



such a long time since anything or anyone has seized her.

Claire and the women gasp for breath as their laughter subsides. This long moment of breathing hangs open: it's been

silly we are! They push themselves to their feet. How hands, revealing a pearl or two in each palm. They laugh. How at themselves, hip to hip like sheep in a pen. They open their Started, the mother laughs in relief. The other women look down the long hallway, perhaps on its way to the baby's room. giant buoyant laugh as she watches a lone pearl meandering moment she remembers—she could laugh. She lets loose a in her chest is rising, a disastrous pressure. At the very last to rattle. Still, it seems she must make a sound. This thing when the pearls scattered like marbles. So cool, impossible Instead, she will be the woman who didn't raise an eyebrow the baby away.

laminated flooring. Now the mother's arms are reaching to take The women are still on their knees, heads low to the blonde middle-aged woman weeping over a broken necklace.

must retain her poise. If she cries now, she'll be the ridiculous howl seems to rise up against the bars in her chest. No—she baby—all the fuss this little person is capable of making! Yet a words, but can't make sense of them. She is so pleased for the

Overqualified

"You're vastly overqualified." It didn't sound like a compliment. His tie was the color of kidneys.

I smiled demurely. The lenses of his glasses were tinted pink. He was the only thing standing between me and my immediate needs. "I have a theory about that," I said.

"Really."

"It's like how unfair it is when someone tells you that they aren't good enough for you. As if *you* don't get a vote, as if one person can really say who's good enough for someone else."

"You lost me at someone." This didn't sound droll.

"At least give me a typing test or quiz me on the advanced features of Excel." I considered groveling. *I need a job, benefits, a car, a new coffeemaker. So what if I have a shiny new Master's degree in European history. There isn't a spreadsheet I can't wrangle! I turn out flawless documents!* But watching him purse his thin beige lips, I knew I didn't have it in me.

"I'm sorry." He was talking at my forehead. "I just don't see this being a good fit." His stomach growled. Sorry my ass.

"But you called me in for an interview, right?"

"I did."

"So for at least three minutes yesterday, you thought I might be a good fit."

The baby's mother blinks hard. Her voice is distraught. "I'm so sorry. I should have warned you." The other women scramble to gather the pearls. The mother rummages beneath the picture books strewn on the coffee table. She pulls out a pacifier, wipes it on her pant leg, and jams it into the baby's mouth. The baby beams and sucks. Claire hears the mother's

held. Claire's fingertip throbs. The rest of the necklace hangs limply, those pearls whose knots bleats in surprise, releases the pearls in hand, Claire's finger. chest and legs and drop to the floor like a burst of hail. The baby Then, half the necklace breaks away. Pearls tumble over her the silk thread stretches and the tiny knots are tested.

fingers gasping, tugging, such a beautiful tension, the pull as pearls press into the skin on the back of her neck. The baby's luster of the pink pearls. The hard, round surfaces of individual necklace—just something to grab, or irresistible, the intriguing Now those outreached fingers dart forward and *seize* her grasps her fingertip so tightly the fingertip is darkening.

reaching poignantly toward her face. The baby's other hand that golden glow of curls. Or maybe it's the plump arm, still The baby is beautiful, something to inspire Italian masters—holdovers from grad student days, have been cleared.

bottom shelves of the white melamine bookshelves, perhaps

conversation—a promise betrayed by the seemingly inevitable last-minute babysitter cancellation or spousal emergency (generally surgical or litigious)—and the baby is part of the festivities after all.

"Here you go!"

The mother is holding the baby at the waist. Claire pastes on a smile and accepts the baby. She has no choice but to grab it beneath its arms. Her thumbs feel huge in those small hollows.

Usually she doesn't focus on the drooling face, the cartoon-wide eyes, the cowlicks and multiple chins. Babies are too much like caricatures to hold her attention. But this one reaches out to her, tips up its wide-open face, cheerful as a daisy, as if expecting something from her. So she looks.

Its cheeks are round and blushed and delicate as a bone china teacup. Its skin is plush and nibbleable. A dumpling—she understands the endearment now. The baby is a fat, pink, dimpled dumpling. Claire doesn't know its age or name or gender. While these facts had been dispersed, no doubt accompanied by details regarding developmental benchmarks, percentiles, and sleeping and defecatory habits, she'd been redecorating her hostess's living room. The architecture is modern but the sofa and chairs are bungalow-plump and the bulky side tables might be grandma's hand-me-downs. The

He cleared his throat. Maybe he was wavering, feeling the force of my determination. Or maybe he was about to call the pink lenses.

rotating and tumbling down, his watery eyes flickering behind likely result when caught? I pictured the silver coin rising and by anyone, even an amateur, heads is the ever so slightly more. Did he know that if a coin is launched from the heads position, I wondered if he knew there was more to this than chance.

Now, he was trying to figure out if I was serious. I wiped my palms on the brown corduroy of my skirt. "What do you say?"

on the bus, the last almond croissant in the pastry case. the coin just shy of dead center. I'd won pitchers of beer, a seat the same flat spot on my thumbnail, to hit the bottom face of vertical trajectory—for show—and a uniform release—for I'd been working on my flip. The goal was a high plumb

you for your time and let you get on with your day." quarter off the edge. "Heads, you give me the job. Tails I thank desk. The coins clattered nicely against the solid wood. I slid a I dumped the change compartment of my wallet onto his

"What?"
There it was: my opening. "Let's flip for it," I said.
"It may well be that I made a mistake."

security. Perhaps he was stuck, afraid to decide his own fate and afraid to let it be decided. Perhaps he still thought he was in charge. The quarter grew hot in the cup of my hand. I knew things.



To assemble:

1. Fold each sheet in half horizontally.
2. Stack pages with color bars facing forward; purple dots in front; yellow squiggly in back.
3. Fold in half vertically.
4. Crease emphatically.
5. Bind with staples.

promise of well-chosen wine and savory morsels and adult then there were these evenings into which she's lured by the hum and suck of breast pumping in the conference room. And be maneuvered around in narrow corridors and the mechanical strides, although she could do without the bulging bellies to Claire admired how well they maintained their professional Her young colleagues kept having babies. For the most part, her arms pinned to her sides!

he or she heaved toward her. How appalled they'd be if she kept infant irresistibility. Always, one more pudgy, green-swaddled They have never once waited for an answer, so confident of first time.

"Do you want to hold the baby?" As if she hadn't heard the house. porcelain teapots, and the thick silence of a well-insulated you could have order, a cream-colored couch, a collection of dramatic mood swings alarming. If you couldn't have children their noteworthy leakiness and stickiness and tendency toward herself, after three miscarriages and a divorce. Now, she found About ten years ago she'd given up on the idea of babies for Not really, no thank you, not one bit.

Do You Want to Hold the Baby?

