

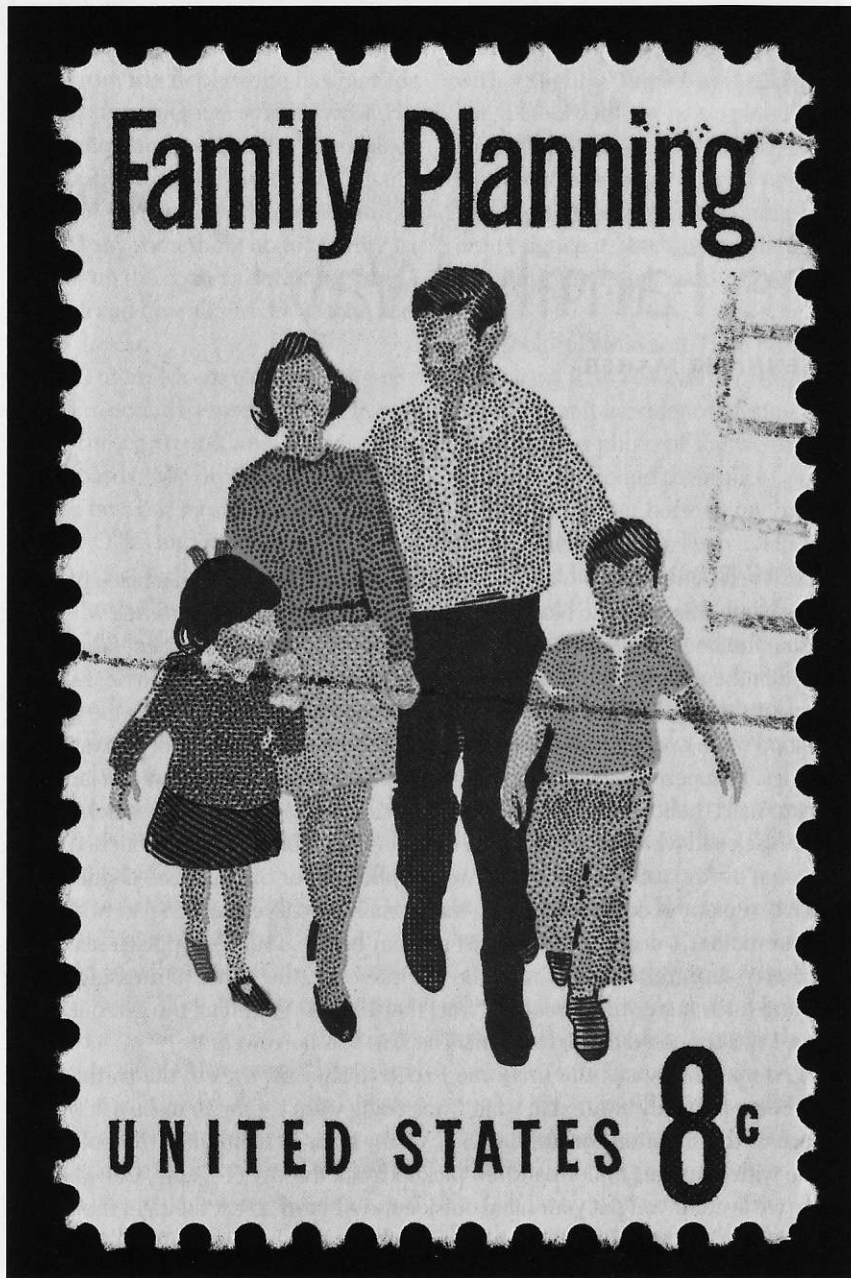
The Family Way

BY JENNIFER MAHER

I'M WEARING A WHITE wool circle skirt with a black pin-tuck overlay when I first see the blood. It's a real circle skirt, which means that when you unfasten the hook and eye on the waist and let it go, it lands in a perfect fabric-puddle and in the middle there's an empty space where your body used to be. I haven't undone it though; I've just lifted it up to go to the bathroom. When I wipe and see the blood on the paper, it feels as if someone has poured a pitcher of ice water into my lungs. I squeeze my eyes shut and turn my back on the toilet bowl in a last ditch effort to make believe it's a dream. They had seen a heartbeat just a week before, a grainy black and white image of a lima bean on the moon. Now I'm crouched in the bathroom of my boss's house where we've gathered for *Shneim asar chodesh*, the Jewish ceremony of commemoration, traditionally held a year after a parent's (in this case her mother's) death. At home, just an hour before, I made a spinach salad with strawberry vinaigrette, worrying in the car ride over (the bottle of dressing rolling back and forth under the passenger seat) that I hadn't gotten all the grit out of the leaves. I was supposed to read a poem. The skirt was borrowed.

Of course, this wasn't the first time I tried to shut my eyes to the truth, all the while being perfectly aware that what I was doing wasn't going to make a lick of difference to the situation confronting me. When I was in elementary school, I used to ride with my sister in her battered pickup truck through Topanga Canyon, near where we lived. If you put your hand outside the window at just the right moment of descent from the top of the beach canyon highway that led back to the Valley, right when canyon chaparral gave way to sidewalk concrete, you could feel the ocean air turn hot against your palm quicker than you could swallow. If I shut my eyes tight at this point in the ride, I'd stop thinking about my dad's new leather jacket and Studio City condominium and my mother chain-smoking her way through the weeknights with her feet curled up under her on the yellow leather couch meant for guests. At the precise spot where the air turned from cool-salty-moist to lead-blanket heavy, I'd breathe up into the sky and my heart would tangle-dance into the trees like an empty bag of potato chips.

My sister would be wearing her bikini top and her cut-off shorts. The top was a string bikini and it really was just two white cotton triangles with a pattern of clouds on each, a fabric diptych. If you were to pull the two triangles together



across the shoe-lacey string, the clouds would have met and formed a coherent image of a midday sky in 1970s airbrush style. I spent a lot of time with my sister and her bikini in those days. My mother was busy trying to recreate her life after her divorce, taking classes for a paralegal degree most nights a week alongside

