

Mister Sandman

A Novel



BARBARA GOWDY



HARPER COLLINS E-BOOKS

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 HarperCollins e-books

For Christopher Dewdney

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Joan Canary was the Reincarnation Baby. Big news at the time, at least in the Vancouver papers. This is going back, 1956. Joan was that newborn who supposedly screamed, “Oh no, not again!” at a pitch so shrill that one of the old women attending the birth clawed out her hearing aid. The other old woman fainted. She was the one who grabbed the umbilical cord and pulled Joan head-first onto the floor.

Joan’s mother, Doris Canary, attributed everything to the brain damage. Joan’s inability to talk it goes without saying, but also her reclusiveness, her sensitivity to light, her size, her colouring ... you name it. Joan’s real mother, Sonja Canary, attributed everything to Joan’s past-life experiences. Sonja was *there* for Joan’s famous first cry, and it’s true she had thought it was one of the old women screaming, “Flo! Flo! She’s insane!” but that didn’t make any sense because the woman who could have screamed it had throat cancer. If Joan was either braindamaged or reincarnated, Sonja preferred reincarnated. She would, being the real mother.

To be fair, though, there was something unearthly about Joan. She was born with those pale green eyes, and the hair on her head, when it finally grew in, was like milkweed tufts. That fine, that white. And look how tiny she was! Nobody in the family was tiny. Nobody in the family was anything like her, her real parents least of all. Sonja was fat, and had dark brown corkscrew hair and brown eyes. The real father was an orange-haired giant, eyes a flourescent creamy blue like seat-cover plastic. He had remarkably white skin, and Joan did, too, but without the freckles, pimples and hair. Flawless. Joan was flawless. Another way of saying not like any of them. Sonja, of course, went further, she said that Joan was not of this world and it drove Doris Canary crazy. Baloney! Doris said. Brain-damaged, brain-damaged, brain-damaged! she said. Face it. Ask the neurologists.

Doris even told strangers that Joan was brain-damaged. Her husband, Gordon, never publicly contradicted her but he winced and sighed. “It’s the truth,” Doris would say then, and if normally she wasn’t a brazen liar. As if Gordon had ever agreed with the brain-damaged diagnosis let alone that you could point to anything and call it the truth. “The truth is only a version” was one of his maxims.

(Which Sonja heard as “The truth is only aversion” and, although she had no idea what it meant, automatically quoted whenever the subject of truth was raised.)

Gordon and Doris were Sonja's parents. They had one other child—Marcy—who had left for kindergarten that June first morning in 1956 when Sonja vomited into her cereal bowl.

"We'll say *I'm* the one who's having it," Doris announced once the cards were on the table, these being that Sonja had missed three menstrual periods, that she had been bringing up to the toilet for weeks, that the young man she'd had intercourse with was someone she'd never known only for an hour, that what this young man had told her to call him was Yours, and that "Try the slammer" was the superintendent's suggestion when, a week ago, she'd gone to his apartment hoping to find him.

"We'll say it's mine and Dad's," Doris said. "When you have a baby at our age it's referred to as an afterthought."

By now Sonja was sucking her fingers and sitting on Doris's lap, and Doris was patting Sonja's belly and feeling like the biggest Babushka doll in a nest of dolls within dolls, although she and Sonja were both the same height—five-foot-two—and tomorrow, at the doctor's, they'd find out that they now weighed the same, as well—153 pounds.

(The doctor would be chosen randomly out of the phone book for the sake of secrecy. He would keep mixing Sonja and Doris up, that was how alike the two of them were. Small, flat featured faces like faces painted on balloons. Dark, curly hair. For the appointment they would hide behind sunglasses, and since only Sonja would remove hers the doctor would assume, wrongly, that her dopey expression was inherited. He'd assume that they were both putting him on—Sonja acting dumber and more innocent than she was, Doris pretending to be overjoyed—and he'd be wrong again. They were putting him on, all right. Sonja was fifteen, not nineteen, and there was no husband overseas. But Sonja *was* innocent. In all of those fifteen years, maybe ten minutes had been devoted to thinking about sex and another minute or so to having it. And, no, Doris wasn't overjoyed, but that was how she always sounded. Thrilled, bursting with news that would knock your socks off.)

Even that morning at the breakfast table, if you didn't know Doris you'd think that having a daughter pregnant out of wedlock was her dream come true. In her breathy little-girl voice she said that as soon as Sonja was out of school, the end of the month, the two of them would go stay with Aunt Mildred in Vancouver until after the baby was born.

"She's starting to lose her marbles," Doris said about Aunt Mildred. "She'll hardly know we're there. We'll tell everyone here she's on her last legs and needs us, her only living relatives, to look after her, and we'll just keep stringing that out." She clapped her hands once. "Play it by ear!"

"Okay," Sonja said dreamily.

Gordon went along, too. Out of being stunned, out of no choice. He stood just inside the kitchen doorway (he'd been about to leave for work, he had his coat and hat on) and kept reaching up and touching the ceiling to reassure himself that he still could, although being a stringbean wasn't something that normally heartened him. At the part when Doris said they would tell people the baby was theirs, "Now hold on" came out of his mouth, and Doris

waited, but he was a desperado pretending that the finger in his trench-coat pocket was gun. Abortion, adoption ... he couldn't even say the words.

This was his daughter.

Their other daughter they would keep in the dark. Doris pointed out that you couldn't expect a six-year-old to hold in a secret as big as this one. Marcy would stay in Toronto with Gordon, and Doris would hire somebody to babysit her after school.

"Can we afford all this?" Gordon asked when Sonja was out of the room. Doris was the one who banked his salary and handled the bills.

"Sweetie, you just leave it to me," she said, her tone even more thrilled and hush-hush than usual so that he allowed himself to envision a secret nest egg, whereas all they had was a huge long shot, something like a five-hundred-to-one chance that she would be crowned queen.

