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Space

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Space

James Calvin Schaap

One last time, Shelly flipped through all the necessary documents in the girl's folder and patted the overnight bag to be sure she had everything—diapers, formula, bottles, receiving blankets—she would occasionally need to take the baby. She glanced at her watch—five minutes. Leon would already be at the airport doing his checklists.

“There's a woman here to see you,” Amy said when she stuck her head in the door. Amy always announced names. There was some reason for anonymity.

She squinted, but Amy shrugged her shoulders. “I don't have much time,” Shelly said, but Amy grimaced as if this someone couldn't be put off. “Send her in.”

She squared the papers on her desk and stuck the folder back in her bag, then looked up, shocked—almost overwhelmed, in fact—to see Janelle Langley, who marched in, her characteristic uninhibited charm still adorned with the same beauty. Turtleneck—heather brown, loose—over jeans and a thin leather vest. Wonderful, long legs. Back in college the woman could wear shorts the first day of March and look absolutely great.

“I hate to interrupt, Shelly—I know you're busy,” she said, standing inside the doorway, one of her gutsy little fighting grins on her face.

“My word, Janelle,” Shelly said, stepping out from behind the desk, “what brings you out here?” She took her hand in both of hers, then melted into a hug Janelle initiated. “Sit down and take a load off, girl—please.” She motioned toward the loveseat behind the coffee table. “You're a long way from home.”

“I came to talk,” she said, “to apologize.”

Earnest, as always. “It's been years,” Shelly said

quickly.

“Six,” Janelle said, holding up two hands.

Her skin was unnaturally dark but never smooth, and now already had the uneven texture too much sun leaves behind on people who tan easily, but her bright green eyes were exactly as Shelly remembered—a few too many shades made-up—and her hair was much shorter, a tight curl at the bottom, shoulder-length, more controlled. So much of her hadn't changed in the ways Shelly thought she would—after what she'd been through.

She had been thinking about Janelle actually, even though she'd not seen her since that sultry day six years before, the day Janelle and Geoff were married in a country church where all during the ceremony the sound of a creaking swing set came through the open windows like a metronome from the school playground next door. Three or four kids were playing, the sound of their voices a kind of tolling reminder that somewhere beneath her flowing white gown was a baby who'd played no small role in bringing the happy couple together. Happy couple.

It was the only wedding she'd ever attended where she wanted to cry out of nothing less than fear. She hated being there—they all did, all of the roommates—the shriek from that rusty swing set a scream of horror. They were both 21 at the time, both majoring in social work. The night Janelle had told them she was pregnant, she had made great claims about finishing college even though she'd be married; but then, Janelle loved big plans: “I'm going to work in the inner city,” she had proclaimed a year before, when she'd come home from an internship in Chicago. “You should see how desperately people need help, Shelly. They've got no hope.”

Always confident Janelle was. “Someday I'm

going to marry him,” she’d announced one night when she’d come in from one of her infrequent good dates, maybe six weeks after she’d begun to see Geoff Libolt regularly. “I knew it already when we first started dating. Despite everything, I’m going to marry that guy. You watch.”

Watch they did, all of her roommates, often in horror.

She and Geoff had recently divorced. Georgia Durand, another ex-roommate, had read it in a Sioux Falls newspaper—“Dissolution of marriage granted to Geoffrey and Janelle Libolt”—then typed over that exact line and e-mailed it to Shelly’s office with one comment: “Sort of says it all, doesn’t it?”

“So, how goes it?” Shelly said.

“I’m fine now,” Janelle told her, opening her hands to look at them, “—now.” She took a long breath, then raised her chin.

“I heard about it from Georgia,” Shelly said reassuringly. “She read it in the paper. She lives in—”

“I know,” Janelle said, shaking her head. “I never see her though. But then I’ve been preoccupied.”

Preoccupied. Janelle always seemed *preoccupied*—too busy to get papers in on time, to study—too busy with Geoff. Classes had never come easily for her, but she had this ready supply of gutsy smiles that always got her by—with roommates, with profs, with everybody. Everyone loved Janelle—charming, beautiful, and naïve. The fashionable word at one time was *vulnerable*. My word, Shelly thought, *vulnerable*.