other newly divorced women at the local community college, clacking back to their compact cars at nine p.m. in their zip-up suede boots, their keys jangling in time to their anxiety about a child's dinner, the long grass on the front lawn, how to replace a ribbon on an IBM Selectric, the vagaries of contract law.

In the way that you learn things without ever having to be told them, I knew that there wasn't an awful lot I could ask of my mother. While she cared for me, my end of the deal involved not creating too much trouble or asking for too much. Rather I was to enjoy those things that didn't make too much noise or require a partner, things like reading and drawing, which I did, in fact, like best.

Once, when she had too much to drink, my mother came up to my room late at night and tucked herself in next to me, crowding us into my single bed. I scooted as far to the edge as I could as she kissed me on my ear and whispered that while she loved me very much, in general she advised against having children because they made you fret about everything and the world was generally an awful place, full of divorce and canyon houses that were falling apart. She had lived through one war as a child in London and she could hardly imagine that the next one would improve matters much and what would happen to all the children who already lived in this world? Why would anyone want there to be more of them right now? And what would become of us if she died? My father has proved himself unreliable and while she knows, she explained, that my sister can handle almost anything, I cared too much about people, cried too easily, she explained, and this did me no good, it really didn't.

The smell of cigarette smoke, Wrigley's gum, and Scotch made me too nervous to talk so I just pretended to sleep, breathing in and out through my nose with a sort of whistling sound. The next morning she was efficient as ever, doling out my Flintstones vitamin and making sure my math homework was folded into the book so that its edges wouldn't get raggedy. In truth, despite her drinking, she was much more capable than most of my friends' parents, who seemed to believe that

their disco-era self-actualization hinged upon treating their children as if they were just very short people they happened to live with. Each morning at our school's parking lot you'd see eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds stumbling out of leather-upholstered sports cars or vans with heart-shaped side windows, kids dressed in halter tops and velvet pants with their hair all knotted up in the back and their backpacks slipping off their shoulders as they clutched half-eaten Egg McMuffins above their heads like track-team trophies.

