

“A wonderful novel—I loved every word and could not put it down.”

—Scott Turow

the ANSWER



to your

QUESTION

a novel

PAULETTE ALDEN

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4900 Washburn Ave. S.
Minneapolis, MN 55410

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Published in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-9885189-8-8

First Radiator Press Printing 2013

Library of Congress Control Number: [2012919935](#)

Cover by David Janik
Radiator Press Logo by Rebecca Swift
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The Answer to Your Question

Chapter One: Inga

I remember the day Ben was born, how they laid him on my chest all mottled pink and squirming. When I rubbed my cheek against his tender head, he clutched my finger with his tiny ones as if to claim me. At that moment I thought I understood everything I needed to know about life, as if everything that had been dark became bright, everything that had been ponderous was lifted up on wings of air. There he was in my arms, my baby boy, flesh of my flesh, a miracle beyond comprehension. A miracle because he existed!

And being, he made me. I became myself, Ben's mother. I understood my role, my meaning. I would love him and protect him and raise him up to be a fine and gentle man. I would let no harm befall him. Now it seems to me that that was the last simple thing: how the love I felt for him suffused me until it became embedded in my very cells. Of all the things I'll never really understand, that love is the biggest mystery of them all. It's just an animal thing, I know, a way nature has of insuring the survival of the young. But we like to think we're more than animals; we like to think we have free will, spirits, souls, even. In that way we imagine that we're in control. That we have choices and reasons for why we do the things we do.

Of course that was before everything else. Before Tony Nichols, before I left Charles, before the four girls and Jean. Before the police came knocking on my door. I don't know how many of us there are whose lives are cleaved in two so abruptly. For me it happened on September 10, 1968. At some point the book I was reading, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, dropped from my hands and woke me up, or maybe it was the sharp rapping at the front door. In

all the years I'd lived in the north end of Tacoma, I'd never known of such a thing. I considered not answering, but the rapping intensified, so insistent that I pulled on my robe, switched on the porch light and looked through the peephole. That peephole was Ben's idea—that, and the chain lock so I could open the door a crack but no one could force his way in. I had scoffed that I didn't need such protections, it was a quiet, safe neighborhood after all. The only "crime" I could remember in the eighteen years I'd lived there was when the Gleasons' son threw rocks through the sun porch windows of a duplex down the block.

Outside were two men, their faces ballooned into monstrous size by the lens. One was wearing a police uniform and the other street clothes, though I could see a miniature gun in a shoulder holster, black against his white shirt. I slid the chain off and opened the door. Beyond were three squad cars, their red and blue lights flashing, and several police were running toward the back of the house, the strangest thing.

The one with the shoulder holster asked if they could come in, and he called me by name. Something in my chest lurched then. The uniformed one swept right past me with his gun drawn, and I turned in bewilderment to the older man. "Is Ben all right? Is he hurt?"

From the day Ben was born I feared something would happen to him. I worried that the small lump in his groin when he was a toddler was cancer, though the doctor said it was cat fever from a scratch, a swollen lymph node that would resolve itself in time. I gave the cat away then, though I loved her. Whenever I read stories in the paper of accidents—the child found at the bottom of a swimming pool with the mother a few feet away—that was Ben face down in my mind, or those car accidents with teenagers out for a joyride, until the car flips and rolls. I spent many an anxious night when Ben was in high school pretending to read, trying to familiarize myself with new books we were getting in at the library, but unable to concentrate until I heard

the back door open. It had only been in the past few years, since he left home for college in Seattle and took an apartment there after graduation, that I'd been able to relax my vigil.

"I'm Detective O'Loughlin." Just then I heard the lock on the kitchen door turn and voices in the kitchen. "They have to search," he said, as if I'd understand. Several policemen were running through the house, opening doors with drawn guns. They left a smell of fear and sweat in their wake, masculine and alien, as if their presence had changed the molecules in the air. I pulled my robe tighter. The house is just a little bungalow, two bedrooms, it didn't take long, and all the time the detective and I just stood there in the foyer, waiting, for what I didn't know. I wanted to ask about Ben again, but found I couldn't speak.

"All clear, Ron," the first policeman came back, and in a moment I heard the squad cars start up out front, then pull away into the night. I knew the neighbors would be astir, and I was already forming a story to entertain them: "It was the wildest thing . . . police all over the place . . . false alarm. Can you imagine!" But even as I was spinning it, somehow I knew I'd never tell it.

