ESSAY

LITTLE BROWN SHACK

Gary Greenberg

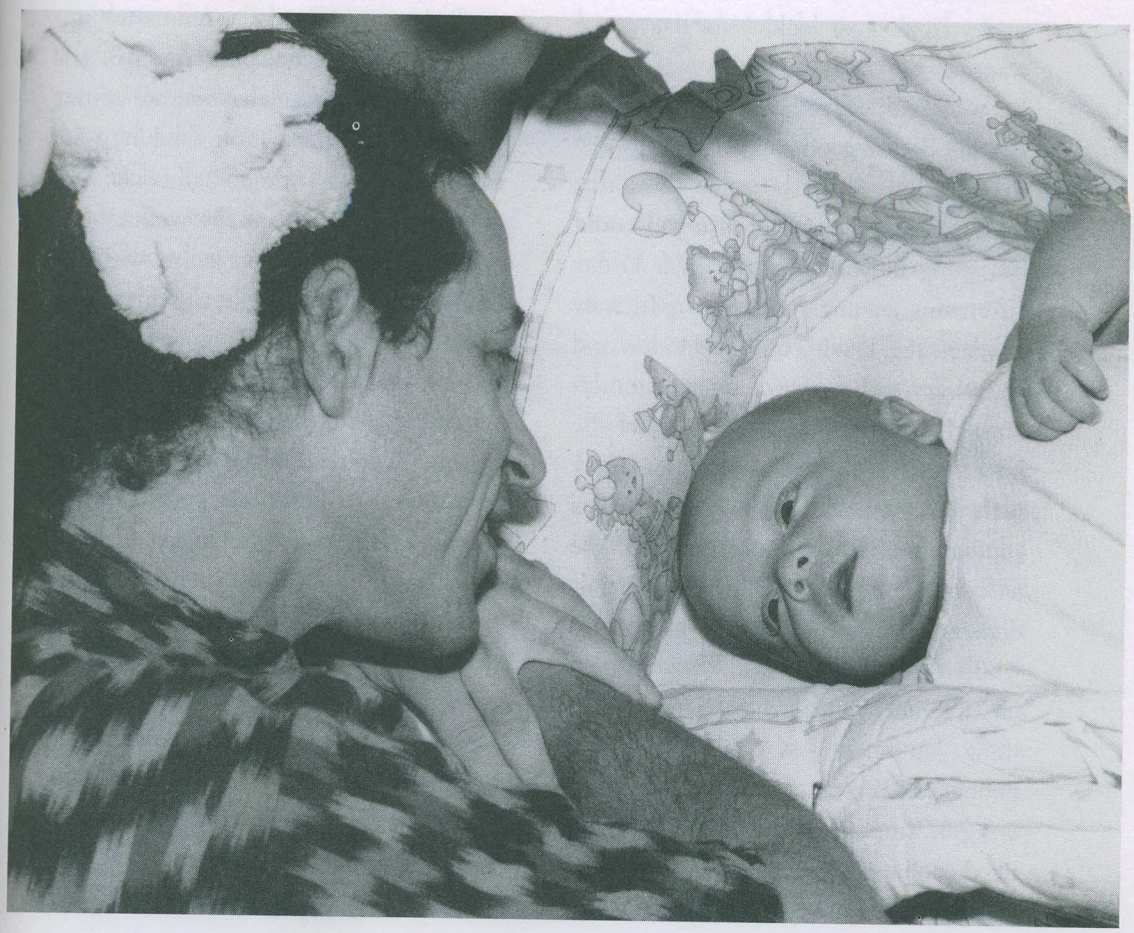
ABOUT A BOY, AND THE LONG ROAD TO ADOPTION

Some parental odysseys originate in strange and tawdry circumstances, and mine is one of them. It begins on a cold morning in early March. My wife, Susan, and I are walking through the slushy driveway of the Little Brown Shack, a ramshackle roadhouse hard by the interstate. The air outside is heavy with the exhaust of idling trucks, and inside it's little better: a thick roux of fry grease and cigarette smoke. We're braving all these foul atmospherics because we're on a mission. We're here to talk a woman into giving us her just-born son.

It's more on the up-and-up than it sounds. Social workers will be overseeing these negotiations. Members of their profession have been protecting the desperate from the unscrupulous, facilitating what they like to call family building since the mid-nineteenth century, when states, hoping to straighten out the knotty legal problems arising when children were unrelated to their parents by blood, first took upon themselves the regulation of the baby trade. Lawmakers found ways to manufacture blood ties, to provide adoptive parents with clear title to their children (and children clear claim to their inheritances), to expunge the birth parents from the historical record, to create a genealogy whose fiction was a secret. Only the social workers would know

everything: birth parents, adoptive parents, the reasons the child was given up and that certain parents were chosen over certain others to receive it—a public trust that demanded they become experts in figuring out who would be fit to bring up a baby, that they develop an algorithm of difficult questions to winnow the applicants.

Questions that, I must admit, we never answered. The social worker assigned to do our home study was so intimidated by our advanced degrees and even more advanced ages and our totally self-actualized lives that she just blurted it out in our first meeting—"I'm looking over your application and I just wanted to say that you're obviously qualified, but we have to go through these interviews anyway"—and proceeded to do us a whale of a professional courtesy: immunity from interrogation about motives and intentions, about how we would raise and discipline a child, about our sex lives and the ghosts of our own childhoods. Three easy interviews and fifteen hundred dollars later,



by the power vested in her by the State of Connecticut, her agency bestowed upon us a license to be parents. We never got the wallet copy.

