

Waiting

Meredith Hall

“Meredy!” My mother is home from work, calling from the kitchen. Her voice is sharp, imperious. I have been waiting for this moment, waiting for more than four months. Still, I haven’t expected this voice, and it stops me cold. I telephoned her when I got home from school, mid-morning, wishing I had let the school nurse call her. When my mother asked why I wasn’t at school, I said, “I’ll tell you when you get home tonight.” I spent the day trying to imagine this conversation, but I could not draw up my mother’s concerned face, could not feel her arms around me. Now, I stand silent, watching myself in the mirror over my bureau. Everything in the house feels muffled, distant, as if suddenly none of it has anything to do with me anymore--not the hum of the furnace below my feet, not my diary under my slippers in the second drawer, not the skittering shadows of winter branches shimmering on my wall—each piece receding into a past which belonged to the girl I have been up until this moment.

I am Meredith Hall, I think, looking back at the girl in my mirror. I am Meredy, a junior at Winnacunnet High School in Hampton, New Hampshire. I will graduate, class of ‘67, and go to Smith College. I am a sixteen year old girl who gets all A’s and is secretary of student council. The ocean flows in and out, in and out in perfect rhythm, every day and every night, across my beach, a mile beyond Mrs. Palmer’s and Crazy Billie’s and Uncle Leo’s, who is not really my uncle but who has always called me My Little Sweetheart, beyond their bunched together and friendly little houses with peeling paint. This has been my bedroom since I was born. I sleep under this soft worn bedspread. I ironed the white lace cloth on my bureau, whose drawers stick, and inside are my clothes. I come home after school and put apple blossoms in a vase or make brownies to surprise

and please my mother. I am Meredy, with a brother named David, a sister named Sandy and a mother who loves me.

I look back at myself in the mirror, my hands holding the edge of my bureau softly. Some things are right. My shiny blond hair and crisp white blouse. My girl's skin. But the awful fear, the aloneness, the waiting for four and a half months for this moment and whatever will follow, have settled into my eyes, my face. School and pleasing my mother and the soft shelter of my room are gone, I know, forever.

"Meredy!" The call is a summons. I suddenly feel too tired to imagine what is going to come next. My mother's voice announces that whatever I have hoped that would be is not going to happen. The hush in the house is slow and deep, a warning I hear but cannot react to as I face her.

"You're pregnant, aren't you?" The words are hard, fierce. I cannot find my mother; she is gone, a million miles away, back in a place where there were no terrible surprises, where good girls didn't draw shame on good mothers. I am surprised that she has taken so long to come to this realization, surprised that after my round belly and morning sickness and fear and retreat have slipped past her all these months, all it has taken is a small break in the routine, me coming home early from school, for her to pay attention finally to her daughter's despair.

"Yes." I struggle to react, to fight this new current, the unexpected coldness, the judgment, before it is too late. But my voice is tiny in the hollow room. Her cigarette smoke floats in the still air. I want cover. I want someone to hold me.

"How far along are you?"

"Almost five months."

"David!" my mother calls, looking at me steadily. "David!"

My brother, home for winter break from college in Montreal where he is in pre-med, appears in the kitchen doorway.

"Your sister is pregnant."

My loved brother's head slowly turns toward me. He looks surprised and then disapproving. Slowly he turns back to our mother; they look at each other silently, then he walks past me into the hall. I hear his bedroom door click shut.

I don't want to look at my mother; I don't want to look at the floor, don't want to allow my mother to see me, my belly round with this shame, me helpless and too scared to speak. I imagine myself erased. The cold gray light tumbles in through the window and absorbs me.

"Well," my mother says. It is a loud word, not ambivalent. There is no struggle in it, no doubt. "Go call your father and tell him what you have done."

My father sits stiffly in the faded brown chair we still call, six years after his leaving, Daddy's chair. The last time we have all sat together in this room was when my father returned after disappearing for a year and announced that he had married a woman named Dorothy. Now, he has on one of his old Viyella shirts, worn out at the elbows, and canvas boat shoes with a hole in the toe. Once, I told him it embarrassed me that he dressed like that; my father laughed and said, "I've worked goddam hard to be able to dress like this." He is tall and large-chested, and fills his old chair. His strong features are handsome. He grounds the room, the house, my mother, me in ways I have forgotten.

