

# Fiction by Chuck Wachtel

## *The Annunciation*

The bear in the driver's seat wasn't made of flesh or any other three-dimensional substance, but of light and color, like characters in animated cartoons. The car it drove had approached him from behind, pulled nearer to the sidewalk, and slowed to the pace of his walk. The bear was purple, except for its ears, nose and mitten-like hands, which were red, and as tall as a human, though plumper around the torso and neck. Holding its eyes fixed to the street directly ahead, it maintained the same slow speed just long enough for him to catch a glimpse of the only other passenger: a little girl in a yellow dress, her legs extending to a point just beyond the edge of the backseat, her toes up, one foot turned slightly inward. She was wearing blue and white high-tops; the colors were bright and clean, and because she

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was too young to walk on them, they hadn't a trace of wear. When the car suddenly sped up and turned at the corner, he became angry and frightened. He woke then, with Nan's hand on his chest.

"You all right?" she asked him. "You said something, kind of, and you were rocking back and forth."

"What did I say?"

"It was like a whole sentence, but it didn't really have words, just sounds."

It had been six days since the morning he sat beside Nan, lying on an examination table, and watched, on the screen of a sonogram monitor, a thin tube enter her belly, then come so close to the fetus inside her that the small hand actually reached toward it. "They do that," Dr. Gisse said, as he affixed a syringe to the end of the tube and withdrew a sample of amniotic fluid. A moment before that the sonographer, an unshaven man wearing a surgical cap, had been impatient with Nan who'd begun to shiver and cry. It was the kind of casually dramatic impatience meant to tell the person it is aimed at that they have made your day harder.

"What's your fucking problem?" he said to the sonographer, in one angry breath.

“Johnny,” Nan said, as if the man wasn’t there. “Look,” she nodded toward the screen.

“They’ve been through this once before,” Dr. Gisse said to the man, who looked back at Johnny, but not at Nan – having understood the unspoken portion of the statement – and gave a nod that constituted an apology.

A nurse came in, labeled the vial of amniotic fluid and held it up to Nan. “You identify this as your name?” The question was part of the same litigation-prevention protocol they’d gone through the last time. Nan hesitated and the nurse looked at Johnny for help. Johnny lifted his gaze to the red-lit exit sign. Two of the four screws that held the plate with the letters to the frame of the fixture were missing and it tilted a degree or two downward to the right, revealing a thin dash of white light over the red *I* and *T* that made him think of the diacritical line that means a vowel should be pronounced as it is spoken when not inside a word.

“My last name is Wilk,” Nan said. She’d kept her own name when they got married.

“But on the chart it says Rizzotti,” the nurse said.

To Johnny the two missing screws seemed cognate with the sonographer’s lack of manners and unshaven cheeks. *Ex-eyet*, he said to himself, without even moving his lips. *I’m ready to head for the ex-eyet*.

“We use my husband’s plan,” Nan explained.

The nurse pulled a strip of labels from the pocket of her smock.

“The post office,” Nan said, then paused as she watched the nurse write her name on a label, peel it off the strip, and wrap it around the vial across the part with Johnny’s last name.

“The post office?” the nurse asked her.

“The post office?” Nan asked her back.

“I work there,” Johnny said.

“And it has the best medical plan,” Nan said, “in the whole damn country.”

The day after Dr. Gisse’s assistant called with the results – normal, a girl – they discussed how they’d announce the good news to the friends and relatives whom they hadn’t told about the pregnancy. Nearly all of their family, on both sides, lived at a distance, and Johnny and Nan had laid low during the last weeks prior to the amniocentesis, at which time she’d begun to show. The few friends and neighbors and coworkers who’d figured it out were sworn to secrecy. Two years ago, when they’d learned Nan was pregnant the first time, they told everyone, even strangers, and the most difficult part was untelling them, undoing what the world around them was still expecting to happen.