So we are officially sanctioned to be sitting here in the Little Brown Shack, among the truck drivers and bustling waitresses with their perms and little aprons, watching the door for the woman the social workers have been telling us about for the last ten days. And here she is—a slight blonde in jeans crowded between two middle-aged, overweight matrons, standing hesitantly in the entry, nervous pale eyes looking for us, maybe wanting to catch a glance before we know she's there, to size us up before we can put on the good-parent act.

Which is exactly the same thing that we are doing to her. Because you could be sitting in your hot tub on a Friday afternoon, leaning back into a friendly cannabis fog, looking out the window and counting your blessings, literally enumerating them—the peace and quiet of the house you built in this forested sanctuary with your own hands, the comfort of a good marriage to a better woman, the ease of an interesting and not terribly demanding job, the freedom to be here while the rest of the world toils away, a life, in short, worth living—and the next thing you know you could be on the phone listening to a social worker delivering incomprehensible facts with practiced coolness—a baby boy and a mother gone, an incubator, an Apgar this and a gestational that—and asking questions about what you want to do, questions that must be answered indecently soon, but even as you tell her you have to wait for your wife to get home, you know that this is only stalling because she won't know either. And you could realize that it doesn't matter, because the view through the window has been replaced by a stained-glass tableau: an infant lying in the harsh light of a hospital room, alone in a crib, his arms reaching up, and you feel them around your neck. All of this could happen and no matter how long you've been waiting for it, no matter how strongly you feel his pull, you will still really want to know what you are getting yourself into. I mean, you wouldn't want to go off into parenthood half cocked.

You fix your stare on the woman. You take in her bright nylon jacket with the truck-repair-shop logo, her country-and-western good looks. You see the fear painted on her china-doll face. But you want to get a closer view, maybe count her teeth or read her palm, crack her open and get at her source code. Because you have to make a decision and she is all you have to go by. And even if you're a psychotherapist and spend your days working the premise of the human being's infinite malleability, you are searching for your still provisional son in his mother's DNA. Which means, you realize as she moves toward the table, that you are still shopping.

Because this is a commercial transac-

tion. Money is changing hands, a lot of it. I don't know where it is all going. I've asked the social workers about this, and they've told me some things that I don't quite grasp: counseling for the birth mother, paperwork, legal fees, rent, salaries (like they'd never been asked, like nonprofit status and trafficking in desperate dreams provide double indemnity against such probing). Of course, the free market rules here as everywhere: The price comes down if you want to adopt a "hard-to-place" child—sick or crippled or multiracial or just plain too old to satisfy the desire for a baby. We've gone down the list and specified our options: this race or illness or deformity or age or gender preferable, that one not. We've tried, that is, to hedge our twenty-five-thousand-dollar bet. So who could blame us now for our caveat emptoring?

Especially with what we already know—and don't know—about this boy and his mother. After I hung up the phone, I realized I'd failed to find out much of anything at all. Was he okay? All his fingers and toes? Why didn't she want him? What was *she* like? And for a moment, I considered not telling Susan about the phone call. I could just pretend it had never happened. Or I could spin it hard the wrong way: "The agency called with a kid, he's got some serious problems, but if you really want to go ahead ..." I was deciding to just play it cool, let her come in and get settled and then, in the chatter of the day's recounting, let it slip out in an oh-and-by-the-way, when I heard her car, and even though it was February, I was out in a bound, dripping naked on the porch. "They called. There's a kid, born yesterday. A boy. Seven weeks premature. He'll be in the hospital for a month. We'd have to be able to visit him in the hospital lots, if not every day. They want to know if we want to be considered by the birth mother."

That's how it works in these supply-side days. No longer are children whisked away from their birth mothers by nuns who pick the parents who have risen to the top of the list by dint of time or connections or well-timed contributions. Instead, an adoption agency assembles dossiers of the bidding parents, little ad campaigns in a manila folder, complete with photos of you and your dog and flowers, and a heartfelt and completely honest "Dear Birth Mother" letter in which you tell her all the reasons you'd be the perfect parents for her unborn child, and the woman—picture her young and in her maternity clothes, photos and letters spread out on her bed—chooses who will get the child kicking in her belly. In the seven months during which we'd been actively listed, we'd been rejected by three of these women, and we were beginning to think we'd have to adopt some new tactics, maybe make a video with some real production values.

Susan followed me into the house.

"What else do you know?" she finally asked.

"Not much. The mother smoked while she was pregnant. She didn't tell anyone about it. She's thirty. She has two other kids. She's on welfare."

"The other kids didn't know?"

"I guess not."

"He's healthy?"

"I guess."

"Then why's he in the hospital for a month?"

"I don't know."

"And what hospital?"

"I don't know. I can call and find out."

"I hear you," said the social worker on the phone, "and I know you're wanting to know more. But we just don't have any more information than that."

"Well, can I call the hospital and find out more?"

"No. All the information has to go through their social worker to us and then we relay it to you."

"Well, I suppose if we have more questions over the weekend, someone will be on call to talk to us."

"I'm afraid not. If you're really overwhelmed and needing to talk, you can call the service and someone will get back to you. But that person won't know any more than we do now."

"Okay. But can you at least tell me what hospital he's in?"