My mother, still in her green wool dress and black heels from her job at *New Hampshire Profile,s* sits straight-backed on the edge of the couch. The muscles of her face have drawn in, setting her eyes and mouth in a smooth, hard mask. I sit by the picture window, tugging at the pleats of my skirt to hide the small bulge of my stomach. I watch my father and mother silently, trying to remember at what point so much had careened off track. I have a vague sense that what is about to happen is somehow inevitable, a scene written in my hazy past and only now being acted out. I can't think what the scripted outcome is, though, and wait to hear my parents speak their lines. They do not say any of the things I thought they would.

"Do you know who the father is?" my own father asks. His voice is not cold. It is slow, uncertain, as if he also can't remember his part.

I am surprised by the question. I look quickly at my mother, hoping there might be a protest, some protection, but my mother returns my look without flinching and waits.

I think my voice will be a roar, will scorch the room, but it is small. I hear myself answer in a wavering voice, “Yes. His name is Tom _____.”

“What?” my father says. “What? What is it?” I say the name again.

My father looks at my mother. “What is that, Bobby? _____?” He repeats the name. “Is that Italian? _____?” My mother doesn’t answer. “Do you want to get married?” he asks me. He doesn’t wait for an answer and asks, “Does he know about this? Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. Goddam that little son of a bitch. Jesus, Meredy.”

I want to say something, to explain that I am stunned, too, frightened and wanting to climb back against these events to my life. But we are lurching blind through our scenes, and I cannot find my voice to say, *Help me*.

“Will he sign the papers?” my father asks.

It is so quiet. I can’t tell if we are all hearing the same waiting silence. I understand that my father means I will have to see Tom again. But “papers”? I have imagined this scene a thousand times, and it has never been anything like this. Papers. I try to think that he means papers having to do with my homework. Or maybe he means something to do with the police. Papers. A slow terrible dawning washes through me. I hold my hands tight against my small hard belly. I haven’t answered my father’s question.

He looks at my mother again. “Now what?”

My mother looks at me coldly. “Well, she can’t stay here.”

In the car on the way to Epping, my father tries to hold my hand. I pull it back in my lap when he has to shift. I am afraid I will cry. I hope that he will tell me what is going to happen to me, that he will say things will be all right. We cross the marsh, golden in the low afternoon light, and take Route 101 through the soft, overgrown, snow-covered farmland. The heater fan hums. We don’t talk during the half-hour drive to his house.

I have never seen the upstairs of my father's and Dorothy's house. I put my bag on the bed. Dorothy closes the door and goes downstairs. When I hear their voices from the kitchen, I open the door quietly and look down the hall. The house is an old colonial my father and Dorothy are renovating. The ceilings are high, the rooms cubes of stripped gray plaster. What has been finished--the hallway, the bathroom and front stairway--are grand and striped and carpeted. There is a heavy strength in the house, something authoritative that makes me feel small and vulnerable. A man's terry bathrobe hangs on the back of the bathroom door. There are only two towels on the rod by the sink. I wipe my hands on my slacks and quietly walk back down the hall. All the bedroom doors are closed. I want to find my father, but I don't dare go downstairs.

My room is on the back corner, with two big windows looking out over the old barn and fields and woods. There are no curtains. Boxes are stacked along the walls and in the small closet. The air in the room is cold, and old. I climb under the flowered bedspread, my arms at my sides, shivering, and watch the last gray light of the afternoon settle over the fields.

Dorothy and my father leave on separate business trips the next morning. I sit at the breakfast table while Dorothy uses the phone to confirm their flights and check in with their secretaries about pick-up and hotel arrangements. Her face has a formal beauty which my mother's lacks; I can see the difference, see her sophistication, and understand my father's leaving for this new life. Dorothy has an old, heavy brown cardigan over her black suit. The kitchen is cold like the rest of the house; Dorothy keeps the thermostat at sixty-four, and tells me to leave it there while they are away. The kitchen hasn't been redone yet. It is large and dirty; newspapers and old mail and stacks of dishes clutter the old linoleum counters. The ceiling and faded flowered wallpaper are clouded yellow from old cigarette smoke. Small cardboard boxes full of Italian tiles line the wall beside the refrigerator. The windows by the table face east, and thin, cold, winter sun outlines the greasy gas stove.