Since the day the at-home EPT test affirmed their second pregnancy Nan had kept the test wand in a Ziploc bag in her sock and underwear drawer, and so, the next afternoon, before she got home from work, Johnny set their huge volume of the works of Leonardo da Vinci on the living room floor, opened to the Annunciation they had seen at the Uffizi Gallery while on their honeymoon in Florence, and laid the wand across the space between the hand of the archangel Gabriel, with two fingers gently raised, and the serene yet startled eyes of the Virgin. Johnny then knelt over his composition with his thirty-five-millimeter camera, and from various angles and distances, and at slightly different foci, shot two rolls of color film.

Eight years before, when Nan led Johnny across the huge echoey, marble-walled room to the painting, she had said, improvising on an ad for Kentucky

Fried Chicken, “When it comes to angels, nobody does wings like da Vinci.” Johnny’s composition, reproduced as a postcard, would make a unique announcement, a revelation of the knowledge they had kept to themselves for more than four months.

The next day, on his lunch hour, Johnny picked up the two rolls at the one-hour photo counter at Rite Aid. He opened the envelopes in the checkout line and by the time he’d flipped halfway through the second stack of photos his anticipation had eroded to disappointment: the collage he had constructed, that had looked perfectly clear through the camera lens, was unrecognizable in the images he held before him. The flash had bounced off the page where it curved above the spine like a wave of parted hair, spilling a wide oval of white light across half the photograph and leaving the other half too dark to identify anything.

Later that afternoon, before Nan came home from school, he’d shoot another roll from different angles in the consistent, nonviolent light of the overhead lamp.

Although the next batch didn’t come out much better, there were three shots in which all the component parts were identifiable. If you knew what an annunciation was, you would know this was one; the implausible object lying across the composition was recognizable as an EPT wand and, most importantly, the red line that bisected the positive box was clearly defined. It was time to show them to Nan, who had much more experience photographing art – she was a professor of art history at City University – and get her advice for the final shoot. He left the three best ones faceup on the kitchen table to see how she’d react to them when she came home from work.

During the last two days they’d been granting entry to feelings they’d held at abeyance for months. They’d reached the top of a mountain so steep that the labor of climbing had kept them from taking notice of the scenery. Now they’d stroll down the other side, enjoy everything, let gravity do the work. “Even so,” Nan had said, thoughtfully, “innocence lost is never regained. And guess what?” she had begun to laugh. “I could give a shit less.” That morning when he awoke, Nan was sitting up, leaning against the wall on her side of the bed, watching him sleep. “You know what I just realized?” she said. “We’ve been pregnant more than nine months combined, and now, finally, we’re in control.” Her exhilaration and certainty frightened him, but he was much too happy to be worried about anything. “Now we’re in control,” she repeated. “We control the horizontal. *Do do do do*,” she sang the first four notes of the theme from *The Twilight Zone*.

“That’s the wrong show,” he said. “It’s *The Outer Limits* where they control the horizontal.”

She slid her hand under the blanket, gripped his penis. “And we certainly control the vertical.”

After they made love – the fifth time in two days – Nan laid the back of her head on Johnny’s stomach and slid her feet up the wall. “I’m telling you right now, there’ll be none of that textbook-sentimental-story-to-tell-later crap. No cravings for ice cream or shrimp dumplings, no belly-hiding muumuus, no sudden mood swings, no sentimental platitudes, no storks on the birth announcement – no fucking storks anywhere.”

Johnny was sitting in the living room, trying to read the paper, when he heard the door to the apartment open, then the sound of Nan’s footsteps crossing the

kitchen, the clunk of her shoes, one after the other, hitting the floor, and the whoom of the bathroom door being pulled shut, followed by the clack of the door hook striking wood.

He walked into the kitchen. Her briefcase was on one of the chairs and a takeout bag with a widening grease blotch on its side was sitting on top of the photos. Johnny moved the bag across the table, and slid the photos to the side she would approach them from.

“Not a spot,” Nan said, opening the bathroom door. “Not a spot all day.”