“Now what?” Shelly asked. “I mean, where to now? What are your plans?”

She bit her lip, went into a stare. “I’ve got some time,” she said. “I mean, I’m only 27 years old. I’m going back to school, finish my degree, and I’m going to get a job in counseling or something—something like you have here,” she said, looking around appraisingly at the pictures of babies on the walls. “With my experience, I figure I can help people—kids—don’t you think?”

Even years ago when Janelle said *don’t you think?* you knew not to disagree. “Oh, Shelly,” she had said one night full of tears, “me and Geoff have already been through so much that I just know I’m supposed to marry him, *don’t you think?*”

“You’ll make a great counselor,” Shelly told her, but Janelle was already lost, looking around suspiciously.

“How did you get to be director here already?” she asked.

Her bluntness was always irritating. She wanted to say she’d murdered two former directors, but the truth was she’d worked her tail off to get there, something Janelle had never done. She said, “Right place at the right time—one of those things.”

“You’re doing wonderful work, aren’t you?” Janelle said, this glowing smile all over her beautiful face. “Adoption stuff?—all those babies, what a ball.”

“Babies and moms,” Shelly told her, as if to say it wasn’t all roses. She glanced at her watch. “Janelle,” she said, retrieving her bag, “I’m so sorry—I’d love to talk, but I have to leave. I’m flying up north to pick up a newborn right now, and the plane is waiting.” She tucked the papers under her arm. “How about lunch tomorrow? I’ll be back.”

“I have to leave,” she said. “Really, Shelly, I came to tell you this one thing.” She stood, then looked away. “I should have listened to you,” she said. “I came to say you were right about everything, and if I wasn’t such a stupid shit about things—”

“Janelle, nobody ever knows—”

“I owe you my thanks,” she said, “because what happened between me and Geoff is exactly what you said would happen.”

“Janelle, I’m sorry—”

“But I was too blind to see it. To me it was all just love or I don’t know what,” she said. “I owe you a huge apology.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“Let me say it, okay?” she said. “You told me what was going to happen, Shelly—and I wouldn’t listen. You said it was going to be bad, but I could never stay away from trouble. I should have been more like you—stay home and study. It’s true. I know that now. Don’t say it isn’t.” She rolled her eyes in a dizzy self-parody. “But it did happen—everything you said, and I should have known because you told me it would.” She straightened her shoulders as if now all that weight was off. “I came to say thanks.”

The baby Janelle carried before she’d married Geoff was miscarried at seven months. Shelly had

never heard exactly what happened because Janelle and Geoff moved to Sioux Falls, where Janelle had begun work as a bank receptionist and Geoff began going through jobs the way he'd gone through girlfriends—even while he was already sleeping with Janelle.

The truth is, Geoff beat up Janelle already before they were married—when they were still in school. He did it when she'd belly-ache about what she was hearing about him and other girls; he did it when he was drunk, which was too often; he did it, she used to say, whenever he wasn't loving her, as if *love* were something pulled on and off as easily as old jeans. With Janelle and Geoff, the whole apartment lived in a soap opera, day by day. And it always seemed to them as if Janelle liked it—the excitement.

One night, terribly late, when Shelly came in from the library, she found Janelle on her bed, crying and wanting to talk, visible bruises on her arm.

“But *why* do you love him?” Shelly said, angry really at yet another big scene. “Give me one good reason. What exactly about him do you love?”

She'd circled the edges of the ceiling with her teary eyes, then shrugged her shoulders. “His smile,” she said, finally. “He's so fine, Shelly—and his eyes, too. I love his eyes. And I love the way he holds me. His hands, too. And when he's good—”

“Forget the damned physical stuff,” Shelly said. “What is it about how he acts? *Why* do you want him the way you do?”

That night Janelle had had too much to drink herself. “I just do,” she said. “It's not something you reason out, like math. I can't help it.”

“You *can too* help it,” Shelly had told her. “Don't say it that way, Janelle. I won't let you say it that—”

“I can't,” she'd said, winding her face up in the sheets. “I try and I try and I can't do anything about it. I tell myself I'm not going to let him do what he does, and then when I'm with him, I just can't help it. He's so messed up.”