Dorothy's voice is commanding, with her secretary and then with me. She shows me where the light switches are, how to relight the gas pilot on the stove, and what food is in the refrigerator

and pantry. She posts telephone numbers for my father in Houston. She will be home first, in four days. I nod at the directions, but don't ask any questions. I have never spent a night alone. The coming days feel like part of a penance, punishment. I am suddenly scared of everything, of the back country road with no street lights and the sagging unlit shed beyond the kitchen, of my mother's voice and being alone and the stove pilot. I am afraid of having a baby. I am afraid of giving a baby away. I nod yes to everything Dorothy says.

When they leave, my father hugs me. I can feel the small tight knot of my stomach against his heavy coat. He pulls away from me and says, "I—. I, I don't want you to go outside while we're away. Don't go outside. I don't think you need to, anyway." No one in town knows I am here, the hidden shamed girl. I pull my sweater around my chest and belly and say okay.

I wash two days' dishes and scrub the sink, as if somehow I mirror the dirt and disarray of my father's house, as if by cleaning and organizing the rooms, I can somehow clean away my disgrace, bring sense and order back to my own life. I spend the morning walking through each room of the house, examining pictures and the books on the shelves, opening the drawers and closets. Everything is a mess, dirty and cluttered, plaster dust and piles of magazines and boxes marked "Keene: Study" and "Kitchen." It is snowing softly, and the gray sky and gray plaster make the interior landscape as dreary as the country outside. I put on all the ceiling lights on the first floor, but the bulbs are low watt and don't cheer up the cold rooms. I climb the stairs to their room.

The blankets are tossed aside. There is a television at the foot of the bed. This room has been finished. It is big, and big turquoise flowers bloom on the walls; the carpet is a heavy red. Their closet is full of shirts and blouses and skirts and suits in dry cleaner bags. Clothes spill out of drawers and over the chairs. I open each drawer, and carefully close it just the way it was. My father's cufflinks and tie tacks are in an open leather box. I remember it on his bureau at home. I dump them out on the bed, examining each one, remembering them, remembering something that lingers softly, sadly, at the edge of my memory, and put them back in pairs. My mother's bedroom slides like a film in front of this one, her worn chenille spread pulled neatly across her bed, the bed

she used to share with my father, and her old sewing machine and the sun sweeping across the clean maple floor.

I take out one of my father's old work sweaters and pull it over my head. It smells of him, of linseed oil and sawdust. I go back downstairs to the front room, to a patch of pale sun on the couch. The clock on the mantle says nine-thirty. I undo the top button of my skirt and sit down with one of Dorothy's paperbacks, a mystery by someone I have never heard of. I wish I had brought the *Demian* and Austen my mother gave me for Christmas. When I packed to leave, everything in my room seemed to belong to someone who had died—things sweet and too painful to hold. I have come to Epping with a small bag of clothes almost too tight to wear. The clock ticks in the big gray room. I look up each time a car drives by, its tires shooshing through the slush.

It snows a lot in southern New Hampshire this winter. My father and Dorothy are away most of the time. Sometimes Dorothy is home without him. She takes over my diet: plain toast for breakfast, cottage cheese and pineapple for lunch, hamburger patty and a slice of tomato for dinner. Dorothy speaks to me every day, at every meal, about the importance of not gaining weight, of using cream to prevent stretch marks, of wearing a tight bra to keep my young breasts high and firm. We do not talk about the child inside me, his future, my future, love, fear, betrayal, loneliness. I am always hungry, and fine, zigzagging lines are already webbing my belly. They feel like a mark on me, a mark to announce me forever as the girl who made a baby and gave it away. They feel like a warning to anyone who might think of loving me someday.

Dorothy catches me one day in one of my father's shirts. She makes me take it off, and gives me a blue one instead with the collar frayed off. I am careful to hide the belt I have taken from my father's closet to hold up my skirt, with the button and zipper wide open. My mother sends a maternity outfit finally, short-sleeved plaid with big buttons, cheap stiff cotton that collapses when I wash it. The pants embarrass me, synthetic, dark blue, enormous, with a panel of elastic that shows every time I move.

I sit on the edge of my bed each morning and rub in the cream Dorothy gave me, goose bumps rising in the cold. My hands recognize the smooth long muscles of my arms and legs. But my breasts, barely formed before I got pregnant, are large and heavy; the small nipples are hard red nubs, tight and sore. I don't like to touch them. My belly hardens, a tight round world stretching inside my skin. I try once, holding on to the bureau in my cold dim room, to move through my old ballet exercises. But I can see my reflection in the window, a stranger, and do not do it again.

