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Giveaway

Twenty-three days after Joan gave birth, the pain between her legs had subsided, but she did not love the baby. The problem was not the baby—a perfectly decent baby whom they had named Mona, after Joan’s maternal grandmother—but Joan herself. Inside her body, which felt like a vacant house or an empty bowl, there was nothing left capable of love.

As she sat on the sofa with her husband, watching the late news, she could hear her sister in the kitchen, murmuring to the baby in a voice—low-pitched, confiding—that Joan remembered from late nights in their shared childhood bedroom. The news that night was disheartening, as usual. Three female suicide bombers had detonated themselves in a crowd of pilgrims in Baghdad, killing at least thirty-one people and wounding over a hundred. A month ago, the footage—of a cratered street, flaming storefronts, a man carrying the limp and bloodied body of a child—would have reduced Joan to tears, or at the very least made her wince. Now she looked on with a dispassionate apathy.

While pretending to watch the news, her husband was watching her. “Your mom called me today at the office.” He had a slight Southern accent, which thickened when he wanted to charm or disarm someone. The accent, along with his leisurely conversational style, conveyed an impression of affability. “She wanted to know if you’re feeling any more like yourself.”

Joan did not know what to say. From inside the hollowed out shell of her body, she considered selfhood beside the point.

He pressed his lips to her forehead, as if checking for a fever. “I told her . . . well, what I said was, it’s not exactly Normalville around here. Seem like a fair assessment to you?”

The news cut to a car commercial. Joan wondered whom he thought he was addressing when he said “you.” She said “ewe” under her breath and imagined she was swathed in a cloud of wool.

Her husband clenched and unclenched his hands. “I’ve never seen it quite like this,” he said with a frown, pulling on one of the dark curls Joan used to straighten with gels and a hair dryer. “New look?”

Since the baby was born, Joan had avoided looking in the mirror. She knew this fact made her somewhat of an exile from Normalville, and that her baby blues had metastasized into a more ominous frame of mind. But she didn’t tell anyone—not her husband, her family, or the parade of observers who came over to meet the baby—and she was careful not to display any obvious symptoms. She showered regularly and dressed herself every morning before breakfast. She held the baby, nursed it, and kissed its scaly head. The presence of her older sister, who had moved into the guest room and bustled around the house with her theatrical energy, helped obscure the transformation of Joan’s body, from animate organism to vacancy. But her sister knew, and so did her husband. They knew something was wrong, and Joan knew that they knew, but nobody mentioned this transformation to her directly, because they were afraid, and Joan was glad they were afraid. Their fear had convinced her that pointed indifference was a kind of power, a greater power than she had possessed as her

passionately opinionated previous self.

Her husband sighed. Sliding his wide hands around her shoulders, he rested his head in the crook of her neck and said in a whisper, “What do you say we retire to the boudoir for a little private wrestling match?”

His breath on her neck felt faintly abrasive. Joan nodded but didn’t move from the couch.

Shaking her hair over her eyes, she slowly extricated herself from her husband. Joan had always considered him a near-perfect partner. From the moment she met him, at an American Psychological Association conference, she was attracted to his cool demeanor. Even his physical presence—compact build and slender limbs; close-cropped hair; unlined face with small, blunt features—suggested simplicity, composure. He answered her quixotic flights with common sense, her hoots and tears with unflappable calm. In marriage their roles solidified: she was the lava, he the stainless steel. It wasn’t until after the baby was born that she began to sense other registers—dissatisfaction, disquiet, restlessness, even rage—humming through her husband’s equanimity. Perhaps, Joan reflected, the distribution of emotions within a marriage was a zero sum equation. Such a phenomenon might explain the sudden plunge in her emotional temperature. Now that the stainless steel had started to melt, the lava was obliged to cool and congeal.

He crossed his arms tightly over his chest, as if embracing himself. “Baby, I’ve got to tell you, you look dog tired.”