She had been spotting since the fifth week of the pregnancy, and though they had reached the middle of the second trimester, it still hadn’t stopped. Dr. Gisse told them it probably wasn’t anything to be concerned about. He told them they worried too much about everything. “But don’t worry about *worrying*. That’s not unusual after what happened the last time.” *The last time*, when the call came, they were sitting in front of the TV, watching *Jeopardy*, eating dinner. How could anything real happen at such a moment? The genetics counselor told them he waited until evening to make such calls, when both partners would most likely be at home: *trisomy 21*: Down’s syndrome: three of the twenty-first chromosome instead of two, forty-seven in total instead of forty-six: *odd*, two parents, two of everything: odd numbers are bad news in genetics. It would have been a boy.

Johnny took Nan’s briefcase off the chair and motioned, like a *maitre d’*, for her to sit. “What do you think?” he asked when she looked down at the three photographs. She picked one of them up but still said nothing.

He could no longer wait. “Da Vinci’s *Annunciation*. And that’s *our* EPT test.”

“I get it,” she said, “but I didn’t get it fast enough.”

“I thought we could take a better shot, then make a postcard. *Nan and Johnny have an announcement . . .*”

“At first I thought it was some kind of weird submarine,” Nan said.

“Not in a better photograph. That’s where you come in.”

Nan started laughing. “I like it. I like that you want to tell everybody. I do too.”

“I think it’s a work of art,” Johnny said.

Nan opened the bag and began setting the takeout containers on the table. “I’m starved,” she said. “Although the Virgin conceived in a very different manner than I did, I know this: as her belly got bigger, her appetite got bigger.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing,” Johnny said. “That it slowly reveals itself. I mean, that’s how art works, no?”

Nan had been right about this pregnancy not being ordinary. Although they felt the anxieties of people becoming parents for the first time, they felt, even after reaching the point of being pregnant longer than they’d been before, that they would never feel the newness, the constant surprise, that they remembered.

Once the news was out, Johnny’s mother, who lived in a senior housing apartment in Florida, called often, usually to talk to Nan. When she called on the morning of Johnny’s birthday, near the end of the second trimester, he was in the shower.

“We talk while I wait for him,” she told Nan. “And I tell you about forty-five years ago today when I *didn’t* have to wait. He was in such a rush I still had my shoes on.”

In the last weeks Nan had grown tired of her mother-in-law’s voice, annoyed at the endless childbearing stories from three generations of Johnny’s family told

as if they were instructions for how to conduct her own pregnancy. But this was the first time she had spoken of Johnny's birth.

"His father was at work, so when my time comes, my brother, Gianfranco – you know Johnny was named for him – drives me to the hospital. I'm seventy-four but I remember like it was last week. We had to pass through the old neighborhood in Brooklyn and when he stops the car in front of Sal's Fish Market I know what he has in mind.

"'I'll be quick,' he says. 'You wait in the car and we don't get a ticket.' What am I gonna say? Since he never got married *bacala* was all he ever thought about."

"Then we get to the hospital. Like a gentleman now, he opens the car door and as soon as I stand up, it's Niagara Falls under my dress. Forty-five years ago today. I tell the doctor I can't stand up my back is hurting so bad and when they put me on the rolling thing I tell him, 'No, no, I can't lay down neither.' The doctor examines me right there, we're not even in the room yet, and he says, 'Why'd you wait till now?'

"'In a car out front,' I tell him, 'there's five pounds of cod fish that'll answer your question.'"

"That's something," Nan told her. "Wow."

"Every year on his birthday the first thing I remember is getting out of that car. That's when it hurt, I can't tell you how much. That's when I say to myself, he's gonna get born – even then I knew he was a boy – even if I'm gonna die."

"Oh, he's dressed," Nan said, waving Johnny into the room, "and he's about to leave for work."

"That's all right," she said. "You just tell him I said happy birthday."

Two months had passed since Johnny showed Nan his photos for the an-

nouncement and they still hadn't pursued the idea. By this time the few people who hadn't been told had gotten word from those who had. The influx of notes and cards and phone messages hadn't tapered off and now baby gifts had begun to arrive.