I write long letters to my mother, angry and frightened and pleading letters, but afterwards I feel helpless and embarrassed, and I rip them up. My mother does not call or write. The house is heavy; the light is heavy; it is only six weeks since I left school.

Sometimes I try to pray at night in my bed, but my prayers always end up being to my mother. "Hold me," I pray. "Please help me."

"Do you know what this town is saying about me?" my mother answers from above. "They say that my daughter is common, that she is a slut."

The big empty house ticks along, slow and cold and quiet. I stay in my room, waiting, watching the light come and go over the pasture and woods. One morning, Dorothy knocks on my door. I stiffen. I am lying on the bed under the quilt, dressed in the maternity clothes I wear every day, shoes on as if I might go somewhere, reading a book from the carousel bookstand by the bed. My back is to the door, my leg bent to make a hollow for my belly. Dorothy enters speaking.

"Meredy. You cannot stay in this room all the time. You have got to get involved in a project. Get some exercise." Her voice is critical, impatient.

I get off the bed and stand on the other side. I don't answer.

"I'll get you a rug. You can do exercises here on the floor." She shoves the boxes one after another into the corner.

I sit back down on the bed. It is going to snow; the room is still and gray. The boxes grate across the pine floor. Dorothy walks back to the side of the bed, reaches around me and turns on the lamp.

“There,” she says.

I call my mother. She is silent after I say hello. I can hear the stereo in the background; my mother inhales her cigarette.

“Mum, I just wanted to talk.”

“About what?”

I hesitate. “I don’t know. Everything.”

“What do you want me to say, Meredy?”

“I don’t want you to say anything, Mum.” There is a long silence.

“Mum, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Well. You have no choice. You’ll be fine,” my mother says.

The first time my father asks me to eat upstairs when company comes for dinner, I have to ask why.

His response is more abrupt than I have ever heard him. “Why do you think?” he answers. After that, I know that when Dorothy cleans the kitchen and living rooms and my father makes fires in the fireplaces, I should go upstairs. The house smells of roast lamb and garlic. I listen to their friends talk all at once about vacations and the snow and their children. Bursts of laughter flare and ebb. I can sometimes hear my brother’s or sister’s name rise above the murmur, and I stand with my ear to the door trying to hear my own.

Dorothy buys a clock for my room. I listen to it flapping the time, minute after minute, for three days. When I am alone again in the house, I unplug it and push it under the sheets in the linen closet. I stand by the bathroom window, my fingertips touching under my belly. I lean my head

against the frosted glass; snow floats in gentle eddies on the wind. I wish someone would come, but I can't think who. The weight settles hard. I roll my head slowly back and forth, eyes closed, fingers touching. The silence in the house leaves me marooned, unattached.

I have come only with sneakers. In the musty shed, I find Dorothy's boots. I put on mittens and my father's old red hunting jacket and a hat. I walk out the shed door into the winter storm. A car rounds the corner slowly on the snowy road. I step quickly back into the shed and pull the door closed. I wait, listening for cars. When it is quiet, I move quickly around behind the shed and, cupping my belly in my arms, I start to run before another car drives by. I have not been outside the house since I came; the cold wind burns my lungs and throat. As I move straight across the field toward the woods, snow comes over Dorothy's boots, packing behind the loose tongue and soaking my socks. Everything is still. Small gusts of wind make snow eddies; stiff weed stems curve down to the ground and etch semi-circles back and forth in the snow. The rotting plank door to the old cold-cellar stands open. I have heard my father talk about this relic from the old farm, but I have never seen it. Dug into the hillside, the domed black pit smells of damp earth and mold. I stand just inside, out of the snow. I breathe deeply, tasting the sweet decay, emptying my lungs of air I have breathed in and out, in and out for weeks in the closed-up house. Turning around, I face the woods; the falling snow softens the line of trees, and the air is sharp and clean.

I cross the pasture, plowing my boots through the snow, and crawl clumsily under the old wire fence. Two cars passed the house, but I feel small and inconsequential in the back fields. I don't run. Instead, I lie down at the edge of the woods, looking up through the bare oak and beech branches. The snow floats here out of the wind, drifting softly onto me like goose down. I am cold. I press my back into the snow and turn my head to the side, flicking little piles of snow with my tongue. I remember the coppery taste of the snow, its quick melt on my tongue. There is nothing moving anywhere. The woods and fields calm me, ease the groundswell of dread. Spreading my arms and legs wide, I slowly sweep a snow-angel, remembering for just a moment my childhood life,

gone forever. I lie still, my belly rising into the soft light, snow collecting around my eyes, my feet cold and everything perfectly silent.