“Janelle,” Shelly said, “will you answer me this—why do you love him?”

“Because he loves *me*. I don't know why except he loves *me*, Shelly.” That was the answer Shelly had never forgotten.

“How do you know?” she'd said.

“I just know, Shelly,” she'd told her, as if speaking to a child.

It was pure self-interest, Shelly thought, a lesson brought home from a social work text, truth made flesh. One of those lessons from the school of hard knocks. Everything made sense right then: people get hurt because they want, so badly, so insanely, to be loved—all of us. Bingo, she'd thought. It's right there.

“If you don't quit him, it'll just keep on and keep on,” she had insisted. “You hear me? If you stay with Geoff, it won't quit. It'll only get worse.”

There were times back then—many times—when she hated Janelle. It hurt her to admit it now. She hated her because she'd started to believe that Janelle loved being hurt, actually lived for the startling pitch of emotional anguish she constantly found herself in, careening through stormy nights that ended, like her marriage, in catastrophe.

One night, half drunk, Janelle, in all sincerity, had simply blurted out, “Sometimes I think I'd even rather be you, Shelly.” She'd said it in innocence. After all, loving and losing so monstrously seemed yet preferable to staying home weekends to type papers.

That was all years ago.

“I just wanted to thank you,” Janelle said, pulling herself away. “I had to tell you that. I don't want you to be late.”

Shelly glanced up at the clock. “I really wish I could—”

“That's okay,” she said, at the door. “I'll come back sometime.” And then that bright gutsy Janelle smile. “I'm seeing this great guy, Shelly,” she said, pulling her hands up to her lips. “He's divorced, but he's a ton of love, really.”

Statistics on divorcees and their rebound failures came up in Shelly's mind as if she'd just written a paper.

“How about you?” Janelle said. “Seeing anyone?”

“No one special,” Shelly told her, because Leon was what he was.

Leon Gustafson was really not “no one special,” and a few minutes later, halfway to the airport, Shelly wondered why she hadn't told Janelle about him. Her hands still jumpy on the steering wheel,

full of nervousness from the whole Janelle thing, she tried to fix her mind on Leon's pale blue eyes—his most wonderful feature. His thin hair was cut long and straight and fell over his forehead in a style that seemed dated, but if she'd even suggest his changing to something a bit more with it, he'd be at whatever stylist she'd recommend by the weekend. That was Leon. He wanted her badly.

She could have told Janelle that Leon had beautiful eyes—and he was trustworthy. He would fly her anywhere, anytime, no matter what the sky. She could have said he had told her he'd always dreamed of becoming a bush pilot, working for a mission outfit somewhere in some rain forest. He was five years older than she was, never married, a very successful farmer. Once a month he flew to Omaha and put on roofs or hung drywall for Habitat for Humanity. That kind of guy. A man with so many skills. A man so admired. A man that should be loved. All of that she could have said.

What she remembered about Geoff was his sulkiness around her especially, as if he knew what Shelly had thought of him—and he likely did. Whenever he'd pick up Janelle from the apartment, when at least he showed the courtesy to come in, he'd lean up against the sink in the kitchen, acting as if whatever words he might expend were more than her roommates deserved.

So why hadn't she just blurted it out the way Janelle would have?—"Yes, I'm seeing someone, and his name is Leon and he's a pilot and he's a wonderful farmer and he's so good, Janelle—he is just so very, very good." She could have just flung out everything in front of her, Janelle-like, and made him sound impressive, because he was. But she'd lied, said she wasn't seeing anyone. Why?

By the time she got to the airport, he had already fueled the plane and finished the kind of thorough check-up he'd do if it weren't required. He'd even packed a lunch. "We'll be up over supper," he said, holding up the bag once Shelly jumped in.

She had always been fond of flying, but she never guessed someday she'd have a job that would require the miles she'd been putting on since she'd begun to run the agency, buzzing all over the Midwest in Leon's little Cessna. Once they'd be up in the air, it was his style to initiate conversation with something he'd likely rehearsed, in the same

way he'd regularly prepare her a lunch. That night it was Israel, in the news. "Can you imagine?" he said, "what life might be like if there would actually be peace in the Middle East?"