Now, I don't really believe in all that universe-is-your-friend, everything-happens-for-a-reason woo-woo jive. (And if I did, I'd want to know why I had to go on the open market to get a kid, couldn't have one like everyone else, by making love with my wife. Why, I would ask, had we had to suffer six or seven—but who's counting?—miscarriages, what Great Plan was that?) Still, I'd be lying if I didn't tell you the hair on my arms stood straight up when she named the hospital in which I was born.

But my wife, the stalwart, the one who had insisted and cajoled and looked on the bright side through all the treatments and procedures, the poking and the bleeding, who, when all her considerable hope was finally gone, had ridden the other horn of the adoption dilemma, offering a counter to my every point about why this was not a good idea, and who had never, not for a moment, indulged in my own whining pessimism, not even when we spent the money earmarked for adoption on a car—Susan wasn't feeling plugged into the great unity of it all. "How much did you say he weighed?"

"Three and a half pounds."

"That doesn't sound like much."

"Kids are born like this all the time now."

"She smoked."

"My mother smoked."

"What if he's sick, what if he doesn't ..."

"He'll be fine."

The true sign of long marriage may be when you realize that you have unwittingly divided the labor of ambivalence.

For years, she had carried the light and the hope and I the dark and the fear, and now, suddenly, after the real thing came into view for the first time, into the light of a stained-glass epiphany, the burdens were reversed.

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So we threw our hats in the ring, and now we are sitting here talking to this woman. The social workers introduce us; we already know each other's first names (and I'll call her Carrie here), and they keep it that way, presumably so we can't track each other down if one of us changes our mind. She takes off her jacket. She's wearing a Connecticut State Police sweatshirt.

The waitress arrives. The social workers and Susan order tea, Carrie gets coffee. Ten days postpartum, she can't weigh more than ninety-five pounds. I want to tell her that breakfast is on me and go ahead and eat hearty, but then I wonder if that's appropriate. After all, great care has been put into arranging this tableau. The half anonymity. The neutral setting. The state-licensed third parties. Their gentle arm-twisting helping her to see for herself that it's really the best thing for all concerned, so that when she finally got in the social worker's car and set out for the Little Brown Shack, it was of her own free will. So much care has gone into making this scene precisely not what it was that it would be a shame to wreck it by offering even this minor bribe, or for that matter by reaching across the table and picking her up by her State Police sweatshirt and yelling, "Give me your fucking baby!"

I order an English muffin and a decaf, and after the waitress leaves, I fidget with my silverware and say something about the Shack bringing back memories of when I lived just across the road, but stop short of the memory itself—of the brief and unhappy flirtation with condo living that came on the heels of living in a cabin I'd built on my grandfather's farm, three years of the postapocalyptic lifestyle brought to a sudden end when a family coup relieved my grandfather of his deed and me of my home, and I fled like a refugee to my future ex-wife's town house—stop right in the middle of a sentence when I remember that I wanted to kill the cousin who came to tell me that I was homeless, that I looked over his shoulder to my loaded shotgun in the corner and for a brief, clear moment contemplated the deed, the logistics of hid-

ing his car, of burying him. I stop short now as I did then, because this is an audition, not the place to impress a stranger with my colorful past and my penchant for confessions about the blackness of my heart.

I look at the social workers. One of them looks like she has just had some terrible news. Her eyes are sunk in her head, her chin on her chest as she sits inert and unresponsive, and I think she is going to break down and sob, or simply stop breathing, at any second. But the other, the head of the agency, has an idea. "Carrie, I thought you might tell Susan and Gary why you chose them."

Of course! They brought the icebreakers. They think of everything.

Except this. I know what we put in that manila folder: a picture of Susan and me sitting on the porch trying to look just exactly happy enough to love a kid but not too happy to need one; an interior scene of our light, airy house, full of warmth and good feeling, but missing that one thing; a letter, carefully modulated in tone ("don't make it too sophisticated," the social workers said), neither desperate nor smug about how we would of course be the best parents in the world for your little bundle of joy. I know what we put in, and I know what we left out, just how cleverly we committed and omitted our way into position, and I'm sure I don't want to catch my own sales pitch coming back at me from its life-bedraggled target.

Because the truth is, the car was my idea.

We decided, finally decided, on our fifth wedding anniversary, sitting in the same spot where we were married, a promontory looking out over a river valley. While the hawks rode the thermals out of the ravine and wheeled away into the fall air, we resolved to suffer this blow together, to be humble in the face of what we could not control, to live out our days without children, and really there are far, far worse things. Like illness and poverty and marital strife. Like giving up all your freedom and flexibility and having to hustle for a buck and save for college and go to Little League games and socialize with other parents and finally buy the whole boatload of crap that you've been successfully avoiding all your life.

I did need a car, really. My fleet—a '62 Ford and a '66 VW and a rusted-out pickup truck—wasn't getting any younger and cold mornings were coming. Approaching forty, I had lost the desire to lie under a car, poke around in its nether parts and wipe rust out of my eyes. So it seemed like fate when I just happened to be looking at the car ads in the very next morning's paper and saw a nine-year-old Audi, low miles, all the mod cons, a steal at five thousand dollars. Which we had and now could be spent, not only because I wouldn't be giving it to an adoption agency, but also because I had no more need to worry about money.

After all, I was joining the ranks of the child-free.