Any day now she should hear. It was pure luck she saw the ad. She'd been unwrapping frozen chicken livers from a newspaper and had spotted the words "To All Ladies in Dire Straits."

"Are you wrestling with severe money difficulties?" the ad had gone on. "Caring for ailing loved ones? Recently widowed? Are you doing everything in your power to improve your circumstances but still can't seem to get out from under?" And then it had said that if this was you, you might be eligible to win thousands of dollars worth of fantastic prizes by appearing on ABC-TV's *Queen for a Day* show, which was holding auditions at the Royal York Hotel—the very afternoon, as it happened.

The minute Gordon and the girls were out the door Doris phoned a neighbour to come home at noon and fix Marcy's lunch, then she put on her frowziest house dress and rifled through Marcy's box of dress-up clothes for an old purse, cracked high heels, that fake fur stole and the tatty purple turban, her plan being to carry these in a bag and change into them at the restaurant washroom near the hotel. On the subway she hatched her sob story. She'd never actually watched *Queen for a Day* but she knew about it. Housewife contestants took turns describing their miserable lives, after which the studio audience decided who was the most miserable and that's who won. It was such a tasteless idea that Doris had always figured that the contestants were actresses. Or so she told herself until she arrived at the Royal York and walked down the line-up of mangy women, and either they were world-class impostors or every one of them, or she shouldn't be there.

She joined the line anyway. A long wait on hot pavement during which she thought of the men on the *Titanic* who had dressed up in turbans and fake stoles and too-small pointy high heels, and what she wanted to know was, how many of them had been responsible citizens with another baby on the way? Answer her *that*. In her head the buoyant refrain of the *Titanic* song screamed—*It was sad, so sad, oh, it was sad, so sad...*

For virtually any occasion Doris knew a song that went with it, or at least she knew the first verse, and she sang it to herself—involuntarily, ceaselessly—until the occasion changed at which point another song usually took over. This was just background, like a radio playing or her own footsteps, but today it was as if she had crossed wires with Ethel Merman. On the subway *Clang, clang, clang went the trolley, ding, ding, ding went the bell* had blared the who

way. Now that her feet were really starting to hurt *It was sad, so sad* was blending into an ear-splitting “Your Feets Too Big.” *Oh, it was sad, so sad that your feets too big.* And, boy, her feet really *were* killing her. By the time she was finally ushered into the room where they were doing the interviewing, her stagger was no act.

A fast-talking, sweat-soaked man in shirtsleeves paced in front of the chair where she was told to sit. “Do you work, Belle?” the man asked. (Doris had given her name as Belle Ladovsky.)

“Twelve-hour shifts in a beanery,” Doris said, putting on the vaguely East European accent she had cultivated years ago to audition for the Yiddish niece in a play. “Nothing but bean soup do I eat.” This to suggest that her round figure was from bloating rather than three square meals a day. “The doctor—“

“How’d your husband die?” the man cut in.

Doris hadn’t even mentioned a husband yet. A heart attack, she almost said, since when with his heart murmur that was how she had always pictured Gordon going. She had a better idea. “In Korea,” she said. “Killed in action.” She thought of the saddest thing she could think of which was going on seven years since Gordon had made love to her, and her eyes filled.

“How many kids?”

“Eight.”

“Any of them sick, deformed?”

“My twins, they are cripples. When my husband died—“

The man stopped pacing. “You mean with crutches?”

“Oh, yes. Crutches, yes.”

“So you’re saying that those kids could do with a couple of top-of-the-line wheelchairs.”

“Yes, of course,” Doris said, immediately catching his drift. “But, oy, who can afford—“

“What’ll get you on your feet, Belle?”

“Maybe pots and pans,” Doris suggested. As she understood it, the queen always won a stupendously expanded version of the humble thing she asked for, plus, the humbler things that thing was, the more fur coats and appliances were heaped on her.

“A few measly pots and pans,” the man said.

“Then one day, God villing, I open my own beanery.”

The telegram arrived June fourth, the Monday after they found out that Sonja was pregnant. It said that Belle Ladovsky was one of three lucky audition winners from the Toronto-Buffalo area and would be flown down to New York City on June twelfth for a June thirteenth taping.

All day Doris worked on a story to tell Gordon, but seeing as the only times in eighteen years she’d been away from home overnight were when she was in the hospital giving birth, everything she came up with made it sound as if she were having an affair. Eventually she decided she’d have to resort to the truth. She waited until evening, until after the girls had gone to bed, and then she put on the outfit—the stole, the turban, the dress and shoes, plus

pair of Gordon's old glasses for extra disguise—and went into the living room where Gordon was sitting on the chesterfield, reading a manuscript. She had the audition ad and the telegram as well as the Dutch Masters cigar box that she kept the overdue bills in. Without a word she handed him the ad and when he'd read it she gave him the telegram.

"I take it you're Belle Ladovsky," he said.

She emptied the box onto the coffee table. "I was hoping to spare you this," she said about the bills.

He studied each one, flattening it first under his jumbo hand, unbending folded corners. Because she was wearing his old glasses she couldn't make out which bill he was looking at but a few of them, like the ones for Sonja's and Marcy's pink bunny-fur muffs, were extravagances, she knew that. *China man, he had a wife, led him such a miserable life* the lyrics in her head went. Why didn't Gordon say something? "Say something," she said to the hunched-over blur of him, feeling as though she were addressing a man in a dream or through frosted glass. Or through time ... the unsung clerk. The bowbacked, myopic, genius book editor, unappreciated by everyone except for her and a few alcoholic has-been writers whose stacks of unpublishable manuscripts were her footstools and bedside tables.

He didn't speak. He held a bill closer to the light.

"Nobody vill recoknice me in dis get-up," she said, sitting beside him.

He shook his head, at her or the bill there was no telling.

