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# Baby

Joyce Carol Oates

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### Recommended Citation

Oates, Joyce Carol (2014) "Baby," *Ontario Review*: Vol. 23, Article 4.

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol23/iss1/4>

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# Baby

JOYCE CAROL OATES

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The second night my brother was home I told him, I told him straight out not troubling to lower my voice, Well she's waiting for you in there isn't she, pretending to be asleep with the light out and it's only nine-thirty. I tried to keep my face from going heavy and sullen like it does. I said, You think I'm blind, the way she's been looking at you all day?—it just about makes me sick.

He's my half-brother not my real brother, three years older than me though he has always acted younger, running off to the Merchant Marines when Ma was sick and losing weight so you could see the bones pushing through the skin, somewhere in the Red Sea (wherever that is: I never had time to look it up on a globe of the Earth) when she died and yours truly had to make the arrangements and pay the bills and deal with the funeral parlor crooks who talk like butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. Already him and Etta's girl were probably carrying on behind my back but my brother looked at me all innocent and a little angry, and said he didn't know what the hell I was talking about.

I said again it just about made me sick, the girl was taking after Etta anyway, you couldn't stop that, but under Ma's roof it made me sick, you'd think some people would have shame.

He said again he didn't know what the hell I was talking about but I had better mind my own business, maybe.

I said right back not troubling to lower my voice that I *was* minding my own business, Etta trusted her girl with me after all and I'd be the one blamed, even if the daughter took after the mother (God forgive me for saying so but God knew it was gospel truth) and surely had tainted blood from the father's side (you could see it in that fat lip no matter how light her skin was, and her hair and eyes), and was already causing trouble at school.

How's she causing trouble at school, my brother asked, like he didn't believe me,—she's too simple, they'd slap her down.

Oh no she is *not* simple, I said. That's just one of her tricks.

My brother got a beer from the refrigerator and started drinking it

with no mind for his rudeness or the fact that I was still talking. I spoke calm as I always do on the subject of Etta's girl (in which yours truly has become an expert and could straighten out the principal and those psychiatrists or whatever they call them at the school but why should I go down there to be insulted?—I already wrote them a dozen letters), explaining that she only pretends to be simple around the house so she can get away with more tricks. Like she pretends to be smiling all the time and humming under her breath and taking an hour to do the dishes and then not drying half the plates right, or forgetting to scour the coffee pot or the oven, and crying when she wants to, her eyes filling up with tears like somebody on television. I told him Etta's girl had been asking when he was coming home for weeks, maybe for months, and the last few days she'd been acting so strange she didn't mind staying out of school to help with the cleaning, just forgot about school, when other times she's scared somebody will come to the door, or telephone asking where she is. I told him I had to laugh, him pretending he could fool *me*. I told him you'd think he would have some maturity at his age—going on forty wasn't it—no matter if the girl was halfway to being a slut and you could wait till Hell freezes over before Etta was going to admit who the father was.

He said he was going out, not to wait up for him—he had plans until pretty late.

I calculated he had been drinking since ten this morning, one beer and then another, taking it slow but drinking steady the way he learned from his father (who was my father too but belonged more to Etta and him, in my opinion), some of the beer here in the house though he knew I didn't approve, and the rest of it in one or another of his beer joints downtown. He was looking up his pals and making telephone calls and I just had to laugh, he got in such a rotten mood by the time he came home for supper, one of his girl friends moved away or wouldn't see him, that was written all over his face. He thinks he's good-looking because of his curly hair and moustache he keeps trim but from the side his chin just dribbles away, he has to stretch to close his lips over those big front teeth, ten times worse than mine. He thinks he's good-looking because probably one of his girl friends (by which I mean some slut or whore he'd never bring to the house) flattered him to get some cash out of him: they know how to do it. And now Etta's girl, not fourteen years old, mooning over him and staring and stumbling like a baby cow when he's in the room—you can see how a man's head is turned.

