

FAMILY PLANNING

TINA TOCCO

After my grandfather finished with her that first time, my grandmother sat in a boiling bath, which cost extra then, at the Century Hotel. Fifteen silver pails were brought up by a young negro girl, pretty, a mulatto maybe, with a tipped-down head and big eyes the one time she showed them. Another girl—this one all dark, as dark as the maids' uniforms that were just silly on them—stripped the sheets down to the mattress, her brown bun pointed at the smoke from my grandfather's Havana.

The mulatto dumped the pails between my grandmother's legs. After the seventh, the eighth, she said, "You sure, Missus?" But my grandmother cracked her neck past the bath's porcelain rim, trying to put herself in her mother's arms, trying to remember how her mother had kept from having Uncle John for so long, trying to remember if it was salt that drew it out, or not.

So the mulatto made seven more trips to the stove at a penny a pail. Only the last pail made my grandfather rattle some change. Only the last pail made my grandmother speak.

"My husband," she said, her first time, "my husband—he won't tip you."

Only the last pail, salted, shocked my grandmother's head from the porcelain rim, into the eyes of the pretty mulatto.