Mid-morning. The early March light is thin, silvery in the dark house. I have been alone for four days. I am almost always alone. Each day is the same. I am awake often in the night, sleepless, frightened, disconnected. Finally, I drift into welcome sleep before dawn, then wake with a jolt as the cold gray light comes to my room. Instantly, I remember: *I am pregnant. I am having a baby. I am at my father's, alone. I will give away my baby.* The nightmare of each new day.

I lie in my bed, unable to get comfortable, stroking my belly. There is not a sound anywhere inside or outside the house, a vacuum, emptiness. Time suspends, dropping me deeply into an aching, inescapable fear. I hunch into the covers for warmth, trying to will myself back into sleep. I open my eyes, I look at Dorothy's boxes against the wall with my limp, faded maternity clothes folded carefully on top. The table and small lamp beside my bed and the closed door to the closet. The two windows with nothing but gray sky beyond. My baby stretches, poking me from inside. I trace what I believe is an arm, and a knee. There is no time. Nothing changes day to day, week to week, in this gray lonely house, in my fear, except that my baby grows, moving closer and closer to being gone forever.

I finally rise into the cold air, lingering in the warm and hypnotic shower. Sometimes I think I hear the phone ringing, or the heavy knocker on the kitchen door. I turn off the water quickly and freeze, naked, round bellied, listening. Maybe someone is calling for me. Coming to be with me. Hope, and shame. But there is no sound.

I eat standing at the messy counter, and then move to my place in my father's chair by the living room window. A car passes every five minutes or so. I rouse to attention each time, straining to catch a glimpse of the man or woman driving, a face, a human being, some small connection which will pull me for a moment from the terror which has become part of me now. The cars speed by, a red collar, a glance in the rearview mirror, a silent laugh shared with the woman in the passenger seat. No connection. Life being lived beyond me, out of my reach. My baby nestles

heavily into my lap. The old clock on the mantle slips silently through the slow, empty minutes, hours. The winter's snow recedes, inch by inch, from the foundation of the barn, the dark tree trunks, the roadside bankings, revealing the muddied earth beneath. I wrap my arms under my belly, holding my baby to me. Sometimes I feel his body tic, hiccups maybe, or his heart measuring the minutes with me.

Late in the afternoon, as the light falls again, I rise and wander through the house, my nighttime agitation rising. There is nothing to do. Wait. Each quiet step, each glance out to the road, each press of an arm or leg inside me. I have no idea how to prepare, or even what to prepare for. There is no one to tell me what is coming. Walking, sitting, lying through the night in the cold room upstairs. My baby, me, just waiting.

"I could take care of it," I say. I have been trying to convince my father about the maple sap all morning.

"Jesus, Meredy."

"Help me move the evaporator behind the barn. No one would see me. All the sap is just overflowing the buckets. It's such a waste. I can..."

"Meredy! If you want to do some work, sand the walls in the back hall. You haven't done a thing to fix up the house since you got here."

We are all embarrassed by my request. My father and Dorothy don't want me outside in the yard. Dorothy sips her coffee and turns the pages of the newspaper. My father gets up, pushing his chair back hard against the wall, and moves to his chair in the living room. I go up to my room and lie under the blankets, my face absorbing the closed-up cold of the room.

Two days later, my father and Dorothy spend the morning packing, arguing and confirming flights.

"We'll both be back at three-thirty on Friday," Dorothy calls up the stairs to me. "We're meeting in Baltimore and flying up together."

"Don't go out, Meredy," my father calls up. Each word is spoken distinctly, slowly.

“I know,” I answer. “I won’t.”

Their car pulls out of the gravel driveway onto the tarred road. I stand by my bed, running my hands over my hard mounding belly. I think of calling my mother. The late March sun floods the overgrown paddock by the barn; snow drips off the roof and pelts the terrace below. I sit on the bed, then stand again. I walk to the window and lean my forehead against the glass. Someone rolls inside me. I turn back to my room: a bed, boxes, the new rug, a lamp.