When I brought the car home, it sat in the driveway, four doors of gray remonstrance. I even tried to sell it right away, but then the transmission case on the Falcon broke, and the VW didn't have heat, and salt and icy slush sprayed through the floor and bathed my crotch every time I drove the pickup through a puddle. So slowly I got used to the heated seats and reliable brakes and the quiet so deep you could carry on a normal conversation as you drove. I even learned to look at it as a car and not the thing that I bought with the baby money.

That's how bad infertility will fuck with your head. It turns a routine case of buyer's remorse—the bad faith of buying and selling masquerading as the conviction that you bought the wrong thing—into heavy symbolism. Because you'd known since the beginning, when you threw away the pills and the rubbers, that you just weren't sure. And since the beginning came pretty late—you were thirty-five when you were first capable of forming even the glimmer of the thought, you'd been living in a state of grief most of your life, you really just wanted to figure out a way to go back to the autistic bliss of your cabin in the woods—you'd gathered at least one piece of wisdom: that all the agonizing in the world over pros and cons would not bring an answer into clear view. Because one thing was obvious: children will ruin your life. (Later on, when we told other parents we'd joined their ranks, they often rolled their eyes and said, "Well, your life is over now," commiseration like a secret handshake. And it wasn't just the interrupted sleep, the enforced celibacy, the endless round of feeding and burping and wiping and worrying, that made them say so. It was the way that freedom had deserted them and the pursuit of happiness, to the extent that it hinged on being able to get in the car on a minute's notice to go to a movie or to Mexico, had come to a crashing halt.) Presumably, a new life arises from the ashes, in which the losses won't mean so much, and you'll look back on all that independence as hardly worth the candle. Best not to think too hard on this, though, because the bet is too big for a sane person to take. Best to let biology trump psychology, introduce Mr. Sperm to Ms. Egg, take the ride wherever it goes and don't look back.

But sometimes biology trumps itself. Susan got pregnant the first month out, six years before we bought the car. She was visiting an out-of-town friend. Just before leaving, she'd seen a gynecologist, figuring that if she was going to try for this, she ought to make sure all was well with her. He called with news about this "very big coincidence." She'd arrived for her exam pregnant. But he was ordering a blood test.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, it's just that with an older patient we want to be sure. No need to worry."

So began our pilgrimage to the land of the elderly primigravida, which is what the medical texts call a woman of a certain age pregnant for the first time, the daily bloodletting and breath-bated waiting to find out if the levels had doubled overnight, if the embryo was making its requisite demands on the hormone factories. This first time, Susan got into the thousands before the numbers trailed off. But it was, the doctor told us, still not such bad news. Happens all the time, usually without a woman even knowing it. No need to worry.

WE LEARNED TO FUCK ON COMMAND, TO FUCK FOR GOD AND COUNTRY, TO FUCK THE WAY YOU SOMETIMES GO TO WORK—BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO IF YOU WANT TO GET WHAT YOU WANT.

And we didn't, at least not for another year or so, after a succession of regular periods sent us to books and friends for advice. So we learned about basal thermometers and in-home ovulation kits, about cervical mucus and breast tenderness and urinary prolactin—all the preparatory swellings and flowings that generally have the decency to pass unremarked. And we learned to fuck on command, to fuck for God and country, to fuck without desire, to fuck because a drop of piss turned blue, to fuck the way you sometimes go to work—because you have to if you want to get what you want.

And that's not all you have to do.

There are all sorts of theories about why women don't get pregnant or stay that way once they do. And to see which one might fit your particular case, doctors will happily inflict on you the best that medical science has to offer—biopsies and laparoscopies and hysterosalpingograms, and other ways of extending the reach of fingers and eyes into the darkness of the human body. And you will get used to it, to all the things they do to your wife, to the puniness of your own sympathy. After all, if you can get used to fucking on command, you can get used to anything.

Well, almost anything. I never did get used to handing over a cup of freshly produced semen to the medical lab. You'd think this wouldn't be so bad, but I am firmly of the belief that onanism is one of those minor vices like watching TV or playing computer games: no use denying you do it, but most fun when kept to yourself.

And no fun at all when Susan's doctor

called with the results. When he first asked if I'd ever had a sperm count done, I said no and added, "But potency runs in my family." I thought it was a funny line, a little in-joke for those of us educated enough to understand how natural selection works.

The doctor did not laugh, but I know he heard me because he used my joke to break the news. "It seems that the family legacy has skipped you," he said, and I wondered if this somehow satisfied him. A sperm count of seventeen million, he told me, and anything under twenty is considered low. Not sterile, he said, but still a cause for concern, especially given how hard it is for her to stay pregnant. "This may be the problem," he concluded.

"But she gets pregnant."

"Yes, but not as easily as you would like. And defective sperm can make a defective embryo. You need to go see a urologist."

Suddenly I was scrambling for my maleness. When the *New York Times* published a story the next week about the drop in sperm count in industrialized societies (one that made my seventeen million look much closer to adequate), I wanted to call the gynecologist and read it to him.

Until I talked to my urologist. "Small testicles," he said. "You have small testicles."

You'd think that would have been something I'd have already known. I wanted proof. I wanted to see his, cup them and roll them around between my fingers as he had mine, get out the caliper and plot the numbers and send them to the *Times* and ask them about average testicle size in industrial societies. I wanted to call my wife, my ex-wife, my ex-lovers and ask: Did you know and want to spare me? Or is this just something that urologists, with their ball-practiced hands, can assay with such certainty? I wanted, as he rambled on about sperm production and viruses and really everything else is quite normal, for it not to be true. I wanted to disappear into the shame of my newly diminished gonads.