"Why don't we sit down," Detective O'Loughlin said, and he steered me into the living room with a hand on my elbow, as if I might stumble. I sat down stiffly on my mother's green velvet Victorian sofa. Why she had wanted such an uncomfortable, formal thing in northern Minnesota I'd never know, and why I then wanted it when I moved to Tacoma I'd also never know. For some reason I felt like apologizing for it, the awkward ugliness of it. The detective sat at the edge of the wing chair, perching there really, then pulling it close to where I sat. He introduced the younger, uniformed one as Sergeant Reinhart. He had those intense blue eyes that some Germans have, and high stern cheekbones, with no fat to soften his bony face. He couldn't have been more than twenty-four, twenty-five years old, around Ben's age. I tried a smile on him but he turned away.

The older one, O'Loughlin, looked to be in his late fifties, a sexy kind of man with a cleft in his chin, a little overweight now in middle age, a man who liked to flirt with women I could tell, though now he was dead serious. I felt clairvoyant, as if I could see it all: the wife, the grown kids, the grandkids whom he indulged outrageously. A family man, a man who believed in the law, who was looking forward to retirement in a few years and didn't want to get killed in the meantime by some thug.

"We need to ask you some questions about Ben." He looked at me so intensely I had to look away. I wondered if sweat had broken out on my forehead or upper lip.

"He's never been in any trouble," I said. "What could you possibly want with Ben?"

"Do you know where he is right now?"

"Why do you want to know?"

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. I didn't know what to do with my eyes, where to rest them. I looked at the framed photograph of Ben on the end table, his high school graduation picture. He had always been a good-looking kid, with thick brown hair, only his was naturally curly, something I could have used. I used to pretend to snatch it off his head and put it on my own when he was little, making him laugh. He had been a happy, bright child. He lost some of his playfulness as he got older, though I thought that was natural. Life becomes more complicated for all of us as we grow up. The officer was waiting me out.

"His apartment in Seattle, I assume. I can call him . . ." What I didn't say was that I hadn't seen or heard from Ben in weeks. Though that wasn't unusual. I intended to get up, go to the phone, but I didn't move. My mouth was so dry my words smacked.

“Get Mrs. Daudelin a glass of water, would ya,” O’Loughlin said, and Reinhart disappeared down the hall. When he returned I had to hold the glass with both hands, it shook so hard when I brought it to my lips. My throat felt parched, but I had trouble swallowing.

“Ben isn’t at his apartment, Mrs. Daudelin. We have men there now. Do you have any idea where he might be?”

“Please tell me what this is about.”

The way he looked at me made me go hot and cold at the same time.

“We have reason to believe your son is responsible for at least one and possibly up to four murders of young women. I’m sure you’ve read about them—the bodies found up in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness area.”

My hands flew to my face as if it had caught fire. An idiotic grin distorted my mouth and I let out a weird guffaw. “You have got to be kidding!”

O’Loughlin looked down a moment and the sorrow on his face frightened me more than his words. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Daudelin. This is no joke.”

“Excuse me just a moment,” I said quickly, and I hurried to the bathroom. Almost before I could pull up my robe and gown I erupted with diarrhea. God, was I going to vomit too? Lightheaded, I had to sit there a long moment, my nightgown pulled up around my hips, my naked legs weirdly white in front of me, as if I’d never seen them before. My right leg started jumping like a fish out of water. I wondered if I’d be able to get up on my own, but the idea of the policemen having to come in, find me like that, boosted me to my feet. I stared at the strange person in the medicine cabinet mirror. I ran cold water on a washcloth, bathed my face. Patted down my cowlicks with the washcloth, ran a comb through my hair. Looked around, as if a secret panel might open and I could escape.

There was a soft knocking on the door. “Are you okay in there?”

“Just a moment,” I said, and when I heard the footsteps recede I came out, shutting the door quickly behind me, worried about the smell. I walked back to the living room on legs that felt like a sea creature’s, hoping I didn’t look as bizarre as I felt. O’Loughlin rose like a gentleman as I took my seat again, but it angered me to see the look of pity and concern on his face.

“You’re going to be back here one day apologizing to me for this!”

He leaned forward in the wing chair, resting his forearms on his legs, looking down for a few beats, as if gathering himself. I stared at the backs of his hands, how they were covered in dark hair. “I know this is hard, Mrs. Daudelin, but I need you to understand that Ben is in very serious trouble. Has he been here?”