Shelly once thought he said things like that to show her his world was larger than his huge 2000-acre farm. But she'd come to understand that he simply wanted to talk to her—even though that night, after Janelle's visit, she wasn't interested in Hezbollah.

"It's unthinkable, really," he said, as they swooped back east. "For how many centuries has there been war?"

He really didn't care exactly what her views were. If she'd have told him Israel should just bomb the heck out of anybody they felt like, he probably would have smiled; in a way it wasn't her opinion he wanted, it was her. But it wasn't that he didn't care either, really. He did care. He respected her. There was so much good to him, so little wrong.

The sky was clear for early October, the air a warm remnant of a long and beautiful summer. Mist hung so lazily that it seemed the motionless air had flattened a paper-thin trail of smoke over yellowed fields of corn beneath them. Of the moments she spent with Leon, she loved being aloft with him best, not only because of the peace—the serenity above the world of anguish beneath them—and not simply because of the ease she felt at his being at the controls. She loved these moments because he was so serious about what he was doing in the air, eyes constantly scanning gauges, always busy. Even though he wanted her to talk to him, whenever he flew he gave her only a part of his attention, a part of himself. Strangely, that gave her more comfort.

Which is not to say that when she was with him otherwise she'd felt crowded. She never thought of Leon's attention in that way. In Kellogsville, it was no secret the two of them were a thing, both of them "eligible," as people liked to say. They both sensed inevitability in the direction in their relationship, two people of their age seeing each other for as long as they had. Sometimes they even joked about what others must be saying. Sometimes she wondered whether she wouldn't like him more if he *would* push her.

"Busy day?" he said, once they were up for ten minutes.

She wasn't about to tell him about Janelle. "Yeah, very busy," she said.

"Need coffee?" He pointed down between them. "The nearest I can figure is somewhere in the area of two hours. Got a tail wind, maybe less."

"I thought longer when I checked the map," she said. "I better not have coffee. I don't know if my bladder will take it."

"I don't make—"

"I know," she interrupted, "you don't make pit stops."

"Sandwich?"

Flying always made her hungry. Thousands of people get sick in airplanes, she thought. *She* got hungry.

"There's some kind of sweet bread in there," Leon said, pointing at the lunch. "Herman, my mother calls it," he told her. "She makes this big recipe—a ton of it—and gives little bits of the mix away. I got some." He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "A bucket of sugar in that stuff," he said, winking. "Just slap it right on your thighs."

They were flying over a beautiful landscape in perfectly clear skies up to northwest Minnesota, a little town named Mondomin, where a teenage mother named Dawn had just had a baby.

Some kind of sweet bread, she thought as she reached in the sandwich bag, so she pulled it out, this brown-ish bread in a zip-lock, all the while staring out the windows at the perfect peace of a day she was happy to be closing. "You want some?" she asked him.

"There's two of them," he said, as if giving directions. She looked closely at what she was doing for the first time, nothing registering in her mind except how unlike Leon it was to say, "there's two of them."

"That's mine," he said, pointing at what she was holding. So she handed that bag to him, reached back in, and pulled out what she knew immediately was her bag of what he'd called "Herman bread," because inside that Baggie he'd tucked a huge diamond ring in one of those little, inch-square plastic bags cheap earrings come in.

A ring. Not cheap either. Leon wasn't cheap. And it wasn't just a diamond.

It was *the* diamond, the one she'd come almost to dread because she knew, like everyone else in

town, that its offer was inevitable.

She pulled out the little bag in silence.

If she had sat down ahead of time to try to plan how she might react to the diamond, to his proposal, she would not have thought of crying because she is not a weeper. But she did, and once the tears began, she realized she couldn't have thought of a better way, not because crying was expected but because she'd learned long ago in her job that tears and sobs can cover a multitude of sins.

"Go on," he said. "Take it out."

She slipped two fingers in beside his mother's Herman bread and grabbed the little plastic bag stuck with crumbs.

"It ought to fit," he said. "I think I got the size right. I had to steal another ring of yours." Even the little bag had a zip-lock. She had trouble getting her fingernails in to break the seal, but the flight itself was satin smooth, the only turbulence in her head or conscience, wherever it is one's still small voice abides.