It was true, she was tired, although this simple adjective, one long syllable in her husband’s mouth, did not do justice to her current condition. The more accurate name for it would have been *a violent fatigue far beyond ordinary exhaustion, a weariness so powerful and so complete it made death seem palatable*, or something like that. But the fatigue was beside the point, compared to the emptiness she now inhabited—or the emptiness that now inhabited her, she wasn’t sure which, maybe both simultaneously, making the husk of her body a double emptiness, a black hole inside a black hole—an emptiness about which no one had warned her. On the contrary, she had been led to believe—by her grandmother who had died when Joan was eleven, her great aunt, her mother, her two aunts on her mother’s side, her step-mother, her step-mother’s half-sister, her mother’s best friend whom she called “Auntie” but was no blood relation, her sister, her seven first cousins, her thirteen second cousins, her five closest friends, her hairdresser, her husband, the justice of the peace who married them, three different cashiers at the grocery store, her fellow therapists in their all-female practice, every single one of her regular clients including her Thursday 9:15 recovering anorexic who was too scared of being fat to get pregnant but planned to adopt, the parking attendant at the clinic, and the midwife who had delivered the baby—that she would love being a mother. But she did not love being a mother, at least not yet. She couldn’t believe it, this lack of feeling, especially in her, a woman notable for her expressiveness and her enthusiasms, her dark and sunny moods, her extreme opinions, but lack of belief didn’t interest her any more than her reflection in the mirror, or the baby.

Her sister tiptoed into the room. “She’s finally asleep. I put her in the bassinet. I must say, I’m quite the genius with babies.” She sat down on the other side of Joan, yawning and stretching. Hovering about her was an aura of forceful competence and self-delight. It was an aura Joan herself used to emit. Along with their fiery temperaments, they had both

inherited this confidence, this intensity, from their mother and grandmother, from whom they had also inherited the greater part of their beauty, a dark-eyed, dark-haired, gypsy sort of beauty that was actually old world Jewish in origin. Theirs was a family dominated by women, a family in which men were deemed useful but, after a certain point, not required.

“I thought I’d take the Mona Lisa on a long walk tomorrow,” Joan’s sister said, flashing Joan a vampy grin. She glowed with whimsical exuberance, one of a host of moods—including extravagant melancholy, aggressive puzzlement, lassitude, somberness, charming fury, obstinacy, and curiosity—that vied for dominance over her temper. “I want to show her the sights, take her on a tour around the neighborhood. It’ll be her first big trip away from home. We’ll have a little adventure, just the two of us. And when she’s older, I’ll take her abroad, to Paris and Rome and London, and we’ll cross all the beautiful bridges together and shop for scarves. Won’t that be positively delicious?”

“I’m sure Joan would love to go along on the tour and see the sights too.”

“Joanie probably wants a little time alone, don’t you think? She can take a nice long bubble bath and give herself a manicure and just relax, you know, put her feet up, like the Queen Mother.”

Her husband glared at his sister-in-law. Joan could almost hear their silent conversation; for some reason she took a vague satisfaction in their uneasiness.

“No, well, of course she can come,” her sister finally said. “We could all use the fresh air. ‘Fresh air’s good if you don’t get too much of it;’ that’s what Grandy Mona used to say, and I say so too.”

The news was over. Joan’s husband turned off the television. The three of them sat together in silence. Joan stared at the blank television screen, in which she could see a reflection of the sofa and its trio of seated figures. An image of herself in a hospital bed, legs bent back like book covers, drifted into memory. Joan had dozed off between contractions. She awoke to a flooding pain from the small of her back, and the midwife urged her to push. In a single moment, in the middle of the night, with the baby’s inaugural cry, an otherworldly sound, a thin echoing wail, Joan had become a husk. When the doctor handed her the slick, naked baby, she held it against her bare chest and glanced at the clock. It was 12:01. Joan looked down, and the baby was nursing, but she didn’t remember giving the baby her breast. After a while, Joan didn’t know how long, the doctor lifted the baby from Joan’s arms and carried it away so that it could be cleaned and weighed and measured; her husband floated after them like a man in love. As the nurse helped Joan walk to the toilet, Joan became intensely aware, as if for the first time, of the frailty of her body. Her skin was cardboard, her hair frayed twine. The bones in her hands were matchsticks. Between her legs was a nest of glass splinters. Her tongue was leather inside her mouth. She asked the nurse for water. The nurse filled a cup approvingly. *Milk doesn’t make milk*, the nurse said. Water makes milk. Joan didn’t care about milk. She didn’t care about anything. She drank glass after glass of water, and when the pitcher was empty, she chewed on the ice. After the nurse had brought the baby back, with its pinched red face and its watery eyes, Joan waited for feelings to flood through her. Joy, sorrow, tenderness, even terror would have sufficed.