My wife never, not once, said the obvious thing: "Well, we've been going along here thinking it was me. I've been prodded and snipped and stared at by men in search of my flaws; I've cramped and spotted and bled out my hope, hated myself for not being able to capture these little sparks of life, wept over their not wanting me enough to stick around. All that sorrow and rejection and self-recrimination, and it turns out it might have been you all along!" That's probably what I would have said. Instead she told me not to worry. She volunteered to help me with future sperm tests (for such there would be, after a course of antibiotics taken on the possibility that infection impaired my too necessary efficiency). And she told me she had no idea what the urologist was talking about.

Because in the country of infertility, blame lurks around every corner. Here

you are, and you've always been able to set nose to grindstone and do whatever you set your mind to, just like your parents said you could, and the things you haven't done you've been able to say you decided not to do. Life has never just stopped you stone cold before, certainly not with this kind of bare, binary predicament: one of you must be responsible. But you avoid recrimination like the plague, because you are on a desert island with this person and you must stay true to one another or you will surely not survive.

And at some point, you have to begin to give up. The doctors won't tell you this. They'll offer you another test, maybe the one where she goes into the office just after you've had sex so they can inspect the sperm's progress, see what happens next. They'll tell you about intrauterine insemination, in which you go in bright and early on the day that the test kit says is the right one, get friendly once again with a sterile cup and hand it to the doctor, who puts it right into a centrifuge that separates the sperm from the spooge, gets the pure stuff into a syringe, injects it directly into her uterus, an affirmative action plan for the sperm-disadvantaged. They'll send you to a university hospital, where important doctors with fresh-faced residents in tow will perform their lecture on your wife's body, who will nod and cluck and promise to get to the bottom of things and then never even call you on the phone to let you know that they haven't the slightest idea why you can't have a baby, will make you call and leave five decreasingly polite messages on their answering machine, until a nurse finally plays the tape to a doctor, shames him into calling you back and telling you the truth. They'll remind you about in vitro fertilization, a drop of

you and a drop of her in a petri dish, and when you recall for them that she can't seem to hold onto embryos, they'll give you the names of lawyers who round up women willing to be implanted with the zygote, willing to rent out the space in their wombs, to court stretch marks and varicose veins and labor pains and episiotomies, who will sign legal documents that swear this is not white slavery. But they won't tell you, unless you ask, that if you divide the cases of infertility caused by the conditions they can look for by the all the cases in the world, you come up with a small fraction, maybe 1/4. They won't tell you, that is, that medicine searches for the cause of infertility in the same way that the proverbial man who has lost his keys searches for them: under the streetlamp, even if he lost them elsewhere, because that's where the light is.

Not that that's their job. Their job is to work a miracle, to make a baby where there was none. Sometimes they find the kind of malfunction—the hormone that doesn't get delivered to the uterine wall in quite enough quantity to create a foothold for the fetus, or the scarring that prevents ovulation, or the faulty valves in the spermatic vein that impair the production of sperm—that they can fix. Sometimes they succeed, and in return for all the time and money and indignity, for surgical and pharmaceutical risks, for turning yourselves into a science project, you get a baby. And no one who has held his own tiny child in his own hands, who has felt an infant's head against his chest, a warm shot of ambrosia penetrating through gristle and rib, right to the heart—no one will deny that it was all worth it (although you might always grieve over having had to make the calculation).

And one day, another cold February day three years after the first miscarriage and four years before the meeting at the Shack, the phone rings and it's the doctor's office and you're standing on top of the house you are building with redemptive fury—proving that you can bring something into being—and scrawling the latest lab results and doctor's orders on a two-by-six with a carpenter's pencil. The numbers aren't good, the drugs are strong, and you can't wait to nail that lumber into a wall, bury it under Sheetrock and paint. A few days later, on a Saturday morning, you find your wife on the border of refusal, almost unable to drive to the lab for another blood test, and yourself unable to push her out the door. You both know, after all, that the levels are either going up or they're not, and there is nothing to be done either way. The recalcitrance in your bodies tips you off to the decision that you've made without knowing it. That you are done. That there will be no jerking off in the doctor's bathroom, no more lying on cold tables under harsh lights pretending to be brave, no more trips to the lab or needles to the cervix, no more fucking on command, no more, no more.

We hadn't put any of this in the folder that Carrie read. We didn't tell her that the last few times Susan got pregnant, we were so fully sickened at having to care about something that would inevitably disappoint that we skipped the doctor and just waited to see if she would swell up with child or bleed. We'd left out the crying and the fist-shaking rage and the panic that set in as the days passed and the periods came and we stopped counting the miscarriages. We'd left out the way that it became impossible to distinguish between wanting a child and not wanting to be foiled by something so arbitrary, the way that life without a child began to gather its own steam and relief began to mix in with anguish—relief at not having to make room in hearts that time and circumstance were closing, or at least making less supple.

"We're living like retired people," I said one day to Susan.

And most of all we'd left out what happened when the conversation shifted from having a baby to getting a baby.

