Stitches

Antonya Nelson

"Mama?" she said. The word cut through every layer: the dark house, the late hour, the deep sleep, the gin still polluting her blood, the dream still spinning whimsically. All of it sliced away as if with a scalpel by her daughter's voice on the telephone.

"Baby." Ellen emerged from the murk: naked, conscious, attuned. "Baby?"

"I'm okay, Mama, but something happened, something happened here." *Here* was in her college town, two hours away from her parents' home, this her first semester. Ellen felt her heart beating.

"But you're okay?"

"I'm okay."

"Not hurt?"

"I'm okay. I'm scared."

Skeered, the children used to say, Tracy and Lonnie, Ellen's girl and boy. "Scared of what?" Ellen's house was lit only by the moon and a streetlamp, 3:30 in the morning, the worst of the witching hours. Without thinking she had brought the telephone from the

hall to her son's room, where he slept, safe. Ellen had been dreaming about her ex-lover, whom she had been missing now for longer than the relationship itself had endured; this longing now felt normal, a facet of who she was. On the telephone her daughter was almost crying, as if to punish Ellen for her unfaithful dream: look what can happen if you aren't paying attention, if your affections go wandering. "Scared of what?"

"What's she scared of?" asked Ellen's husband, his breath bitter with sleep and age, his presence here at her elbow similar to his presence beside her in bed: she wanted to push him away, she wanted to pull him close. Sometimes she sunk her teeth into his shoulder and pretended it was erotic. He loved his daughter without hesitation, the way he loved his wife, his son. It was cloying, reassuring, inescapable, horrifying. Secure: like a safety belt or a prison sentence.

"Mama, I was *raped.*" Now Tracy began to cry sincerely.

"What?" Ellen's husband shouted. They went back to their own bedroom and he was dressing, muttering, lights were igniting, drawers were slammed as Ellen clutched the phone with both hands as though it might leap through the air.

"Where *are* you?" she asked. "Where are you, darling?"

"In my . . . dorm," said her daughter, and that building erected itself, proud and institutional, enclosing the girl on its fourth floor, in her room full of posters and stuffed bears and empty beer cans.

"Police?" her husband asked, as he tried to extricate the phone.

"Not the police!" came Tracy's voice over the line, "it was someone I *know.*" Now Ellen's husband was working pants over boxer shorts, the material bunching at his waist, storming from room to room in search of wallet and keys and eyeglasses and jacket, shirt flapping open like a flag.

"It was someone she knows," Ellen repeated for him.

"I heard," he said grimly. "I'm on my way," he added, tucking his shorts into his fly and zipping sharply. His decision had been made just as automatically as pulling a zipper; or, rather, his thinking had cleared a path through the fog of the night: blinding, exact, preemptory. Ahead of himself he saw only his daughter. Ellen had to marvel. "You stay on the phone," he told her. His hair was wild, his shoelaces trailing him as he slammed the door.

"Don't let him come here," her daughter had been saying, repeatedly. "*Please* don't let him come here." As if he could have been stopped.

"I'm going to talk to you, honey," said Ellen to her seventeen year old. A young college student, she was a girl who'd always been ahead of her years in some ways and behind them in others. Smart yet sentimental, maternal yet childlike, she was rounded and soft, dark, vaguely furred on her upper lip and forearms, the nape of her neck. She bore an uncanny resemblance to her maternal grandmother. Ellen would never escape that particular blend of bossiness and naivete. They book-ended her, her mother and her daughter, dark stocky peasants. Practical, conscientious, good: they exerted force from either side, like a flower press. Like a vise.

"Oh, why does he have to come here?" Tracy wailed rhetorically. And Ellen could easily envision her daughter's olive skin, wet with tears, as she wandered back into her son's room. His skin was exactly the opposite—fair, nearly hairless—and it covered a very different, knobby body. In his face you could see the child he'd been and the man he would become, lean and frail, charming and awkward. "Of course your father's coming, and we'll just talk until he gets there." The hundred miles between them appeared in Ellen's mind, the desert, the bright moon, and the animals as they blindly scurried out of his trajectory. His trip would be a clear shot, simple as a bullet from a gun. He had raised the garage door with enough force to make the lights in the house flicker.