Beside her on the sofa, Joan’s husband cleared his throat. Joan closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, she was in her own bed and it was dawn. Her husband slept beside her in a T-shirt, the sheet pulled up to his waist. Joan slipped out of bed. Her

breasts were swollen. She thought of her body now as a machine that filled and emptied according to a pre-programmed schedule, a schedule over which Joan had no control. Her mind was not part of the machine; as a consequence, she could no longer exercise her will in the physical world, so that her thoughts disappeared as soon as she had them, and her body carried out its instructions more or less autonomously.

As she crept down the hall to the baby's room, she realized that for the first time the baby had not woken up hungry in the middle of the night. She wondered if the baby had stopped breathing and was curled up, stiff and cold, in the lap of the bassinet. If the baby had stopped breathing, Joan would have to plan a funeral. She had never planned a funeral. Her sister would help her. She tried to imagine what she would wear, since her best black suit was probably still too small, and concluded that she would have to buy something new.

Joan stole into the baby's room, which was dark, cavelike. The bassinet was empty. For a moment, relief swept through her, then dread. Someone had stolen the baby while they were sleeping. She ran, on tiptoe, down the hall to the guest room to wake her sister. Only as she leaned over the warm sleeping body of her sister did she see the baby, curled up against her sister's chest.

Joan sat on the floor and leaned against the bed, listening to the sounds of her sister and the baby breathing, as dawn light broke into the room. Her pulse throbbed in her throat. She wondered why she was not experiencing emotions—irritation, outrage, sibling rivalry, flat-out betrayal—appropriate to the situation. Even a partially-operational mother would have cared that someone else had taken her infant and that the two of them were sleeping peacefully together in the same bed. And yet, Joan didn't care. What did she feel? Neither irritation nor outrage, rivalry nor betrayal, not an underdeveloped love or a deformed love or a disabled love, not even the opposite of love, but the absence of love. She felt nothing. Had her feeling forsaken her, she wondered, or had childbirth somehow turned her into the deserter? The baby made a shuddering noise in sleep and sighed.

Joan's sister had folded last night's clothes over the back of a wooden rocking chair, a gift from their mother. *I could have worn that outfit to the funeral*, Joan thought. As she stared at the black pants and the black T-shirt and sweater—her sister, the same size as Joan, always wore black—something dawned in her, starting in her belly, emanating outwards through her muscles and nerves and skin. It took a moment for Joan to recognize the feeling, which washed through her like a fast acting poison. Guilt. She almost laughed. After years of therapy, first as a patient and then as a therapist, Joan had said goodbye to guilt and considered their parting a permanent separation. Good old guilt. She remembered guilt with grudging fondness, but why did it have to come back to her now?

The guilt did not fill the emptiness, nor did it replace the emptiness, but instead became a companion to the emptiness. Almost immediately it assumed physical dimensions. Guilt branched around her—she could almost see it as she stood—and absorbed her like a body of water. The sun slipped up the horizon; guilt wafted from her skin, with the faintly sweet odor of a yellowing gardenia. The baby was waking up, squealing and sputtering like a rusted engine. She lifted the baby from her sister, who was sleepily kissing the baby on the head and inhaling with a blissed-out smile. As Joan carried the baby to the kitchen, guilt linked an arm in her arm, like a debonair suitor who held doors and kissed her gloved

hands and attended to her every whim.