"It's beautiful," she told him, because it was what women were supposed to say, and besides the ring *was* beautiful; she wouldn't have expected anything less from Leon Gustafson.

She pulled it up to her eyes and watched the sunlight shimmer into a thousand colors; and when she looked at him, his face was filled with his goodness and strength, his lips drawn down over a smile he wasn't quite ready to go public with because Lord knows, she thought, he doesn't want to push me toward something I don't want.

For a while, she hid behind her tears and asked herself once more the questions her sleepless mind offered her almost nightly—why wasn't she thrilled to the marrow? Would she have been happier if he'd suddenly thrown that plane onto automatic pilot and the two of them had made passionate love up there in the blue skies over southern Minnesota? Did she really want a Geoff, something to be tamed? What was she afraid of with this man?

What had been killing her ever since she realized she didn't want him to stop calling her was her own inability to understand exactly what was holding her back from really loving him. *Why am I so unreasonable?* she asked herself. She would lack nothing in his home. He is wonderful, kind, loving, she told herself. He will always treat me gently. My

goodness, he cares for me.

There's a constant hum in a Cessna, in any plane really, a hum that forces you to talk louder than you should; and when you're trying to say something important, she thought, it seems somehow wrong to have to yell.

"Well?" he said.

"I don't know what to say," she told him. She didn't slip the ring on her finger. "I'm so honored, Leon," she said, and it sounded awful. "I really am, but I've got to think it through."

"I understand," he said, and in a way, she wished he'd have simply told her to jam it on her finger, to shut up and do it—not to think. Maybe she thought too much, Miss Goody-Two Shoes, the social worker.

And then it was like him to change the subject, too—always thinking of her. "So who is this old friend?" he asked. "I called the office, wondering if you'd remembered the time, and Amy said some old friend from college..."

"An old roommate," she told him, "somebody I hadn't seen in years."

"So how come she showed up?"

"It was nothing, really," she told him, still holding that ring in her fingers. "It's a long story." For some blame reason, she couldn't tell him anything either.

* * *

Dawn was almost 17, darker than Shelly had imagined from the phone conversation, darker but not younger, and like almost all young mothers more knowing than other girls her age, her eyes less child-like than her skin and arms. She was small, thin through the shoulders, with a big nose she likely always hated; but her cheeks were finely sculpted, and it went without saying that if she were dressed for the prom, she would be a whole different young woman than what she looked like right now, her face flushed and exhausted from childbirth, her hollow cheeks swarthy, her eyes heavy with a sadness she tried hard to cover with a persistent giggle.

She was alone in the room, which Shelly had found actually something of a blessing at this moment, even though it always meant more trouble later on. The father wasn't there, nor her parents—evidently there was no blessing on what she'd decided.

The baby had his mother's dark coloring and an uneven thatch of dark brown hair so full he could have been Korean. The whole case had been unusual, a very late referral, some friend telling Dawn about this Christian adoption center who'd find good parents for her child. Only a few days before the birth, she'd called the agency to say that she'd decided she didn't want the baby because she couldn't lay all that guilt and stuff on her boyfriend—"guilt-and-stuff," her words, as if all the baby seemed was a pain in the conscience.

It was her fault she'd become pregnant, she said. Scott didn't want to marry her—he had college yet, after all, 'cause he didn't want to work in the body shop his whole life. He wanted more, he said. And why, the girl said, should she keep the baby when she knew there were couples all over who really wanted children—and wasn't that awful sad?

On her own, she'd turned this unexpected baby into a blessing, the very attitude Shelly herself sometimes steered her clients toward so the separation wouldn't be as awful as it could be. Much of that had already been said over the phone when Dawn had told them why she'd called. There was so much more Shelly would have liked to say—just as there always was with Janelle, so much kids like Dawn didn't see, so much of life ahead.

She went over everything she was required to, Dawn half-sitting up, the baby in her arms. Perfect color. Long fingers. They were always perfect, it seemed. When the moms couldn't have them—or wouldn't—it seemed the babies were always perfect.