I followed him out into the front hall and told him he'd better not make a lot of noise when he came back, and he didn't pay any atten-

tion, and outside I could hear him toss the beer can onto the sidewalk,—that's the kind of pig they are, him and Etta both—not caring that it was right in front of the house probably and somebody (yours truly) would have to pick it up next day. This was going onto ten o'clock and near as I could figure out he didn't get home until early morning—five-thirty, maybe.

I thought,—He won't dare, at first. He'll hold back as long as he can.

Which was maybe true, for all I know. He had twenty-one days at home counting the first day and the last.

Or maybe they started in right the next afternoon, when I was away at the doctor's office, first in the waiting room and then in one of his cubicles, all those hours.

Blame it on me for my trusting nature, listening to Etta's lies about when she'd send for her little girl, when she never paid half her share for Ma's funeral or anything else for that matter. (Is this your "little girl," I asked Etta when I saw the child, but she never caught on to my sarcasm or maybe pretended not to hear. I had to laugh, seeing the size of her; and how much she guzzled when you weren't watching.)

First Etta begged, then Etta cried, she promised it wouldn't only be for a few months, until she got settled. I never knew whether there was another man in the picture or not and wouldn't waste my breath asking: there aren't two sisters, half-sisters or whatever, on the face of the Earth more different than Etta and me, praise God. She had the girl, who was eleven at the time, almost pretty except for her small close-set blinking eyes that looked scared all the time, and her mouth that she was in the habit of keeping open (you could hear the poor thing breathe—it was actual panting), and some kind of pimply red skin rash on her arms and neck she couldn't stop scratching. And she had the little boy who was maybe eighteen months old but small for his age, high-spirited and laughing when there wasn't much reason to laugh. Sometimes the girl's daddy and the little boy's daddy was one and the same man (gone out to the State of Washington, going to send for Etta any day), sometimes you got the impression there were two men, two daddies, but I wouldn't lower myself to ask. Etta promised how she'd send money for the girl's room and board (as she called it) and for a few months there was \$20 every other week or so, \$45, \$60 a month, then naturally it tapered off. The last postal money order came from Tampa, Florida, \$45 and zero cents, no note enclosed. That was maybe a year ago.

At least the girl could work around the house and do errands in the neighborhood, that was a blessing. Panting like a cow or a sheep or something, and sweating so you could smell it a room away, and talking to herself under her breath when she didn't think I was close by. . . . The neighbors said how good-hearted I was, they pointed out how Ma always claimed her youngest child (which was me) was the only one that ever loved her or showed respect, but anyway the girl could help out with the housecleaning, that was a blessing. Also, she never gave me any sass or ran away when she was being disciplined the way a brighter girl or boy that age would.

I didn't want to tell them that even so I'd have preferred the little boy, if Etta had given me a choice. (Of course she didn't.) He was noisy and made messes but he took to me right away, flailing his fat little hands around and laughing even when I scolded, like he didn't care what my opinion was, he had his own. One day Etta seen me looking at the baby and said with that nasty laugh of hers, He about ripped me in two, that one, took a night and a morning to get himself born, and the way she said it, and the fact she said it so straight out (we were right in the kitchen getting supper) made me sick to my stomach.

After Etta went away taking the baby and leaving the girl behind I sometimes heard the baby's crying, I thought, coming through the walls, or up the heating ducts from the cellar, but the girl never heard anything so I knew it was all in my head. Then later I forgot about him and told myself I'd better forget about Etta, too.

There's one born every minute ain't there, my father used to say, pointing to some fool or idiot in the newspaper that got himself killed, say, for picking up a hitchhiker, or opening the door to a stranger at the wrong time of day.

All these things I explained to Baby when I judged him old enough to comprehend. No matter how ugly the truth is it's still the truth and must be honored, praise God.

How they managed to do their nasty tricks in secret, my brother and that thirteen-year-old slut (and her a niece to us both), I never knew, unless it was when I went Wednesdays and Saturdays to the market, or took to my bed with migraine. Or maybe they arranged to meet outside the house. Etta's girl could cut classes, and my brother could take her somewhere nobody would know about. . . . He was low-minded enough to give some thought to it, and her no better, in spite of pretending to be so simple-minded and sweet like she did.