But Lonnie hadn't woken up, twelve years old, skinny, innocent, eyelids almost translucent; he was sleeping the passionate sleep of an early teenager.

"Is he mad?" Tracy asked.

"Frightened," Ellen said. "Men get angry when they're frightened. He's mad at whoever raped you."

"Mama?" she sucked wetly in. "It wasn't exactly rape?"

"Tracy." Ellen pulled her bathrobe closer around her; the heater came on and the cat wandered to the floor vent beside Lonnie's guitar stand. When had she draped herself in her bathrobe? What had she been thinking, a few minutes ago, standing naked in her son's bedroom? She and her husband had had sex before going to sleep, she recalled now, which explained both her nudity and her dream of her ex-lover. "Trace. What do you mean, it wasn't exactly rape?" She was used to her daughter's amendments: the extremity, and then the backpedaling.

"I mean, I knew him, I know him, and he invited me to his house, and I went there, and I knew we were going to have sex. Don't keep saying my name," she added, stepping out of her tragedy for a moment to be irritated.

"There can still be rape—"

"I don't think it was rape. I agreed, I wanted it. I mean, I wanted some of it. He's my professor."

Ellen's heart hammered in a new kind of anger, the anger that comes after the fear, the anger that begins to refine itself, take shape in more intricate ways, like lace, like coral, around any extenuating circumstance. The worst thing, well, that wasn't what had happened to Tracy. It wasn't simple violence of the sort Ellen had envisioned. The man hadn't been a stranger in an alley, or a burglar in the dorm. He hadn't been a frat boy at a party, or one of a gang of drunks in a bar. Instead, it was a middle-aged man in a bed with a headboard, piles of books on the table beside it, floral sheets, prescription meds in the night table drawer, a room not unlike the room Ellen shared with her husband, filled with the familiar objects of comfort and respectable living, complication and texture, history. Instantly that house formed in Ellen's mind, growing swiftly from one fruitful word, *professor,* the divorced professor, the separated professor, the lecherous professor whose wife was out of town or teaching her own seminar, and Tracy there in that house, seduced by the older man's flattering attention to her. "Tell me," Ellen said to her daughter. "Tell me what happened."

"He's my movement teacher," she began, and what followed was not surprising, not to Ellen, who'd also been to college, who'd also developed crushes on professors, who knew all about the liberal arts. What was surprising, what had always surprised Ellen about this daughter of hers, was how she never failed to bring her female business to her mother. Breasts, boys, menstruation, makeup, cat fights, betrayal. It was unnerving to be this girl's mother. She was so *forthcoming.* So frankly healthy and unfucked-up. How had she gotten this way? Ellen felt somehow excluded from the process; she wasn't so healthy herself, still vaguely anorexic, still drinking too much and smoking occasionally, lying to her husband about her affections. She kept secrets—not in drawers or closets or diaries, but in her heart, behind her eyes, on her lips. Tracy's admirable openness seemed not to have been inherited from Ellen, so it must have come from her father.

"How old is this professor?" Ellen asked suddenly. Something Tracy had said made the image of the man shift. The bed, it was a *waterbed.*

"He's not actually a professor, per se," Tracy said. "He's more like the TA."

"Per se."

"What?"

"How old is the TA?"

"I dunno. Twenty-five?"

Ellen sighed. Not so much younger than her ex-lover. Now the professor's stately bedroom was devolving into her ex-lover's ratty apartment. Mattress on the floor, stolen silverware, chairs festooned with duct tape, disposable razors, wine in a box.

"He raped you? Or you had sex when you didn't want to? Or what?"

"Mama?"

"What, babe? What, Trace?"

"You know the most awful thing? The awfullest-seeming thing, the thing that's just really *really* hard to handle?"

"What, doll?" Ellen played with the phone's telescoping antenna, up and then down, patience a tone of voice she put on like a hat.

"A man crying," Tracy said. "I don't know why, but I can't take it."

