn't know how, I didn't know what to say. . . ." She shrugged and tried to smile, as if to show me that she understood how ridiculous this all was, but her face crumpled and she began to cry. Outside the rain had stopped. The sky, a flat yellow-brown, was the color of water stains on old love letters. "What I did to Nick was the cruelest thing I have ever done to another person," my mother said. "And I've never gotten over it."

It was then that she told me that Nick had phoned her one afternoon a few weeks before. It was the first time she had heard from him in over twenty-eight years. He was at his sister's, he said. Her name had come up, and he got to wondering how her life had turned out.

"What did you tell him?" I didn't look at her when I asked, afraid of the truth I might see in her eyes.

Gently, she touched my arm. "I told him I was happy," she said. "And I meant it. I was."

"Then what—"

But she held up her hand to stop me. "Nick told me he had business in Philadelphia, and he wanted to know if I could meet him for lunch—" She

glanced at me hesitantly. "I told Dan about it, Maribeth. I honestly didn't think it would be a big deal and certainly I had nothing to hide." She started crying again. "It's not what you might be thinking. The entire lunch Nick and I talked about our kids and afterwards we didn't even hug goodbye. I figured I'd never see him again."

"So *what* happened?"

"I don't know. Dan brought me home and then went back to the office for a few hours and I—" She drew in her breath, seemed to hold it in her throat for a moment and then blew the words out like smoke. "I phoned Nick, Maribeth. I told him I'd never stopped loving him."

"You did?" I asked incredulously. "You?"

She left abruptly on a Monday morning. For the first time in her life she rode in a taxi alone, then boarded an airplane without her husband or children. She went to Milwaukee, the city where she and Nick had grown up, where they had met and fallen in love. The following morning they flew to Montana, a place my mother had never been. Later, try as I might, I couldn't picture her in such barren, open surroundings, in "a landscape dominated only by sky" and "punctuated," as she would eventually write, "not by sounds but by stillness." Earlier that spring, however, Nick, a roofing consultant, had been contracted to fix the leaking stone walls of a small church near the town of Hardin, Montana. Stone by stone his crew would take the building apart that summer and then slowly rebuild it. My mother would spend her afternoons in a tiny café, drinking iced tea and trying to concentrate enough to read. Most days, she would tell me, she couldn't get through more than a page.

In Iowa the drought continued. For weeks at a time it seemed this was all anyone talked about. In the afternoons the local pancake house where I waitressed was filled with farmers drinking cup after cup of coffee. There was nothing to do except pray for rain, and hope. Often, driving west along Route 30 towards the next town, I would see women standing on their porches, staring out at the flat expanse of yellow-blue sky, waiting. In July there was talk of bussing in a tribe of Sioux Indians from South Dakota to perform a rain dance.

I too spent the summer waiting, first for her letters, then for the sound of her voice over the phone. At night I would sit for hours, watching as the

sun set and the Iowa sky darkened, tightening like skin around a wound. I tried to picture her in Montana, tried to imagine her sitting at a dinner table with him, laughing softly as she took a sip of wine. I wondered what he looked like and what about him was special enough that my mother would abandon her life to be with him. Each time I thought of him, though, all I could see was the vague image of that dark-eyed boy from the yearbook; and all I could hear was the echo of my mother's voice: "I never stopped loving him."

By the autumn my mother and Nick had returned to Milwaukee and were living in a small two-bedroom apartment just off the interstate. Alone, with no friends, no one she could talk to in the long afternoons when Nick was at work, my mother often phoned me. She told me of the different recipes she was trying; she described the books she was reading—Jane Smiley's *The Age of Grief*; Mona Simpson's *Anywhere but Here*; she tried to laugh at herself for feeling such exhilaration the day she passed the Wisconsin driver's test. "I did it," she said, her voice ebullient. "Can you believe it, Beth?"

Quietly, I congratulated her. I knew it didn't matter that my mother had been driving all her life. It was as if she were seventeen, as if she had gotten her license for the first time.

When she phoned me on September fourteenth, however, I knew the minute I heard her voice that everything had changed. "It's me," she whispered when I picked up the phone. She sounded scared.

"Are you all right?" I said.

"I don't know. I was okay when I woke up. I was going to do some reading and I'd taken some spaghetti sauce out of this freezer for dinner—" She began to weep. "All of a sudden the pain just started washing over me, Beth, and I couldn't stop it. I realized it was Dan's birthday yesterday and our anniversary tomorrow and I didn't understand what I was doing here anymore. *Why* am I taking spaghetti sauce out of this freezer, *why* am I not home in my own kitchen?" She was sobbing now. "And that's not all."

She waited for me to remember and, of course, I did: on this day fourteen years ago she had given birth to a stillborn, a seven-pound boy named and baptized Daniel Joseph. In all the years since it had happened, she had spoken of it to me only once before.