The sap is running hard. At first, as spring comes, I feel the old excitement, the child’s release as the sky clears, the buds swells, the air carries the rich sweet smell of earth, the birds return and remember their mating songs. I want to be outside, where the world feels orderly, where there is life, reassuring cycles. But as the days warm, the sap rises from deep below the snow-covered soil and overflows the buckets my father set on the taps. My father is too busy, away too much, and I watch the sap fill and drip over the buckets day after day. Some days, my father walks tree to tree and pours the sap out over the melting snow, replacing the empty buckets one by one. It frightens me to see the sap rising to nothing, the days roaring on, the fullness of the earth wasted, discarded. My own blood courses through my enlarged veins, the fullness of a new life coming. I want to slow and contain the flow, bring the swift current of time, of growth, under control. I can’t bear to watch the sap released onto the ground, my baby now weeks from slipping into the world, leaving both of us alone.

I struggle to drag the old evaporator out behind the barn, but it is big and heavy; its metal legs catch in the mud, and I leave it beside the shed. I go back inside, find Dorothy’s lobster kettle on a shelf in the shed, and wash it carefully at the old sink. I put it on the stove and head back outside, careful to listen for cars as I leave the cover of the house for the open yard. The sap buckets hanging from the old sugar maples along the driveway drip into the muddy snow beneath each tree. I put my mouth over the tap and suck the cold, sweet water down my throat. Bracing against the rough bark, I lift the gallon buckets off the hooks and carry them, one at a time, into the kitchen. I empty them into the kettle and hang them back out on the trees. Each time a car approaches, I walk heavily for the shed, setting the sloshing bucket in the snow. Five buckets fill the pot. I light the

stove. A loud shhh, and the pop and crackle of expanding metal cracks the silence of the kitchen. I stir the clear liquid with a long wooden spoon, watching the swirl and eddies of the simmering sap.

I stay in the kitchen all day, stirring the kettle and cleaning up the counters and sink, feeling calmer than I have for many months. Late in the afternoon, I put my sweater back on and light a fire in the fireplace, something my father has told me not to do when he isn't here. I look for a book, pick up one of Dorothy's romances, and settle into my father's chair by the window. I sit with my legs crossed under me, my large tight belly braced on them, the sweater stretched tight and thin. Maple steam fills the house.

I stays downstairs by the fire. Sap flows through the trees outside, dripping into the emptied buckets. It boils on the stove. I tend the kettle every half hour until midnight and then, turning the flame low, climb upstairs to bed. I leave a light on in the hall, a luxury.

The sun wakes me as it edges the east window. I can smell maple even up here. I stay under the warm covers, the quiet of the house thick in the early light. I lie on my side, watching the wedge of light widen. My hand slides down over my belly, a foot or elbow answering in a tight quick arc. Closing my eyes, I cup the tiny point in my hand. My baby rolls and flutters. A crow calls from the woods across the road.

From my father's closet, I take down a thick sweater I haven't worn before. I button it around myself, standing back from the mirror on their closet door. My hands spread wide over my hard belly. The girl I was a year ago is gone. Now, I am old, tired with fear and shame, sixteen, almost seven months along. One of Dorothy's sheepskin slippers is on the unmade bed, a newspaper beside it on the floor. I have a sense of conversation, even laughter, happening in this room when I am not here.

I hear the mailman stop at the end of the driveway. Downstairs, I watch him on the slant from the edge of the living room window, keeping myself hidden by the drapes. I lean on the casing after he leaves, staring down the road. The kettle shushes quietly in the kitchen, a reassuring sound, a hushing sound like a mother's love. I look at Dorothy's couch, the glass my father left by his chair,

at the quickening woods. It was cold last night, but the sun has warmth finally, and the buckets will be overflowing again. Three months here.

I walk into the kitchen to stir the sap. Over the stove, the old wallpaper has pulled away in large sagging sheets from the wall. Yellow steam, stained with old nicotine, beads on the ceiling and drips yellow onto the counter and floor and stove and boxes, onto me. I turn. The paper, the greasy brown wallpaper, hangs in limp sheets four feet down from the ceiling all the way around the room. The stained and pocked plaster underneath glistens gray with steam.

I turn back to the stove and slowly stir the thickening syrup. I put down the spoon. The filthy steam drips from the ceiling onto my hair, my arms, my belly, the floor. My fingertips hold the edge of the stove lightly. My baby will be born. I will give my baby away. This past will be etched forever into both our lives. The crying comes, silent, the kettle shushing on the stove.

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