Ellen thought of her husband's crying. When he had believed that their life together was over, he had wept. Tracy was right. It was an *awful* thing, it left her full of awe. Frightening, pathetic, to be patted on the head, to be avoided, shunned, locked out of the house. There was no good reaction to a man's crying, not one that would work. Men didn't know how to do it, how to modulate, how to breathe or minister to their own sudden emissions. Ellen thought that men would be inept at childbirth, as well: they were so ugly in pain, so bad at giving in to a force larger than themselves. She was remembering her ex-lover's contorted face, he'd been tearful a time or two, as well. "Baby," she said.

"It can just about kill you, watching a boy cry."

"Why was he crying? Why?"

"Because he hurt me."

Once more Ellen felt anger rise in her. Anger and empathy: these accompanied the guilt and the love she felt toward her daughter and always would. She paced the house's flowchart of a floor plan, hallway-kitchen-dining room-living room-hall, a smooth oval that her children used to chase around as if at a racetrack. The cat, the same age as Tracy, watched her, blinking sagely and calmly. This man in distant Albuquerque kept shifting character in Ellen's mind, elastic as a superhero. She focused instead on the image of her husband, driving steadfastly through the desert, the bright moon beaming uncomplicatedly down upon him, both of his hands on the wheel. *He* was not a shape-changer. "*How* did he hurt you? What did he do?"

"Oh, it's embarrassing."

Ellen heard a near giggle in the girl's voice. Tracy always had frivolity just beneath the surface. She was a ticklish person, a jolly girl who liked to find things funny, who more than once had started laughing in the middle of a harsh scolding from her parents, so confident was she of their indulgence. Ellen could recall slapping her—

how dare she mock her punishment?—and being glad to see that smirk disappear.

"Embarrassing how?" she asked, skeptical suddenly of the phone call, the tears. *Drama overdrive*, her son would have said. That was Tracy's M.O. She had a long history as a theater major. Even before she'd been in college she was majoring in it, back when no one had majors, just tendencies. She wanted her family members to prove their love; she wanted to sound an alarm in the middle of the night and see them jump. She depended on their willingness to play along.

"Like sex," Tracy said. "You know."

"I *don't* know. Tell me." The cat rolled onto its back on the dining room floor, splayed fat and relaxed, like a smiling drunk. Tracy was talking about her flirtation with her TA. His name was Henry Fielding.

"It is not," Ellen declared.

"It is so."

"Henry *Field*ing?"

"You've heard of him?"

"Tracy," she began, then thought better of it. Had she herself heard of Henry Fielding when she was seventeen? What had she been doing at seventeen? Why was her daughter supposed to be doing something nobler?

"Everyone else calls him Hank, but I like Henry. Is Daddy really coming here?"

"Of course he is. You call, he comes."

Tracy laughed, and it turned into tears. Ellen left the cat and found a chair at the kitchen table, where the two halves of a squeezed lime lay in a puddle of melted ice. She leaned over the telephone, creating a pocket in which her ear and her daughter's mouth made contact. "Sweetie," she said, "what happened?"

"Sometimes it's called 'deliveries in rear.' Coming in the back door." She paused. "In my bottom?"

"Darling." Ellen shivered. She could not help imagining her daughter's naked body, there before her as if in time-lapse photogra-

phy, the grinning chubby baby, the naked little girl splashing in the bathtub, the adolescent who ran on tiptoe from shower to bedroom with a towel clutched under her arms.

Tracy said, "So that wasn't actually rape, was it?"

"No?"

"No. It was more like . . ."

"Consensual?"

"Not exactly. More like a car wreck. Just. Out of control."

"Okay, honey. Out of control." Ellen fell into the echoing habit of the shrink. She could be grateful for that simple trick, if nothing else, from all of her tedious expensive sessions in therapy, all her attempts to be cured of that ex-lover of hers, that obsession like a virus, like a new life-form present in her body.

"And he said his waterbed might have had a leak."

"Waterbeds," Ellen recalled. "I thought those days were gone."

"It sloshed. Like being in a boat."