Even before he shipped out at the end of December the girl was

crying a lot and acting strange, but I had my pride about poking my nose where it wasn't wanted, and my dignity. Also, my brother's temper was getting worse and worse like it always does at the end of a visit home, and you'd better watch your lip around him, and feed him when he wants to eat, not too early and not too late; he got it all from our father, it runs in the blood. I wouldn't provoke him by asking questions, I wouldn't lower myself to such filth then or now.

One night he went on a drunken rampage, and me and the girl locked ourselves in the bathroom. He's going to kill us, he's going to kill us, Etta's girl was sobbing like crazy, hot and clumsy as a baby cow but trying to burrow against *me* as if I was her Momma!—so I gave her a slap of my own and said loud enough for him to hear through the door, Anybody lays a hand on anybody else under this roof, the police already know who to arrest,—and that's just the beginning of his troubles.

So my brother pounded on the door a while longer, and said I'd better unlock it, then he gave up and went away, and didn't come home until seven the next morning, sick-drunk and stinking of vomit. If Etta's girl was crying over *him* it serves her right.

Over the winter I saw how she was putting on weight in her belly, and the baby fat around her face became sort of hard and white and shiny, and she'd eat like a pig or maybe eat nothing at all for a day; so I knew the shame that was upon us and took her out of school. I was obliged to whip her a few times, it was my responsibility, but she cried and shrieked so hard my migraine started, and I didn't want to be too rough because something might happen to the baby inside her (who I did not call Baby at the time) and that would be a sin in God's judgment. It was bad enough it would be born a bastard of an unclean union and draw ridicule and scorn upon us throughout the neighborhood.

What did you and him do that I never knew about, I asked Etta's girl, and she bawled and said they never did nothing, she wasn't a bad girl, you could ask Mrs. Cassity (who was in charge of the Special Education students at the school) if she was one of the bad girls, or the good girls, Mrs. Cassity knew them all. Oh yes that's a likely story, I said laughing, I got so angry I was laughing lots of the time that winter and into the spring,—*that's* a likely story, we can tell your mother that can't we.

But I gave up after a while because what was the use?—some people are born too wicked to feel shame.

\* \* \*

Etta's girl stayed indoors but, still, around the neighborhood they started in asking,—Who's the father—who's going to own up to it?—looking me square in the face. But I never said a thing, I wouldn't give them the satisfaction. Then they started in asking me where we would place the baby. The Catholic adoption center was just a few blocks away on Grand River Boulevard but if you knew how to go about it there were plenty of couples desperate for babies of their own and they might pay, well, five hundred dollars . . . a thousand dollars. . . .

Yours truly never said a thing.

My plans were: buy myself a plain gold wedding band, and see about renting another house across town where people would mind their own business.

By the middle of the summer Etta's girl had left off crying and just sat around the house, not watching television but only staring out the window into the street (did she think *he* was likely to come back?) or the rear yard. Where before she guzzled everything in the refrigerator if I turned my back for a minute now she wouldn't hardly eat at all. Any kind of gravy made her sick to her stomach, and just the sight of fatty meat, and globules of fat floating in soup. I had a book I was reading on diet during pregnancy but Etta's girl just shrugged her shoulders. Finally I went out in 95° heat to buy a gallon of butternut-ripple ice cream one day to get her eating again. She said she'd be sick at her stomach but I handed her a spoon and that was it: once she got started she couldn't stop.

There were exercises she was supposed to do too, according to this book I had, but she was too lazy to budge. I told myself,—Well, babies get born anyway, they always have.

It was queer how her stomach got—big and round and high, and hard-looking, not like an ordinary fat belly—while the rest of her was pinched and sallow. The baby fat disappeared from her face and her eyes were bruised-looking and old. Once I looked up at her in the kitchen—this was in early August, not long before Baby was born—and thought I wouldn't know who that girl *was*, if she was kin to me or not.

Already Baby was a strong presence in the house, you knew he was there, just waiting. He'd kick and I swear I could feel it across the room!—even before Etta's girl made one of her sharp whining noises like she was being stabbed.

Already you knew he was a *he*. There was never any question of that.

