Making Room for My Baby
You can do it!” Jane Fonda called to me, leering from the television set as she rocked her skinny little body back and forth in a stretching exercise. Pregnant women surrounded her, all happy and glowing in their various trimesters, all rocking away. “Think of this as making room for your baby!” Jane called,chipper as a squirrel.

Oh, fuck you, Jane, I thought, shaking my head to get the hair out of my eyes. My back ached. I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate on the rhythm of Jane’s tireless counting. I might as well make room for this baby, I thought, rocking dutifully. I wasn’t writing anything. I had nothing else to say. My mother hadn’t even called since the reading. My family hated me. What else was there but the baby?

“Round that back!” Jane called. Around her, beautiful women all rounded their backs, smiling as ecstatically as if they’d been sipping on Manhattans. I rounded my back as best I could over the bowling ball that had become my stomach. It grew bigger every day, threatening to topple me forward every time I stood up. It didn’t seem like Zoe needed me to make room for her, I thought, stretching my back out carefully. She seemed to be doing a pretty good job taking up space on her own.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The readings were over for now. All I had left to do between now and Zoe’s birth was one trip to Chicago for the American Booksellers’ Association Convention, where I would be doing a signing of Amnesty. That was it. Then I could just concentrate on my baby. I took another deep breath and tried to flow with the music of Jane’s fourteen-year-old video. I opened one eye and glanced at her. There she was, bulimic and annoying as ever. Why didn’t she bring this tape up to date and re-release it? Probably, she didn’t want anyone to see how old she was getting.

I exhaled mightily. My sister had told me on the phone that she had done the Jane Fonda video every night of her pregnancy. I was lucky if I got to it once a week. On the screen Jane rocked back and forth, the cords on her neck standing out like ropes. I was entering my eighth month. Only a few weeks were left for me to make room
for anything—my writing, the baby, my relationship with Connie. Then I would be catapulted into motherhood, and everything would change.

I rolled my head gently, trying to ease the knotted muscles of my neck. I’d spent the morning cleaning every room, scrubbing out the corners as diligently as if I’d been cleaning out my head in preparation for a host of new ideas. Lately, all I wanted to do was work on the house, reaper the bedroom, tear up the carpet in the kitchen and lay down linoleum, and paint the bathroom. The only room I couldn’t seem do anything about was Zoe’s. Every time I tried to think about it, my body balked. I kept the door closed and walked wide circles around it. It was a mess—heaps of baby clothes that people had given us, several infant car seats, a bassinet a friend had loaned us. The floor was covered with a blue shag rug that must have been there since the ’70s, sometimes doubling as a litter box for a cat we’d had to put to sleep. I knew I had to rip it up, but I just couldn’t make myself go in there. The day before I had tried to sort through the baby clothes, but panic froze my fingers. What was going on with these sizes? What would she be wearing when? How would we know what to take with us to the hospital? My heart had begun to beat so hard I’d had to leave the room, close the door behind me as if shutting away monsters, and lean against it like I was making sure it wouldn’t open again of its own accord, its contents spilling out to fill the house.

I stood up and turned the television off. I trundled down to the kitchen to make a cup of tea, one hand on my back just like every other pregnant woman I’d ever seen. It must be an instinctive thing, maybe the only instinctive thing about this whole process. A soft breeze drifted in across the sill, ruffling the curtains and filling the air with its scent. The lilacs that we’d planted the year before were blooming. The azalea that had masqueraded as dead all winter was in full bloom, and one of the rhododendrons was almost ready to open. I took a deep breath, inhaling their smell. Their growth amazed me. I hadn’t really believed it would work. I couldn’t imagine that we could just stick something in the ground and have it take root. “Like sperm,” Connie had said.

I made myself a cup of tea and sat down on the couch, pillows wedged behind my back. I took a deep sip of tea and held the cup in my hands, feeling its warmth between my palms. I’d been sitting like this for hours lately, between my bouts of housecleaning, just reading and writing in my journal. I lay back against the pillows.
This was the only position I had found that didn’t rack my back with pain. I glanced out the window. Robins pecked about the lawn, squirrels chased each other through the trees. I took another sip of tea. I was thirty-one and a half weeks pregnant now. Once we got to thirty-six weeks, we were home free—the baby would no longer be considered premature. Soon I would go into labor, give birth, and nothing would ever be the same again. She would enter our lives, whether we’d made room for her or not. I readjusted the pillow behind my back and reached for my book. The silence of the room was deeply satisfying, empty now of Jane’s annoying voice. I settled into the pillows and opened the book. Maybe I’d try to make some more room for her tomorrow.