"I'm promisink hew."

When he was done he neatly piled the bills and returned them to the cigar box. "I had n idea," he said into his hands.

"Heck, it's not that bad," she said. "Eleven months out of twelve, I can manage just fine."

"Now this baby—"

"Okay, we need a miracle, and hallelujah!"

Gordon looked at her. Then he looked her up and down as if he had only just registered what she had on. "Jesus, Doris," he whispered.

"Listen to me." She took his hand. Kissed his mountainous knuckles. "Sweetie," she said, her voice trembling with righteous fervour. "I'm a shoo-in."

She was. She got to be the third contestant, a lucky break because it allowed her to top the agony of the other two. The first contestant was an arthritic cleaning woman with nine kids and a bed-ridden husband. Then there was a wall-eyed pea sheller whose husband had ditched her for a good-time girl. Neither of them knew how to build a story let alone how to play to an audience. But you should have seen Doris. When she sobbed, "I am so ashamed to be a beggink," two fatsos in the front row sobbed along with her. Before the applause meter had even confirmed it she knew she'd clinched the crown. Her winnings included two full-length fur coats (one sable, one mink), two wheelchairs, a colour television, a twenty-piece set of pots and pans, an electric range and a year's supply of beans. Back in Toronto her explanation to neighbours was that she had entered a draw and what do you know?

She sold the fur coats back to the dealer who'd sold them to the show. Just the money from them alone paid off their debts with enough left over for fibreglass living-room drapes—pe

green, shot with what Doris told the girls was real silver—and (here's why Gordon couldn't muster enough annoyance to even shake his head at that lie) a convertible. Baby blue, brand new, their first new car and not one he'd have dreamed of buying if they hadn't hit the jackpot and she hadn't haggled the price down by trading in the beans and wheelchairs.

On the drizzly morning that she and Sonja left for Vancouver, Gordon picked up the car from the dealer's, and so the first family outing was the drive to the train station. To everybody's disappointment the weather obliged them to leave the top up.

"We wouldn't want to ruin the *regally luxuriant, stylishly elegant upholstery*," Doris said in her tone of confidential exhilaration. She was reading from the sales brochure.

"You see the road but never feel it," she read, twisting around to the girls in the back seat. "This car has glamour plus." She batted her mascaraed eyelashes.

She wasn't one to get "all dolled up," as she put it, but for the train ride she was wearing fire-engine-red lipstick, moss green eye shadow, mascara and a smudge of rouge on each cheek. To the girls her face looked like a movie star's. To Gordon it looked like a clown's, not that he let on. He loved her a great deal, protectively and sheepishly. "What do you think of my new hat?" she'd asked that morning, and he'd said, "Very smart," although it was ridiculously tiny, like a chimpanzee's hat, and her hair springing out from under it made her head look detonated.

She had sewn on an elastic chin strap to keep the hat from blowing off. As she read from the brochure the strap gave the girls the funny impression that her jaw was hinged, like a marionette's. They laughed at her into their hands. "It's a supreme joy and a thrill and a blessing," Doris read, and the girls giggled into the white cotton gloves they were both wearing.

"And," Doris read, "it's all yours!"

Yours being the baby's father's name, Sonja swallowed hard before laughing. She wasn't quite free of him yet but would be once she was on the train. A few weeks from now she would get a postcard signed "Yours, Dad" and all she'd swallow over was that he hadn't signed "Love."

(It wouldn't be signed love because Gordon would be feeling unworthy of using the word. He would still be a wreck from having received, the day before, a consolation card. Sent by a man named Al Yothers. The picture on the front of the card would be a cartoon of a squirrel and inside it would say, "Hope all your troubles will soon be nuttin'." There would be no message, only "A.Y." encircled in a heart. Marcy would see it—she would come into the kitchen while he was still staring at it—and she would ask if it was from her mother or her sister. Because her hopeful, lovelorn face would be slaying him he'd answer yes. He'd say "It's for you," and then have to account for the A.Y. "All yours," he'd come up with. "A.Y. means all yours," he'd say, and she'd think a minute and say, "Like the convertible!" which would first bewilder and then grieve him, since by that time the car would be scrap metal.)

That day, the day Sonja and Doris left for Vancouver, the car didn't have a scratch and cruised along as smoothly and quietly as a car sailing off a cliff.

Doris had splurged on a sleeping cabin. There was a sink, toilet and what was supposed to be

a double bed but turned out to be more like a good-sized single.

“Let’s see how the springs hold up anyways,” she said, and with the old Negro porter right there she climbed on and started jumping in her high heels, then bounced onto her back and thought it was a scream when her dress billowed up and the porter saw her garters.

That was the first sign of the new her. Up until then she had been a woman who flushed when the doctor pressed the stethoscope against her breast and who, once she was in a chair, preferred to stay put. Try telling that to the people who were on the train. On that train she couldn’t even sit through a meal. Ten times she’d get up to stretch her legs, visit the ladies’ room, cuddle somebody’s squalling baby, yank the baby out of the mother’s arms and stridle with it like a mad sentry, up and down, up and down, almost running. At night in bed she was still so keyed up that Sonja had to wrap her arms around her to keep her from thrashing.

Sonja was the opposite—so relaxed on that trip she couldn’t detect her own pulse. Every morning she squeezed herself into a lounge chair in the observation car and more or less stayed put, snoozing, eating Animal Crackers and Tootsie Roll Pops from the snack counter, reading her Nancy Drew book, looking out the window. Off and on she pressed her hand over her heart to try to feel her heartbeat while under her new Miss Chubette dress with its Peter Pan collar and daisy-shaped buttons her baby’s cells multiplied.