\* \* \*

My timing was just right: we moved across town to Union Street, and a few days later Etta's girl went into labor (it lasted fifteen hours but they said that was normal enough) and Baby was born, seven pounds four ounces, no known defects, Caucasian male (as they called him).

It was like the baby book explained: you think they are ugly at first, and their skulls not right, and that flushed skin, and queer blackish hair and blind-looking eyes. . . . Etta's girl laughed and said, *I don't want it*, later on she said (embarrassing me in front of the nurse), *I don't know what it is, it isn't mine, I never had anything to do with it.*

So I had to take charge immediately, or Baby would have died of neglect.

(Later I would think, or God would allow me to think, that Baby should have died right there in the hospital, he should have been born already dead, but of course I couldn't have such knowledge at that time.)

When Baby first came home I was frightened to hold him thinking he might slip through my arms, he could squirm and kick so, or he might stop breathing all of a sudden the way they say babies do. But of course nothing happened because he was too strong. He fixed his eyes on me right away and knew who I was.

Etta's girl pretended she was too sick to nurse so yours truly had to take charge as anybody would have predicted. At my age! . . . preparing baby formula, changing diapers (which did not seem so disgusting after the first week or so), giving Baby his bath and laying him down for his nap. In this new house (a duplex—I believe in upstairs and downstairs and having your own front and rear doors) Baby and I were situated upstairs and Etta's girl had a room off the kitchen that the landlord said was a dining room if you wanted one.

Baby's crib was white wicker, old-fashioned and sturdy, that I found in the old cellar when we moved. This was my own crib a long time ago, I told Baby,—so it's right you should have it.

Etta's girl lazed around the house too mean to nurse though you could see the milk staining through her clothes. She watched television now whenever she could get away with it and just laughed when I asked wasn't she going back to school?—she knew from the start how Baby had turned against her and pretended it was *her* doing.

Baby knows who his true mother is, I said, and Etta's girl just



laughed, swinging past on her way to the bathroom.

Baby knows who hates him and who loves him, I said. Who his true parent is.

By this time Etta's girl had got so fat and sloppy you could feel the floorboards give a little beneath her bare feet. She had got so mean and lazy she whispered swear words under her breath pretending I wasn't close by.

Once when I was telling her about Baby, and about how he knew more than he let on, she turned to me with an ugly grinning face and said, That baby don't know shit.

And when I went to slap her she dared raise her hand against me—both her hands against me, made into fists—like she was going to hit *me*. And Baby was a witness all along. So I knew I had let things go too far, I would have to notify the health authorities about Etta's girl and get her taken care of properly, as her condition required.

So Etta's girl left, and Baby and I were alone together as God decreed.

It was the right thing to do, having Etta's girl taken away, they told me at the county home not to feel bad about it, if I read the newspapers (which in fact I do if I have time) I'd know that more and more young mothers were doing injury to their babies. They were dependent, they told me, on people like myself stepping forward and speaking out.

One of the nurses told me a person like myself wouldn't believe what went on in that housing development on the west side, they were just animals there, if I knew what she meant. I said I did know. She said it made her sick sometimes to be called over into that neighborhood, it made her almost lose faith in the human race, but my niece was not of that category of course.

Well, I said, wiping Baby's mouth with a tissue where he had drooled on himself,—some people *are* animals, after all.

That was our happiest time now I look back on it—three or four months when the house was empty of Etta's girl and Baby had not yet come into his powers.

He learned to crawl, and to walk, and to say things meant to be talking, all earlier than the doctor said to expect, which comforted me in the beginning because it meant that he would not grow up feeble-minded like his mother. Even when he was asleep, though, he filled the house upstairs and down, there wasn't a room he wasn't in, I could

feel him through the walls. No matter what I was doing—for instance scouring the oven one time—he could summon me to him if he wished without making a sound.

Baby knows who loves him, I would say. Baby knows who his true parent is.

And Baby stared at me understanding every word and smiling for of course he *did* know.