After she picked me up from school in the evenings and we got home, my mother would remove her bra and change into a long terry cloth yellow dress with a deep V-neck that showed off the freckles across her chest. It was the same dress she'd wear with open-toed sandals to the grocery store on the weekends, her hair pulled off her forehead with a green and white spotted kerchief. Sometimes at night while my sister did the dishes, we'd watch TV together on the couch and I'd rest my head against the fabric as it stretched across her body; it was soft as a baby chicken, but thin, so I could feel the indentation of her belly button as her breath rose and fell. I'd reach back and receive the half-melted ice cubes I liked to chew on and I'd feel almost safe. During the week at her secretarial job, my mother wore a series of floral polyester wrap dresses from JC Penney paired with "tan" pantyhose that came in a plastic package the size and shape of an ostrich egg. They were called "Leggs," and in their nascent form they looked like a shriveled taupe blood clot, smaller than my fist. Once on, though, they made everyone's legs—my mother's included—long, shiny, and taut enough to walk into and out of any door you could open. Via a complex series of kicks and squats she'd carefully pull them all the way up, far enough so that you could

no longer see the small cotton oval that marked the space where it all began, the cause of the present life she had to shimmy into and out of every day.

My older sister was born over ten years before me, which means I spent much of my young life alternately copying her clothing, mannerisms, and musical tastes and constructing myself in opposition to her clothing, mannerisms, and musical tastes. My father likes to tell a story about the day I was born, how my sister ran up and down the street at six in the morning ringing the neighbor's doorbells in a peach nightgown to announce she had a baby sister before our parents realized she was gone and shuffled her home, explaining that not everyone would want to be woken at that hour. She had reddish hair, freckles in the shape of the Milky Way behind her left ear, and green-blue eyes as round as cereal bowls. By the time she was old enough to babysit me my parents had already split up, but much of her own young life was spent in the midst of terrific battles where she learned early and often to take my mother's side. Later she cared for me many hours a week with a combination of guilt, resentment, anger, and rare and random tenderness. I cannot for the life of me imagine her as a child skipping from house to house early in the morning like that. The Laura I knew had a set jaw and slept in oversize men's t-shirts from the Head Shoppe down the street with phrases like "Keep on Truckin'" screen-printed on the front. She'd sooner tap a tree for maple syrup and craft me a doll out of muslin and dried corn cob than wear a nightdress. I, on the other hand, had been trying on my grandmother's slippery polyester peignoirs and prancing in front of the mirror practically as soon as I could walk.

At some point after my birth, long past the joyous doorbell-ringing episode I imagine, my sister learned of

my father's numerous affairs, though she couldn't have been more than a child herself. I don't know how she knew but I have heard it said that my mother once found bits of paper in my father's wallet, math problems arranged across the back of an old receipt—212 plus 88, then 74 plus 2 minus 54. In a flash of hunch, she picked up the phone and dialed the numbers in order and a woman answered. When I picture the woman at the other end she comes to me fully formed, an amalgamation of chiffon femininity with long dark hair curled and flipped up at the bottom like snail shells. She reclines on a pink bed and answers the phone (next to the bed, on a white wicker nightstand) wearing a beautiful nightgown and high-heeled slippers with marabou feathers across the toes. Laura somehow knew about the phone numbers and who knows what else, and without telling my mother she marched to the Thrifty drugstore one day after school and shoplifted a bright lipstick in a shade my mother would never wear, carefully placing it in the passenger side-pocket of my father's car, under the door handle. All that was left to do was wait for the day my mother would reach in—to rest her pocketbook on the way to dinner? to search for a Kleenex?—and touch incontrovertible evidence in Revlon Kiss-Me-Coral of his indiscretions. And one day she did just that.