One evening Nan walked in looking pale and exhausted. Their plan was for her to take the next semester off, but there were still four weeks left in this one.

"You're working so hard," Johnny told her. "I wish there was a way you could just stop now. Couldn't they get a substitute or something?"

"How dare you," she said, anger flashing in her tired eyes.

"What?"

"How dare you accuse me of being lazy?"

"You got it all wrong."

"*You're* the one who got it wrong, buddy."

Johnny walked into the living room, sat on the couch, picked up the remote, and turned on the TV. He stared at the Weather Channel, listened to a few bars of the soft jingly music that accompanied the five-day local forecast, then got up and walked back to the kitchen.

"Does your mother ever sleep?" Nan asked. There were tears in her eyes now.

He remained standing in the entryway.

"Last night some movie star told David Letterman that while she was pregnant she had the uncontrollable urge to eat flowers. Daisies especially. Eight o'clock in the morning your mother calls because she has to tell me this. Plus she keeps suggesting names. This morning's suggestion was Ricardia, *her* mother's name. 'Doesn't Ricki sound nice?' she said. How many times do I have to tell her we're not discussing names yet?"

"That movie star, did she eat them?"

"I can't get enough sleep."

"I'm sorry," Johnny said. "Next time let the machine answer."

"You are such a gaping asshole."

He walked back into the living room, turned off the TV, and lay down on the couch.

Five minutes later Nan came in. He lifted his legs as she sat down, then lowered them onto the arm of the couch so they crossed the space above her lap like the safety bar on a Ferris wheel seat.

"And you can tell your mother that we're not doing to *our* daughter what Italians do to little girls."

Johnny laughed at this, though not too much, since there had been no acknowledgment that the fight was over. She was referring to an argument they'd had during the last pregnancy – during the wait for the amnio results – something they had not spoken of since. The sonogram image had given some evidence that it was a boy. If the results confirmed that, Nan wanted him to be circumcised. Johnny did not.

"He'll automatically be Jewish since you are," Johnny said. "It's matrilineal. You told me that."

"I did."

"So can't he be Jewish without having his little dick whacked?"

"Anatomically, he should look like his father," Nan argued. Johnny had been circumcised in the hospital, as had most male babies of his generation, and had never given it a thought. However, the idea of having it done to his son had caused him to imagine the pain for the first time: it would be as if it were happening to him all over again. He began to envision the cutting of the foreskin as an ongoing, constantly repeated process, like the bound Prometheus's liver being eaten by an eagle, only to grow back again overnight, then to be eaten again by the same eagle, from his ripped-open torso.

"And what about the thing Italians do to girls?" Nan had said, smiling, but tired of his persistence.

"What do they do to girls?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Prenatal ear piercing?"

Nan slid Johnny's legs off her, turned so she could lay her head on the side of the couch, then laid her feet on his lap. After letting her weight settle she grunted, arched her back, lifted her heavy torso just high enough to slip her hand underneath, and pulled out the remote. She lowered herself back onto the cushions, turned the TV back on, and skimmed the channels. She stopped at a shot of a beautifully pure blue sky, which held only for a second before the camera dropped and found two teenagers, a boy and a girl, leaning against the fender of a car. They were contemporary teenagers, but the car was a vintage, late-sixties Corvette convertible, bright red. They appeared tired; they were sad and a little bored, yet sexy in an adult way.

"You were *with* her," the girl said, energized by her anger, though sleepy-eyed.

The boy turned his head away.

The girl, wearing dark red lipstick, looked briefly at the camera, pouting, then slowly lowered her gaze.

The boy turned and directed his eyes downward, toward whatever the girl was looking at.

"I bet it's going to be Pepsi," Nan said.

"I was just . . ." the boy said, then paused. "I was just . . . *there*."

The camera slid down their slender bodies. They were both wearing jeans. One of the knees on the boy's was ripped, showing the pale skin beneath.