Now that her morning sickness was over and nobody had seemed to notice that her stomach was swelling, she didn’t think about the baby too much apart from something so precious that she was temporarily in charge of, as when you’re the one with the tickets or the money. For the most part she felt nothing but cosy and puffy. She felt like an angel food cake. Her only distress, and it was a very slight one, arose at either of these two thoughts: that Marcy would forget to feed her hamster, Sniffers, and that, because she’d already missed too many lessons to ever get back into Miss Gore’s tap class, her dancing days were over. Her ultimate view on both prospects was, Oh well.

Sometimes Doris perched on the seat beside her to see how she was doing, and Sonja curled up with her fingers in her mouth and her head on her mother’s lap and let herself be lulled by the rhythm of her mother’s breakneck chatter, its pleasing accompaniment to the rhythm of the train. Frankly, she didn’t actually hear much of what Doris was going on about.

One morning, though, the third morning, she had her head in Doris’s lap and Doris said, “wonder what the heck’s gotten into me?” and Sonja heard that.

“What, Mommy?” Sonja asked.

“Sweetie, you tell me and we’ll both know.” She knocked both her fists on Sonja’s skull absently and too hard, but as Sonja usually had to see blood before it occurred to her that she’d hurt, she didn’t mind.

“You’re still excited about winning the draw,” Sonja suggested.

“Well, that’s the truth,” Doris said.

“The truth is only aversion,” Sonja reminded her.

“I feel like I’ve eaten Mexican jumping beans,” Doris said. She laughed, her new high-speed hyena laugh. “Brother, listen to me go.”

She was panting.

Joan was born on Friday, November thirtieth, 1956, at around one-thirty p.m. Pacific time in the basement guest room of Dearness Old Folks' Home. The same room that, two years earlier, a seventy-year-old woman named Alice Gunn wrote backwards in the window grime *ROT IN HELL* then choked herself to death with her rubber restraining belt.

"Callous Alice" the newspapers called her in their features about Joan, because that old tragedy was dredged up and tied in to the reincarnation story. A week after Joan's birth, before which time both Doris and Sonja thought it was safe to leave her on her own for a few minutes, a reporter sneaked into the room and took her picture and then drove to White Rock and showed the snapshot to Alice's ninety-seven-year-old mother, who after Alice's death had changed old folks' homes.

"That's Ali, all right," Alice's mother was quoted as saying. "I'd know those bug eyes anywhere." She said, "Tell her new mother I'm still paying monthly instalments on the headstone, if she'd care to pitch in."

Not just Doris and Sonja but everyone at Dearness took exception to the bug-eyes crack. Everyone at Dearness was bowled over by Joan's beauty, even the old men were. Men who found the soup-spoons too heavy asked to hold her. One man believed that Joan was the reincarnation of his first wife, Lila, who in a recent seance had talked of returning to earth for "another go-round." When Joan started making that odd clicking sound she sometimes did, he said, "Yep, hear that? Those are her teeth, those are her new uppers," resting his case. "Well, Lila!" he said, propping Joan astride his scrawny knee, "I took the nervous breakdown, expect you heard."

Even Aunt Mildred was under Joan's spell, and she was the one who'd predicted that Joan would be a midget or a dwarf, "something deformed and bunched-up like" because of the tucked-in, round-shouldered way Sonja had carried herself when she was pregnant.

Aunt Mildred had gone downhill a lot further than Doris had realized. On the phone back in June she'd said come on out, failing to mention not only her throat cancer but also that she had lost her house to creditors and was moving into an old folks' home just a week before Doris and Sonja were due to arrive.

"For crying out loud, why didn't you tell us?" Doris said when they finally located her after a morning of taking taxis all over Vancouver.

"Give me the name again?" Aunt Mildred rasped.

"Doris! Gordon's wife!"

Aunt Mildred shook her head. "Doesn't ring a bell, honey."

Doris decided they might as well stay at Dearness anyway, might as well move into the basement guest apartment for the time being since it was dirt cheap and included meals. She booked it for the maximum allowable duration of two weeks, signing in both herself and Sonja under fake last names (and when the reincarnation story hit the headlines was she glad she had!). That same day she found a cottage for them to live in when the two weeks were up, but four days before they were supposed to go there she fell in love with a nurse named

Harmony La Londe. Unhinged by this voodoo rapture and by the thought of Harmony being out of her sight for more than a few hours, she staged a little drama in Dearness's office. She pretended to telephone Gordon, then over the dial tone pretended to be hearing that he had been fired from his job and there would be no money for her and Sonja's return train fare for not for many months. She hung up slowly. She sat there blinking, one hand over her mouth. She allowed the woman who owned Dearness to pry the news out of her and she said, with dignity, "I'm very grateful," when the woman said, "You and your daughter stay right here for as long as you need to."

"You are a liar," Harmony La Londe said upon hearing this story. She sounded nothing but charmed. She found Doris exotic, if you can believe it. When all she knew about Doris was that Doris was a housewife from Toronto who had tried to swing on the hot-water pipes, she said, "Are you exotic or what?" This from a lesbian Negro career woman who wore se through negligées and had painted her apartment to match her parrot.

On the ceiling of the basement corridor the water pipes were rung like monkey bars, and early one morning when Doris was on her way to the lounge for coffee she saw that a ladder had been left propped against the wall next to the stairwell. Out of pure high energy and without thinking, she climbed the ladder and reached for the nearest pipe. Harmony heard the yelp. "Are you all right?" she called from her door.

"I had a little accident!" Doris said, scuttling down the ladder.

Harmony hurried toward her. She was wearing a red chiffon negligée, she looked on fire. Doris extended her hand and there were two pink slashes—one across her fingers, one across her palm. "Better get that under cold water," Harmony said.

As Dearness's head nurse, Harmony lived rent free in what had once been a second guest apartment. Doris followed her down the hall. "Ow, ow," she said, graduating to "Wow" when she walked through Harmony's door. The layout was the same as Doris and Sonja's apartment but the walls were painted a brilliant lime green, and instead of Venetian blinds there were drapes, orange with a black dust-web pattern. In the centre of the room, in a glittery cage that hung like a chandelier from the ceiling, a parrot squawked and flapped around.