Dawn listened to every word of the legal stuff, just as attentively as Shelly would have guessed, her eyes shining but her face flattened by the numbness she'd created, like they always do, from the will to cover pain she knew was about to occur.

"I always wanted a boy—I don't know why," Dawn said.

"In a way, he'll always be yours—you know that," Shelly told her. She had a storehouse of answers. In the years since she'd worked this job, she'd learned what to say. That first movement, she knew, was always the most painful, the slow arc of the elbows outward, the baby shaking slightly as the arms extended.

"He's such a blessing," Shelly told her. "I wish you could be there when I bring him to them."

She touched Dawn's hands first, held them momentarily before she took the baby, before Dawn gave him, as they all did, like a sacrifice to an act of love never meant. Even in the finest moment between them, at some place she and her boyfriend had promised undying love, they had never meant to create anything so lovely and painful. Shelly took the baby and held him while the two of them prayed, as always, an arm's length apart.

"And what about Scott?" Shelly said as she stepped back slightly. "What's he thinking right now?" It was the only way she knew of to get this girl to think about something other than what was happening. "Did he see Josh?" she asked, pointing with her eyes to the baby.

"Oh, sure," she said. "He's been here twice."

Twice, she thought. "How old is he?" she said, rocking the baby in her arms.

"Almost twenty," Dawn told her.

"I thought you said he was going to start college?"

"He's thinking about it," the girl said.

Thinking about it, Shelly thought.

And then something broke in the girl, something fragile as lace. She talked through the tears, almost as if they weren't there. "He wants to be a game warden," she said, so guardedly that Shelly knew the defenses had broken down—the effects of exhaustion plus every ounce of love emerging from insides where they'd been so stiffly guarded. What fell over her face was an accidental spill of pure aching pain for her baby.

"Do you want to marry him, Dawn?" she asked. "Do you want Scott to be your husband someday?"

Her lips tightened, her eyes moving almost deliriously around the room. Then, "I love him," she said, her voice determined. "They'll take good care of Josh," she said, not intending it as a question. "These people, they're rich, aren't they? I mean, he'll have great toys."

"He'll have great toys," Shelly said. "They'll be wonderful parents."

"They'll be happy," Dawn told her.

"They wanted a baby so badly," Shelly said. "He'll be such a blessing."

It was time now. She had to take the baby.

"It's the best thing," Dawn said, suddenly the words plummeting out in self-defense. "Scott says

so too—we both agree. I mean, we can't have him now—I mean, *I* can't. He's didn't ask me to marry him or anything like that—I mean not yet. He's got all this stuff he's got to do before he, you know, like gets into life and gets hitched and everything. Both of us—we've got so much in front of us now that a baby—well, you know."

"They'll send you letters," Shelly said, turning toward the door. "You can show them to Scott—and pictures too probably, right?"

"He's a teacher—he teaches," Dawn said. "She's a lawyer. My goodness, think of how good my kid will have it."

"They'll be great parents." She stood one last moment at the door of the room. "He'll be loved," she said, nodding.

Dawn raised her hands. "I love Scott," she whispered. "I really do. I love him so much." Her face seemed distorted, twisted. "Oh, Shelly—I just love him more than anything—"

She had to go—she knew she had to go. There was a time in every last appointment when she knew she had to go.

"I couldn't live without him either. He's just not ready for this yet, you know? I mean it would be a burden now and not a joy. It just isn't something we could do." She bit her lips. "But someday, it'll be just great when we really want a baby—and we want to have kids. We talk about it all the time—"

But there was this one question, again, coming back. She stopped, remembered Janelle, and the question came back. "How do you know?" But she didn't ask.

Dawn turned away. "I'm not having games in my house," she said. "That's what I told him—if we get married, I'm not letting him play those games all the time. I won't have it."

"You'll have to work some things out," Shelly said. She should leave, she told herself. She should be gone now.

"Did you ever do this?" Dawn said.

Shelly squinted.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"You mean have a baby?" Shelly asked.

"Sometimes people who do what you do—like alcoholics or something," Dawn said. "I don't know. I'm sorry—"

"I don't know exactly what you're asking."

Shelley said.

