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Judith Claire Mitchell

UNKNOWN DONOR

Here lies Lois Mello spread on an examining table, shivering in a backless johnny, wishing she'd kept her socks on. This wing of the clinic is cold; if the nurse was still here Lois would ask her to adjust the thermostat. Though no doubt the nurse would laugh at that request. No doubt the nurse would list all the bona fide medical reasons for keeping the heat so low. Maybe in warmer temperatures, the eggs go runny. Frozen sperm melts. An image comes to Lois. The dark bay near the shabby triple-decker in Fall River where she grew up. Spring thaw. Slush. Minnows.

If only Unknown Donor were here, she thinks. He would warm her feet in the palms of his large and generous hands.

"Hop up, lie back," the nurse had said. "Butt, slide on down." This had been nearly thirty minutes ago. Even then the doctor had been running late. The nurse glanced at the wall clock, shook her head. "So now all we need is that boss of mine to show up and do his stuff," she said. "Not that he's got that much stuff to do. I'm sure he's told you the whole shebang takes maybe a minute or two."

"Yes," said Lois.

"It's completely slam bam thank you Ma'am, just like in real life." The nurse looked again at the clock. "Let me go track him down."

"Thank you," said Lois.

She spent the next few minutes checking out her surroundings. Stirrups and speculums, gizmos and gadgets, silver and steel. After that her attention moved to the ceiling, and that's where it's largely remained. There's a poster up there. A border of primroses and robins, a numbered list in the middle. Ornate script. The Fifty Best Things About Life. *Number twenty-three: a playful puppy. Number one: love.* It's that sort of poster. *Number thirty-eight: chocolate ice cream. Number thirty-seven: chocolate ice cream with sprinkles and whipped cream.* If one of Lois's students ever handed in something so sappy, so sentimental, she would draw mean-spirited hearts and violins all along the margins.

And what, she would like to know, is someone in her situation supposed to make of number ten? Number ten, looking down at her, innocent as can be, sandwiched between *number eleven: moonlight* and *number nine: autumn leaves*, is the smell of new babies.

Insensitive, is what Lois makes of it. Insensitive at best, cruel at worst. And yet it's a risk, isn't it, for the clinic to display a poster that includes number ten? Number ten is the only item on the list likely to trigger true emotions in this place. Taking risks. Daring to evoke genuine feelings. Surely those things are worth something, Lois thinks. Surely those are worth a few extra points.

And surely the poster isn't meant to be cruel. Was the list-maker supposed to leave out number ten just to avoid making people feel bad? Either the smell of babies makes life's top ten or it doesn't—that's reality. Which, she notices, doesn't appear on the list at all. She agrees with the omission, most everyone would. But not absolutely everyone, she knows that for a fact. Because wouldn't reality be on Daniel's list? Wouldn't it be number one on her ex-husband's list, number one with a bullet?

Daniel is a corporate litigator, a partner at a law firm in downtown Providence, a logical and fastidious man nearing fifty; that is, a man nearly fifteen years her senior, who eats every meal with a silk tie slung back over one shoulder but who never forgets to right it as soon as he's finished his espresso. Manuel Daniel Santos, Esquire. Face the facts is one of his favorite sayings. He began shaving his head the morning he noticed his hairline receding.

Face the facts. Sometimes he came out with variations. Get real, Lois. Or, Wake up, Lois. Or this, which he claimed a Black Panther said in the sixties when Daniel had been in law school and she'd been five: *reality, baby—you takes it and you deals with it.*

"Even blocked fallopian tubes?" Lois had asked Daniel. They were still married then. "I have to even takes blocked fallopian tubes and deals with that?"

"Especially blocked fallopian tubes."

"But I don't get it. Why don't you think this is a viable way to deals with it? What's going on with you? You all of a sudden don't believe in medical science?"

"I believe in playing the hand you're dealt," he said. "I believe in facing the facts."

And so she knows the calligraphied slop above her head wasn't compiled by Daniel. Nor, truth be told, would any of her students have written such tripe; she doesn't seriously have to worry about that. *Number forty: fresh laundry. Number sixteen: shooting stars.* If she ever asked her kids to write about the best things life offers, not one of them would come up with shooting stars or laundry. *Reefer*, they'd write. *Blow jobs. New clothes.* Once she assigned them to write a composition called "My Ideal Day." They pretty much all wrote about getting laid or driving to the mall.

She can imagine who did write this list. A marketing firm. A marketing firm's computer. What's harder to imagine is the actual hanging of the poster, the event itself. Which clinic employee actually entered this chilly room holding a ladder, thumbtacks in her pocket, and mounted the thing to the ceiling? She can't imagine this sort of poster appealing to the staff here. That nurse before, her comment about slam bam thank you Ma'am. That was more in tune with the culture of the place.

It's a staid-looking medical building. Blond brick on the outside, nubby mauve upholstery within, and in the parking lot, near the entrance, a group of protesters parading like a tiny merry-go-round, prim fillies in bulky white cardigans and comfortable flats. Ex-nuns, she's been told by the receptionist who added, "It's all I can do to stop myself from ramming them with my car every morning. Why can't they go harass a frigging abortion clinic like everyone else?"