"The Gap," Johnny says. "Five bucks says it's the Gap."

Nan, still holding the remote, turned off the TV before they could find out.

Three weeks before their due date, Johnny woke to the sound of Nan crying. He reached toward her before he even opened his eyes and found her side of the bed empty. She was sitting in the chair across the room, leaning over, her elbows on her knees. "Nan," he said, then, "What?" He was afraid something had gone wrong, or that she'd gone into labor early, but he knew, in the first instant of full wakefulness, that it would be best if he didn't appear frightened. He responded as if the loud sobbing that had penetrated his sleep was a question he hadn't fully heard or understood. "What?" he said again, softly.

"It's four-thirty in the morning," she said. Her breaths were sudden and shallow, with a faint trace of voice in them.

"I thought your idea for the pregnancy announcement was terrific," she said. "It was a work of art. I'm sorry we never made the postcards."

"Who cares? Nan, are you all right?"

"I need something," she said. She seemed angry now. "Why did your mother tell me about that stupid fucking movie star?"

"What do you need, baby?"

She started crying again, harder.

"Nan?"

"Flowers." She said this between gasps, in a whisper.

"What?"

She covered her eyes and shook her head. Johnny helped her back into bed, then held her in his arms. "You want flowers?"

"Marigolds," she said. "I keep thinking of the thick part in the middle." Her breathing was slower now. It seemed she might even be falling back to sleep.

He slid out from under her weight, then got out of the bed and stood beside it. He pulled the blanket over her, leaned down, kissed her hair.

Just north of Houston Street, he found a greengrocer that was still open, but

there were no marigolds, only blue daisies that looked like they'd been watered with dye, ordinary yellow daisies, and roses that looked morbid and inedible. Before he headed toward the twenty-four-hour greengrocer on Avenue A, he bought the yellow daisies, just in case he couldn't do better. According to the thermometer on the Emigrant Savings Bank it was nineteen degrees Fahrenheit, minus seven Celsius.

He had met Nan in his first and only year of graduate school. She was a student in the freshman composition course he taught. At the end of that year, a cut in federal funds had forced nearly all teaching assistants at CCNY to be laid off. So Johnny, along with several other graduate students, quit school in what was both a statement of protest and an act of necessity: he could not afford to continue without the teaching assistantship that had paid his tuition. The first job he found was at the post office. One afternoon, more than eight years later, Nan handed him a yellow slip at the parcel pickup and information window.

"Mr. Rizzotti?"

He didn't recognize her. He assumed she saw the name on his ID tag. "You gave me an A. My first in college. I never thanked you."

In his entire adult life he had never felt anything like what he was feeling now, walking east through the predawn morning. He'd carried mail for four years, and drove a mail pickup route for three more before becoming a supervisor. You could see the city in a million ways: during his workday he saw it as a complex chain of mailboxes, with the rest – the buildings, the cars and trucks and people – slightly out of focus. Now he saw this neighborhood, the one where their daughter's first home will be, as a constellation of twenty-four-hour greengrocers, their lights glowing like stars. He did not feel the cold. He

only felt a steady current of elation. They'd passed all the danger zones, now all they had to worry about was adolescence and college tuition. He couldn't wait to meet his daughter. He couldn't wait.

When he walked in Nan was sitting at the kitchen table with a pencil in her hand.

"Since I was up," she said, emphatically casual, "I thought I'd get some work done."

He set an array of cone-shaped bouquets, wrapped in gift paper or clear plastic, before her, covering the entire tabletop, including the student paper she'd been reading. Among them were two batches of marigolds. He'd got the second batch at the last place because their tops were bigger than the ones he'd already bought.

"Is it cold?" she asked, no trace of what she was feeling before he left in her voice or eyes.

He began unwrapping each bouquet. When he laid them back down, they lost their shapes. It was as if he'd amassed an entire flower garden on the table before her. "See anything you like?"

She picked up three of the bigger marigolds – the soft, orange centers inside the dense corollas of small petals were as big as marshmallows – and held them out to him. "You first."