“I can assure you Ben is no murderer!” I wanted to sound indignant, but my voice wheezed out like a balloon losing air, so that by the time I got to “murderer” I could barely say the word.

O’Loughlin sighed and took a sip from my glass of water on the coffee table. I wondered if I should offer him something. I was shivering, but his face was sweating, so maybe the room was hot. I couldn’t tell. There was a *Time* magazine on the coffee table, the cover a photo of Nixon and Agnew clasping hands and holding them up above their heads, with the caption “The G.O.P. Ticket.” I didn’t even know who Agnew was. I wanted to pick up that magazine and read it more than anything in the world. I clasped my hands together to keep them from reaching for it.

“What evidence do you have?” I squeaked out.

“One of the girls at the erotic massage parlor where Angela Cruz worked knew Ben and identified him as the man Angela left with the night she went missing. We got a positive ID on him from Sissy Bockman’s roommate who was with her at the bar the night she disappeared. All the bodies were found in the same area and appear to have been killed by the same man. We think that man might be Ben.”

I was about to explain that Ben would not be at an erotic massage parlor. But what did I know of what Ben did? My mind veered away from it, the idea of it, whatever it was that happened in such places. I had never been able to talk to Ben about sex. When he began growing body hair, when I realized he had wet dreams, I told him it was time he started washing his own bedclothes, and even that embarrassed us both. I had been an only child, no brothers, I didn’t know much about boys. How I wished then that Ben had a father, but Charles had been out of our lives for years. I had heard he had remarried, that he was living on the East Coast. It was as if we had never known each other, let alone brought a child into the world. I was staring off into space.

“Maybe you should call someone. To come be with you.”

“I don’t . . . What? You mean, like a lawyer?”

“Right now, Ben is a suspect. There’ll be time for legal counsel. We need to find Ben, talk to him. Anything you can do to help us.”

“I see,” I said, not seeing at all. Instead I was thinking about Ben, trying to draw him into my mind, get a fix on him. I couldn’t seem to think straight about him. Who was he? And didn’t I know? Of course I did. He was . . . Ben, he was . . . It was like trying to describe myself.

“Could I call someone for you, Mrs. Daudelin?”

“No, no. It’s not necessary. Just give me a moment. How were they killed? I mean, I must have read . . . I can’t . . .”

“Bound and strangled,” Reinhart said coldly.

“That’s enough,” O’Loughlin waved him off.

Something huge and hard was growing in my chest, pressing on my lungs, making it hard to breathe. “Then it couldn’t have been Ben,” I said.

“Do you mind if we have a look around?”

I got up on my crab legs, not knowing what else to do, and led the way.

I showed him Ben’s room first. It was in perfect order, neat, clean, the way it never was when Ben lived at home. His posters of a ’57 red Corvette and a ’53 red Maserati on the wall, his stereo in the corner, the Fender Stratocaster guitar he wanted so badly and then never learned to play, his books, science fiction and fantasy mainly, not my taste but at least he read something. I gazed at the black globe on his nightstand, which projected stars on the ceiling when the overhead light was off. When he was a boy, still mine, as I thought of it, before he got more complicated, more . . . distant, we’d lie across his bed and recite the names of the constellations, Sagittarius, Orion, Scorpio. Those were happy times, peaceful times, of that at least I was sure.

Detective O’Loughlin was looking in the closet. I’d spread out into Ben’s closet, since he never spent the night anymore, hanging my summer and winter clothes there, depending on the season. So much of life was not what I had expected or would have chosen, but I’d gotten used to it. I would have wanted a child who kept in closer touch, came home more often, took more of an interest in my life, but since that was not the child I had, I’d adjusted. It was closet space going to waste, which I could use.

He looked in my room, the double bed where I slept alone, tousled now from when I leapt up to answer the door. An old maid's room, I felt him thinking, a dried-up aging woman, though I wanted to protest that I was only forty-six. But maybe he was right. I'd only had one lover in the twenty years since I divorced Charles—David Dunn, our family doctor, and given the way I was, it didn't work out. We were back to being friends. Well, regardless of what this policeman thought, I liked the room, with its white spread, opaque white curtains that let light in but kept eyes out, a feeling of sanctuary. A pretty room, feminine without being sweet, comfortable with its reading chair with cream cushions that blended nicely with the whites, a floor lamp and stack of books beside it.