And yet despite the architect's attempt at a veneer of respectability, despite the circling reminder of the serious procedures that take place here, the nurses are always cracking wise. The time there was that exposé all over the news—a doctor in California implanting the eggs of one patient into the womb of another—a nurse here had referred to it as the case of the poached eggs. Lois had winced and the nurse had grinned, pleased with herself. "Just a little egg humor, dear," she had said. "We like to keep our sunny sides up around this joint."

And once, when Lois asked where the sperm donor unit was, the receptionist had nearly leered. "Why? You want to look at the dirty magazines?" she said.

"I'm serious," Lois said after a moment. "I would like to see it."

"Well, you can't," said the receptionist. "There's nothing to see anyway. It's closed now."

Maybe they didn't let the boys in on the same days the girls were there. Maybe they were worried about what all would go on. Men and women getting together, eliminating the middle man.

"Anyway," the receptionist added, "you read the contract. 'Recipient shall not seek any information pertaining to nor in any way attempt to identify any anonymous donor of semen.'"

"I don't want to ferret him out," Lois said. "I'm just trying to get the feel of the place."

And what if she did want to meet him, this stranger who for reasons Lois would never learn had decided to ride to her rescue? This masked man whose

identity never would be revealed? Unknown Donor who fights the crimes of oblivious nature. Unknown Donor who, disguised as an accountant, a sales clerk, a mild-mannered medical student, maybe even a doctor or lawyer, masturbates, then moves on. Comes and then goes. Her hero, her secret lover. Her imaginary friend.

“All you’d see there is what you see here,” the receptionist said. “A waiting room.”

The receptionist is a busty woman with pink and blonde hair and fake brown fingernails. How has Dr. Finney come to hire someone so frowsy to greet his clients? He himself is such a sweet man, short and pudgy, appropriately ovoid. Something comforting in that, in how round-faced and utterly, but naturally, bald he is. No morning stubble on that egg head of his.

And gentle, so gentle. Whenever he’s touched her, whether with one of his gadgets or one of his fingers, he’s never hurt her. Her former physician used to roll his eyes if she dared cry out. “Oh, for pity’s sake,” he’d say. “That didn’t hurt.” But Dr. Finney is tender.

Charmingly disheveled, too, in his baggy khakis, scuffed loafers. Never a tie. Sometimes, an old tweed jacket. “Dress-up day,” Lois says to him when he wears the tweed. Shortly after she began coming here she had a dream about that jacket. In her dream she was so small she fit in its breast pocket. She crawled in alongside a fountain pen, stood on her toes, peeked out at the world. It was nice in there though she had to cover her ears with her little hands; his heartbeat was deafening.

Lois teaches Pre-Remedial Freshman Comp at a community college just two exits south of the clinic. “Don’t get excited,” she told her aunts when she was first offered the job, when they did get excited and called her Professor. Her aunts were delighted that one of their own had not only graduated from a real college, but now taught at one, too. Like her parents, her aunts were immigrants from Cape Verde, that Portuguese colony off the African coast. They were women whose own mothers—grandmothers, too—had married Europeans, and their skin was the color of overdone pie crusts. Her own skin was even lighter than theirs. “It’s not a real college,” she had to tell them. “It’s a junior college. It’s a bad junior college. It’s where kids too dumb to get into the worst of the four-years go.”

“You mean a school for greenhorns,” her Aunt Filomena said.

“Mostly,” said Lois, “though there are plenty of descendants of moronic Pilgrims, too.”

Some of her aunts had persisted in remaining excited on her behalf. “Does it have ivy all over it the way they do?” her Aunt Maria asked. Then Lois had to explain that not only was it a college for dumb kids, it was grim and depressing as well. The entire campus consisted of a single poured-concrete building surrounded on all sides by parking lots. The building was as huge as it was homely, everything and everyone stuffed into it, the empty swimming pool, the nearly empty library, the surly administrators and underpaid faculty walking the halls with their heads lowered, muttering about pearls and swine. And the cafeteria and the book store and student health services and several bowling alleys and a video arcade with surveillance cameras to discourage the students from breaking into the change machine.

And the students, of course, the swine themselves, so many of them her own students, her eighteen-year-olds with their piercings and tattoos and dreams of making fortunes writing about vampires and spies. The piercings didn’t distress her. She liked a glint at the nostril, a flash on the tongue. But, oh, those dreams and tattoos. Hard to say which of those got to her more. The tattoos, she supposed, since they’d last forever. They were such awful tattoos, so unpleasant in both appearance and sentiment. Bargain-basement tattoos if there were such things, always the same shade of blackening green, the color of long-rotted vegetables.

Early in the current semester one of her boys had come to class with the word assassin misspelled across his biceps. *Assasin*, his tattoo said. “Look at this,” he said to her. She was glad someone else had already pointed out the error. She was forever correcting them, their essays and the handwritten notes they left in her mailbox, lined paper torn from spiral notebooks, her name nearly always spelled Mellow. Professor Mellow, I will not be in class due to the fact there’s this fucking rad group I gotta go see play in Boston. Hope you understand. Professor Mellow, this is to inform you I am going off Ritalin and my doctor says it might make me disruptive in class. Hope you understand.