Not long after we finished the house, we ordered a catalog from an agency that handled foreign adoptions. It was arranged by country. You could get a baby from Peru or Bolivia or Colombia or Romania or Russia or China or Nepal. The catalog listed the rules and regulations and restrictions in all these places. Where various lifestyle misfits—homosexuals, single women, unmarried couples, people over forty, Bible thumpers, atheists—might find themselves in or out of favor. The kind of children available in each country—infants, toddlers, older kids. And prices—Nepal was the cheapest by far, but, the catalog warned, all of these costs were strictly a la carte, and some of the items were infinitely vulnerable to the vagaries of the particular marketplace you chose. You had to pay your way there, stay in a hotel while the third-world bureaucracy bumped along, and contend with all those functionaries with their rubber stamps and outstretched palms. Well, they didn't say that exactly, but the implication was clear—an indeterminate amount of baksheesh as well as patience, more in some places, less in others, would be required.

On a sultry summer day, we went to a meeting at the agency's offices in suburban Boston. We sat in the air-conditioned conference room and drank tea out of Styrofoam cups with forty or fifty other people and learned all about how you get a baby from a far-off land, about the lawyers here and there, the chartered airplanes, the fantastic tourist opportunities while you wait, the importance of bringing a piece of the child's homeland back so that she will have a memento of her roots (which I found confusing. I mean, didn't all this business hinge on a rootless view, on nurture over nature every time?), the emigration papers, the immigration papers (they even handed out an Immigration and Naturalization Service form, suggested that we send it in now even if

we hadn't yet decided, since this form held the key to bringing the child into the country and could take forever to get processed), the adoption papers, the payment plan. I stopped listening for long stretches, looked around the room at the gathered fertility-challenged—all white, seemingly affluent, middle-aged—and wondered for what loss they were seeking consolation. I watched out the window as a thunderstorm gathered in the east, listened to it crackle over the building and pull away, saw the sky clear and the afternoon sun kindle the glass towers of downtown Boston, all prelude to a brilliant rainbow. The facilitator directed everyone's attention to the window. It was an omen, she said. They turned and their eyes went dewy. They really wanted and they really believed.

When she announced—just after a glowing couple brought in their adorable toddler in patent leather and lace, imported from China (the toddler, that is)—that there just happened to be baby triplets available today in Korea, there was a stir of laughter in the room, and I was sure that someone was going to put his money where his mouth was, that someone there (maybe more than one someone; was that competitiveness lurking behind the laughter? Would there be an auction?) was going to prove to be more than a spectator. But not me. I just couldn't imagine myself doing any of this—trekking to some unknown place to get handed a baby plucked randomly from an orphanage, spending my first night as a father at the Holiday Inn, changing diapers in front of CNN while waiting for an exit visa, buying a sombrero or a floppy-eared Himalayan wool hat for that future talk, the one where we explain why her skin is a different color or her eyes a different shape, struggling to keep an infant whom we hardly know happy and quiet on the eighteen-hour flight home, the hairy Customs eyeball on our papers, our baby, our obvious incompetence.

Or was it just adoption—abroad or at home—that I couldn't imagine? Not just the yuppie robber-baron aspects, but also the apparent lunacy of the thing itself, courting disaster by taking on a stranger's legacy. What would happen when a baby whose face didn't reflect mine or my wife's or the people whose faces ours reflected woke me out of deep sleep at 2 A.M.? Would I be able to resist the urge to put the intruder outside? Would he or she ever be my own?

The contemplation of adoption awakened some latent tribal impulse in me, the primordial instinct to preserve and protect my own and repudiate the rest. Freud tagged this as one of the leading follies of civilization—the narcissism of minor differences, the belief that I am better than you because I have this hooking Jewish nose instead of that high Aryan brow. But this wasn't all just the stuff of ancient bloodshed. Medical science tells us that we are literally in our

progeny, in the genes we pass along. And we had good genes, Susan and I. Success genes. Lawyer and doctor genes; whose could be as good? Suddenly I was a racialist, a genetic determinist, hewing to folly with bone-deep conviction, instantly forgetting the cancer, deafness, retardation, suicide, insanity, malfeasance, and seemingly innate cruelty that ran so deep in my own accomplished family.

Or maybe I just didn't want a kid badly enough to suspend disbelief and judgment.

The catalog sat in a basket, slowly covered over by mail and magazines. We got on with our lives, each childless day a trial run for the rest of our lives, no day glorious or awful enough to move us decisively one way or another, every action freighted with life-or-life uncertainty. We got a puppy. When I drove it home and it put its head in my lap, shaking in fear, and I reached down to pet it; when it whined all night and I stuck my foot out of bed and kicked its kennel; when we had to figure out what to do with it if we wanted to go out for the day—we read all these events like tea leaves.

We went to another meeting, this time at a Jewish agency that had good connections in Eastern Europe. This was Susan's idea. She thought that my horror of otherness might be overcome by the promise of a child who came from my own ancestral homeland—descended, perhaps, from the very same Cossacks who chased my forebears all the way to America.

The social worker wore her hair in a black bun pulled back so tightly that it narrowed her eyes. She fidgeted with her long painted fingernails as she described her agency's program in her Brooklyn accent. She showed us pictures of happy couples bringing their babies home. She showed us the offices where we would be grilled for the home study. She leaned across her desk and said, "I want you to know that here we don't believe that people ought to adopt because they want to help a child, to rescue a kid from poverty or an orphanage. It's not for the child's benefit. That's just not a healthy reason. The only good reason to adopt is for yourselves. You want to adopt to make yourself happier? That's the kind of couple we want."