"Nice," O'Loughlin said, giving a nod, somehow embarrassing me.

We peeked in the bathroom, nothing to see there, no lingering odor, thank god, and went down to the kitchen. I always did the dishes and put them away. I tried to view things through this detective's eyes, how he'd see I was a person who didn't let things go, a stable woman with a job, a few friends, a father and a grown child. Not the kind of woman who would have a murderer for a son!

O'Loughlin led the way back to the living room, again with that light touch on my elbow.

"Mrs. Daudelin," he said. "I should warn you. There will be reporters. It'll go national very soon now that we have a lead suspect. There's been a lot of interest . . . and fear . . . around the . . . girls."

I couldn't let my father find out on the news! I rushed to the phone stand in the hall and dialed his number back in Minnesota, up on the north shore of Lake Superior. It rang and rang, after one a.m. there, but I had to wake him. When I heard his voice, *hello, hello, who's there?* I couldn't say a word, my throat closed. All I could do was hand the receiver to the detective.

He cleared his throat. “Sir,” he said slowly. “This is Detective O’Loughlin with the Pierce County Sheriff’s office. I’m here in Tacoma with your daughter—”

“Inga,” I said idiotically, “It’s Inga.”

He paused, then, “With your daughter Inga,” and I could imagine Dad on the other end, frightened, still trying to wake up.

“No, she’s okay, sir. Just upset. That’s right. I’m sorry to have to tell you, sir—but Ben, your grandson, Ben Daudelin, is a suspect in—”

Another pause. “No sir. I’m afraid it’s much worse . . . Murder . . . possibly more than one, actually.”

I motioned for him to hand the phone to me. “Dad, Dad . . . just listen now for a moment. I know. Listen to me, Dad, it’ll be all right. It’s all a mistake. A big mistake!” and I looked O’Loughlin right in the eye. “No, don’t come now. They’re looking for Ben. No, I don’t know where he is! When they talk to him, it will all be cleared up. It’ll be okay, Dad.” I wanted to say *I promise*, but couldn’t. “Don’t watch the news. Don’t turn on the TV. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay. Go back to bed, try to get some rest.”

“He loves Ben so much,” I started to say, but suddenly my legs crumbled beneath me, I sank to the floor, my hands coming up to cover my face. It wasn’t true! How could this be happening? We had to fix it! How could they accuse him? Ben! Ben! Strange guttural sounds were coming from my mouth, tears were streaming down my face.

“Kleenex,” O’Loughlin ordered Reinhart. I went cold and clammy, as if blood were gushing out of my body. Am I dying, I wondered. Is this what it’s like?

O’Loughlin was helping me up, steering me over to the wing chair. “Put your head down between your knees,” he was saying from far away. He pressed on the back of my head until I

leaned over. “Take slow, deep breaths,” and I tried to do as he said. Still, everything was turning black around the edges.

The next thing I knew I was in an ambulance, with an oxygen mask over my face, which I wanted to rip off. I couldn’t believe what was happening. I thought wildly of being at home, in bed, asleep. I struggled to wake up. “Just try to stay calm,” someone was saying as he took my pulse.

At the hospital they hooked me up to an EKG. I tried to think what to do, who to have them call. David, he was a doctor, he’d know what to do. He knew Ben, he would tell them it couldn’t be true. When he arrived I reached for him and he put his arms around me. David’s eyes had been damaged in the war, he wore thick glasses under which his eyes seemed to swim. Except for the brief interlude when we tried to be lovers, he’d been our family doctor since Ben was ten.

“Did they tell you?” I asked him wildly.

Through his thick lens, I saw bewilderment, but he didn’t say a word, just rubbed circles on my back.

When my heart settled down, they let David drive me home. We sat in the living room, he offered me a scotch, even though it was four a.m., or a Valium, but all I could think was that Ben was wanted on suspicion of murder. They didn’t know where he was. The word *nightmare* was too mild. My imagination couldn’t contain what had been shoved into it so brutally.

David stayed the rest of the night, sitting there in the living room, while I went and lay down on my bed. There beside me was the book I had been reading when I dozed off. I stared at it as if I had never seen it before. If only I could go back, back to the person I had been, the life I

had known, before the police came knocking on the door. But the day outside my white curtain brightened, and a life I couldn't conceive of commenced.