That's a husky baby people said in the neighborhood,—that's a good-looking baby, they would say, fixing their eyes on me and getting ready to ask (I had to laugh, I knew it was coming) where his daddy was. So I said, Well now his *daddy* is halfway around the world but he's good about sending money home, that was one good thing about him, and the way I talked you could tell they were puzzled but they didn't know to ask where his *mommy* was, which was none of their business anyway.

That's certainly a *boy* baby, a woman from across the street said, poking her nose into Baby's face, you wouldn't have any doubt he's a *boy*, she said, meaning to flatter, then smiling a big wide smile and asking what his name was—if I'd told her, she said, she must have forgotten.

Baby is what I call him for right now, I said. Baby is name enough for us both.

Yours truly was *not* rude—but kept the baby buggy moving.

Just when the Change started in I cannot say, although looking back there were signs all along.

Sometimes Baby would allow me to cuddle him, and rock him, and kiss him, and sometimes he would not—he'd fly into a rage and half choke with shrieking. *Like he did not want to be touched.*

Sometimes Baby would eat every spoonful of his food as I fed it to him (his favorite for many months being mashed apricots which I flavored with sweet cream and sugar) but sometimes he would not: he'd spit it out, maybe cough and vomit, and scream and kick and flail about as if someone had hurt him. (Which assuredly I did not—for I knew very well never to put hot food or a hot spoon in Baby's mouth, a common error it is said ignorant young mothers frequently commit.)

Sometimes, also, Baby would sleep peacefully when he was put to bed, but sometimes, what a commotion!—he'd shriek and clamber about in his crib, kicking, and banging his head against the sides, I didn't dare lay a finger on him because he would only get worse, his face all wrinkled and purple and his breath irregular. What if he

chokes to death in the blankets, I thought, what if he puts his head through the bars and strangles himself. . . . Next door the neighbors began to knock against the wall in protest and I was sick with shame, that strangers might know of our private business, and talk amongst themselves of Baby and his wildness.

You must learn to be good, I told Baby, half-fainting because my heart beat so, you must obey your Mother, I told him, but he only stared at me cold and insolent like he had never seen me before.

There is nobody on this Earth who loves you as your Mother loves you, I told Baby.

Baby laughed.

You could not doubt but that Baby *was* all boy, however, nothing weak or feeble-minded about him. Thus I praised God as it became clear that his nature had skipped over my brother's and was close to being Baby's grandfather's if I remember correctly. His hair had turned light brown and was very, very fine and curly. His eyes had turned the bluest blue.

Baby must have his way inside the house and out, and his Mother's legs, that have never been strong, cannot keep up. I laughed to myself saying that I had been fool enough to pay \$7.50 for a big jar of cod-liver oil tablets sold to me at the door (by a high school girl a stranger to me) when Baby did not need extra help in growing . . . !

There were five hundred tablets in the jar, of which I gave one to Baby before his breakfast each morning, and by the time the jar was emptied the Change was well upon him—though I would not say that the cod-liver oil tablets were to blame.

By this time Baby had long since learned to dress himself and to go about his business as he wished, sometimes very quietly in the morning, so only the creaking of the floorboards alerted me that he was awake. At other times of course Baby romped about, and crashed into things, and chattered to himself as (it is said) small children will do at that age. I pressed my ear against the wall to hear more closely but his words were secret to me.

Baby what are you saying, I whispered through the wall but of course there could be no reply.

How husky he was growing!—as all the neighbors commented, the mothers in particular who were perhaps jealous of Baby. For, by the age of three, Baby stood near to my shoulder (tho' I am not a tall person it must be remembered) and when we were seated, why, I believe we were of a height. Baby used his own spoon now—and his

own knife and fork—and often ate with his head lowered to his plate as my brother did (though there could be no influence for Baby had never glimpsed my brother). It was not indifference to his Mother for I believe he loved me, but simply the way he was, thinking his own thoughts and forgetful of my presence.