The boy flexed so she could better see his tainted muscle. “I trusted the asshole,” he said. “He looked like he knew what he was doing and first it looked right but then this other guy there, he’s all like, hey, man, that’s like ‘ass, a sin,’ and I’m all like shit! And now I feel like I been fucking raped, you know what I’m saying? You think I can sue?”

“Probably,” she said. She wanted to reach into her handbag, find a moist towelette, rub at his forearm. You weren’t supposed to touch them, though. She said, “Now do you see why I take off for spelling?” He nodded miserably.

“Here,” she said, and then she did reach into her handbag, scrummed around till she found one of Daniel’s cards. Why not? Daniel had paid her grad school tuition. He had continued to mail her checks even after the divorce; he sent them even now. Why not give him a referral, pay him back as best she could?

Daniel had been the first person she called when the junior college hired her. Daniel, first. Only then the aunts who had raised her.

“Ah,” he had said. “So. Freshman comp.”

“Well, not really.” She’d been sitting on a yellow chair in the former supply closet that is still her office, her feet on her small metal desk. The desk was so empty and flimsy it hummed under the scant pressure of her shoes. “You know how there’s freshman comp? And then there’s the course for kids too dumb to handle that? Well, I’m teaching the course for kids too dumb for that one. English as a second language for native speakers.”

“Oh,” he said and she waited, certain he would tell her to get real, face the facts, she did not want to take such a menial position. “Well, still,” he said finally. “Still, all in all, it’s pretty good news. It’s a good first step and there are health benefits and it will be something to put on a résumé. And God knows it’s better than working in Bed and Bath.”

“Hey!” she said. She didn’t like him disparaging Bed and Bath. It was where they’d first met, the linen department of Filene’s. He had come in a little before closing. She had noticed him immediately, the skin olive-brown just like hers, the expensive suit, and in his earlobe, the tiniest of gold studs. “M. Daniel Santos,” he had said, extending his hand. He had charged a set of Ralph Lauren towels in hunter green, fringed fingercloths to bath sheets. Hundreds of dollars. She worked on commission.

Now the earring was gone. The hole in the lobe had repaired itself, sealed. He was remarried to a young associate in his law firm named Ferguson Miller.

Lois had met Ferguson at a law firm barbecue shortly after she’d gone back to school for her masters. She’d watched Ferguson bring Daniel a drink, stirring it, as she walked to him, with her pinky. “Do people call you Fergie?” Lois had asked.

“Not twice,” Ferguson replied. She didn’t smile. Lois smiled broadly, feverishly. *Number twenty-three: a playful puppy.*

“And what did you do before you came here?” she asked.

Ferguson looked over Lois’s shoulder. “I used to clerk for Justice Bouchard in the Second District.”

“What a coincidence,” Lois said. “I used to clerk for Filene’s in the North Dartmouth Mall.”

Ferguson didn't smile. Lois hurt from smiling. "I know," Ferguson said. "Danny's mentioned." She had long blonde hair, curls everywhere like those party favors, the ones that explode from cans. She wore very dark sunglasses and a Lily Pulitzer sundress, expensive if not quite appropriate to the occasion, tight, with a tropical fruit pattern. There was a sliced mango on her right breast. "Excuse me, Lois," she said, and went to join a group of lawyers.

On nights Daniel said he was working, Lois sat up and pictured him in bed with Ferguson. She imagined them in a suite at the Providence Biltmore, laughing at her. Foreplay, acrobatic screwing, all followed by post-coital laughing at Lois, a full and merry evening, and she hated the part where they laughed at her even more than she hated the part where they tenderly kissed.

And yet she does the same thing, doesn't she? She laughs at people. The young man with *ass*, *a sin* on his arm. She feels sorry for him, true, but equally true, she's repeated the story to everyone. Face the facts, she has lectured herself, it's not a kind thing to do. Although she forgives herself for it. She's only human, and they are so damned ignorant, the young men and women who sit in her classroom. Has Dickens written anything a little more up-to-date? they have asked her. Their favorite playwright? Tennessee Ernie Ford. Stunning, stunning, and she finds it unnerving that there is no statute precluding the entire student body of her little school from voting in national or statewide, even in local, elections. And so, doesn't she have the right, just like any other terrified human being, to belittle what scares her?

She has shown their essays to some of the men she's dated since her divorce. A quick way of sharing her life, herself. The how-to's are her favorites. Usually she just reads the titles— *How to Find A+ Reports on the Net*, *How to Steal Stuff from the University Bookstore*, *How to Make a Really Fine Bong*—but there was one man she'd gone out with six times, a post-Daniel record, and before she lost interest and lied, telling him she'd reconciled with her ex, she read him the entire first paragraph of *How to Make a Girl Come with Your Fingers*. He was a successful accountant, this man, and he drove a navy blue Jaguar with gold license plate frames and yet when you looked at him you could still tell what he'd looked like when he'd been a boy, and so she'd been hopeful and they'd begun sleeping together on the third date. "As is the law," she told Daniel over the phone.