Chapter Two: Jean

Mrs. D hasn't been at work for two whole weeks, what with all the commotion about Ben in the news. The police are looking everywhere for him, though they haven't a clue where to find him. All his teachers and friends, the folks who've known him his whole life, can't believe Ben Daudelin could kill those four girls. Just last week his high school principal went on TV to say how Ben had been an excellent student, well liked by all, with leadership potential. But I can believe it, even though I've never met Ben. Things are not always the way they appear. My Ganny has a gift for knowing stuff that other people can't know, and she says I have it too.

People are wondering about Mrs. D too, now. Like maybe she did something to make Ben do the things he did, like dropping him on his head when he was a baby, or withholding love. There's this girl at work I don't like, Margery, who's always going on about Mrs. D being a murderer's mother and how she'll be afraid of her when she comes back to work. It's just foolishness and makes me mad. No one could be afraid of Mrs. D. I can't wait for her to come back.

Mrs. D was the one who hired me in August when I came looking for a job after Jimmy got sent to Nam. I haven't looked it up on the map, though we have a lot of big maps at the library. It's like a made-up word in my mind, Nam.

First thing she asked me was how old I was. I told her sixteen. She asked where I was from. I told her Carolina, like that song they play on the radio all the time. When she looked blank, I sang a little of it: "*In my mind I'm going to Carolina. Can't you see the sunshine, can't you just feel the moonshine . . .*" She laughed a little then, like she liked me even though she had just met me. I liked her too, like I had known her a long time. She asked me why I wanted the

job. I told her about Jimmy being in Nam, and that I didn't know much, but that I liked books. When she asked me what I liked about them, I said all the words. She looked at me then, reading me like one of her books. She has shiny brown hair that she tucks behind her ears when it gets in her way, like she doesn't know about perming or curling it. Her face is no-nonsense but delicate-like, pretty for someone her age. Her eyes are hazel, kind and bright, with eyelashes so thick it's like she's wearing mascara, but I don't think she is.

It was Mrs. D who taught me how it all makes sense. She wanted to train me right, she said, for the future. She showed me how to understand the numbers and letters on the spines of books. We were on the fourth floor, and she said to me, "Each book has its place and no other place will do." She took a book off the cart and studied it, then she ran her finger over the other books in front of us until she found the right place, the only place, and put the book exactly there.

We were getting along just fine until the police came looking for Ben. That first morning after it came out on the news, it was like a lightning bolt had hit the library. Some folks were crying, others were shaking their heads, some didn't say a word, and some took off during their lunch breaks to shore Mrs. D up, tell her it couldn't be true. I guess Mrs. Haskell was the one who took Ben's picture off Mrs. D's desk. It was Ben in knickers and a winter jacket, a thick scarf wrapped around his neck, a red wool cap on his head, holding up what looked like a big moose antler, snow-covered pine trees behind him. You could tell he was Mrs. D's son. Then suddenly his picture was gone, Ben was gone, and Mrs. D was gone, and what had made sense didn't make sense anymore.

Now sometimes I stand among the stacks, and time goes by without me doing a thing. I'll be afraid an hour has gone by, but usually it's only twenty minutes or so, and no one has missed

me. I can't remember what I've been thinking or feeling while I was standing there, but it's different from being asleep.

At home in the evenings I'll sit down to read and the same thing will happen. I'll look down and see the open book in my lap, and it'll be time to go to bed, when I've just got up from supper. Before Mrs. D left, I would read all the time, actually following the words and making sense of them. When she was around, I'd find inter-esting things in the books I shelved, and the day would go fast. Now the days feel stuck, like a clock that's broke.

Lots of days Ben's high school graduation picture is in the paper. You can see why those girls went with him. He has a head of curly hair, a sweet smile, and a black mole by his right eye, a beauty mark like Marilyn has, only hers is by her mouth. It's funny but I feel I have Ben to thank. I already knew the easy things, like not going out at night, not opening the door unless you know who it is, looking in a car before you get in, always locking the doors and never ever walking anywhere alone. But Ben taught me that it doesn't always happen one of those ways—something you can understand and guard against.

Finally our big boss, Mr. Reynolds, told us Mrs. D was coming back to work the very next day. Everybody was so excited, and nervous, too. Mrs. Haskell, who has been telling us shelvees what to do while Mrs. D was gone, broke down and cried. When I heard the news my stomach did a somersault.