Ellen asked for the whole story. She had only one policy with this girl: frankness. "I'll be the most angry if you lie." It had seemed obvious to Ellen: the truth. But many people in fact did not want to know it. Her husband didn't. He did not want to know that Ellen loved someone else. He put his money on the wedding ring, on the indisputable evidence that every night he climbed into bed with Ellen, and she with him.

Tracy heaved a monumental sigh, backing up to the beginning of her evening. "First I went to a bar, with some friends. We had to cheer Tiffany up."

Ellen breathed evenly, trying to match her mood to the cat's. Beebee had survived, years and years, just by roaming calmly from room to room, meal to meal, allowing Tracy to come and go, love her and then forget her.

"So when I got to Hank's, I was kinda drunk. I had some beer."

"How did you get to his house?"

"I didn't drive, Mama, I walked. I walked there. It's a guest house behind a real house." Ellen's ex-lover's apartment now transformed

into a tiny lighted cottage, and the revision was not unpleasant. What bothered her was her daughter drunk on Albuquerque's Central Avenue, wandering toward that cottage through the traffic and the whores and the roaming wolfish men.

When she got there, Tracy went on, Henry was listening to music.

"What kind?" her mother asked, thinking that this would define him, this movement class TA, his taste in music. But what kind would save him in her eyes? Classical? Jazz? Polka?

"I have no idea, some stuff, you know, like *guitars.* Henry's allergic to smoke, and I stank like the bar," Tracy went on. "You know how you stink after a bar?" As if she and her mother were now confidantes at the dorm, hanging their smelly clothing out the windows to air, hoping their underpants wouldn't wind up on the lawn below. Shouldn't a mother reprimand a girl who was four years too young to be at a bar? But where could she begin, with this reprimand? She herself had been to bars underage, to the homes of professors and married men, to the apartment of her ex-lover. and not so long ago. Ellen tossed the soggy limes into the sink and wiped her hand over the puddle, as if to erase her own evening of drink. "So I took off my clothes and showered." They'd been flirting with each other in class, she reported. He was shy, awkward, far from home, which was that famous daunting place, "Back East," a recent theater major himself, and he wanted to be an actor. An actor! And she wanted to sing. Like that maternal grandmother of hers, Tracy had an astonishingly strong voice, rising from her ample chest, which housed her extraordinary heart. How could Henry Fielding be worthy of that heart, Ellen wondered? Only her husband was worthy, only Tracy's father. Again she featured him, behind the wheel, completely untutored on the complexity of this so-called rape. He was acquiring rage as he drove.

"Henry lended me one of his shirts. He wears these great old button shirts . . ." *Lended?* What had happened to the SAT champ they'd sent to college a semester early? "And then," Tracy continued, "then we started to kiss." She would have smelled like his Ivory soap, her

mother imagined. Boys often had Ivory soap, unperfumed, familiar. His shower would be so ill-equipped that Tracy would have had to use the soap on her hair, that thick wavy Italian hair inherited from her grandmother. Ellen knew exactly how that hair looked, damp. The tips of it saturated and dripping, like paint from a brush, steady trails of water sliding down her cheek. She had beautiful plump purple lips, a gorgeous soprano singing voice, a quirky sense of humor. She turned her eyes toward the people she loved, as guileless and faithful as a puppy. She was a solid slow-moving girl, heavy and sexy, her body utterly different from her mother's, her nature sweeter, her keel evener, that sly funny girl. Yet innocent. Would Henry Fielding have recognized her innocence, despite her acting skill, her mature voice, her cleverness?

"He cooks," Tracy said, as if just to keep the line from going silent for too long. "He likes to cook, a lot, he says. Like Dad. Remember when Lonnie said Dad's cooking all tasted like underarm sweat?"

"Yes," Ellen said. She swelled at the memory. She loved her son more purely than the others she loved. He'd told his father the food tasted like underarm sweat, it was true, but it hadn't been an insult, just an observation. That was only one of the million things Ellen loved about Lonnie.