"Stroke her," she read. "Feather the clit. Open her up. Don't forget your thumbs."

"That's sickening," the man said. "I can't believe kids actually have the

balls to turn in that kind of puke. What do you do when you get a piece of smut like that?”

“I correct the spelling,” she said.

Other than the spelling, the paper had been fine. She had asked the class to be as precise and specific as possible, and this boy had fulfilled that part of the assignment perfectly. She could have taken that essay to bed with her, followed the directions step by step, fallen asleep content and purring—and if she’d refrained from doing just that it was only because the paper conjured up the image of its author, a scrawny kid, a child really, with a face like a Boston terrier, big bulging eyeballs, an expression full of worry and urgent needs.

She had intended to read the entire essay to the man she was dating, but his reaction to the first paragraph had so discouraged her she’d put it away. And yet it was the second paragraph she really admired and would have liked to have shared with someone. “After she goes home be sure not to call her. Even if you want to. Make her worry and suffer and think about you. Tell your friends everything you got off her. This is because of the time you fell in love like the dumb shitforbrains fuck-lug you are and what it felt like and now you are out for blood.” She’d held her red pen over that paragraph for a long time. What to write? This is an inappropriate subject for a how-to? This is sad? Watch out for fragments/run-ons? See me?

There are always the same five ex-nuns protesting outside the clinic. Lois is a lapsed Catholic herself. They must have a lot in common, she and the nuns. The day one decides to walk away from that which one used to hold dear. The day of cold wind and black ice and you slip and fall on your ass and suddenly realize nobody cares. You takes it, you deals with it, you struggles to your feet. You brush yourself off, count your own fingers and toes, see that, except for your faith, you are whole.

The nuns tell Lois they do care about her. Each day when she shows up at the clinic they shriek their care in her face as they rush at her, encircle her, order her home.

“Why don’t you adopt?” they say. Or, “New life is the exclusive purview of the Lord.”

“Yes,” Lois once summoned the nerve to respond, “which would make this place holy.”

She was as shocked as the nuns at the sound of her voice. She felt she’d been rude and she lowered her head and scurried to the clinic’s entrance

where she threw herself into a wedge of revolving door that, sensing her presence, began to spin on its own much too fast until it threw her into the lobby flustered and graceless. Her legs shook and she had to sit for a while on the bench by the pay phone which she suddenly found herself longing to use.

Unknown Donor, oh, Unknown Donor. Come for me, comfort me. Tell me your name.

That was the first and only time she talked back to the nuns. Since then she's just navigated through them, barely listening, constantly nodding. "We're praying for you," they shout at her and sometimes they hold hands, forming a five-person chain, an embarrassingly silly effort to prevent her from going inside. "Thank you," she says then, and walks around them.

They are annoying and presumptuous, but at least they're reliable. And in some ways they're more equipped to deal with the world than Lois. They bring oranges with them, offer her sections which, though she's always hungry, she always turns down, fearing they're poisoned. And they always have those cardigans with them, even on the sunniest days. If only Lois had thought today to bring a sweater.

She has long ago kicked off her useless paper slippers. Now she is rubbing her feet together trying to make sparks. She tries to summon a hot flash. Suddenly, she realizes, she's longing for the bout of faux menopause brought on by the Lupron. She shakes her head. "I'm going crazy," she says to the ceiling. She has to be crazy to want to relive for even a moment that brief foray into sweats and soaked sheets, those thudding stomach aches, the nausea and pounding cramps the hormones had triggered.

This is how the procedure worked: Every day for three weeks she came to the clinic for her hormone shots. That is, every day for three weeks she left school, skipped lunch, and braved the nuns so a wisecracking nurse could lead her to a small examining room where Lois would lift her blouse, pull her slacks to her knees, bare her belly, bite her lip, and take it stoically in the stomach just as if she'd been bit by a mad, foaming dog and now needed rabies shots.

In the fourth week she received the injection of Pergonal and Metrodin. The cocktail, the nurses called it as if it were happy hour and they were barmaids. That shot went into the hip; she'd limped for days after. Then last ("but not least," said Dr. Finney with a bashful smile), there was the single shot of human chorionic gonadotropin. Thirty-six hours later they harvested her eggs.

She has called Daniel throughout the ordeal, has kept him apprised of her progress. He is, after all, paying. Her benefits at school turned out to be negligible and he seems to feel guilty about her situation, about her being alone, unprotected. The checks he sends aren't her only clue. At first she was the one calling him, Lois missing Daniel, her new apartment so quiet, the shadows at night so unsettling, but now he picks up the phone just as often, maybe more. "Did you want something special?" she'll ask after they've chatted a while. "Not really," he says. "Just checking in. Just making sure no one's libeled you recently or tripped on your welcome mat. I'm still your lawyer, you know."