And speaking of enlightened self-interest, the social worker also happened to know of a lawyer who could advise us on how to strike a deal with a sister or a friend, or, failing that, who could help us round up a woman willing to be implanted with our own little zygote, willing, for a fee, to sign legal documents that promise to hand the baby over right away and never look back. We hadn't put this in the file either: that we visited this lawyer, that we actually approached someone, an acquaintance, a sweet and strapping young woman, to ask us if she'd do us this big favor.

She was smarter than we were. She just said no.

It wasn't long after that that we

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climbed our wedding hill and made our decision. We held each other and talked about making closer relationships with nieces and nephews and all the other compensations we could find or invent. We resolved to put our feet firmly in one world, to close the door on the other one, to end the torture of decisions reversed by the minute. We bought the car and lived our lives and tried to stop the questions in their tracks when we walked by an infant in a stroller.

The next spring, Susan said to me, "Look, I just don't think I can live with this. What if I get old and look back and wish we'd done something different? I'd never forgive myself. I realized the other day that if I were alone, if it was just me, I'd do it. I'd adopt. And I'm afraid of what that means about us. I might come to see you as standing in my way."

When you're in your second marriage, and you've chucked it all (including the first marriage) to be there, and you're sure that your wife can stand anything—sure in part because she has already withstood so much—and you've long ago forgotten the fact that there was a time when you didn't share a breakfast table, it doesn't really matter how self-absorbed you are. You'll take some notice of words like these.

And of this. Later that same week, at my office's staff meeting, a colleague of mine was describing a case of hers, which involved a Catholic-school girl who had gotten pregnant and had decided to give her child up for adoption. The discussion was supposed to be therapist talk about how to handle the conflict in the family, but I could only pay attention to my ankles, to the strange energy that was creeping up my legs, not unlike the vertiginous buzz that seems equally likely to fling you off the precipice as keep you safely away from the edge, that made me want to leap up and say, "Wait a minute! What about the baby? Who's getting the baby?" But it seemed unprofessional. So I cornered her after the meeting and asked with all the nonchalance I could force. "Oh, I guess they've made arrangements with an agency," she said.

I was shocked at the soreness of my temptation, the vividness of my fantasy of letting myself into her office, rifling her files, getting the information, arranging a coincidence. I was appalled at my acquisitiveness. And most of all, I was overrun by the breathtaking purity of my desire.

"I REALIZED THE OTHER DAY THAT IF I WERE ALONE, IF IT WAS JUST ME, I'D ADOPT. AND I'M AFRAID I MIGHT COME TO SEE YOU AS STANDING IN MY WAY."

So we signed up with an agency. Not the Boston one or the Jewish one, but a little agency in El Paso. Because I had one condition: we had to adopt a newborn. I didn't want to defy both nature and nurture, compounding the genetic crapshoot with an environmental one. Who knew what foster care or orphanage horror was in store for a baby while he or she awaited the bureaucrats? But most foreign governments require that children be at least three months old, often much older, before they can be exported. And most healthy newborns, the scarcest commodity in this very hot market, go to people with deeper pockets than ours, or who have more time to wait than we did—we had by then joined the ranks of the middle-aged. But in El Paso, evidently, young Mexican women regularly have children they cannot keep, and who are Americans by virtue of their birthplace—which means there are no foreign rules to abide by or palms to grease. For us it was the best of both worlds, for the children were still foreign in one important respect: they were not white. Our willingness to have a brown baby was fostered more by the fact that my brother was married to a Nuyorican and Susan's brother to a Peruvian—unions which had already given our families six more or less brown babies—than by any multiculti commitments. But there was no doubt that it gave us a leg up on the competition.

We didn't put this in our folder either—that our shrewd strategizing had led us to expect a little brown girl. That she was going to be named Lily, that we were already planning our regular root-seeking trips to Mexico. That we had turned on a dime one day when we realized that Texas might as well be a foreign country and decided to use the same agency that had done our home study (a license granted in Connecticut is recognized in Texas, so we were using a local agency to vet us for the obvious logistical reason) for the adoption itself. That we were still expecting a Hispanic girl—a Puerto Rican child from Hartford, we imagined—when the agency called with the news about a little white boy lying in an incubator in the hospital where I was born. That we had spent the next weekend reading about premature babies, learning about gestational age and critical birthweights, about ventilators and antibiotics, about emotional and social problems of premature children, trying to parlay our little bit of knowledge into some kind of certainty, that we crunched the numbers—fifteen hundred grams, thirty weeks—added up the factors, and decided to make our bid. That we had waited all week to hear something back, that when Susan called on Thursday to talk about dinner and I only asked her where the tomato sauce was, she started crying. That when the agency called the next day to say that the birth mother wanted to meet us (but not, of course, until Monday, when the social workers

came back to work), the weekend loomed large and cruel in front of us, and we blamed Carrie for leaving us to roast on this spit. We left all of that out.

Omissions that may or may not have anything to do with why she is right now sharing this round table with us and the social workers, our family-building enterprise squarely in her delicate, pale hands.

She answers the social worker's question. "I liked the fact that you were a teacher and you were a psychologist," she says, looking vaguely in Susan's and then my direction. "I thought it would mean that if there were problems, you could handle them." It is really a good thing that I didn't tell her about wanting to shoot my cousin.

I take my first good look at her. She isn't just thin, she's gaunt, emaciated, worn beyond tired. There are dark circles under her blue eyes, setting off her high cheekbones. Her hair is long and layered, her shoulders are hunched and she holds her arms tight to her body, keeping her hands in her lap when she is not sipping her tea. She sits in her chair—a brown captain's chair with a curving top rail—without touching its back or sides, a wisp of land in a dark sea.