I awoke at 4 A.M., so hot I couldn’t breathe. My shoulders ached; my stomach clenched with nausea. It was like morning sickness all over again. I turned on my side and reached down and wedged a pillow between my knees. My shoulder hurt. My upper arms ached as if I had been lifting weights. I rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. The thought of my maternity leave loomed up at me, one long stretch of time. Fear shot through me, direct as a heart attack. I was afraid to be alone with the baby all fall semester, afraid for the baby. What did I know about taking care of her?

I rolled over to the other side. I wasn’t supposed to be lying on my back this late in pregnancy. According to the pregnancy books, sleeping on your back put too much pressure on your inferior vena cava, a vein that carries blood back to the heart, causing all kinds of problems, from hemorrhoids to impaired circulation. Sleeping on my stomach, however, was about as comfortable as curling up atop a basketball. I felt as if I might throw up. Connie turned onto her side, her back to me, exhaling pointedly. I’d awakened her. I sighed. Now there would be hell to pay.

When the alarm rang, Connie sat up and shut it off as violently as if she were killing a fly. She glared at me. “I just don’t see why you don’t get up when you can’t sleep,” she said. “Why do you have to keep me awake too?”

I said nothing, just lay there dutifully on my left side, the way the pregnancy books said to.

She flung back the covers and got out of bed. The floor shook beneath her step. Above my head the dream catcher wavered slightly in the breeze. When she got to the door, she paused. “I have to go to work,” she said pointedly.

Guilt shot through me like rifle fire. She was right. She did have
to go to work. I, on the other hand, was just going to spend another
day wasting my time at home. I wasn’t writing. What the hell was I
doing with my time? I should just go out and get a job, maybe third
shift since I wasn’t doing anything else with my nights. At least I’d
be bringing in some money. I rolled over and pushed myself up to
a sitting position. My belly must have swelled three times in the
night. I looked down at it. The skin was stretched so tight I could­
n’t imagine how it could possibly stretch any more. I took a breath.
My lungs barely had any room, they were so crowded by my stom­
ach. I pushed off the mattress and staggered to my feet. I could hear
the sound of the shower. Connie and her sacred sleep. Irritation
rippled through me. How was she going to deal with it after the
baby was born? I was afraid that taking care of the baby would be my
primary responsibility because I would be the one home with her. I
imagined the baby crying in the middle of the night and Connie
saying: “Shut that kid up—I have to get up in the morning!”

I pulled on a robe and lumbered down the stairs to the kitchen.
When Connie came down, we avoided each other. I took my tea
back up to my office in silence. I sipped it silently, gazing out at the
street, imagining going into labor in the middle of the night and
not waking her up, just leaving a note that said: “Didn’t want to
wake you.”

My tea was cold. I took my cup downstairs. Connie scowled at me
when I entered the kitchen. “Are we not speaking to each other?”
she asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know,” I said. “Are you speaking to me?”
“Yeah, I’m speaking to you,” she said. We glared at each other.
“Are you speaking to me?”

I could feel my irritation raising its shaggy head, gruff as a bear.
“Well,” I said menacingly. “I answered you, didn’t I?”

We looked at each other for another moment. A shadow of a
smile played about the corners of her mouth. I could feel my anger
melting inside me, much as I wanted to hang onto it, the way our
dog hangs on to his pathetic tattered little bones.
“Yeah,” Connie said. “You answered me,” and then we both be­
gan to laugh. “I’m sorry,” Connie said, pulling me toward her in
a hug.

“I’m sorry too,” I said, pushing my head against her face. Zoe’s
presence was as subtle as a Mack truck, keeping us from getting too
close to each other. It was not the last time, I suspected, that she
would get between us during a fight.
“I’ll see you later,” Connie said, kissing me on the cheek and leaving me alone with my pregnancy, alone to face the day.