Face the facts, she has ordered herself whenever she finds herself wondering if it could possibly be love or desire or searing regret making him dial her number. It's only guilt. Guilt compounded by his jaundiced view of the procedure. From the moment she told him she was going ahead with it, he hated the idea though he had to concede it was no longer any of his business. But he hated it anyway, was convinced something bad and actionable would occur. Dr. Finney would make a terrible mistake and someone else's eggs would be forced into her womb, outraged hatchlings beating on the inside of her rubbery belly, screaming to be let out, demanding their real mother. Or an ex-nun would plant a bomb in her car while she was off getting a shot in the belly. Lois comes out, jumps in the Toyota, fastens the seatbelt, turns the key and, boom, there lies Lois dead and scattered. And here comes Daniel, all motions and writs, suing the clinic on behalf of her estate. It would be a high profile case, good for his career. And hence, the increase in his phone calls.

"Human chorionic gonadotropin," he had repeated when she described that last shot to him. "I dare you to say it three times fast."

"Gonadotropin, gonadotropin, gonadotropin," she said, and that made her think of a recent essay in which a student proposed the school teams be renamed The Nads. "Then the cheerleader bitches would have to shout, Go Nads! in front of the whole fucking school!" the boy had typed in all caps.

"Brother," Daniel said. "I remember coming up with that same imbecilic pun when I was, I don't know, maybe ten. How old are these kids?"

Lois remembered her friends coming up with that same childish joke, too. Middle school in their case, all her friends greenhorns like herself, dark-eyed, light-skinned children of Cape Verdean and Portuguese immigrants. Their mothers were maids or factory workers or, like Lois's mother, worked in the school cafeteria. Hair nets, plastic gloves. Her mother ladled sloppy joe mix

onto a Wonder bun, squirted whipped cream on Jell-O. It hadn't seemed like the most strenuous job in the world to twelve-year-old Lois, but her mother came home weary, too exhausted to talk. "So tired," she'd say and head directly to bed. "Bone tired," she'd say, and then one day she went to sleep and died, and though Lois was not the only girl in her crowd whose mother had died, of all the dead mothers, Lois's had died the most efficiently, with the least drama or mess, the fewest farewells. As for their fathers, they were without exception fishermen, rarely at home or even on land. When she thought of fathers, she thought of calloused hands, gold teeth and tattoos, but bright tattoos, reds and blues, ocean greens, tattoos of anchors, of mermaids, sea horses, the names of their wives.

"Go Nads!" Lois and her friends whispered to each other as they watched the cheerleaders practice. They giggled and agreed how funny it would be because those girls were too dumb to understand what would be coming out of their own mouths. They wouldn't get it, not those big yellow-headed girls, each as overwhelming as a sunflower in a city garden. This must be why her students' tasteless essays don't offend her the way they offend others, the accountant for instance. They are her childhood friends, these pierced, dreaming kids. They are Rosa Tavares, Ruy Silva, Nanda Medeiros.

"What frightens me," Daniel said, "is how someday we're going to be old and feeble and completely dependent on these imbecile kids of yours to keep the economy going. Not even someday. Any day now. Tomorrow, sometimes it feels like." He sounded sad and worn and then he grew quiet. "So," he said after a bit. "I've been wondering. Why don't you learn how to give yourself the shots?"

She was caught off guard. "Stick a needle into my stomach?" she said.

"I know, but how much is it, a clinic visit every day? It must cost a fortune. And it must be incredibly inconvenient, running over there all the time."

"I just don't see myself sticking needles into my stomach. How would you like to do it?" She meant how would he like to stick a needle into his stomach, but he misunderstood, thought she meant how would he like to stick one into hers.

"I guess I could," he said, "if someone showed me how."

She imagined him coming by her office every day. He would test the needle, squirt water into the air to get rid of dangerous bubbles, then pierce the skin of her tummy. He would press his handkerchief against the pinprick of blood.

“I could, I suppose,” he said again.

For a moment there *was* longing, his, hers, she couldn't deny it. She had a quick and vivid fantasy of him kissing the spot of blood, then continuing to kiss her, his mouth moving lower, one hand opening her legs, the other covering her mouth so students in the hall wouldn't hear her moaning his name. He would climb onto her and the metal desk would shimmer beneath them and Ferguson would be back at the law firm, slaving away.

But her hormones were hectic that day making her overly, artificially emotional, given to daydreams she knew not to trust. And she was not allowed to have sex during the procedure under any circumstances; Dr. Finney had made that clear.

“They don't charge extra to jab me,” she told Daniel. “I'm not squandering your hard-earned money.”

“I wasn't implying you were,” he said. “That's not at all what I meant.”

In some ways she has enjoyed visiting the clinic so frequently. She likes the meetings with Dr. Finney. She even likes the encounters with the staff, the awful jokes about boiled eggs and scrambled eggs and eggs over-easy. Sometimes the nurses sneak the dirty magazines down from the sperm donor unit—they really do have dirty magazines there, it turns out—but though Lois laughs at their bad girl routine, she doesn't read them. She prefers the dog-eared issues of *People*. Actresses, princesses, some jilted, some dead. They go on just the same, glamorous and loved. *People Magazine*. Talk about smut. But she likes it. Bad coffee and junk magazines and smart-ass girlfriends. Even the ex-nuns, so much like the cheerleaders. This must be what it's like to live in a sorority house or spend time in a beauty parlor. In the movies the beauty parlors are always like this. A row of ladies chatting under big metal hoods. She fits in here. College she squeezed around her job at Bed and Bath, and it took forever to finish, the oldest student in her class by the time she got her degree. And grad school, all those dreary classes in rhetoric and pedagogical theory. She commuted to Boston from home, made hardly a friend, somehow lost her husband along the way.