"There's been so much loss," she said. "And it's too much, Beth, it's just too much."

I remember feeling frightened for her. There was such unrestrained sorrow in her voice that I thought of water, black ocean water on a moonless night—and how afraid I was to enter it, to wade deeper than my calves.

Outside it was a bright autumn day. A breeze riffled the papers spread out on my coffee table. I heard a bus pull away from the stop outside my apartment. I thought of the other September fourteenth, of the day the baby had been born.

It had been a rainy Friday. My sister, brother and I had come home from school to an empty house and a neighbor waving at us from under a dark umbrella across the street. “Over here, kids!” she called. “Your parents aren’t home.” The three of us raced across the street, kicking up arcs of rain behind us. My older brother won as always, beating my sister and me to the neighbor’s porch. “She’s having the baby, isn’t she?” His delighted squeal seemed to skip over the puddles like a stone flung sideways across the surface of a pond. My sister and I were also shouting by now: “Is she having the baby?”

The neighbor offered a tenuous smile. “I think I’ll let Dan tell you all about that when he gets here,” she said.

A few hours later, my stepfather picked us up and took us home. “Your mother had a boy,” he told us as he tried to get us to come sit with him on the couch. But we were jumping and screaming in celebration. My brother was yelling to the tune of “Old McDonald” — “B-B-B-O-Y, B-B-B-O-Y, B-B-B-O-Y, Yes I have a Bro-ther!” — until finally my stepfather blurted it out—that the baby was dead.

On the phone now, fourteen years later, I asked, “Is it the baby, Mom? Is that why you’re so upset?” I was upset myself. “Should I call Dan?”

“There’s really no point,” she whispered. “I’ve hurt him too much already.”

“It’s not irreparable,” I said. “You can still go home.”

For a moment she didn’t say anything. I felt how the echo of that word—*home*—hung between us, static in the line so that it seemed we were losing our connection.

“I can’t,” she said finally. She sounded surprised, as if this wasn’t what she had planned on saying. Again she repeated it, testing the words the way I had once tested a snowflake on the tip of my tongue. “I can’t.” Her voice was choked with something I couldn’t name—panic or resignation perhaps,

or maybe simple grief. After she hung up, I remember standing for what seemed a long time with the phone against my ear, coiling the cord around and around my fingers as if, somehow, I could reel my mother closer.

She is driving home from the food store one morning in late September. It is early, only a little past seven, but she has been unable to sleep lately and decided she would get the shopping out of the way. It is cold out. When she came out of the apartment this morning she noticed the windshields of the cars were covered with a layer of frost as thin as parchment paper. Already she wears a winter coat and, as she is setting the grocery bags into the back seat of her car, she sees her breath dissipate into the cold morning sky. In New Jersey it would still be warm, she thinks, she would be having coffee on the side porch, twelve-year-old Mark would be getting dressed for school in the clothes she bought him last spring.

She is almost at the turn-off to her apartment complex when she sees the children waiting at the bus stop, sees the group of women, their mothers, standing in a huddle around them, trying to shield the children from the wind blowing off Lake Michigan. Suddenly she feels ill. She thinks of Mark, of how each morning, after he was dressed and his bookbag was packed, he'd come to her room and wake her by laying a warm washcloth on her face, the same way Dan had woken him. She thinks of his face in the window of the school bus, remembers that he was so scared on his first day of kindergarten that he threw up. She is afraid she herself will be sick and pulls the car onto the shoulder of the road. Later she will call me. She will tell me this story.

Still, she will fly home to see Mark twice that autumn and, twice, despite the obvious pain she is feeling, she will return to Milwaukee.

I picture her that autumn in the various gift shops near her apartment, where she spends afternoons hoping to find in some pre-printed Hallmark card words which might somehow neutralize her family's anger. Too dressed up in the clothes she has no other place to wear, she lingers at the racks of specialty cards: "To A Special Daughter"; "To A Wonderful Son"; "Have I told you I love you lately?"; "How much do I miss you, let me count the days." I wonder if she notices the blue and white posters one aisle over advertising Yom Kippur cards. Does she know this means "Day of Atonement"? Does she know that all she has to do to be forgiven is come home?

My mother and Nick returned to Montana for Thanksgiving, hoping, I imagined, to find again the brief happiness my mother must have felt there earlier that summer. I was convinced, however, that waking to the silence of a hotel, eating Thanksgiving dinner in a restaurant—being without her children on a holiday—would only remind her of all that she had lost. Consequently, I allowed myself to hope: as I stood alone in my own kitchen on Thanksgiving morning, making stuffing the way she had taught me and baking the traditional pies she had always made, I promised myself that soon she would come home. She had to, I thought. How could we get through the holidays without her? And how could she get through them without us?