"The best part," my mother and sister would say, their words toppling over each other like children down a hillside, is that at first my father tried to deny it, claiming the lipstick must have been left by a hitchhiker, but then he eventually confessed and moved out of the house for good. I learn that I am supposed to laugh along with this story every time it is told, though it makes me feel like I'm the one cheating, only on my father. On odd weekends he too drives me across Topanga Canyon to the beach, where

he does in fact pick up young hitchhikers in string bikinis like my sister's and who sometimes slide him their phone numbers across the gear shift. But I am young enough to love him without knowing any better and because he calls me his "last chance" and lets me eat uncooked Top Ramen right out of the package. His leather jacket smells like nutmeg and cigars.

Still, after hearing it told so many times, I finally get the lipstick and cheating story right, learning to admire and re-tell it as a family fable of gumption and inventiveness. I once told it to a group of college friends on a road trip to protest against a pro-life group targeting Planned Parenthood. It was late and we had been driving a long time across dark freeways, a Replacements cassette tape stuck in the dashboard player, everyone convivial and punch drunk, high on the libidinal energy of youth and a shared cause, one-upping each other with funny stories of the fucked-up suburban adolescences we thought we'd left behind. After the appreciative choruses of "Really's" and "Are you kidding's" died down, Charlie, our unofficial leader and part-time designated driver—the one all the girls wanted to fuck for both his recent vow of celibacy (the better to concentrate on his activism) and his perfect sideburns—said "That's one of the saddest stories I've ever heard." And all of a sudden it was. I rested my head against the back window. It had fogged to the point of invisibility in the presence of so much young breath, evaporating. I drew circles in the steam with my fingernail and tried to shirr the stars into the shape of something but they just stayed stars.

I must have been sixteen years old the first time I went inside Planned Parenthood by myself. At the time a reluctant virgin who lived in books, I practically memorized my hand-me-down copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*

the same summer I read every Tom Robbins novel the library owned along with a biography of the Beat poets given to me the previous year by a history teacher on whom I had a painful crush. Armed with these imaginary narratives of adulthood, I took two buses to the office near UCLA and signed up for my first pap smear. I imagined it as a turning point of near-guaranteed consciousness-raising, as if Gloria Steinem herself would greet me at the door in a white coat with a clipboard. I didn't reckon on the threadbare carpet, the stained folding chairs, the out-of-date copies of *Newsweek*. Still, I stripped down and stepped into my paper dress as if I were valedictorian in some sort of feminist graduation ceremony, practically leaping into the stirrups where I lay staring at a waterfall poster on the ceiling tile, trying to calm my nerves by imagining my breath darting under the teeth-torn edges of Scotch tape and up and into the light fixture with its row after row of plastic indentations the size and shape of peppermint Tic Tacs. I politely declined when the nurse practitioner with her cool hands encouraged me to use the hand mirror to look at my cervix. (I just wanted to get those awful pinching salad tongs out of me as soon as possible). I promised to read the tiny onion-skin insert instructions of my pills from page to page, to bust each capsule out of its foil mini-pouch at the exact same time every day for at least one month before I'd let an actual penis so much as brush up against my pant leg. I left the office proud, prepared, and completely in the dark about my fertility, a state I remained in, more or less, for the next twenty years.

Much later I learned that the Planned Parenthood office I went to that first time was the same one my sister visited monthly to pick up her own pills when she was living with her first boyfriend in Santa Monica. They

rehabbed houses together and by the time she was twenty-four she could lay a floor and wallpaper a kitchen practically by herself. When she turned thirty, she got married to another man and they bought a house together in the only place they could afford, at the very outskirts of Los Angeles, a subdivision that still smelled strongly of the cow dung left behind when the dairy farms were razed to make space for row after row of patterned stucco houses with dirt backyards and three-car garages. They tried for years to have a child, and she once only half-jokingly told me how pissed she was that she spent so much needless money on the pill at the Planned Parenthood on Vermont Avenue if it was this goddamn hard to get knocked up in the first place.