"I liked most of the sex," Tracy said as if reviewing a meal or movie. "It didn't hurt as much as I thought it would, the regular part."

"This was the first time?"

"Duh." Ellen, of course, would have been informed if it were otherwise.

"He *knew* it was the first time?"

"No. I lied." Now Tracy was crying again, the hiccuping variety of crying that would leave her eyes plumlike. Dark as she was, the underside of Tracy's eyes were nearly black, like her grandmother's. These shadows made her look older, wiser, than she was. She could fool bartenders and TAs with the bruisy rings beneath her eyes.

"I lied the other way, when I first had sex," Ellen said speculatively.

"Really?" Tracy snuffled. "You were nineteen, right? And the first time Daddy had sex he was fourteen."

"I'd forgotten that." She wasn't sure she'd ever known it.

"But I wonder, did anyone ever . . . does everyone have to . . . "

"Anal sex?" Ellen stalled while waiting for an answer to occur to her. What was the answer? *All men want it.* "I don't know a single woman who enjoys it," she said.

"I can see why," Tracy said, and then burst out afresh. Ellen let her. All those years ago, when she herself had been in college, calling home, her mother would never have let the line go unoccupied this way, silence and tears, dead air. In those days, with that generation, one was always aware of the ticking long-distance meter, the phone bill, the expense, the simple unease of intimate discussion, over the phone—or even in person. Her own mother absolutely refused to accept the human traits that weren't virtuous. She did not allow them in her loved ones. Ellen listened to her daughter cry with a kind of pride; she would let her cry for hours, if need be, hundreds of dollars' worth of tears.

"He didn't mean to put his penis there!" Tracy exclaimed. "It slipped, I think. He was confused," she sobbed. Oh, the confused penis, the slippage, the proximity of those two apertures, the slick bodies in the dark, the heated excitement of love, or its possible beginning. They were at sea in a leaky waterbed, it was a storm, an emergency, he'd made a mistake. Or not. If not, he was rough, unkind, piratical, dangerous. If not, then he did not care for Tracy, neither her pain nor her pleasure. Ellen didn't want to think of her daughter having sex at all, let alone painful sex, ambiguous sex. That body had been under Ellen's purview for a few years; she had been an exemplary steward. Who was this boy to use it so?

"It hurt, Mama, it hurt so bad."

Ellen involuntarily squeezed the muscles of her own buttocks. *Sphincter,* she thought. She had no idea what to advise for her daughter's pain; whatever the damage, something as straightforward as stitches was not the answer. Ellen could see the dorm room,

its view of a nearby smokestack, the wheat fields, the little city at night. Except that had been her own dorm room, from twenty years ago, in winter, in Kansas. Freshman loneliness: it struck her with the force of a blow to the stomach. Loneliness never stopped stunning her; it was a lesson to learn again and again. "Baby, what can I do? I wish I could . . . " She wished she could take her pain, drain it from Tracy and absorb it herself. That was how her children's suffering always wounded her, her inability to suffer it for them.

"It's more psychological than . . . whatever," Tracy responded, "you know, else."

Ellen's head hurt. She had a hangover, she realized. Her daughter's phone call had distracted her from it, but now it claimed her suddenly in a wash of dizzy nausea. Her own past evening was coming back: drinks, sex, passing out. Water, she thought, she needed water and a white slice of soft bread and some ibuprofen and a hot wet washcloth on her forehead. "Baby, did you bleed?" she asked, as she went in search of the components of her cure.

"A little," Tracy said.

"And do you still hurt, now?"

"Yeah. Two different kinds of hurts. I'm lying on my stomach, on my bed." She paused. "He used condoms," she added.

"Good," Ellen said, woozy at the use of the plural.

"Condoms *are* good," Tracy agreed. She was a girl who'd been educated early about their virtues, carrying one in her backpack since tenth grade, just in case.

Tipping the phone away from her mouth, swallowing water, Ellen thought, Hangover is crapulence. She thought of that word often on Sunday mornings, which this morning was. Sunday. *Crapulence.* It was the perfect word.

"I feel yucky," Tracy said. "I feel all wrong."