"That's Giselle," Harmony said. "She's the jealous type."

The bathroom was sunny yellow. Harmony turned on the tap and took hold of Doris's wrist to direct her hand under the water. As if Doris were a child. No, as if she were an old lady. Doris realized. But Harmony was the older one here. In her short, slicked-back hair (Doris presumed she'd had it straightened) were single white strands like cracks. Not a line on her face, but ancient eyes and furrowed bony hands that made Doris's plump white hands look like they belonged to a lady of leisure.

"That better?" Harmony asked.

"I'll say. Listen, I hope I didn't wake you."

"Oh, no, no, it's my day off. I was just lounging around." She turned off the tap, then dabbed Doris's hand with the corner of an orange towel. "What were you doing, anyway?"

Doris told her.

Harmony laughed. "You crazy?"

“Sometimes I wonder.”

“You really wanted to swing on the pipes?” She had stepped out into the hall and opened the closet there. Doris saw shelves crammed with bottles and vials, medicines, bandages.

“Good thing I didn’t, eh?” Doris said. “I’d have brought down the whole plumbing system.”

Harmony took a tube of salve from the back of one of the shelves. “Mrs.—“

“Oh, call me Doris.”

“Doris.” She turned and planted a fist on her hip. “Are you exotic, or what?”

“Me?”

Doris wasn’t aware that she had been avoiding glancing at the negligée until she glanced at it. She only wanted to give it an exaggerated once-over, as if to say, You’re the exotic one around here! But the light coming from the living room had made the chiffon transparent and so what Doris found herself looking at was her first naked woman. The high, conical breasts, the darkness of the nipples, the darkness at the crotch and the long thighs pouring down. She stared, all right. For how long? (“Long enough,” Harmony said later.) Say, fifteen seconds. Dead seconds, so evacuated of everything except for Harmony’s body that staring seemed natural to Doris, a serenely clinical act, a polite one even, until the bird started squawking, “Giselle! Giselle!”

“Yes, you,” Harmony said then. Quietly. She stepped back into the bathroom and took hold of Doris’s wrist again to apply the salve.

“God, God, God,” Doris thought. She felt faint from embarrassment. Her vision blurred. Now what? Don’t tell her she was going to cry!

“There you go,” Harmony said.

Doris whispered, “Thanks.” Okay, it was over.

No, it wasn’t. Harmony still held her wrist. Doris looked at both their hands, hers the most helpless thing she had ever seen. She watched Harmony lift it like food to her mouth.

“A kiss to make it better,” Harmony said before her lips touched down.

Five months later, ten days late, Sonja’s water broke. It was Friday, early afternoon, and the Jolly Kitchenaires—the little band of wheelchair-bound ladies who met after lunch in the dining room to bang cutlery on cookware and belt out show tunes—were working on “I’m Just a Girl Who Can’t Say No.” You could hear them all the way down in the basement, that’s how loud they were. Happily, languidly, Sonja was pencilling loops in a notebook, eating licorice Allsorts and trying to balance her grammar book on her head while, sitting next to her at the card table, her starry-eyed little tutor, Miss Florence Butson, cooed encouragement. (It turns out that a retired teacher of penmanship and deportment isn’t the same thing as a retired teacher of English after all, but at a nursing home you take what you can get in the way of tutors was how Sonja and Doris were looking at it.)

Doris wasn’t in the apartment that afternoon. She was hardly ever there, being too full of pep to just sit, she said, and when she did fly in, by then Sonja was usually asleep. But Sonja was often awakened by her mother’s hands on her belly. First thing in the morning Doris would go for Sonja’s belly again, feeling for the feet and hands, listening to the heartbeat.

through Sonja's navel. In her sleep she sometimes moaned, "Baby ... baby," and Sonja pressed her mother's hand against herself and said, "Right here, Mommy. Feel, Mommy."

Nobody had prepared Sonja for her water breaking, so when she felt the sudden pressure she thought she was dying to go to the bathroom. She came to her feet, forgetting about the book, which slid off her head and onto the floor, right under the downpour.

"Oh, my," said Miss Butson and scraped back her chair.

Sonja waddled in the direction of the bathroom. Halfway there a knifing pain bowed her backwards and she fell hard on her rear end, bringing a table and lamp crashing down with her.

"When a person tries to kiss a girl!" shrilled the Jolly Kitchenaires.

Another pain. Another. Unaccustomed as she was to pain, Sonja wasn't a good screamer and could manage only a few broken whinnies.

"I'm going for a nurse," Miss Butson said, scurrying for the door as it opened and "I can be prissy and quaint!" blared in together with Aunt Mildred.

"What's all the racket?" Aunt Mildred rasped.

"She just fell right over!" Miss Butson said at a hysterical pitch.

"I want my mommy," Sonja whimpered.

"Is she having it?" Aunt Mildred got down on her knees, joints cracking like popcorn. "Let me take a look-see," she said, throwing up Sonja's soaking dress and peering in. "Huh," she said.

"What?" cried Miss Butson.

"Get up," Aunt Mildred ordered Sonja.

Another pain. During its long trajectory Aunt Mildred moved behind her and hooked her hands under the arms. "Well, don't just stand there like a nitwit," she rasped at Miss Butson.

Miss Butson clutched Sonja's hands and tugged, her sweet, milky eyes ogling Sonja with an expression of terror-stricken reassurance. Sonja was no help. Between pains she felt numb from the neck down. She felt like a tiny, melting snowman's head. "Whut you goin' to do when a feller gits flirty?" shrieked the Kitchenaires. Finally Aunt Mildred growled at Miss Butson to get out of the way, then mustering astonishing strength managed to heave Sonja onto the high four-poster bed.