Her lips tightened again. "Did you ever give a baby to somebody else?" she said. "You aren't married, are you?—you aren't wearing a ring." She pointed at Shelly's left hand.

She looked down at the boy and shook her head.

"Shelly," Dawn said, almost frantically, "you got somebody, don't you?—I mean, you have a boyfriend?"

The baby's body seemed to tighten in her arms because her first thought was to say *no—I've never been in love*. But there were so many good reasons not to say exactly that. She looked away, life moving palpably in her arms, and saw in the theater of her own imagination this very child, Dawn, hanging on to an illusion about a boy who'd claimed he somehow wanted more from his life, hanging on with her fingernails to a guy who'd visited twice.

"You ever been in love, Shelly?"

She said it because Shelly needed to hear it. "Right now," she said, turning back, "right at this very moment I am."

Almost without thinking she turned around and walked back to the bed, put the baby back in the Dawn's arms, even though she knew she shouldn't have. She took that tiny plastic bag from her coat pocket, pulled out the ring, and showed it to the girl who needed it so much more than she did.

"It's beautiful," Dawn said.

"He just now gave it to me," Shelly told her, "on the way up here, on the flight." It was scary to admit it so publicly. "I mean, like, just now," she said, almost giggling, "an hour ago, just a little while. He gave it to me on the plane up here—had it all arranged in a bag—it was something he'd planned. He had this bread, this sweet bread in like two different bags, and this one, he said was mine—and that's when I saw it. He'd had it all arranged—you know to give it to me."

"True?" Dawn said, astonished.

"Just now."

"That is so great," Dawn said. "That is so exciting. Do you love him?"

She could not have said no, not even if she'd have let herself say anything at all. It wasn't that she didn't love him, not really—more that she didn't know what it was she was supposed to feel, what anyone does. She closed her eyes and smiled, like a

mother might have.

"This guy," Dawn said, her arms full of her baby, "what's his name?"

"Leon Gustafson," Shelly told her.

"Leon," she said. "I'm so happy for you," she told her, pointing. "Whyn't you put it on. Doesn't it fit?"

She felt so powerless, her answers so much not hers, and yet hers, too. What was wrong with her, anyway? Was everybody sure?—Janelle, Dawn? They were both dead sure, once. Both of them were absolutely dead sure.

"Shelly, put it on," Dawn said, eyes shining.

She couldn't not put on the ring now, she knew, so she pulled herself to her feet and slipped the ring on her finger and held it up to the light, spun her hand in a half circle.

"It's gorgeous," Dawn said. "I'm so happy for you."

"I love him," she said, then and there for the first time. All three words.

She used the receiving blanket to wipe away tears as she walked down the silent corridor and away from Dawn's room, that little dark-haired dear in her arms. It was on her hand now, and she felt something like a life within her, something she'd taken on, in fear, as the Bible says, and trembling.

"You'd better visit her," she told the nurses on duty, conscious of smudges around her own eyes. "It's awful that she's all alone. Can you keep her company? She's just a child. Have you seen her parents?"

They looked sadly at each other.

"The boy?" she asked.

They nodded. "A couple times maybe," one of them said.

"She's going to need love," she said, biting her lip.

And when she saw him waiting in the lounge, like always—dependable, trustworthy, loving—she made sure her left hand was showing outside the baby's blankets so that he'd see it, and he did.

But he gave her little more than a guarded smile, something she knew him well enough to see was fierce, full of pride and joy, beneath the stillness. He wouldn't push her, never would. He was Leon, after all, and in her arms she held a baby whose

responsibility had now become his, the pilot.

She couldn't hug him, even though she wanted to, and he didn't offer because he'd been along on enough of these things to know that what she'd just done demanded a respectful silence, even though this time she was sure that it took more for him to restrain himself. He had his hands on his hips, all this strength in him bound tightly, wanting so badly not to push, not to shove, wanting for her to move, waiting to love.

"Leon," she said, a flutter in her voice as he helped her pull her coat around her shoulders, "I want you to kiss me."

He did.

"More," she said. "Again, please."

So he lifted her face in his hands and did it again, long and hard this time, several times, the nurses at the station standing and watching, while this precious new bundle of life lay in her arms between them.