



Muriel stared at the baby. Two months old, Trina slept not in childhood's peaceful slumber but with brow furrowed and small hands curled into fists, as if even in sleep, she was conscious of some as yet unnamed threat lurking beneath her crib or in the shadows of the closet.

Sighing, Muriel turned away, her slow exhalation of breath filled with a self-pitying despair that, like her daughter's invisible adversary, she was helpless to overcome.

At seventeen, she was unprepared for motherhood, not merely the demands, the unending responsibility, but the boredom of it all. She often thought of her friends—or her former friends, since they no longer included her in things. They were going to parties, dating and falling in love, and they had no more responsibility than keeping their rooms clean or perhaps helping with the dishes, and just the thought of their freedom left Muriel envious and more than a little sad.

Her own responsibilities were interminable: cook the meals, wash the dishes, clean the apartment; and on top of all that, since Trina's birth, she now was faced with even more chores, the most onerous, as she'd told her friend, Katie, 'changing all those never-ending shitty diapers.'

Muriel wondered if it was just her, but she'd always imagined babies as cute, little, cuddly things—kind of like animated dolls—that smelled of Johnson's Baby Powder and cooed all the time. Yet that wasn't how it was at all, at least where hers was concerned. It crapped all over itself, spit up food and milk, and the only time it didn't smell sour was immediately after she bathed it. As for cooing, Trina stayed too busy hollering to coo at anybody, especially her own mama.

Walking toward the bathroom, Muriel thought about how sometimes, though she wasn't about to mention it to anyone, since they'd probably just say she was being weird, she suspected there'd been a mix up at the hospital. She'd seen something about just such a situation on *Oprah* a few months ago. A woman had carried a baby home from some hospital in Houston, raised it, devoted herself to it, and all the while experienced this vague feeling that something wasn't right. As things turned out, it was because the kid wasn't even hers but that of another woman who also had been caring for the wrong child and experiencing the same feeling that something was amiss.

Muriel remembered that when Oprah asked the first woman what caused her to suspect the child wasn't hers, the woman replied, 'Because, though I was ashamed to tell anyone at the time, I didn't feel any *motherly* love. Oh, I took care of him and all, but he just didn't tug at my heartstrings. You know what I mean?'

Muriel knew exactly what the woman meant; and she didn't think it was so farfetched that the same scenario could have occurred down at Memorial Hospital, right there in Warner Robbins, Georgia. It certainly would explain why she didn't feel all mushy toward Trina the way she'd always imagined mothers were supposed to feel. Like that woman had said, the motherly love just wasn't there.

She distinctly recalled when she'd first seen the baby and how, though it had surprised her at the time, she hadn't felt much of anything, except maybe disgust since it was all red, wrinkled, and not cute in the least. And there'd been her husband, Gavin, and the nurse, both grinning like fools and expecting her to take the thing in her arms, to carry on like it was the most beautiful baby she'd ever seen; and maybe she'd held it—though not for long—but she'd merely done so to please Gavin and not because she herself had any desire to hold the ugly thing.

Muriel paused in the doorway of the bathroom. On the opposite wall, her reflection swam in the mirror over the vanity. There was no denying Trina looked a little like her—auburn hair, upturned nose, even a dimple in her right cheek—but that could be mere coincidence. Maybe the woman who'd mistakenly gotten her kid had red hair and similar features.

Yet even as she concluded this, Muriel experienced an unsettling sensation, one she recognized as guilt. 'Well, it could've happened,' she insisted, deciding not to think about it anymore. Switched babies or no switched babies, motherhood still fell short of her expectations, even if she herself wasn't exactly sure what those expectations were. All she knew for certain was that, when it came to babies, hers wasn't anything like babies were supposed to be—for instance, those in TV commercials and movies—cute and cuddly and precious, as well as unobtrusive.

Hell, she thought. Those babies giggled at their parents, never made a mess, and slept almost all the time. They didn't soil themselves, throw up, and cry half the night. Nor did they interrupt their mother's favorite television shows or interfere when she was trying to have sex with her husband.

Feeling a hard knot of resentment in the middle of her stomach, although she simultaneously experienced a vague sense of disquiet, Muriel wondered why Gavin wasn't annoyed by the kid's constant demands and the way it disrupted their lives.

The one time she'd voiced her own aggravation—perhaps about two weeks after Trina's birth—and told Gavin that she found Trina's unrelenting insistence on having her needs met tedious and, at times, totally irritating, Gavin had looked at her like she'd said something despicable.

'She's just a baby,' he'd said. 'Hell, she doesn't do these things intentionally.'

Not liking his expression—it reminded her of that of someone who'd just spied a cockroach crawling across the kitchen table—Muriel had forced a laugh. 'I know that,' she'd said. 'I just meant . . .' Yet she hadn't completed the sentence, had simply turned away, because even she wasn't sure what she'd meant.

Not wanting to think about the way Gavin had looked at her, yet feeling her resentment grow because her husband's disapproval was also somehow the baby's fault, like everything else that was wrong with her life, Muriel walked into the bathroom and snatched the lid off the laundry hamper. Just as she'd suspected, full again, which meant when the kid woke up, she might as well head on down to the stinking Laundromat, which was the last thing on earth she wanted to do. Christ, but she had better things to do with her time than spend it sitting in that hellhole.

She kicked the empty laundry basket into the center of the room, dumped the contents of the hamper into it, then yanking the damp towels from the rack over the tub, threw them on the pile.