"Now then," she wheezed.

"Is it the baby?" Miss Butson asked, tremulous.

With one quavering hand Aunt Mildred fumbled at her cardigan pocket while regarding Sonja under half-closed, leathery eyelids. She pawed out a cigarette and a book of matches. When she had the cigarette lit she took a deep drag, lips puckering like a draw-string purse. "I'll tell you what you do with left-over mashed potatoes," she said to Miss Butson.

Miss Butson made a whimpering sound.

"What you do is—" She frowned at Miss Butson. "What is it again?"

The next pain produced a dozen little pains that flew like sparks. "Better get her drawn off," Aunt Mildred said. Sonja felt hands scrambling on her belly, and then her underpan

being jerked down her legs. The caressing coils of vein and the crib-like little bones, the coral pink-and-white chamber she had envisioned her baby living in she now envisioned being scraped away by the slow, sinking rotation of a cement-block thing. "Make way," her aunt said, and Sonja felt her mouth opening wider and wider as if obeying or as if pantomiming her other end, but the cry skidded in her throat.

"It's out."

"Oh, my."

"What do you know about that, it just jumped right out."

"Oh, my."

"You got a hold of it there, Flo?"

"Yes, yes I think so ..."

"Let me see," Sonja murmured.

"It's a girl."

"You've got yourself a girl, honey."

"Let me see," Sonja said.

"She's not breathing!"

"You've got to smack her."

"Please," Sonja said.

"Go on, Flo, really whack her one."

"I can't..."

"Give her here."

"Mind your cigarette."

A loud slap, a faint bleat...

Then...

"FLO! FLO! SHE'S INSANE!"

Or was it, "OH! NO! NOT AGAIN!"

Whichever, that famous, disputed scream was loud. Even the Jolly Kitchenaires heard what they agreed among themselves sounded like bad news in the hot-water pipes, likely rupture. Write off that ear-splitting cry as something mechanical or as a hysterical, multiple hallucination and you still have the mystery of why a head-first fall onto the floor didn't kill her let alone cave in or crack her skull. The only visible injury was a bruise to the left of her soft spot, a mauve quarter-sized circle from which radiated a wavy starburst of hair-thin veins so that you had to wonder (or at least Sonja did) if the bruise wasn't transmitting urgent bulletins from the afterlife.

There was the mystery of Doris calling her Joan, being inspired to call her this the first time she held her in her arms although Anne was the name that she and Gordon and Sonja had agreed on for a girl. Not until almost three years later, when Gordon looked up from his crossword puzzle and said, "*Sonja* is an anagram of *Joan's*," did anybody realize that Doris

had unwittingly branded her with her real maternity.

Her beauty was a kind of mystery, not just because it was genetically inexplicable but because it was so seductive. People always say, What a beautiful baby! but here was a baby who inspired adoration even in the blind. At Dearness the blind faltered their hands over her face and limbs and like everyone else compared her to the disadvantage of all other babies including their own. The picture of her that the photographer took to show Callous Alice's mother also appeared in three Vancouver newspapers and generated hundreds of claims that she was the reincarnation of this or that beloved relative, pleas and orders to hand her over.

The newspapers were notified by Aunt Mildred, another curiosity when you consider that her hip broke when she fainted and she had to climb two flights of stairs to get to a phone. Fortunately, by the time the first two reporters showed up, Doris had everything more or less under control. No pictures, she said, no disturbing the mother or the baby, but as she couldn't put a lid on Aunt Mildred, let alone the other residents, all of whom were declaring they had heard something mighty eerie, she left it to them to answer the reporters' questions. Nothing to worry about there. Thanks to her, everyone in the home was under the impression that Sonja's last name was Gorman, that she was nineteen, and that she was the bride of a doctor who had been sent to the British Honduras as part of a U.N. relief effort.

Until the to-do died down, Sonja and the baby should stay put in the guest apartment, Doris decided. She brought them their meals and otherwise took over, and it didn't occur to Sonja to feel anything aside from off the hook. The ache she sometimes felt watching her mother give Joan her bottle she thought was her womb shrinking. "There it goes again," she'd think and feel a reverential affection for the complicated workings of her body. When Joan's whimpers made her breasts leak she went into the bathroom to squeeze the milk into the sink. Formula was better for babies, her mother said, which was just as well in Sonja's view. She couldn't imagine her breasts being sucked by an innocent baby, especially a baby who was supposed to be her sister. Who, for that matter, might still be Callous Alice, although most of the old people who had been willing to entertain that notion had changed their minds. With a few exceptions they now called Joan, Joan.

Everybody bore gifts. Lots of knitwear and blankets, a red and orange hand-quilted blanket from the Negro nurse, which Sonja thought was a bit loud for a baby but which Doris went into raptures over. Some of the residents brought money. One old couple, old pals of Alice's, showed up with a Black Velvet Chocolates box containing twenty-five silver dollars. The couple was one of the few exceptions. "Cold, hard cash, Ali!" the man said with a wink to Joan, and then he started pestering her with questions about the hereafter. "Blink once for yes," he said.

"It's her huge eyes," Doris said one night after the visitors had gone. *Jeepers, creepers, where'd you get those peepers?* she sang, venting the song in her mind. She cleared her throat (and Joan made a similar sound, imitating Doris, you'd swear) and said, "The way they seem to see right through you."

"Maybe they do see right through you," Sonja said. Leaning over her mother's arm, she lightly touched a finger to Joan's bruise, a thing she did from time to time in case she picked up a message. "Ali?" she called softly.

"Cut it out!" Doris said, and then cooed "Sorry" because Joan had flinched. Turning back to

Sonja she whispered, "I've had it up to here with that mumbo jumbo."