There was much resistance to his bath now for Baby said he wished to bathe himself (feeling some shame perhaps at his nakedness—for Baby had rapidly matured); but I did not trust him to cleanse all his parts thoroughly. Thus we had frequent disagreements which flared up in quarrels leaving Baby blotched in the face and panting hard, and yours truly half-fainting on the sofa, sick and dizzy with grief. (It is not the place to speak of my health but I am obliged to mention that my Doctor expressed some concern for my blood pressure and an “erratic” heartbeat he detected with his instrument. Since moving to Union Street I have consulted a new doctor who knows me as “Mrs.” and respects the ring on my finger and the fact that I am a Mother—altho’ I am wise enough never to allow him to examine me down below, as, being a doctor, he would surely note some evidence that *I had not had Baby in any physical manner.*)

When I lay fainting on the sofa Baby would give evidence of remorse but (God forgive him) would not apologize. Doubtless he shed tears in secret—as I did—but his pride was such he could not be humbled.

Also, sometimes when I napped in the late afternoon (for my nerves were such I had begun to tire halfway through the day) Baby would appear silent by my bedside gazing down with no earthly expression on his face. Though my eyelids were closed I could see Baby clearly, as he was in real life yet altered with queer nicks and dents in his cheeks and a tawny glow to his eyes such as you find in the eyes of cats. Baby it is in your power to do great harm, I whispered to him (though my lips could not move), but I pray God you will show mercy to me . . . for I am your dear Mother who loves you above all the world.

Baby did not speak. His eyes were in shadow and his mouth was pinched inward like a fist.

As the months passed, however, the Change grew more and more upon him, and I fell into despair wondering what I must do.

He had begun to stay away long hours from the house despite my pleas; and where he once chattered and babbled happily under my roof now he was silent days at a time. Why do you grieve your Mother, I asked him, but he turned aside as if the question was a shameful one.

When I tried to kiss him he went hard as stone or ice shrinking from me in his soul.

Now it happened too that the mothers along Union Street rose up against Baby saying they no longer wanted him to play with their children. Has he injured any of them, I asked, my heart beating so hard I could scarcely breathe. He has not injured anyone yet, one of the women said unkindly. But he speaks to them, he gathers them around him to say such things they will not repeat to us,—and when we approach they run away guilt-faced and laughing.

No, he is not a natural child, another told me, her face contorted with hatred. You must keep him away from our children!

Not a natural child! I exclaimed. How dare you say such things, when you know nothing of us! —And in pride and scorn I turned from them to retreat to my house where Baby hid crouching at the window.

*Not a natural child.* The words lodged deep in me as a curse.

For Baby had altered to such a degree he was scarce recognizable at times; God was urging him from me whether I would consent or no. If I made to embrace him impulsively, as mothers do, even to stroke him with loving fingers, Baby shrank from me murmuring *Don't touch me! don't touch!* with scarce a movement of his lips. In hurt I cried that he was not a natural child but he laughed and paid no heed.

Not a natural child. But what would God have me do, to make amends?

I wept that my half brother, the cause of so much sorrow, had abandoned me to his corrupt off-spring, to live out my life in apprehension. For I could not control Baby. I could not control his thoughts nor the wayward movements of his body. One night while bathing him suddenly I summoned all the strength in my frail body to push his head beneath the soapy water and hold it there . . . but of course Baby resisted as of late he resisted my every desire; and in the end, after much struggle, and kicking, and splashing, and shrieks, I relented and let Baby go: my bosom and skirts soaked, my face wet, pulses beating wild. I relented and let Baby go, to my shame, having not the physical strength nor, it may have been, the moral courage, to continue. For by now Baby had grown husky indeed, his muscles taut as steel seeking to prolong his life.

Afterward he lay gasping and whimpering on the floor, his mouth pursed still like a fish's and his eyes rolled back up in his head. I calmed him; sang softly to him an old lullaby sung to me, many years

ago; told him his Mother loved him and would protect him, though his Father had abandoned him long ago. And Baby clutched at my skirts, and sank into sleep in trust of me.