At the end of the day Mr. Reynolds had us all gather in the conference room, so he could tell us how to act when Mrs. D came back. While we were waiting, Margery leaned over and pinched my arm to make me look her way. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," she said, to

get my goat. I felt like snatching that dyed yellow hair right off her head, but just then Mr. Reynolds came in and everyone got real quiet and still.

Mr. Reynolds is tall and bald and always wears these brown V-neck vests that match his brown pants. When he's nervous, he runs his pink tongue over his lips, like he's found something good to lick there. "As you all know," he said, lick lick, "Mrs. Daudelin will be returning to the library tomorrow. We will welcome her back, of course, but without too much . . . fanfare." Lick. "Of course. I just want to remind you all to mind your manners. Don't stare. And for Pete's sake don't ask her anything about Ben . . . But don't avoid her, of course. Just act normal." Lick.

"Normal like a murderer," Margery whispered in my ear, and I slammed my elbow into her side.

"She won't be wearing a name tag," Mr. Reynolds said, "to protect her from the public."

But everyone in town already knows who she is. She went on TV right after Ben became a suspect to ask him to come home, but he never did.

On the bus ride home I thought about what I could say to Mrs. D tomorrow. Mr. Reynolds said don't say anything to her about Ben. All I ever say to her is yes ma'am and no ma'am, and ask her which carts of books she wants me to shelve. But maybe this time I would get up my nerve. I would tell her Ben wasn't her fault, that she was a good person and never forget it.

I opened the icebox to see what I could eat for dinner. All that was in there was a half a package of hamburger turning brown. I couldn't remember when I had bought it, but I fried it up. When I smelt it I ate soda crackers instead. I stayed up late watching TV, though what was on I couldn't say. I thought about the four girls and things that were coming out in the newspaper

about them, how their hands had been bound behind their backs, how their throats had been squeezed until they could breathe no more. At some point I fell asleep on the couch, but then I woke up with a terrible start, my heart beating hard. I sat straight up and said, “Monstrous! Monstrous!” though I didn’t even know it was a word I knew.

I overslept and didn’t have time to fix any lunch. I was afraid I’d miss the bus. I flew down the stairs to the parking lot in front of the apartment complex, and there was Jimmy’s truck, grinning at me with its wide metal grill. I hardly ever drove it, ’cause I was afraid of wrecking it. It was Jimmy’s pride and joy, a 1960 Chevy pickup, two tone, with a white roof and body, a green hood and the top half of the back was green. White wall tires. It didn’t have any rust, except in the truck bed. The last thing Jimmy told me before he left for Nam was to take good care of it. I wouldn’t drive it even if I was late to work on this of all days, but I was in luck. The bus was just pulling up to the stop on Military Way when I got there, out of breath and wet, ’cause I had forgot my umbrella.

I was hoping it would be Mrs. D giving me the carts of books to shelve but she was nowhere to be seen. It was Mrs. Haskell again, who is nice, just not as nice as Mrs. D. Maybe Mrs. D hadn’t come into work after all. She wasn’t at her desk like I thought she’d be. It was a letdown for sure, but I carried on, putting each book in its exact and only place the way she taught me.

Since I hadn’t had time to make lunch, come noon I had to walk three blocks to McDonald’s and spend money. When I started across Eleventh Street, I glanced down the steep hill to the Port of Tacoma. White smoke was pouring from smokestacks and a couple of big ore boats were docked down there. Behind them the snow-covered mountains made me think of the

mountains at home. There was that stinky smell in the air from the paper mill, Tacoma aroma. All at once I got the dizzy-head. I was afraid I might puke right there on the sidewalk.

I went on down to McDonald's, thinking maybe food would help. I got a fishwich and a coke and sat down near a girl with a kid. Now I figure that was an omen. She kept putting the baby down, but it pulled itself up by catching on the leg of her jeans. She wasn't but a young girl herself, and the kid had a big moon face with those pimples that babies get. The girl was real skinny, and I wondered if that baby had sucked all the fat out of her. Normally I wouldn't have put my mind to them, but for some reason I couldn't help staring at the kid, the way it pulled at her and looked around so serious, like it had something important on its mind.

Before he left for Nam, Jimmy said he wanted us to have kids. But I told him we needed to wait. It was nothing I could connect with me. Once you have kids, everything is laid out for you. A circle is drawn around you and everything that happens from then on is going to be inside that circle. Like the girl at McDonald's. Her circle was already drawn.