The only time I ever heard my sister cry, I had just returned from a camping trip in Northern Wisconsin. Dirty and loaded down with plastic shopping bags of bruised handpicked cherries, hung-over from smoking too much pot and then trying to sleep on the ground, I played her hiccupping answering machine message. I was twenty-four myself now and utterly self-absorbed in my graduate studies and romantic entanglements. Thousands of miles from home, I hadn't, to be honest, been paying an enormous amount of attention to my sister's struggles to conceive a child. I was still in California when she adopted my nephew, an adorable and fairly miraculous two-year old, and I just sort of thought it was all done. But still she wanted a baby. She and her husband tried IVF enough times that the miraculous two-year-old now played water rockets in the bathtub with the leftover supply of plastic syringes. When they ran out of IVF money they sold one of their cars and signed up with an independent adoption agency with a team of lawyers and an eight thousand dollar non-refundable sign-up fee. Finally

chosen as a “forever family,” Laura took the young mother-to-be out to dinner at Applebee’s and shopped with her for maternity clothes at TJ Maxx, where, she was surprised to report, the young woman inevitably chose only men’s flannel shirts to wear over the jeans she could no longer button, despite my sister’s nudging her toward honeysuckle-printed smocks, the kind that tie in the back just under your bra and make you look like a human cupcake. Her suspicions of subterfuge were confirmed when the mother suddenly changed her mind a few weeks later and reunited with the baby’s father, a jailed white supremacist.

My sister had already laid fluffy carpet in the small upstairs room and hung paper maché airplanes and cotton ball clouds from the ceiling with thumbtacks and fishing line. Already they were looking into a bigger house, hopeful that they could fill it with more adopted babies whose toes they could dangle above the new sod of their larger and larger backyards. I cried with her into the phone; I sobbed the only questions I could, asking for the sort of tragic details that make no difference and which I didn’t really care about the answers to; “Did she call you? What did she say? How could she do this?” To hear her crumpled like this was a pain I couldn’t have conjured; it emptied me. I couldn’t hang up even when she asked me to. Instead I paced in circles wide as the curled phone cord would allow. I held my breath, twisted the handles of my bag of cherries harder and harder until dark rings formed on my wrist. That night I sat at the kitchen table and carved out the cherry pits one by one with a twisted open paper clip until my palms turned blue/black/red, emptying the stones into the garbage pail in a rush of tiny wooden hail. I planned to make a pie but in only a few days the cherries turned into a sickly sweet mountain of



“I need some attention. I just need to think up a stupidly divisive issue to drive mothers crazy.”

mush that I threw out the window into the hedges below.

I am reminded of this phone call, of that that dark red juice and rustling white plastic, the night I leave the bathroom in my circle skirt in the middle of a prayer recitation. I think of her when I sit on a chair with toilet paper stuffed between my crossed legs, the upper one shaking back and forth so hard I’m sure at any moment my shoe is going to fly off and hit someone in the head. The panic is palpable, but by the time we get to the hospital they slow me down by issuing reassurances about heartbeats and twelfth weeks, reminding me over and over again to breathe. When you check into the emergency

room because you’re having a miscarriage people keep telling you to breathe, as if that would help anything. Just like people from California will respond to almost any physical complaint—headaches, cramps, fatigue—by telling you to drink more water, hospital staff are forever reminding you to breathe, as if you were going to forget how, as if you could actually slow down the processes taking place inside you, the ones you never consented to in the first place. If breathing is all it took, there would be babies for anyone who wanted them; you’d be able to pick them like cherries. These thoughts rush through my head as I change into a crunching paper gown but I don’t speak them out loud.

My husband calls my best friend and he brings a deck of cards; we have been teaching ourselves poker. I like the clack and thwap of the deck, the melding of numbers and faces in black and white and red, the square patterned piles.

"Some women bleed during pregnancy and everything is fine," says a nurse at the door with a blanket. "It's not a good sign but it's not the worst sign."