"Turn on the television," Ellen recommended. "TV is familiar." She headed now to the living room, to the enormous screen on which the family had watched movies the way their ancestors had sat in the glow of a hearth fire, communing. "Turn on Jack Hanna,

honey." Wouldn't his golly-gee voice be a kind of comfort? Everything amazed and excited him: he was perpetually pleasantly surprised, like a kid. And *shouldn't* surprises be pleasant? Poor Tracy, with her bad date and awful surprise. "Liquor in the front, poker in the rear," Ellen recalled, a once-funny pun. "Jack Hanna's talking to elks," she said, watching the animals swing through the woods, knocking into trees with their heavy racks of antlers. A hangover felt like that, she thought, like a rack of antlers.

"I don't have cable," Tracy said flatly, "and Jack Hanna is dumb."

"Many men are dumb," her mother said. "But he's harmless, which a lot of men are not."

"Henry Fielding didn't even know how to get blood out of sheets," Tracy said. "That's how dumb he was. He was going to use hot water."

Ellen tried not to envision her daughter's blood on some boy's sheets. Ellen had spent a summer changing sheets, cleaning hotel rooms, in high school. People abandoned everything in hotel rooms: shame. Decency. Vomit. Pubic hairs. Leftover drugs, drink, food, clothing. She'd once pulled open a set of drapes over a large plate glass patio window to reveal a huge shattered piece of glass, cracked and distorted, appalling in its shocking violent intactness. But, mostly, at that hotel were the beds with bodily fluids on them, urine, semen, saliva, blood. The blood had never been enough to signal a murder. Just enough to suggest pain. A humiliation of some degree. The virginal. The menstrual. The reluctant anus. Ellen had wrapped them all into bundles, stuffed them deep into a trolley she would deposit downstairs, where the Mexican illegals would apply bleach. Onto those beds Ellen spread clean sheets, crisp and creased, tucked at the corners the way her mother had taught her, a neat fold like a sealed white envelope waiting to be undone.

"What will I tell Daddy?" Tracy said. "I don't want to tell Daddy about all this."

"Your father loves you," Ellen said, which was supposed to mean that Tracy could tell him anything.

"He'll think I'm a slut," Tracy cried.

"No, honey. No." But Ellen knew, as Tracy did, that her father would not be able to bear the details. "Just tell him it was the first time you had sex. He'll understand that. You don't have to lie about feeling upset. You are upset."

"I don't want to lie at all!"

"It's not lying to not tell him everything." That was Ellen's gift to her husband; she had saved him with it before. Listening to Tracy sniffle, Ellen was tempted to tell her daughter that her father loved her more than he loved anyone else. Was Tracy ready for that piece of parental honesty? To hear also that Ellen loved Lonnie that same way, *more*? Better? At what point was this blunt information fair game for her daughter? Her husband would never admit that he loved Tracy best. How could he admit something he didn't even know?

Ellen knew it for him.

"You and Daddy met in college," Tracy pleaded. "He was *your* TA."

"That's true."

"I want to meet someone, I wanted to, I thought . . ."

"You will." Would she? Ellen wondered. "You probably will, someone like Daddy. Someone who loves you."

"I know he loves me," Tracy said, "but I don't want him to know what happened."

"I understand," Ellen said. She walked once more to her son's room. There he lay, sprawled, wearing boxer shorts and a T-shirt in bed, just the way his father did. In the fly lay his boy's penis. He had one, his father had one, Henry Fielding had one. They got hard and wanted to fit somewhere. They had the power to harm. They stood out like vulnerable targets. A woman had cut her husband's off, thrown it in the street. There it must have lain, rootless and forsaken as a toadstool.

"Hear Lonnie snoring?" Ellen whispered.

"You know what, Mama?" Tracy whispered back. "Henry Fielding reminds me a little bit of Lonnie."

How could her heart not soften at that news? Her lover had reminded her of Lonnie, too.

"Yeah," Tracy went on dreamily, "you know, he has these clumsy big feet."