And she meant it, even though she herself couldn't shake the feeling that there was something going on with this kid. A few crossed wires from the fall. She'd had two babies she knew the score. A newborn shouldn't be able to focus on you the way Joan did, right across a room, it wasn't supposed to follow you with its eyes like that. Then there was her extreme sensitivity to light and noise, and all those unbaby-like sounds she came out with. The throat-clearing, the droning, the clicking, hissing.

Do you want to know the truth? For a while there, Doris was also looking at Joan and asking, "Ali?" Not out loud, but she was asking it. Later she'd look back and think no wonder. For one thing she didn't know then that Joan was brain-damaged, added to which she herself was hardly in her right mind around the time that Joan was born. Doris was wild ... an out-of-control, madly-in-love nymphomaniac but carrying on as if she wasn't, like a murderer you find out was a clown at children's parties. She was either keyed up or so absent-minded that she felt she went into trances. Take the night she was jiggling Joan to bring on a burp, and Sonja drew her attention to how red Joan's face was turning.

"She looks embarrassed," Sonja chuckled. And only then did Doris realize not only that she was *holding* Joan but that she was shaking the poor kid like a ketchup bottle.

This was when Joan was five weeks old.

This was when Doris and Sonja had the same dream.

It happened on the train ride home. What with all the money from the Dearness crowd Doris had splurged on a cabin again, one with a good-sized double bed this time. It was the second afternoon, and Doris had put Joan in her basket and then she and Sonja decided to have a nap along with her. After a few minutes, because Joan was wide awake, cawing and clicking, they moved her into the bed, and that calmed her down.

They all slept—even Joan, who hardly slept at all, even Doris, who never slept soundly anymore. When Doris opened her eyes about an hour later, Sonja was also blinking awake. At the end of the bed, over the sink, was a big mirror, and for a few minutes in the grey light the two of them lay there looking at each other... their pie-plate faces (identical except that Sonja's was fatter these days), their corkscrew hair smoking out, and the train rocking them in time. And a little farther down, in the space where they had each lifted an arm to make room, Joan's round, bald head like a planet.

Doris, for once, was okay, despite having had a nightmare about Harmony. She smiled, and as if an invisible connection went taut, Sonja's mouth straightened into a smile, too.

"I had the nuttiest dream," Sonja whispered, addressing Doris in the mirror.

"Join the club, Sweetie."

"You know that Negro nurse?"

Doris waited.

"Melody," Sonja said. "You know ..."

"Harmony!" Doris said too vivaciously, too loud. "Harmony!"

"What?"

Doris started pulling a thread from the sleeve of her cardigan. “Her name,” she said, trying to keep a grip on her voice, “is Harmony.”

“Oh, that’s right, Harmony. Well, anyways, I dreamt she was in that play you were when you were an actress. *Julius*... no, *Romeo and Juliet*. She was an old lady and she said ‘I’m falling apart,’ and then she really did. Her arm fell off, and then her foot and her other arm. Then her head.”

In the mirror Doris witnessed herself blanching.

“And then ... And then she changed into a big fish, one of those ... oh, what is it...?”

“A dolphin!” Doris burst out.

“What?”

“She changed into a dolphin!” Doris could hear herself—the crazy, tickled-pink gush of her voice.

“How did you know that?” Sonja asked, turning to look at Doris in the flesh.

Doris held her breath.

“Mommy, how’d you know she changed into a dolphin?”

Doris was unravelling her entire sleeve. “A guess,” she got out in an exhalation.

“Well, jeepers, good guess.” She resumed looking at Doris in the mirror. “Anyways, she was a dolphin but with legs, black legs, and then... then I woke up.”

At which point Joan woke up and turned her head to stare at Doris while making *tsk-tsk* noises, just like scolding, and Doris thought, “It’s *her*,” by which she meant that Joan being between them was how the dream had passed from her to Sonja, or from Sonja to her. Joan had conducted it! And then the even more harrowing possibility struck her that Joan had made the dream up! A dream about Harmony! “She *knows*,” Doris thought, completely spooked, while Sonja, oblivious, touched Joan’s bruise and sang, “Bunny, little bunny,” but Joan was fixed on Doris, her eyes like ponds.

A year before all this, one Thursday afternoon in early November while Gordon is eating a ham sandwich at his desk, an orange-haired giant swaggers into his office. At first sight Gordon is in love, so the young man is ringed in fireworks, but anyone would stop chewing. The office is suddenly doll-housed, and the young man is in it like a dreamer, blinking around, scratching his throat. His throat is alpine. His forearms are clubs fleeced with orange. Orange froths out of the V of his white T-shirt and is greased back in rivulets on his head.

“Knock knock,” the young man says, knocking on Gordon’s bookshelf.

Gordon swallows his food.

“Secretary said go right in,” the young man drawls.

A few hours earlier a guy with a drawl phoned wanting financial backing to write a first-hand account of the stevedore life—“The real *On the Waterfront*.” Gordon told this guy to drop in around noon. “Yes, hello,” he says now, coming to his feet. “Gordon Canary.” He reaches across the desk to shake hands. It doesn’t often happen that he has to look up to look into another man’s eyes.

“Al Yothers,” the young man says, smacking his palm into Gordon’s. “You done with this?” He lets go of Gordon’s hand and picks up the half-empty cup of coffee on the desk.

Gordon gestures. “Uh—“

Al strolls over to the window and takes a sip.

“It’ll be stone cold,” Gordon says.

Al kicks the radiator. “Air blocking the flow.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Air pockets.” He turns the latch on the window and shoves, the muscles of his arm leaping into relief.

“It’s painted shut,” Gordon says. With a sound of splintering it opens. Al tosses out the coffee.

“Hey—“

Al glances at him. Now he’s trying to loosen the screw at the end of the radiator. “No can do,” he says. He sets the cup on the window ledge and withdraws a screwdriver from his back pocket.

Gordon finally gets it. He drops into his chair. “I asked for someone to see about it two weeks ago.”