On the periphery of her awareness a thought—the baby needed to be changed and fed—appeared, but guilt was commanding the greater part of her attention. It interested her more than her breasts, which, bulging with milk, looked like the breasts of a porn star; more than the lassitude that was wearing her out like a concrete suit; more than the anxious face of her husband, who stood silently in the kitchen doorway as Joan, pacing like a trapped animal, held the crying baby; more, even, than the baby, a small ancient creature sent from another time and place to speak to her, although Joan could not understand what she was saying.

“Joan, my goodness, what are you doing? Can't you see she's hungry?” Her husband's voice was edged with frustration. He maneuvered her into a chair and brought a pillow from the living room, positioning it between the arm of the chair and Joan's arm so that Joan could comfortably nurse the baby.

He shook his head, muttering, “Good Lord, where on earth are you?” Was he posing the question to her, or to someone else? Joan didn't know.

Her husband was a pharmaceutical psychiatrist. He didn't listen to people's problems, like she did, but listened to the problems they were having with their medications. He believed that emotions were chemical in origin, a theory Joan allowed herself to entertain, although she had never found it especially helpful to conceptualize her emotional life, her rages and raptures, her vengeful fantasies, her jealous silences, in strictly chemical terms.

The baby nursed, twitching and slurping. Joan looked at the baby's pimply face and felt guilt's thick arm arched around her shoulder.

“Do you ever feel guilty?” Joan asked her husband.

He startled at the sound of her voice. “Guilty?”

She nodded.

He stared at her, thumb and finger worrying the stubble on his chin. “Why, do you?” he finally asked.

As she tried to formulate an answer, a tiny spark ignited in her conscience, a flash of her former self, of the person who as a matter of pride answered all questions honestly, without evasion or embellishment. *People should not lie to their spouses*, Joan thought. It appeared that she still inclined in the general direction of truthfulness. She was a trifle disappointed, though she ought to have presumed a few live currents between one life and the next. After a length of thickening silence she answered. “Yes.”

Her husband's whole body tensed, as he fought the thrill of this admission. “If your estrogen and progesterone levels take a dive, and then you throw in the hormones produced by the thyroid—and let's not forget postpartum variations in blood volume, blood pressure, immune system and metabolism—well, it's no wonder a woman's mood can go a little haywire after she has a baby,” he intoned in his genial twang. He straddled a chair opposite his wife and child.

“You know, for something like this,” he added, tracing the baby's arm with his index finger, “you might, just maybe, consider the possibility—remote as it may seem—that you could benefit from medication. As a temporary measure, to get you through the rough spots, is what I'm thinking. I know you don't like the idea, but depression's nothing to fool

around with.”

“I’m not depressed,” Joan said. His presumptive diagnosis irritated her. The guilt, and the emptiness, glittered darkly around her, as if shadows were reflecting off the mirror of her body. “And I don’t want medication.” Her voice sounded vaguely familiar, like the voice of a long-dead relative.

“I’m not sure you’re in the best frame of mind to make that decision for yourself.”

“You can’t make me,” Joan said in her new voice.

His lips parted, just a crack, with a barely audible intake of breath. “Right.”

He shifted in the chair. “Well, will you at least give Seamus a ring? You haven’t seen him since Mona was born.” Seamus was Joan’s therapist and mentor, an intimately reassuring presence for the last thirteen years, like an angel on her shoulder. As a college student Joan had been plagued by a host of passions and demons, by the pressure to perform her starring role, to live up to the generations of brilliant women who had preceded her. After a consultation with a university counselor, she ended up in Seamus’s office, clutching her tan leather backpack, in which she carried books, a calendar, a roll of toilet paper, and a plastic bag filled with ninety-seven sleeping pills. Seamus guided her through the underworld of her unconscious, its verdant gardens, its dazzling bouquets and nausea-inducing perfumes, its dark cityscapes, its labyrinths of streets and dead-end alleys. He helped her navigate the gales of emotion that gusted through her, taught her to ride them like a bird. He convinced her to surrender to his safekeeping the bag of sleeping pills. In short, Seamus saved her. Joan decided that she, too, wanted to devote her life to shepherding emotionally-bedeveled women through the hell they called the self. She met with him weekly during her Ph.D. program in clinical psychology, her clinical internship, her move to private practice, her marriage, her pregnancy. In the context of her second family, a hand-picked family of likeminded practitioners of the psychological art, Seamus was her father, the therapeutic essence made flesh. She had always taken great pleasure in idealizing him, even though she couldn’t fail to notice his workaholic tendencies and the chronic aura of disenchantment that haunted all unhappily married men.