Ellen sighed. Her son was the one who had kept her from abandoning everything a few years earlier. He was a funny boy, prickly, eccentric, tearful one minute, punch-drunk the next. It didn't surprise Ellen to hear that Tracy had been attracted to a boy like her brother. Her son could someday make a mistake, put his penis someplace wrong, end up crying. Ellen's eyes filled. For Lonnie, for Tracy, for herself and her husband, for that lost lover, even for Henry Fielding, no doubt.

Ellen considered fixing herself a drink. The clock read 5:03. Never had she had a drink at this hour of the day. She'd had them at 4 A.M., and she'd had them at 9:00 A.M., but never at five in the morning. It was both too late and too early. Why not? she thought. This was what her bartender Paco said instead of "yes." "Why not?" in a bright exclamatory. Ellen adored her bartender. She visited him every evening, just the way her father had *his* bartender, when she was young. She and her father needed escape from the innocence that was their spouse—her mother, her husband, the placating good-hearted. Only a smoky bar would do, some days. If it were 5:00 P.M., that's where she would be headed.

"Mama," Tracy said now. It had been her first word, way back when. The next had been "Daddy."

"Baby."

Ellen returned to her bedroom. She had switched off the lights and muted Jack Hanna, and now settled her sore head on her pillow, daughter beside her. The cat jumped onto her feet and walked up her blanketed thighs.

"Now it'll be all weird in class," Tracy said forlornly. "It's not fair." She sounded weary, depleted, capable of falling into an exhausted sleep.

"No, it's not fair." This was what college would teach Tracy. It was, after all, the only lesson, and some people never learned it.

"I'm sorry, Mama."

"You don't have to be sorry, darling. You just have to convince your father that you're okay."

"I know. I figured that out. You think I'm okay?"

"I think you are." She did, actually. Ellen listened sleepily to the lack of static. Did she need to say that this was only the beginning of Tracy's difficult education? That no love would be pure, no gesture uncomplicated, for a long long time? Over the phone line there was silence, as if they would now slip into sleep, into the same dream.

"I'm a good actor," Tracy said faintly, as if trying to rally. "I can make my eyes water in a New York minute."

"Useful," Ellen said. Then she heard her husband's knock on Tracy's dorm door and was startled lucid once more. From a hundred miles she recognized the confident force of his fist. There was no mistaking it.

"Shhh! There's someone at the door," Tracy said, fear in her voice.

"It's your father. He made record time." Ellen sat up and checked her bedside clock: an hour and a half. The cat had stopped purring, ears perked, eye whiskers lifted.

"Let him in," she told Tracy as the cat jumped briskly to the floor.

"He'll know!" Tracy wailed. "I've *never* been able to fool him!"

"He won't," her mother assured her. "You have." When Tracy dropped the receiver, Ellen had the sensation of being let go, left behind. Now she was just a plastic instrument lying on the dorm table while a lock was turned and a door was opened. *He won't*, Ellen heard, and would hear for a long time, reverberating, *you have.*

Far away her daughter said her next word. "Daddy," she said, and Ellen hung up.

The Lonely Doll

I owned one for a while," she told him. "I found it, you won't believe this, in my grandfather's bedside table, in a drawer. There were three, in fact, like the bears, big, medium, baby. Maybe I was innocent at age eleven, I can't really say. It's true I was snooping, but it was *naive* snooping. That's the thing about being eleven: you feel so stupid, so duped, like the grown-ups are still holding out. I expected to find maybe a cigar or a hip flask, you know, Peepaw's *public* foul habits. Instead I found a plastic penis. Three of them, each the weight of, like, a flashlight.

"My first instinct was to slam the drawer, as if they might hup-to and start acting like billy clubs. *Whap whap whap!* But when I looked again, there they were, lying innocent. Alongside a tub of Vaseline. They were always there, week after week. The Vaseline seemed fairly wiggy, don't ask me why. Finally, I stole one. I stayed the night at my grandparents' on Friday nights forever. I slept with my grandma, while Peepaw had his own bedroom. He snored. Sometimes his snoring would wake me up. He'd spend the evening in his La-Z-Boy