And what about those ghastly law firm parties? She never fit in at those, not for a second. She always felt like the least consequential wife in a room full of inconsequential wives. The prettiest, Daniel used to say back in the days they'd just begun, the sexiest he whispered into her straight dark hair, but also the only greenhorn, that was for sure. He, at least, was third generation. The wives, Junior Leaguers in floral skirts, forgave him his roots. But

“Where are your people from?” they always asked Lois, and Daniel would take over, answer for her. “Massachusetts,” he’d say. “Just like yours, Alice.”

How different it is at the clinic. Here she feels welcome and wanted, one of the girls. A sister to Dr. Finney’s fountain pen. Even the protesters—what would they do without her?

And yet today they’ve all abandoned her. It’s been nearly an hour now that she’s been here alone, freezing and shivering, flat on her back, thinking about Daniel, and reading the ceiling. She slides her hands under her bare bottom, uses the remaining heat of her body to warm her fingers. She wishes she could summon the nurse. “Not to be a bother, but could you please bring me my socks from the changing room, please?” She could get up, she knows, fetch the damned socks herself, but as soon as she did, as soon as she rounded the corner, that would be exactly when Dr. Finney arrived. She won’t risk missing him. And she’s not convinced, really, she could find her way back to the changing room, not without someone to guide her. The winding halls in this unfamiliar wing of the clinic made her dizzy before. Even the nurse had commented on them.

“Rats in a maze,” the nurse said as she held Lois’s johnny closed in the back and steered from behind. A few yards ahead of them, another nurse was leading a couple down the same hallway. The man walked close behind the woman, using his body to shield her rear end. “Rats in a maze,” the other nurse sang back, “with their tails hanging out.”

For a brief, alarming moment Lois thought the couple might be Daniel and Ferguson. Something about the man’s gait, his suit, the way his ears were attached to his head. But the woman was too tentative, sloshing along in her paper slippers, too vulnerable, much too exposed. And the whole idea of it was crazy. Daniel would never come to this place. Nor would he ever need to. It would be too much of a coincidence for the second wife to require the clinic’s services, too. When Daniel and Ferguson have a child, they will have it the regular way. That will be their reality, Lois knows, and she knows, too, it’s likely to be something they do soon. Tempus is fugiting, passion must be dulling if only a little, and surely Ferguson must be aware of the increased volume of calls to Lois. Maybe she stands outside Daniel’s office and listens, wondering what she should do to reclaim his full attention. A baby is what she will do. A baby is what women do.

Several months ago, Lois began checking the birth announcements in the paper. Born to Louis and Camille Izzo, a girl Kimberly Morgan. Born to

Hartoon and Seta Kazarian, a boy Michael Kyle. She is looking, of course, for Daniel's name. So far it hasn't appeared. And, yes, it is spying, but what choice does she have? He never talks to her about his wife. Sometimes, needing to be reminded that the girl is still in the picture, Lois will say, "And how's Ferguson?" as if she's referring to someone they're mutually fond of, a goddaughter, a niece, and he'll say, "Fine, thanks," and then change the subject.

And how are her fallopian tubes? That's what Lois really wants to ask. Have you had them checked out? Are they all aglow, as translucent as alabaster? Her own tubes are so blocked her former physician called in several interns to look at the ultrasound image and marvel. It crushed her with shame, made her think about bathroom pipes clogged with hair.

Daniel had put his arm around her shoulder. "Come on, now, don't take it like that," he said. "What do we care? So while everyone else is spending a fortune on tuition and braces, we'll be on a beach in Belize."

Only weeks after they'd met at Filene's, she moved into his duplex. They had sex constantly—one afternoon he rolled off her, caught his breath, and said, "Not that I'm complaining but I don't think we've spoken more than two words to each other this whole weekend," and she said, "No, I'm sure I've said at least these three: *Dios, Caro*—again?"

He laughed at her jokes and bought her presents which became more expensive as he moved up at the firm. Short leather skirts, silk scarves, Italian shoes, suede and strappy, showing some toe cleavage. He liked to take care of her. "Why keep such a menial job?" he said and she cut back her hours at Bed and Bath, then quit all together. She liked to take care of him, too. She spent most of her time cleaning the house. It sounded all wrong, degrading, she knew, yet she didn't mind, *she didn't*, she liked housework. Arranging pillows on the bed. Shining the brass rods that kept the oriental runner smooth on the staircase. She liked the whine of the floor buffer when she polished the parquet. She liked the magic of taking something worthless and turning it into a thing of use. Old rags became hooked rugs. Dried beans became stew.

But still—an old story—he had worked so hard, too many hours. She'd been lonely, as simple as that. Maybe he'd been lonely, as well. If there were a poster listing the fifty worst things life had to offer, loneliness would be number one. Would be the other forty-nine, too. "I'm not interested in laying around a beach somewhere," she said when he brought up Belize. "You forget I grew up on the beach. I'm sick of the beach."