I want to ask what the worst sign would be, but of course I don't. When they wheel me in for the scan, they don't let my husband come in with me; no one is allowed in, the technician, who is wearing squishy pink clogs like rubber erasers on her feet, explains, and she cannot report on anything that she sees either; she is not a doctor, and all she does is record the images. She uses what is probably her best attempt at a soothing voice as she spreads clear jelly lubricant onto the plastic dildo she'll slide inside me to begin shooting her independent film about my uterus. Of course, I clench against the intrusion, my legs shaking so hard again I'm sure I'm going to bruise her arm between my thighs. I want to believe her silence is professional but I can't help thinking that if she did see something, she wouldn't be able to resist a whisper:

Look, little mommy, she might begin. See that, right there? I'm not supposed to say anything because I'm not a doctor, but do you see it? That's a heartbeat. Everything is going to be fine. Close your eyes and rest now.

Instead she instructs me to focus on the ceiling and take deep breaths. My skirt is crumpled onto the plastic chair in the corner of the room, my wrinkled black tights wrapped around it like an asp. I feel something inside me widen and curl into its own absence like a cloud in the shape of a fist. When she pulls out the ultrasound wand, it makes a moist sucking sound and my eyes close shut against the metal air and finally I

can breathe and right then I know it's over; for this time, at least, all of it is over.

Afterwards, strung out with grief, I collect miscarriage stories from everyone I can and hoard my Internet statistics tight to my chest like mantras of digital faith: occurrence rates of one in every six pregnancies, eighty-five percent conception rates after one loss, fifty to seventy percent in the first trimester due to unavoidable chromosomal error. I stare at the stock images of men and women on infertility webpages, studying how they lean into each other on suede couches or walk hand-in-hand in wrinkled linen on a beach. The women's eyebrows arch like lopsided frowns; the men sport biceps the size of small skulls. My sister tells me that I should be happy I at least got "this far," and I know she means it. I want to hear that my mother has lost a baby but she hasn't, not ever. Still, she sends me a bouquet of flowers with a small card upon which someone from the florist shop has scrawled the word "Sorry." The handwriting is large, pointy and right-leaning, utterly unlike my mother's tight round cursive. I only know they're from her because it says so on the yellow receipt I sign at the door.

It takes almost three more years for me to carry a baby to term. The near-constant bleeding after childbirth reminds me of that night and elicits the same jagged-glass feeling of short breath mixed with the smell of waxed hospital floors. This blood is different, of course. Called *lochia*, it's a combination of blood and uterine tissue, and it can last up to six weeks. Two months after the birth of my son and there is still some blood. I am just beginning to feel better. The C-section stitches are gone, flicked out by the OB/GYN nurse with a device that reminds me of something from the summer camp Arts and Crafts table. It still hurts when I move too quickly or walk too far, but my postpartum panic

has begun to lift. Jack smiles now, and I no longer feel that at any moment I will drop him on his head or accidentally starve him to death. I still get a racing heartbeat feeling every day around dusk when I sense the world outside of my room adapting to a cyclical rhythm of rest and activity that round-the-clock breastfeeding denies me. I have not yet been able to open my laptop and instead watch hour after hour of daytime talk shows in a white cotton eyelet nightgown with the top three buttons broken off. I rarely answer the phone during the day because if I have the chance to answer the phone that means that I have a few minutes to myself and if I have a few minutes to myself I would rather chase sleep like a feverish lover, Jack curled under my neck like an eleven pound cashew.

My family, on the other side of the country, are getting impatient with my not returning their calls fast enough. They want more pictures, more updates. They don't seem to understand how a person could be simultaneously so exhausted yet so frenzied, that I can be so in love with this baby yet want so badly to run away as fast as I can. When I describe the constant feedings, my sister says, "But you just have to sit there, right?" and my mother tells me that I would feel much better if I put the baby down with a bottle and let him cry until he falls asleep in order that he not learn how to take advantage of me as he is clearly so intent upon doing. My sister wants me to fly out at Christmas. I hear her longing and am unable to communicate how some days I cannot imagine how I will be able to both take a shower and brush my teeth, let alone board an airplane. My father, after the collapse of his second marriage, has moved only three hours away and wants to visit as soon as possible. He has four children and has never changed a diaper, yet everyone knows that after you have

a baby, family members are supposed to come over and help you. This is all any of us have to go on: We know what families are supposed to do. Even if our family has never really done what it is supposed to do, still we know the way things should be done.