“Joanie Baby, are you hearing me?” Her husband watched her expectantly. The lines on either side of his nose deepened.

Joan knew she ought to nod, but somehow she was unable to move her head. *Nod*, she said to herself. Apparently the instructions from her brain had not reached the muscles in charge of nodding. This phenomenon would have interested her before the baby was born, but now she simply noticed it as it drifted through her consciousness, as though she were a passenger on a train, and her thoughts were the blurred scenery outside the window. Her husband smoothed the nursing baby’s sweaty hair. His hand was shaking.

After he left for work, Joan watched her sister make her daily assault on the household. She cleaned, she cooked, she held the baby, dressed her, changed her, and sang to her, all with a devout cheerfulness that bordered on mania. Joan sat at the kitchen table. The guilt was in her hands now, like a pair of gloves underneath her skin. She couldn’t see it, but she could sense it. It made her hands heavy and clumsy, and she was afraid that with her new hands she might drop the baby and that the baby could be hurt and possibly scarred for life. Joan stared at her palms. As she turned them over and over, she began to feel sorry

for her hands, which had guilt inside them. She had the distinct sensation that death was somewhere nearby.

She decided to mention the guilt to her sister, omitting the parts about her hands and about death, which were bound to provoke the requisite concern. Her sister laughed loudly and unnaturally, with evident relief.

“Of course you feel guilty,” she declared.

“Why of course?”

“Because,” her sister said, even trembling a little, “there’s so much pressure on new mothers, and you internalize it, the tremendous pressure, and now you’re putting it on yourself, and you see that you can’t live up to your own expectations—no one can—and so the guilt sets in. Everyone feels it.”

“Really?” Joan was skeptical.

Joan’s sister tapped herself on the temple. “It’s all in here, Honey.” She snapped the car seat, sleeping baby inside, into its handy set of folding wheels and headed for the door.

Joan followed her sister without thinking, out the door, along the brick walkway to the sidewalk. In one way or another she had been following her sister all her life. They trekked briskly through the neighborhood, her sister setting the pace. It was a cool day, presided over by a serene cloudless sky. The leaves still on the trees were the color of flames; the leaves on the ground were the color of ash. While she pushed the stroller, Joan’s sister hummed to herself. Her voice had a reedy, childlike quality that many over the years had admired; however, aside from a semester in junior high choir, she had never favored the public with her talents. She had made a bad marriage to a good man. The marriage lasted five years, four years and five months of which she had spent yearning for her freedom. “Far too good for me,” she had concluded about her ex-husband, and no one in the family could bring themselves to disagree. After years of repetition, “Far too good for me” had become a kind of slogan, applicable not only to her former spouse but also to the institution of marriage, which she had renounced shortly after her divorce, as a safeguard against future disappointment. Between alimony and the considerable savings from a decade of modeling for catalogues, she had enough money to live without earning a living. Every now and again she alluded to a fabulous creative venture, which was wholly absorbing her attention and forever nearing completion. It was said about her, by family, friends, and most waiters, that she was difficult, but she usually managed to take the epithet as a backhanded compliment, which in fact it was. She was thirty-seven years old and aging imperceptibly; people often mistook Joan, three years her junior, for her twin.

“Oh my God, will you look at that? She’s smiling in her sleep! Did you see it, Joanie? She smiled, I swear. She is just the most scrumptious thing, aren’t you, Mona bologna?” Joan’s sister happily cooed and clucked at the sleeping baby.