“You know how they say ‘two weeks’ in England?” Al says. A few turns of the bolt, and a hiss comes out. “Fortnight,” he answers before Gordon can grasp the question.

Gordon waits, but apparently that’s all Al has to say on the subject.

Al squats, retrieving the cup. His thighs are like sandbags but his buttocks are as small as a boy’s. A ripple of spine where his T-shirt rides up. “It’s real backed up,” he says.

Gordon is squatting next to him, saying something. Saying “How does the air get in the

anyway?" or something, meanwhile sliding his hand around Al's waist. No, he's standing, they both standing. Gordon is behind him. He reaches around and unbuckles Al's belt, unzips his fly. grips both sides of the window frame. Two strokes and he's hard and turning. His eyes are close mouth open. The door is closed. Locked. Before going over to him Gordon has shut and locked the door and told Margo to hold his calls. No, he has sent her out for another coffee and sandwich, and to the bank ...

"When was the last time you had this drained?" Al asks, glancing at him.

A split-second too late Gordon looks up. Al's eyes narrow. What amazes Gordon isn't just how far he has let his imagination go, it's the sense of nostalgia that's egging him on, as if some life, and it isn't this one, he has actually danced this dance. By the time Al turns back to the radiator Gordon's legs are trembling so badly the change in his pocket jingles. "Last winter," he says.

Al doesn't speak for a minute. Then he says, "Tell you what, Mr. Canary." A jet of black water shoots into the cup, and he quickly tightens the bolt. "How about I keep this just loose enough so's you can drain it yourself from time to time?" He straightens. Slips the screwdriver into his back pocket.

"All right," Gordon says too eagerly. "Good idea."

Al strolls over and sets the coffee cup back on the desk. There is a dime in Gordon's paper clip saucer, and he picks it up. "This here's your screwdriver," he says, flicking it off the end of his thumb.

Gordon fails to catch it. Laughs. "Right," he says, covering it with his hand where it has landed on a manuscript. "Good idea. Well, yes, certainly, I'll do it myself next time."

"It's a deal," Al says.

His smirk goes straight to Gordon's heart.

Gordon sits like a pillar of salt. A good five minutes go by and then he places both hands flat on his desk and looks around his office. Everything before his eyes he is homesick for. His phone rings and he waits for Margo to pick it up at her end but it rings and rings and with each ring it's as if his chances of saving himself diminish. He reaches for his coffee. He has the cup tipped at his mouth before he realizes that that black stuff isn't dregs. In the same second it hits him that it isn't too late! This affair in the wreckage of which he is staggering, hasn't happened yet!

He stands, goes over to the window and pulls it shut. Cracks his knuckles, paces. Sits back down at his desk and dials home.

"Hello?" Marcy says in her high, expectant child's voice.

"It's Daddy, honey. Is Mommy there?"

"Oh, hi, Daddy. Mommy's outside hanging up the laundry. I'll get her."

"No, no, that's okay. Just tell her I phoned, nothing important." He checks his watch. Twelve-thirty. "Are you eating your lunch?"

"I just finished." She breathes noisily. "You know what?"

"What?" He presses the receiver against his ear. He wants to hear her blood circulating.

“I forgot to say grace”—she’s whispering—“and my sandwich went mouldy.”

“Honey, it would have been mouldy before, and you just didn’t notice.” What the hell were they teaching her at Sunday school?

“No, it *wasn’t* mouldy before!” she cries.

“Okay, all right. Did Mommy make you another sandwich?”

“I ate the mouldy one,” she says piously.

That evening at the supper table he feels like someone who hears that the plane he decided not to board has exploded in midair. Doris and the girls seem like apparitions, Doris’s round face infinitely alive and kindly, a guardian moon. In bed he clings to her capsized body, and as if Al Yothers were nothing more than the catalyst to return him at last to this sanctified threshold, he gets an erection.

“Doris,” he moans.

But she’s asleep.

And there goes his erection.

Not his high hopes, though. Not his feeling that everything is going to be fine, that this is only the beginning, etc. An erection, even a short-lived one, that’s something in this bed.

The next day at the office, whenever he is in the corridors, he keeps an eye out for Al Yothers. To avoid him, he thinks. There is a proofreader named Tom Hooks, a surly kid with insolent little hips and fluttering blue eyes, whom he has taken mighty pains not to look at. Today, however, standing behind him at the Gestetner machine, he stares at the boy to reassure himself that his desire isn’t fatally pinned to one man but is spread out, restored to its old, harmless sprawl. Back in his office he sits at his desk and pictures Al Yothers over the radiator, and feels, well, no more aroused than he is already. He wonders if he has ever been even half this aroused with Doris. He doubts it, although he remembers the first few years of their marriage as a time of perfect happiness. Maybe the way it works is, if you’re that happy once it vaccinates you against the possibility of being that happy again. He sits there rubbing his thighs, and the part of him that is feeling how long and bony they are experiencing them as if with the hands of another man and thinking, worriedly, that they’re like a pair of goddamn banisters, that part seems like the last of it. The little brush fire that will burn itself out.

It’s just after four o’clock when the stevedore phones and says, “Hey,” and Gordon’s gut drains. He thinks it’s Al. “Al,” he says, and sees bombs blooming.

“No, Frank,” the stevedore says. “Frank Amis. Say, about yesterday...”

Yesterday he got held up. A shipment of pork bellies. He suggests a meeting tonight, five-thirty at the Lakeview Tavern, adding that this thing is big, real big.

Gordon says, “Drop by the office tomorrow.”

“I might not be alive tomorrow,” Frank says, which Gordon doesn’t fall for, but his head is in his hand and his heart is still banging, and so it happens that Frank is talking his kind of language. “All right, five-thirty,” he says. He then phones Doris to tell her he’ll be late.

At five-twenty, as he is putting on his coat, Frank calls back and shouts over what sound

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