For the first time, I grasp the enormity, the vast, mythic proportion of this business of taking the flesh of your flesh, placing him forever and ever in the care of someone else, walking away, never to see him again. Carrie knows what this means better than I do. She has two other children, a boy and a girl, whom she has raised alone. She tells us about them, the hard life they have had, living in rundown apartments and houses in different towns, attending unwelcoming schools. How she didn't want to burden them with knowledge of another child coming, so she concealed the pregnancy ("I carry small," she explains, and I wonder how this is possible), had to hurry home from the hospital after the delivery so they wouldn't know they had a brother, has been packing lunches and putting them on buses for the last two weeks, living in a secret twilight of grief and indecision, and (she doesn't say this, but I think it must be true) thinking every day about going to the hospital and getting her boy, whom she loves as a mother, whom she wants to do right by, whom she may give to a psychologist and a teacher so that he'll be with people who know exactly what to do to keep him safe.

She tells us about the day he was born. She'd been out four-wheeling the day before, riding around the woods in a friend's pickup truck. "It was getting bumped around that did it, I think. I wasn't ready to decide yet, I thought I had more time." She went to the hospital while the children were at school, called the one friend who knew she was pregnant to look after them, gave birth at around three that afternoon. It was an easy delivery, no doubt because it was her third and he was very small. She'd asked for the priest to baptize him. She was

home early the next morning, in time to get the kids off to school. She told them she'd been sick, but she was better now. She says she went to the hospital once to see him, gave him a Beanie Baby, but hasn't been back in over a week.

We ask about the father. "He was a real gentleman," she says. From the South, "a lot nicer than my ex-husband." She only knew his first name. He was a big man who had the room next to hers when Welfare put her family up in a motel. She distracts us from the father with a horrifying description of living for months in a single room with two young and active children. It's not too hard to do this, because it feels so unseemly to be asking in the first place for the details of her love life. (Later, Susan will tell me that she thinks it was a long affair, that Carrie knows more than she let on, that she is protecting him. I think he was a construction worker temporarily housed, who got lucky with his next-door neighbor. We both wonder what we will tell her son.)

And now we have settled into conversation, the familiarity of stories traded momentarily covering over the utter strangeness of what we are doing. The dissonance is not just between the appearance of civilization and the barbaric business at hand, but also between the sympathy Carrie's suffering kindles—her poverty and single motherhood; her nomadic, fatherless childhood; her abortive attempts to pull herself up by training to be a nurse's aide, someone who can wipe and wash and push and carry old people abandoned in convalescent homes; the whole cruel apparatus of the free market focused on and embodied in this kind and hapless woman—and our inescapable wish, no, our fierce and burning need—now that we have determined that she is someone whose genes we probably don't have to fear—to capitalize on it. The thought flits through my head—I could give her the twenty-five thousand dollars, and then she might be able to keep her son. But I say nothing.

Because you have to believe that you are entitled, that you will be a better parent than she will be. Even if you know that the credentials that so impressed her, that gave you the resources to be doing this in the first place, are largely flukes, nothing you really deserved, and certainly nothing to do with bringing up babies. You have to believe this even more than you believe that you will be better than your own highly educated, well-intentioned, and vastly incompetent parents. You have to believe this and she has to believe this, or you might just as well write her the check and push it across the table and go home.

You have to have hubris, you have to be willing to be the author of your own original sin to ask another human being to give you her child. And here at the shack, I find myself more than willing. I am not only eager and greedy, I am dying for Car-

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rie to look at me and my wife and say, "Okay. I've decided. Where do I sign?" But even though we've been our best psychologist and schoolteacher selves, lived up to our dossier, agreed to her terms—that she can get (via the agency) letters and pictures updating his progress, that we will pass along Christmas and birthday gifts—she is not ready to close the deal. And now it is time to go. We watch the social workers leave, our son's mother in tow. He is eleven days old.

Later, we will call the agency. They will tell us that they are sure the workers are helping her to make up her mind and that if she decides to give him up, it will be to us. I will lie awake all night, thinking of those outstretched arms. We will get up Tuesday and pretend to live our lives and we will lay awake all night again, and when Wednesday comes, we will give up, sure that she feels as we do—unable to walk away from this urge. But the phone will ring that afternoon, and the agency will tell us that Carrie has signed the papers that assign them as guardians, and, much more important, allow us to go and visit the boy in the hospital.

And the next day, at three in the afternoon, we will meet another social worker at the entrance to the hospital. She will be so well dressed that I will notice, for the first time, what I have put on for this momentous occasion: a pair of blue jeans with holes in the leg, a flannel shirt with enormous, sloppy buttonholes, stained work boots, a ratty cotton hat. We will

make our way through the lobby to the elevator and up to the neonatal intensive care unit, cordoned off from the rest of the hospital by huge swinging double doors with signs warning away the diseased, insisting that all who enter wash scrupulously before handling the babies. In the hushed corridor, we will meet the hospital's social worker. Our little entourage will step through the third door on the right into a room that is home to three plastic cribs, one on each wall. A couple will be sitting in front of the one on the left, the mother holding an improbably small baby to her breast. In the far corner, a nurse will be hovering over an infant who is crying implacably. And there on the right, asleep and alone in the third crib, wrapped in a white blanket, a blue knit cap covering a head the size of an orange, his tiny and immaculate face in deep repose, will be the boy from the stained-glass window, my son.