“It’s probably gas,” said Joan, staring at her guilty hands, which had begun to look vaguely crustacean. Her thoughts kept returning to the guilt. Was it a repressive emotional state from which she could emigrate after a few months of biweekly sessions with Seamus? Or was it a chemical crisis that could only be properly managed with a chemical weapon?

“You are lucky,” Joan’s sister proclaimed. “Lucky, lucky, lucky.”

Joan glanced at her sister, who was addressing these remarks to the sleeping baby.

“You were born in the most densely wooded urban area in the whole country,” her sister went on, greatly enthused, “which means that you are the infant princess of the loveliest forest city in the world. And it’s no accident that you were born in the loveliest season too, because you’re the loveliest. I wish you could see the trees; they give off such a glorious light.”

Joan recognized these romantic autumnal stirrings—she herself used to experience them every year—but now she felt only indifference toward nature’s seasonal pyrotechnics. Their mother had always told them that an invisible line divided people with children from people without children. Joan suddenly understood that somehow her sister had crossed that line when the baby was born and that Joan had been the one left behind on the side of the childless.

“Why don’t you talk to her, Joan? Babies learn the sound of their mothers’ voices in the womb, did you know that?”

“I’m just . . . I don’t know what to say.”

“The subject matter’s not important. You have to talk to her all the time—that’s what they say—so she can hear how words sound,” Joan’s sister chided, as they made their way back to the house. “Get those synapses firing in her little evolving brain.”

Following the walk and the afternoon’s rambling reflection, Joan decided that the source of the guilt was neither physical nor psychological but spiritual, imposed on her by something, and from somewhere, beyond known mortal dimensions. Why she should have been singled out as the recipient of a secret cosmic guilt she did not know, but she was nonetheless confident that she had been gifted, as it were, with this burden and that it was a life sentence. Though its origins were mystical, it had a human representative in the person of the baby, whose task it was to make sure that Joan served her sentence, following both the letter and the spirit of the law. She considered it a curious irony that everyone expected her to relish motherhood, when fulfilling her maternal duties meant nourishing and providing for the very person who enforced the terms of the sentence.

Of course, thoughts like this only made the guilt stronger, and more visible. She could see it hovering, glimmering in the spokes of harsh light that poked through the kitchen blinds late that afternoon. The guilt was beautiful and possessed the timeless, transcendent quality of a work of art. There was a fall chill in the air. She felt a sudden stab of sympathy for death who, faceless and robed in black, was feared by everyone simply for bringing things to their proper completion. Joan’s sister and the baby were asleep again in the guest room bed. The light danced in patterns on the floor. Without thinking Joan picked up the phone and dialed Seamus’s office. After his message and the tone she paused for a moment. “Uh, hello, Seamus, sorry to bother you, it’s. . .”

“Joan? Is that you?”

Joan walked into the living room and sat down on the sofa.

“Joan? Are you there?”

“Hmm.” A fly batted itself against the window.

“I haven’t heard from you. What’s going on? How’s the baby?”

Joan opened and closed her fist. “Fine.”

“Fine? Is that it? Come on, what’s the story? Give it to me.”

“I’m kind of tired.”

A solicitous silence. “Charlie left me a message.”

“Did he?”

“We should talk.”

Joan sighed softly. She was thinking about the mistake that had occurred, the bureaucratic error that had granted her sister access to the top-level offices of parental devotion and had kept her in the ground floor typing pool.

“Why don’t you come by the office, say in an hour? I was going to stay late today anyway.”

“That’s okay.”

“Why not?”

“The baby.”

“Leave her with Diana.”

“Really?”

“Charlie’s extremely concerned. I’d like to see you, hear what you have to say, and talk about your options.”

The fly crawled across the windowpane. “I’m sick of talking.”

“Joan, we’ve known each other a long time. Let me be straight with you. You’ve got me worried. You don’t sound like yourself.”

“Who do I sound like?” As soon as Joan posed the question, she knew the answer.