"No," he said. "You."

She moved the flowers closer, but did not speak a word.

He shrugged, slowly leaned forward, and took the head of the largest one in his mouth.

She suddenly began to cry.

"Nan," he said.

"This is crazy," she said, anger filling her voice.

He did not know how he knew, but he knew what had happened. "That was the one you wanted," he said. "Wasn't it?"

"Shit," she said. "How dare you?"

"Was it?"

"You don't understand."

"Was it?"

"You're a man. A *mailman*. How could you fucking understand?"

He was furious, but knew he was still happy underneath. "Tell me, professor. What the hell is wrong?"

"I married an idiot," she said. "That's what's wrong."

When the baby was six days late, Dr. Gisse sent Nan to the hospital for a non-stress test. Unfortunately, it was done in the same clinic as their second amniocentesis.

As soon as they entered the ultrasound examination room, his eyes found the exit sign. He was relieved to find that the missing screws had not been replaced: changing anything in that room might indicate a change in their fate, perhaps for the worse.

Though they had a hard time recognizing the parts of her anatomy, the baby appeared fine. At one point, the sonographer – a different one, a woman – told them that the baby had just moved a foot and a hand to her mouth, and pointed with a little plus-sign-shaped cursor to where this was happening.

"Does that mean she's hungry?" Johnny asked.

"It could," the woman said.

"Oh Hannah," Nan said, trying out the name they had chosen, softly curving the second syllable downward.

"What an appetite," Johnny said, shaking his hand Italian style, then began to weep.

Everything looked fine, but nothing would be certain until they got the results of the second test, which involved Nan sitting in a room with other beyond-due-date mothers, each with a fetal monitor strapped to her



belly, while various electronic beeps recorded the baby's movements and vital signs and her own mild contractions, most of which could not even be felt.

Two days before the last pregnancy had been terminated, the doctor inserted a branch-segment of laminaria, a kind of seaweed, into Nan's cervix, to dilate her in preparation for the abortion. Once that was done there was no reversing the process. The following day he would remove the insert and replace it with two branch-segments, widening the cervix further. Those two days, during which Nan experienced the symptoms of early labor, were even darker than the previous two weeks, when they had lived each day with the news. They'd had to make a decision, as parents, as non-parents, and perhaps the most difficult part was accepting that the decision had already been made, and that it resided inside them, always had, and would continue to, long after the pregnancy was terminated.

On the first of those two visits, the doctor told them there was a possibility, though an unlikely one, that they would encounter anti-abortion activists on the morning of the procedure. Legally, they're not permitted to approach anyone, he said, not even be on the same side of the street, but anyone can walk into the waiting room, and there's no telling who someone could turn out to be. Records are confidential, but they have ways of finding out when late-term abortions are scheduled.

"They know," Nan had told him. "I think they knew before I did." Less than a week after getting the amnio results, a pamphlet had arrived in the mail with a photo of Down's children sitting in a circle around a teacher, smiling and clapping their hands. Though the envelope it came in had a post office box as a return

address, they thought it was the information they'd asked the genetics counselor to send. The tone of its introduction was sympathetic; it offered hope in the form of knowledge. The persuasion didn't assert itself until the second page, which began with the words *Search and Destroy*, an anti-abortion catchphrase for amniocentesis.

In the remaining two days of Nan's pregnancy, Johnny would have fantasies so real they lifted him entirely out of the moment, out of the abrasive, fast-slow dream of time: on the street, or in a hospital corridor, a crowd of strangers would approach him and Nan, and even before they spoke he would know they were the people who had sent that pamphlet. He would lunge into them shouting and throwing punches. He would not stop until he had hurt them all.

During that same visit the doctor also told them that in second-trimester abortions there are remains, and that now might be a good time to think about how they wanted to handle them. The hospital could take care of it; forms would have to be signed. Or they could choose cremation, even burial. His voice implied, warmly, that it would be best to not make too big a deal of this part, to begin leaving the past behind as quickly as possible.

