

To Fill the Gap

She shuffled to the stove, bouncing the baby at her hip. The tin pan scraped across the burner, vaguely reaching her with its high, scratchy sound. She put the bottle in the pan and bounced the baby to the other shoulder, watching the bubbles form in the slow water.

Twelve o'clock again and this little child mewling for food. In the London hospital she'd asked the midwife, "are all the parts there?"

"No," Sean jumped in. "He hasn't got a dick."

Bridgette was fiercely proud of this girl, the tiny while bundle of bones and soft feet and pudge. Proud that Annie hadn't got a dick, that she'd deprived him of a little man that he would only teach to drink, to screw, to lie, to laugh loud, to laugh mean.

Tired, she leaned back against the stove, and caught her reflection in its greasy steel. Bridgette's vagina felt like she'd scraped it against the floor, and she was glad the sight of the birth had put Sean off sex. There she was, distorted by the steel of the stove, but still recognizable with her dark, damp curls and a fine long nose.

Bridgette took the bottle at last, squeezing two droplets onto her wrist. Warm milk, perfect milk, exactly balanced by Heinz for her baby. Annie wouldn't suffer under Bridgette's diet of baked beans on toast, and endless cups of tea.

In a sleepy daze she took the infant to the couch, and Annie slurped and sucked. She, Bridgette, also had an exquisite mouth. So why she had done this thing and matched such a crass father to such a delicate child? The urge of pregnancy had incited desire for

stability, for nightly doses of television with her husband, with baby slowly sorting colors on the rug, gumming plastic rings.

The room smelled like a church, cold and damp, the faint hint of his cigarettes a kind of unblessed incense. She slept here on the couch with the girl on her stomach, to be close to the kitchenette. Bridgette noticed smells since she'd birthed Annie: damp must, and the warm sweet and sharp baby smell, and her own sour breath.

Her ring glinted in the faint forewarning of dawn. What did it mean, that hoop of gold? *He provides the gold*, she thought, *while I provide the hands*. Once, a year ago, she'd felt an emotion she could barely remember, the ecstasy of expectation, that with Sean beside her she'd never be alone again.

Nonsense. Bridgette shook her head and snapped on the overhead light to chase away the rest of the gray from the room. Soon she'd be back in the kitchen for the next feed time. *The heating routine, the heating routine, the cheating, heating routine*, her mind chanted. There she went, making up rhymes in the fuzz of her mind, thick cobwebs of words that floated by.

So that's what I think of him, she observed. *Tradition, attrition, suspicion*, her mind rhymed to itself.

At least Annie won't cheat on me.

With that realization, Bridgette gave Sean back to the God of the Pub, to his school friends.

Bridgette finished burping Annie, and went into the bedroom, pulling down the blinds against the strength of the dawn. She shut the door – on the living room with its

television and couch, on the view to the other door, Annie's nursery. Gently Bridgette folded back the quilt and slid her heavy body into bed, holding Annie tightly to her chest.

Settled on her back, Bridgette rolled over to face Sean's side of the bed, pushed open the quilt, and put Annie in the blank space.