“Lying,” he said.

“No, I mean it.”

“Not laying. Lying.”

“Don’t correct my English. I went to college.”

“Speak like it, then. And you didn’t grow up on the beach, for Chrissake. You grew up on an old polluted sea port.”

Her tears always surprised them both. “It *was* the beach. There was sand. There was saltwater. There were fucking sea gulls.”

She used to go to the shore to look for her father’s boat. At dusk she followed the footprints the gulls left in the dunes. Their paths lurched and veered as if the birds were barflies staggering home after last call. Sometimes, before she erased her own footprints from the parquet in Daniel’s home, she would make herself a tall Coke and Jack in a pretty frosted glass and totter through the house in the same crazy way.

She had gone to the clinic on her own and brought home the first contract. It was a simpler affair than the one she eventually signed, though that first one had been complex enough. She had showed it to Daniel after dinner. He took the document, weighed it in his hands, shook his head. “One of the many members of my profession who thinks he gets paid by the word,” he said. Then he read the title out loud, projecting as if he were giving a speech: *Informed Consent and Contract for In Vitro Fertilization with Spousal Semen*.

While she cleared the table he turned pages, scowling. Finally he looked up. “You didn’t read this, did you?” he said.

“Of course I did.” She had skimmed it. It was dense, single-spaced.

“You’re such a liar. No one who read this thing would go ahead with this procedure.”

She went to the kitchen. He followed and while she washed dishes, he read parts of the contract out loud. “Article Roman Two,” he said. “Recipient—that would be you—hereby acknowledges the *in vitro* fertilization failure rate to be more than eighty percent.”

She drenched forks and knives under a rush of hot water.

“Article Roman Three. Recipient—”

“That would be me.”

“—hereby acknowledges that the practice of medicine is not an exact science and therefore, that reputable practitioners cannot guarantee results and that no guarantee, warranty or other assurance has herein been made.”

“I told you I read it.”

“Get real, Lois,” he said, and so she had applied to grad school.

Now here she is, doing it on her own. She decided to on one of those days she was scanning birth announcements. She came across another D-name who was married to another F-name, and that was close enough for her, she felt her heart screech like a skidding car. She went out, took a walk. She came home, overate. She slept one more time with the man with the Jaguar. The next day she called Daniel. “Are you happy?” she asked him. “What’s happy?” he said.

The hell with all this, she thought, and she made an appointment, drove to the clinic and signed the contract, this one even thicker than the first, this one called *Informed Consent and Contract for In Vitro Fertilization with Unknown Donor Semen* and containing even more warnings. Article Roman Four: Recipient hereby acknowledges that in the event a child shall be born as a result of aforesaid procedure, such child may be mentally or physically abnormal or may have undesirable hereditary tendencies or conditions, or such child may be stillborn or may have congenital defects or sexually transmitted diseases or may otherwise suffer from the complications of childbirth.

The complications of childbirth. The phrase should have scared her. It only touched her. She initialed the bottom of every page, checked the box marked nonapplicable where it asked for her spouse’s name. She invented a signature so ferocious it sliced through the notary clause.

She is remembering that signature, the fierce dot over the small i in Lois, her surprise as she wrote her own name, Mello, that funny Portuguese name, but hers or at least as close to hers as she was ever going to get, when Dr. Finney opens the door. He is over an hour late but here at last, and the slam bam nurse at his side. The nurse is smiling and holding a tray and on that tray is a catheter and in that catheter is Unknown Donor’s sperm and Lois’s eggs. “So finally,” says the nurse. “It’s eggplant time.”

“Oh, Lord, Lois,” Dr. Finney says. “It’s freezing in here. Jeanine, can you turn up the heat?”

“You should feel my feet,” Lois says.

He grasps a foot, that’s how agreeable he is, so ready to tend to her needs. “Lord,” he says. “Lois, I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but in my professional opinion I think you’re dead.” But he’s already rubbing the foot back to life, rapid movements, efficient as a scout with two sticks. “I’m sorry,” he says, rubbing, rubbing, “but it’s been one hell of a day. We had a bit of a

crisis with the folks before you. Lost the eggs and the couple, well, you can imagine—just bereft. And furious. I mean, you can only imagine. And of course, the clinic feels terrible, but the thing is, it happens.”

“It’s right in the contract,” the nurse Jeanine says. She has opened a closet, adjusted the dial of a thermostat hidden inside.

Dr. Finney returns Lois’s right foot to the right stirrup, now takes the left in his hands. If Jeanine wasn’t here, Lois thinks she might cry out from this touching, might beg him never to stop. She might press her bare foot against the front of his trousers, press and rub against him. That’s why a nurse always accompanies him. Not to protect her, but to protect him from her affection, her gratitude.

He touches the inside of her calf and she opens her legs for him. Then there is no more touching. With gestures, he gets her to spread her legs wider, with gestures he gets her to wriggle closer to him.

“It’s all in the contract but no one pays any attention,” Jeanine is saying. “And then something goes wrong like you warned them it could, you tell them you lost their eggs, and they get all bent out of shape. Like they think you misplaced them. Like you ought to be running around looking for them. Like they rolled behind the file cabinet or something.”