I pictured her in Montana, lying alone in the queen-sized bed of the Western Inn where they were staying, waiting for Nick to return from the dining room with the pot of coffee and the freshly baked brioche which the concierge set out each morning. I could see her growing impatient and hungry, wondering what was taking so long, could see her wrapping herself in the thin chenille bedspread and walking to the high latticed windows, which reminded her more of Europe, she wrote, than of the “Wild West.”

In Iowa, as I set out the china and silver we’d received as wedding gifts, as I served turkey to the friends my husband and I had invited to dinner, as I wrapped leftovers for them to take home, as later that night I sat in the dark eating piece after piece of French silk pie, I pictured my mother standing at this window, her head against the glass, the sunlight falling over her like a white slip. Perhaps this is when she would feel the heaviness in her body, the stillness. Perhaps this is when she would realize that the new life she had wanted so much with Nick had quietly died inside of her. I could see her crying now, could see her moving slowly across the room towards the phone. . . .

I replayed this scene in my mind until it became spliced into all our other home movies: my older brother and I as toddlers fighting over a tricycle; my younger sister’s first birthday party; the endless reels of my mother and stepfather’s trip to Arizona the month before Nick phoned—minutes and minutes of blurred purple and red canyon walls like the insides of the huge heart we had walked through as kids at the Franklin Institute in downtown Philadelphia. And then I pictured my mother standing at the window in that hotel room, her pain so focused it became its own landscape.

The Thanksgiving weekend passed, however, and nothing happened. When I talked to my mother a week later, she admitted that the holiday had been horrible. But it no longer mattered, because whatever “horrible” meant, my mother hadn’t called us; she hadn’t come home.

“Was her life that bad?” I sobbed to my husband. “Was it so awful that she’d rather be in pain than come back to us?”

When I recall those weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas, weeks which a poet once referred to as “the unimaginable present,” I remember only the confusion and disbelief: she wasn’t coming home. Maybe this was why I watched the documentary about stillborns that was on TV that November. I was willing to look anywhere for a clue—some hint—which would help me to understand: *Why?*

I learned that in Australian hospitals, unlike many in the US, doctors allow a woman who has had a stillborn to hold her baby after delivery. A nurse will take pictures of the child, sometimes let the mother dress the baby in something special to be buried in. Psychologists say that the greatest regret of the mothers of stillborns is that they never held their child, never got a chance to say goodbye. Their sons or daughters were simply whisked out of sight as if they had never existed.

I hadn’t expected the show to upset me. But as I clicked the TV off and watched the screen fade from green to grey to black, I felt as if something was blackening inside of me too. I couldn’t stop thinking about the dark-haired woman on TV who had given birth to three stillborns. For each she had a photo album filled with pictures of her dead child and of herself as she underwent labor. As she was being interviewed, she had almost frantically flipped through the pages of these albums, ordering the cameraman to focus in on the pictures. At one point she had stopped him, pointing to a favorite photograph and trying to explain why she liked it. She tried not to cry when she spoke, but her voice cracked and she had to turn away. I had been horrified.

Later, however, I realized that this horror was unjustified. Those photographs were all she had, the only proof of the life she had borne, a life which *had* existed, despite what everyone told her. And it struck me that perhaps what was truly horrible was *not* that a woman would save a photo album full of pictures of her dead child, but that she wouldn’t; that instead,

afraid of being called crazy or morbid, she would do what everyone said she should—she would forget.

I remembered the afternoon before my mother's stillborn was delivered. By then he hadn't kicked in almost two days. Already she must have known that he was dead. My sister and I had no idea that anything was wrong, however, and so we spent the afternoon coloring pictures for the baby's room.

My mother lay flat in the four-poster double bed, a heating pad rolled like a washcloth beneath her breasts. Each time we finished a drawing we brought it to show her. As we stood hesitantly near her bed, she would smile, momentarily looking away from my stepfather who sat at the desk near the window, absently rolling a pencil over the wood in harsh, jerking movements. "Thanks, guys," she'd say, holding the picture in front of her face and studying it before she set it carefully on the night stand with all the others. There must have been twenty or thirty of them. My sister and I would have colored all night, I think, if it hadn't been for my stepfather.

Entering the room once again with another drawing, my sister behind me, I saw my mother softly punching her clenched fist against her distended stomach. She froze when she saw us peering in the doorway, our pictures held in front of us like invitations for admittance. She cupped her hand slowly, protectively, to her stomach then. In that split second before my stepfather turned away from us, I thought I noticed tears on his face. But he snapped his dark eyes away from me before I could be sure. All I could see was his back, a grey shape outlined by a too-bright September sun, which seemed to lie to us about the season.

"It's okay," my mother said, staring not at us but at my stepfather. And then turning her strange quivering smile on my sister and me, she gestured with both arms. "Come here. Let me see what you colored this time," and we scrambled into the room, hopping knees first onto the bed. I remembered her softness, the damp sweaty smell of her thin velour robe, and then the surprisingly sharp grip of my stepfather's fingers clamped tight around my wrist as he jerked me from my mother.