“Will you come in tomorrow?”

The baby was awake and crying. Joan dropped the phone on the sofa and drifted into the guest room. Her sister, curled around the crying baby, gazed at her with a rapturous expression. “You have lovely healthy lungs, my dear. With that voice you’re bound to become a famous opera singer. I’ll be your tour manager, and we’ll travel the world together and sing in all the great opera houses.”

Joan slipped off her shoes and crawled into bed beside her sister, the baby between them. The baby’s crying sounded like a discordant song, with gasping rests between chord changes. The repetition of this song, a basic theme with several variations—hungry, wet, lonely, cold, and pissed off for no perceivable reason—always put Joan in a trance. Lying on her side, she lifted her shirt and bra and urged the baby’s head toward her nipple. The baby latched on and stopped crying. The sensation of the baby’s mouth on her nipple was ever so slightly repugnant to her. The thought that she had not had sex with her husband since the baby was born floated through her consciousness without settling anywhere.

“Isn’t she the most perfect being imaginable?” her sister asked.

Joan told herself to nod, but her head didn’t oblige. The baby suckled contentedly, breathing into the pale expanse of Joan’s breast. Joan stared at the baby’s face, waiting for a fresh feeling—of tenderness or anxiety or grief—to eclipse the guilt.

Joan’s sister ran a finger along the baby’s nose and cheek. “She looks like you, don’t you think?”

Joan shrugged without meaning to. The baby looked neither like her, nor like her husband. If anything, the baby had the face of a withered old man and the pale, wriggling body of a deep-sea creature that had been hauled out of the depths and exposed to light

and air.

Joan gazed into her sister's face, and her sister stared back at her with the same eyes narrowed in concentration, the same hooked nose, the same slightly open mouth, the same prominent chin and square jaw, the same olive skin, with the same freckles and creases. As she looked at her sister, Joan seemed to be holding her breath. "You should take her."

"What?"

Outside, the sun was beginning to slip below the horizon. Guilt shimmered at the edges of her cuffs and her collar. "You should take Mona."

Joan's sister started to smile, but the smile transformed into a scowl. "Snap out of it," she whispered.

"I can't."

"Joan, listen to me." Her sister had grown rather pale and seemed to radiate a delicate sorrow. "You have a baby now. You have to be yourself, in full force. You know this. Remember what Grandy Mona used to say: 'The true religion of the world comes from mothers, who carry the keys of our souls in their hearts.'"

"You've got to be kidding. That's so corny."

Joan's sister abruptly sat up in bed. "It's an admirable sentiment!"

"You love her," Joan said. "I don't."

"I don't believe you."

"You're so good with her. You're a natural mother. You should take her."

The baby gazed unblinking at the ceiling. Joan's sister pulled a blanket over her warm body. "Joanie, I absolutely adore her," she said, tucking a damp curl behind the baby's ear, "but you're her mother."

"I thought you wanted her."

A sharp intake of breath. With one hand her sister made a brusque sweeping motion, as if ruffling the guilt along Joan's supine body. "Are you accusing me?" Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes. "Are you? Is that what it's come to?"

"No, I'm not. . . ."

"You can't deal, so you start blaming me. Oh, that's perfect. Just perfect. I'm sorry, but this has gone far enough." She scrambled out of bed and grabbed her sweater from the back of the rocking chair. The baby tensed, fists balled, and uttered a few fretful squeals.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Out."

"But Di, look, she's crying."

"What do you want me to do about it? You're the one with the milk."

Joan followed her sister into the living room. "You can't leave me here alone."

"I can do anything I want." Snatching Joan's car keys from the hook next to the front door, she checked her reflection in the entry hall mirror. "By the way, you're not alone," she added as she breezed out the door, not bothering to shut it behind her.

Joan stood in the doorway, staring at her hands as the rumble of her car faded. A moist, strangely warm breeze rattled through the pines needles and the dead leaves. From the guest room the baby sang her aria. Joan backed slowly into the house. It was almost dark.