“People think,” Dr. Finney says as he puts two gloved fingers inside her, “that when we say eggs are lost we mean lost as in I lost my keys when what we really mean is lost as in we lost grandma to influenza.”

“Even if they had rolled behind the file cabinet, we couldn’t just look and see them.”

“The human egg is microscopic,” Dr. Finney explains as he wriggles his fingers, feels something that makes him smile and nod, murmur good.

“Smaller than a bubble of spit,” says Jeanine. “But people always picture Easter eggs.”

“Life is sad,” says Dr. Finney. He has withdrawn his fingers. “Some days all I see here is sad followed by sadder.” Now he’s reaching toward her again. “Here comes cold and gloppy.” He is smearing a thick gel on her, inside her. “But you, I’m happy to say, have no reason to feel sad today. Can you relax for me? Can you open up just a little bit more?”

Not long after she first began with the Lupron, Lois read about yet another corrupt clinic in California. The doctor there was fertilizing his patients’ eggs with his own sperm. Everyone had been outraged; people pressed charges. Lois understands, of course, but she also knows she would never sue Dr.

Finney if it turns out he's introduced his sperm to her eggs. They charged the California doctor with an act of fraud, but Lois thinks it may just as well have been an act of love. Isn't that what love is? A pleasant kind of fraud? Your imagination running away with itself but in a nice way, the way the dish ran away with the spoon. A happy if mismatched couple in the moonlight, and isn't that another lovely fraud, *number eleven: moonlight?* There's no such thing, the moon is not a source of light at all, and yet at times Lois has read by it.

The day she signed the contract they led her to a room done up like a den. Brown leather sofas, shelves full of books about pregnancy and motherhood. Displayed on the coffee table like bright modern sculpture, a plastic model of the female reproduction system. There were also a half dozen notebooks containing hundreds of Unknown Semen Donor Profiles.

She picked one of the notebooks, opened it at random. She accepted that the profile she turned to was the one meant for her, that her hand had been guided to it the way a magician guides you to the queen of hearts though you never understand how, though everyone, including yourself, feels they've witnessed an act of free will.

"Are you sure?" she was asked. "Don't you want to spend a little more time?"

She shook her head. She was given a photocopy of the profile. "Keep it somewhere safe," she was told, and Lois put it in her new apartment's linen closet, beneath the clean sheets and extra washcloths.

Dr. Finney has withdrawn the catheter. "All done," he says. She surprises herself by starting to cry, hot fat tears that roll sideways. "Oh," Dr. Finney says. He puts his hand on her forehead as if he were her mother and she a sick child. "There now. You're all right." She closes her eyes and imagines what's happening inside her. Her own, fertilized eggs—or maybe they are really the eggs of some other woman; it doesn't matter, really, it doesn't—these eggs that have bypassed her vaginal canal, these eggs that her doctor has ferried past her cervical lock, these eggs are now affixing themselves to her uterine wall like barnacles on a hull. "All right now," Dr. Finney says.

"You take good care," he says before he leaves. "We'll be thinking about you."

When she gets home, she goes to the linen closet and takes out the Anonymous Donor Semen Profile. Then she goes to the bathroom, runs a hot bath. As the tub fills she sits on its side and reads the profile. On one side are his vital statistics—height, weight, hair color. Also a list of his talents. Circle all

that apply, the form says. Unknown Donor has circled musical, athletic, math.

On the reverse side is the release he signed, his name blotted out. She's read the release so often she knows it by heart, can recite it like a poem:

*Unknown Donor hereby
agrees to make no attempt whatsoever
to locate Recipient
and/or aforesaid child.*

She steps into the tub, one foot, the other. She sinks down. The water burns but bearably, and she closes her eyes. When, at last, she is thoroughly warm, she sighs and she opens her eyes and she reaches for the profile again. She folds it and folds it again, until it is very small, an origami swan. She floats it in her bath.

*Unknown Donor hereby
irrevocably releases and gives up forever
all rights to his donated semen
and to any child that results from its use.*

Forever. It touches her. She reaches for a towel, stands.

And now she gets out of the bath. Slowly and gingerly she walks to her bed. She will treat herself well, take care of herself. Then, if she makes no mistakes, she will get to have this baby. She will get to suffer and worry and think about it forever. And if she makes no mistakes, if she is good, if she is lucky, then one day she will be doing something very ordinary, maybe riding a bus, and a man will bend down to retrieve the rattle dropped by the infant in her lap and his hand will brush hers and he'll look at the baby and then into her eyes, and he'll begin to say, to ask. . . .

At the same time she knows that one clumsy misstep and nature, like a stranger lurking on a playground, will lure those eggs from her. Then what will she do? She'll pick up the phone and when Daniel answers, she'll tell him what happened. I'll be right there, he'll say. Don't be silly, she'll tell him. You can't come here now. Don't you have clients who need you? I'll be there in thirty minutes, he'll say. Twenty if the lights go my way. He'll burst into her office, find her there, folding essays into swans, into paper planes, and he'll duck when she lets one soar past his big moon head.