She looked around for anything else that might be added. The more laundry she did today, the longer she could wait to do it again, that is unless the kid got sick a like she had last week. Muriel clenched her teeth, felt her exasperation prickling beneath her skin. Picking up a damp washcloth, she glared at the floor near the commode. A telltale stain, identical to one she'd cleaned up just the day before, discolored the tile. And though she was at a loss as to explain why—didn't even think in those terms—this viscous spot on the white floor somehow embodied all Muriel's frustration and disillusionment. *How in the hell*, she wondered, *can anyone miss something that damn big?*

Experiencing a blend of disgust and more than a little anger, Muriel thought about just how unfair life was—how nothing ever turned out the way she wanted—how it was just one gigantic disappointment; and grabbing Gavin's favorite T-shirt—the one with the Budweiser frogs—from the laundry basket, she knelt beside the commode and wiped at the splattered urine.

'Every damn body expects me to do every damn thing,' she hissed. She tossed the T-shirt back toward the basket, watched it slide onto the floor. 'And next time, I'll use his fucking toothbrush.'

Standing, kicking the basket again, she jerked open the linen closet and grimaced. Beneath the bottom shelf was a garbage bag filled with Gavin's greasy work clothes. He worked at Dave's Automotive Repair, and his things got so filthy she wouldn't let him put them in with the rest of the laundry. She pulled the bag from the closet. She'd just washed three days ago and yet, like the drudgery that was now her life, the task of providing clean clothes for a family was one without end.

This too was somehow the baby's fault. Before it had come along, with all its crap and throw up, once a week had been enough; and then she and Gavin had gone to the Laundromat together on Saturday. Hell, it was almost like a date. They'd sipped Cokes and talked, giggling and cutting up, or else they'd sat in the car and made out, though not too heavily, just enough to turn each other on and make them antsy to get back home. Other times, they'd finish the wash then grab a bite to eat and go to the movies, or sometimes just drive around, cruising the streets the way young people did, stopping to laugh with friends or have a beer. But then the kid had come along and changed everything.

Muriel headed back to the bedroom, having decided she might as well do the sheets. Why not? She had everything else to wash. She tossed the comforter onto a chair and began stripping the bed. Not concentrating on what she was doing, the routine already automatic, she thought how even without Gavin, she wouldn't mind doing the laundry so much if she didn't have to lug the kid and all its shit along—bottles, diapers, wet wipes, and that damn carrier that weighed a ton. If she went by herself, at least she could read *Cosmo* or *Seventeen* in peace or else stroll around the plaza and check out the sales, even stop at the café for coffee and maybe meet somebody interesting.

She wadded the sheets and tossed them toward the doorway. Hell, but the kid had ruined everything. Now she had to sit in the Laundromat while the clothes were washing and drying because toting a kid around took all the fun out of window shopping or sitting in a café. And if that wasn't bad enough, she had to listen to all those frumpy housewives yammer on and on about their own obnoxious brats, as if babies were the only damned thing in the world to talk about. *Ooh, lookie here, little Arlene has a tooth. It's so precious. Baby Frankie can say 'Da Da.' Isn't he a regular little Einstein?*

Muriel wondered just what it was about motherhood that made some women lose the capability to discuss any subject except their offspring. Did the process of giving birth do something to their brains, leaving them unable to have conversations about engaging and far more pleasurable topics, like music, fashion, and movie stars?

*Silly cows*, she thought. *Can't talk about a damn thing that's interesting.* And why in the hell were they always trying to pull her into their inane conversations? Couldn't they see she wasn't anything like them? She wasn't some boring housewife and mother. She was still young, pretty, and in fine damn shape—having gotten her figure back in no time after Trina was born. But then she cared about how she looked, unlike them, with their scraggly hair and chipped nails.

Muriel felt the sudden unexpected heat of unshed tears. *But why do I bother*, she wondered. *It's not as though it matters how I look any more.* Yet no sooner had the thought appeared than she dismissed it. Yes, it did matter. It would always matter.

She looked into the mirror over the dresser. *I'm better looking than ever*, she thought and felt the ache of her discontent, a discontent somehow related to this recognition of her own increased attractiveness, though she herself was unable to say why this was the case, could but recognize her own beauty and mourn for something not gained but lost.

Turning her head from one side to the other, Muriel studied her reflection. 'Damn,' she muttered, 'damn, damn.' She picked up the brush, ran it through her long copper hair. She knew one thing for sure, no one was ever going to catch her going out in public like those women she saw at that Laundromat—hair pulled back in some stringy ponytail or, worse, up in a nest of rollers. Talk about trashy, as well as just plain butt-ugly.

Abruptly looking away from the mirror, unable to bear what she saw reflected there, Muriel studied the display of framed photos arranged on the dresser. *We were so happy*, she thought, *so carefree.* Gavin's senior prom at the Hilton. A summer picnic at Lake Lanier. The trip to Disney World before she'd found out she was pregnant. And finally their wedding photo. Gavin handsome in his tuxedo and her smiling and beautiful. She swallowed, looking away, unable to bear the thought that all those golden moments were now no more than memories and would never be again. How, she wondered, had her life come to this nothingness?

Muriel brushed away tears over which she had no control. *This can't be my life*, she thought. *It can't be. I won't let it be.* She glanced toward the window, beyond which the October sky shone bright with promise. *It's all the baby's fault. The baby changed everything. Now we never go dancing, never go to parties, never do anything, except once in a while, which isn't enough. I'm too young for once in a while.* Thinking this, she felt her heart beating against her ribs, knew she was afraid yet could not explain why, and she again looked around the room, this time her gaze desperate, searching. *I have to find it*, she thought. *I have to.* Yet as for what she was searching, Muriel herself didn't know, though she had a faint, somehow disturbing, suspicion that it wasn't there—it wasn't anywhere at all.