Often now I thought of my brother; and of Etta's girl (who is said to be happy amongst others of her kind in a Home in the country); and of my wicked sister herself (who has not contacted me for many years). I thought of them with some bitterness, yes and some rage hidden in my heart, that they have abandoned me to Baby who watches me so strangely now, his eyes narrowed to slits, and his thoughts so secret and cunning. Now at the age of four he has grown to my height, and a little beyond; which is to say,—for I measured myself against a doorframe—five feet one and a half inches. His hair is of no distinguishable color, and wild and springy; his skin smooth as a true baby's, yet coarsely flushed; his lips oddly full as if heavy with blood. Yet it is those eyes that frighten me, a cat's eyes intense with thought, peering into my very soul. *Yes? What? You? Who are you?*—Baby seems to mock.

I have not described Baby's voice because though he has a voice he rarely allows me to hear it save in shrieks or murmurs. As to *words*,—never does he speak words, to me. (Yet I have seen him many times out in the alley, surrounded by children who listen avidly to his every word: and my heart is torn with affliction,—for what does Baby say? What does he tell them, he will not tell his Mother?)

What would God have me do, I begged nightly. To make amends.

Thus it came about I took Baby into the country one wintry day, telling him it was time now for him to join with his true Mother, who missed him greatly, and was now summoning him to her.

And Father? he inquired in his low hoarse voice I could scarcely hear; a voice, I am sorry to say, quivering in mockery.

Yes: your Father as well, I stoutly replied.

Hastily I dressed him, at dawn, as for a long journey. Took him downtown to the Trailways bus depot where I bought tickets for a village I had located on the map (its precise name need not be recorded) some five or six miles from the Home in which Etta's girl is lodged. The tickets were round-trip for me, one-way for Baby, a melancholy fact he could know nothing of though during the morning's long ride he sat silent and stubborn beside me staring out the window, turned from me as though we were strangers. What is your boy's name? an elderly lady across the aisle inquired of me, rather cheekily I thought, though I answered her politely: His name is Baby,

I said, he is not so old as he appears. Oh, said the lady staring, and is he a good boy? He is not always a good boy, I said frankly, hoping Baby would overhear (for he had turned resolutely away as if he knew me not) . . . no he is not always a *good* boy . . . his mother and father abandoned him long ago.

Oh, said the lady again, staring yet more rudely, I'm sorry to hear that.

Yes, I said. It is a sorry thing.

At our destination I took Baby firmly by the hand and walked him from the bus depot along a street that dipped to an area of warehouses, vacant lots, cracked and weedy sidewalks. Baby made no resistance. Though I had never set foot in this town before I felt not the slightest hesitation as God was now guiding my every step. At last we came to a deserted park, a playground with three meager swings and two teeter-totters and a drinking fountain damaged by vandals. *Here?* Baby seemed to cry out in his soul. *Here? Is it here?* —Your true Mother is to come for you, sometime before dusk, I said. So you must not despair beforehand. You must not run away.

Baby's face was wet with tears but when I peered closely I could see the pupils of his eyes shrunk to pinpricks. *Don't touch!* Baby whispered; and indeed I did not.

So it was I was forced to leave Baby in the playground and to make my retreat. I too was crying in my heart but I did not slacken, not during the long journey back to my home on the bus, not till I unlocked the door to my house and stepped into the darkness. For it seemed he had preceded me! Baby, I called out blinking,—are you here? Are you here, and hiding?

But Baby was not there, so far as I knew.

In the years following I have heard of certain hideous acts committed in the countryside, yes in the city too, no longer do I dare read the newspaper, for amongst its lies are tales of such peculiar mystery, I am led to believe Baby is the agent; yet I cannot know. And often in passing the playground beyond Union Street I see Baby sitting on one of the swings, idly turning, head bowed, or does he sleep, alone on the swing with no playmates near (for natural children avoid him), turning now from left to right, from right to left, slow and idle as the Earth's turning on its axis, and his old secrecy about him, those cat-eyes narrowed and aslant so that he can watch me pass by hurriedly. *Yes! You! It is you!*—thus his wicked heart calls out but I am not tempted to pause.

Not till I am safely in my house, the door locked against him, do I think of him with regret, and tears, and love; and I bite my lips murmuring Baby if you have come so close to home. . . . But I have not weakened thus far: and God give me strength, that I do not.