The sick feeling had almost passed, so I figured maybe I was just hungry. All the time I was eating my fishwich that baby was picking up dirty French fries from the floor and putting them in its mouth. Then it pointed straight at me and looked me in the eye, like it knew something.

"Why's your kid pointing at me like that?" I asked the girl.

The girl shrugged and pulled the kid up on her lap. It nearly yanked the neck of her T-shirt down to her titties. Then it squirmed to be let down. As soon as she put it down, it wanted to climb back up. It grabbed and pulled on her, and her just a scrawny worn-out looking thing.

"You wanna hold him?" she said to me. "You hold him awhile."

She jumped right up and delivered him into my arms. He was heavy as a sack of grain, and he made a kind of sucking sound that 'bout made me sick again. He started whimpering, and I knew he was winding up. His face turned red and a blue vein thumped in his temple.

“Here,” I said to the skinny girl, shoving him back to her. He clutched onto my sweater and wouldn't let go, but I pried his greasy fingers loose. “He doesn't like me.”

I was feeling kinda funny again. Maybe that baby had put a spell on me. I ate the whole fishwich 'cause I'd paid for it, even though I'd lost my appetite. When I was walking back up the hill I thought I was going to throw up right there on the sidewalk. I couldn't help picturing that fishwich, how they keep them sitting around too long, how the gob of tartar sauce oozing around the brown square of fish was hard and yellow.

I made it up the library steps, but saliva was flooding my mouth, the strangest thing, just like used to happen when I'd get carsick on windy mountain roads on the way to Ganny's. I ran past the checkout desk up the three stairs at the back to the girls' room, and spilled out everything I'd eaten into the toilet. I sat back on my heels, right there in front of the commode, a dirty place to be but not as bad as the men's. I figured if I could just rest a moment I'd be fine.

That's when Mrs. D came into the bathroom.

She froze like she didn't want to see me, like she wished she could hightail it out of there. But then she sighed big and swooped down beside me. She took me to the sink and patted my face with a paper towel. She smelled clean, like a cucumber, not sweet like perfume. I wanted to put my head on her shoulder, rest there a bit.

My legs felt shaky, like they might fold up beneath me. Mrs. D took me by the arm and led me into the back room where everyone gets their coffee. There were little pink packages of opened sugar scattered on the yellow table, and a bunch of mugs: Mrs. Reynold's black-and-

white one that says “Boss,” Mrs. D’s dark blue one, Mrs. Haskell’s red one oversized like her that says “When Your Wrong, Your wrong.” Eight or ten other ones, all with brown stains inside. It smelled like stale coffee and there was an open box of donuts on the counter.

“Jean—?” she said, like she might have forgot my name she’d been gone so long and so much had happened. There was something different about her face now that she was back, like she’d been slapped. “Are you okay? Maybe you’re getting the flu. . . .”

I told her how I’d gone to McDonald’s for lunch, how I’d eaten the fishwich and felt sick walking back up the hill. “But I’m okay now, Mrs. D.” In truth I still felt queer.

“Have you been sick at your stomach prior to this?”

It was true that I’d thrown up a couple of times lately. I thought it must be what seasickness felt like, though I’d never been on a ship. But until that moment, I had made myself forget about it, like it never happened. That was a trick I learned early in life.

“Jean—you should probably see a doctor.”

“Okay,” I said, though I didn’t mean it. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. But I was not going to go, not to some strange man who’d look at me with hard eyes and poke me with hard things.

“Jean—could you be pregnant?”

Every thought drained from my head.

Then this one thought rose like a mountain in the middle of the road: Jimmy hadn’t used a rubber the last time before he shipped out to Nam. I had figured it didn’t matter. But now I knew that it did matter.

Time passed, as it is bound to do. Then Mrs. D was giving me something, placing it cold in my hands: a mug of ginger ale. To settle my stomach she said. My mind had sat down in the middle of the road like a mule that refuses to budge.

She tore open the saltines package with her teeth, and handed me one. I put it in my mouth because it was there, and I chewed a little piece of it, salt and cracker. It felt like my whole life was rising up inside me like floodwaters, but I couldn't speak a word. Two big tears spilled over and ran down my face but I didn't even know what I was crying for, 'cause it was nothing that had a name.

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