"That's enough," he said. He tried to hold his voice rigid with control but it came out shaky and painfully frazzled.

My mother said, "It's okay, Dan, really."

In their odd watery stares, I saw an entire conversation that I didn't understand.

My stepfather shook his head and then more gently pulled my sister and me from the bed. “No, it’s not okay.” Then, “God damn it, Laura, you don’t need to do this right now.”

She started to cry. “Yes, I do, this is exactly what I need.”

“How can it be?” he snapped. “You’re not all right.”

“I will be if you’d just let it alone,” she said, her voice growing louder.

But my stepfather pulled us away. “I’m sorry, girls. I don’t mean to make you feel bad, but your mom needs to rest for a while.”

My sister and I went back to our room. We began to clean up and, without talking, arrange the crayons into systematic rows of colors. Midnight-blue, navy, ultramarine, cornflower, skyblue. Darkest to lightest. And then another color.

Fourteen years later, the November after my mother had left, it wasn’t so easy to find a means of ordering the world. As I paced about my apartment in Iowa, pictures of the Australian woman in my mind, I sensed for the first time that my mother probably wouldn’t come home—not because of Nick, not because of the baby who had died, but because somehow, in all the years of forgetting, some part of my mother had died. How dramatic this sounded and yet as I got up from the couch I couldn’t help but recall a conversation I’d had with my mother earlier that autumn. She had been seeing a psychologist in an effort to understand how a woman like herself, a woman who had always prided herself on being a good mother, a good wife, could so suddenly leave. The psychologist, she told me, had written under diagnosis “prolonged grief.” My mother had laughed at this. “What do you mean?” she had asked. “What do you think I’m grieving for? I was happy.”

“So happy that you left,” he reminded her quietly.

Absently, I flicked on the stereo. Anne Murray, one of my mother’s favorites, was singing “Daydream Believer”: “Cheer up, sleepy Jean/ Oh, what can it mean. . . .” Through all those conversations when I had asked her to come home, when she had whispered, “I can’t, Beth. Please try to understand,” she must have known, as I did now, that if she returned we would pretend once again. We would pretend that her leaving had been a whim; we would pretend that she was happy. We would forget—just as we had after the baby died.

She had talked to my sister and me about the stillborn only once, years after the fact. I don’t know how the conversation came up or why we were

discussing it. I simply remembered her describing how her friends pretended nothing had happened, how they acted as if the baby hadn't been real:

"He would have been so sick," they had told her.

"It's better this way. . . ."

"At least you didn't bring him home and start loving him. . . ."

She told us, too, that when my stepfather reached out to hold the baby in the delivery room, the nurse had stepped back and abruptly pulled him away. "It's better if you don't," the nurse apologized. "There's really no point."

"Dan said he had black hair," my mother had told us. "That's all I know." She had turned to stare outside the window, something she did often when she was upset, as if looking at another landscape was all it took to distance herself from the one she was in.

After a moment, she said, "Nobody understood that the baby was already real to me, that he had a personality even in the womb. At the end of the pregnancy, he used to wake up every night at four in the morning—right on the nose. I'd go into the room Dan had fixed up and sit in the rocking chair and sing to him and rub my belly until he settled down." She had laughed quizzically, the way people do at jokes they don't understand. "I mean, I knew even before he was born that he wasn't going to let me sleep through the night the way you guys did—" She had shaken her head in wonderment. "To think that I hadn't already started loving him," she'd said.

I put a pot of water on for tea and went to sit at the table, waiting for it to boil. When I began to cry, my sounds seemingly enormous and out of place in the quiet and darkness, I thought it was for the Australian woman with three dead children, but then it occurred to me that I was crying for my mother, for all that I had never understood. I realized too that I was crying for my own loss. Because all through childhood and adolescence, when I thought I was getting to know my mother, and later, after I was married, when the two of us would sit at the kitchen table for hours, talking and drinking tea—all that time, she had been as distant to me, as unknown to me, as that dark-haired woman on the other side of the world, that woman who, unlike my mother, had understood what it means to grieve.

It's not the stillborn baby I think of so much anymore when September fourteenth interrupts my life like a cold, leaving me achy and tired. It's my mother's wobbly but bright smile as she fixed our lunches before school the morning before the baby was born, knowing that he hadn't kicked or moved for more than two days. It is her making sure we each had a quarter to buy a soft pretzel at recess; it's her going to the hospital without the diaper bag packed full of pastel-colored baby clothes. It is my mother carrying a dead baby inside of her and never letting go of that pink crescent of a smile, which, when I think of it now, seems almost separate from her face. As if that smile had nothing to do with my mother at all.