But this time when the phone rings, I answer it, to my sister's voice. Laura says "Jenny? Where are you?" and I see each word as she says it; I even see the space between each word; they stand straight up like winter branches grown out of the bottom of a pond. She demands I hand the phone to my husband, and I do, because she is ten years older than me and it's second nature for me to do what she tells me, especially when I don't think about it for too long first. He whispers "Jesus," and then "Okay," and raises his hand up to the back of his neck, and with his other hand he turns the mouthpiece of the phone upside down against his thigh and tells me to sit down. He trades me the baby for the phone and cups the Jack's head as he carries him to the opposite corner of the room so that the two of them are diagonally across from where I sit perched on my crumpled bed-nest.

"Jenny?" my big sister says again. "Are you listening to me?"

I don't understand why she is asking me that, but I say yes:

"Mom died," Laura says.

"No she didn't," I say.

The words come out before I can think them. There's a sound of ringing in my ears like I'm on an airplane.

"Listen to me. She had a heart attack and the neighbors found her in the entryway this morning when she didn't go out to pick up her paper."

I know she is trying to inure me against denial through detail and a matter-of-fact tone but then I hear her hiccup and moan and hand the phone to my brother-in-law, because even for her this is too hard. Then she remembers

the daughter she made herself into for my mother in the first place, and I can almost see her yanking the phone back though I can't really see her doing anything.

"Jenny?" she says again. "She's dead. She's really dead."

"No she isn't," I cry. "You're making this up. She isn't."

I am five years old on the playground asphalt and I can keep up this "is/isn't" game for hours. I can float into the canyon. I can shut my eyes. I can go to my room and draw and cry or read a hundred books. Only now somehow I have come off the bed; I am kneeling at the side of the bed and I have slid my hand between the mattress and the box spring where I hold on with the nails of my right hand as if I might float away.

The baby gurgles and my husband rocks him from side to side but I sense none of this. I stare hard into the puffy smocked pattern on the mattress like a flight pattern across clouds. We are on an airplane, I decide, a paper maché airplane hanging from the ceiling in a not-yet-baby's-room. When we land we will buy coral lipstick and birth control and drive to the beach. My father is here too, and he's gotten the stewardess's phone number. She wears a hot pink dress that ties in the back and after she freshens my mother's drink, she saves me an ice cube and draws down the shade so she can rest. My sister is in the seat in front of me. I tap her on the shoulder.

Look little mommy, I say, pointing at the grid of earth below us. Look, you can't see them clearly from up here but see all those houses on the ground? There are so many houses there, all the houses you could wish for and they are full of babies inside. I'll sit still as a doorbell and I'll hold my breath and I won't hang up the phone until you find the best one.

The cell phone pressed between my shoulder and my ear is thinner than a

deck of cards. I can't say how I actually hung up the phone that evening, or how I got up off the floor, or even how I made my way down the stairs and into the end of things. But some things I can tell you: My son's eyes will stay the same matte blue they were when he was first born, though everyone told me they'd change. My husband and I will split up in two years and my mother's ashes will arrive, mislabeled, at my next-door neighbor's house long before this happens. I will always miss my sister though she doesn't go anywhere. I will always want my mother because she has. My son, who wrings my heart out every day, rubs his earlobe with the first two fingers of his right hand while he sucks the thumb of his left one. I want to whisper into his seashell ears that our lives make curving flight patterns like circles, or eggs, or the bends of a canyon road as it empties into the beach below: *You can't even see the patterns from this high up, but trust me, little baby, there's plenty of room to land.*

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This essay was originally composed for a graduate seminar on Creative Nonfiction I was lucky enough to be a part of in the Spring of 2011. I had wanted to write about the experience of miscarriage from a pro-choice feminist perspective, but the essay had other ideas and wanted to be about my complicated relationship to my older sister, and later, my mother, who quite unexpectedly died before she was able to meet my first and only child. The piece, also, I think/hope explores how emotional trauma both connects us to the present and takes us away from it in the same (sometimes held) breath.