I made myself another cup of tea, sat down on the couch, and pondered my list of things to do. Nausea racked my stomach. This was almost as bad as the first trimester. Around me the plants drooped, desperate for water. Our dog, Ned, panted beside his empty food bowl. I couldn’t imagine getting up for anything. A little flame of hunger licked at my stomach, but the nausea quickly drove it back. I closed my eyes. Maybe I could just sleep a little here and wait until my energy came back. Zoe turned over and wedged herself up under my rib cage, as if to say I’d better make more room for her, before she kicked out a wall herself.

The tattered POW-MIA flags rippled in the wind up and down Wellsboro’s Main Street. It was nearly July, and once again every lamppost was bound with an American flag. The announcement board in front of the Methodist church read: “Spaghetti Dinner Tuesday—Come Meet Jesus!” I stared at it for a while. Sometimes I just couldn’t figure out what people around here were trying to say.

I pushed open the door of the car and hauled my body carefully out of the driver’s seat and up over the curb. I felt like a huge duck, waddling my way down the sidewalk to the store. All along the street the catalpa trees wept lush white flowers that covered the sidewalks, their scent skimming the breeze. A few women smiled at me as I passed them; a man held the door open for me as I made my way up the steps to the office supply store. “Take care now,” he said, when I thanked him.

I stood in line at the photocopier, waiting my turn. The woman at the cash register caught my eye and smiled. “When’s your baby due?” she asked. Her tone was benevolent. Everywhere I went these days I felt blessed. Everything was so different now that I was pregnant. People treated me in a way they never had before. The first reaction to me had always been distrust; I could read it in faces everywhere—in stores, on the street. My short hair, my height, my clothes—everything called attention to the fact that I was somehow different. When I was younger people used to call me “sir” regularly when I waited in line at cash registers. No one ever smiled at me, even when I smiled at them first. That had been my experience every day of my life, and I’d never even realized it until now.
Now everyone smiled at me. They held doors open for me. They waved at me when I walked down the street. They asked when I was due. In New York a few men had given up their seat for me in the subway. The waitresses at diners asked me how I was, cautioned me to be careful, and called me “Hon” as I pulled open the door to leave. A woman in a bathroom had spontaneously touched my stomach with both hands, as if she couldn’t help herself, as if she had been drawn to me like a magnet. It was as if the world had united to embrace me, as if I were passing through some initiation rite with people waiting on either side to help me. For the first time in my life I had a place.

When it was my turn, the cashier came around from behind the counter. “You want me to make those copies for you?” she asked, “so you won’t have to stand in front of that Xerox machine?” She took them from my hands. “Have a seat,” she said. “This will just take a minute.”

My throat hurt suddenly. Tears stung my eyes. I thought I might cry. I hadn’t realized how it felt to ease my guard, relax my control. I hadn’t realized how hard it had been to live without this acceptance. My life would have been so different if people had smiled at me instead of frowning. It would have taken so much less energy to live, so much less courage just to enter a store or walk down a street, have any human contact of any kind.

This pregnancy had given me a place entirely on its own, a place my wedding ring and my home ownership had not, even though they were among the hallmarks of adulthood. It was true that my baby had no father, but neither did a lot of babies. The truth was that as far as my pregnancy went, a man had been involved somewhere in the process, and I suspected that was all it took.

The cashier turned to me. “Are these OK?” she asked, showing me the copies.

I nodded, reaching quickly into my purse for my wallet. “They’re great,” I said.

“Good luck,” she called after me, as I pushed open the front door.

The summer breeze hit my face as I walked back into the street. The flags were clinging to the lampposts as if for dear life. Zoe rolled over, kicking a foot somewhere in the vicinity of my liver. Someone waved from a passing truck. This was my baby I was carrying. Unlike Connie, Zoe would have automatic rights guaranteed by law—the right to my health insurance, the right to my
name, the right to be my heir, the right to have a relationship with me that was defined, unquestioned, and protected, even in the event of a custody hearing.

As I reached my car, I wondered how things would change once this baby was outside my womb, once my difference was back again, flagrant as that American flag rustling in the breeze.