On the morning of the procedure they avoided the waiting room entirely. After helping Nan into her hospital gown, Johnny waited in the hall outside the recovery room, along with two Orthodox Jewish women who stood facing the wall that separated them from the ward in which their loved one would awaken, once whatever was being done to her had been done. One of them opened a small book and held it between them. They began to rock gently, chanting softly in Hebrew: the rhythm of their praying was the only thing that enabled the

minutes to pass. They continued to pray when the doctor came through the door from the recovery room, his green surgical mask hanging loosely from his neck, and approached Johnny. Everything had gone smoothly, he said. Nan would be awake in a minute or two.

Johnny felt relief. It was as if the weighted matter within his own body, relentlessly subject to the pull of gravity, had been removed. For a breath's time it was over, but he knew that the next moment would begin a process of unbearable mourning. The doctor stepped into the elevator. The two women had now stopped praying, and before Johnny walked through the door into the ward he told them that he hoped the patient they were praying for would have a full and speedy recovery.

A week later, when their taxi arrived at the Upper West Side funeral parlor where they were to pick up the ashes, they had to wait while the three limos ahead of them discharged their passengers at the edge of the long awning that reached to the curb from the wall above the entrance. It wasn't until they had stepped out that they noticed the police barricades holding back a crowd of onlookers on both sides of the street, and the network news trucks with telescopic antennae on top parked across the street.

Johnny took Nan's hand, and they walked at a quick, deliberate pace. He had no idea what was going on, and as they approached the entrance he imagined the things he'd shout at a police officer if one tried to stop them. He half hoped one would, but no one approached them. They were walking through a different dimension: no one even noticed they were there.

They climbed three steps, walked through the entryway and into a wide rotunda where a woman walking toward

the exit came between him and Nan.

The rotunda was filled with people, most of them standing in groups, talking, and when Johnny reached the middle of the room he discovered that Nan wasn't beside him. He spun around and caught a glimpse of her walking into the office. At that moment he realized that Nan was never more in the world than when she was pregnant, yet her grief had caused her to withdraw from it to such an extent an onlooker's casual gaze could not detect her presence; he, a father who hadn't been able to protect his child and his wife from danger, was cloaked in his own helpless anger.

The most direct route to the office Nan had just entered took him between two men who were facing each other, perhaps two feet apart, talking. They looked familiar, and as they stepped back to allow him to pass, he was certain he recognized them both.

When he walked into the office, the man sitting behind the desk rose, approached him, and without introducing himself, motioned Johnny to one of the two seats facing his desk, and said, "Your wife is in the rest room." The man apologized for the crowd, pressed the fingertips of both his hands together, looked down at the desktop, and said nothing more.

On the cab ride back downtown Nan examined the white cardboard canister, the same size and shape as a container of Quaker Oats. There wasn't a word or number to identify what it contained.

"How do they know it's ours?" she asked, then said, "Give me your keys."

With the penknife on his key chain she cut the tape encircling the middle, holding the top and bottom halves together. She tried to open it, but couldn't get her nails into the small space between the two parts.

“Let’s wait till we get home,” Johnny said.

Nan turned, looked out the window, and said, impatiently, “We’re only at Sixty-eighth Street?” and then, as if it were part of the same thought, “It sounds crazy, but I think I saw Phyllis Diller coming out of the bathroom in the funeral parlor.”

Johnny suddenly realized that the two men he had walked between, less than fifteen minutes ago, were the ex-mayor David Dinkins and the comedian Alan King. Nan and Johnny had been left no room for curiosity, no interest in looking through the window it opens on the proximate world. The enormous crowd, the police, the news trucks, were just there. “I bet it was her.” Johnny said.

A few blocks later Nan tried again, and was still unable to open the canister. This time she handed it to Johnny. He held the bottom, and with both hands she loosened the top. Inside was a small plastic bag that contained less than a handful of pebble-hard, gray ashes, and a scorched metal ring, perhaps an inch in diameter, with the number five stamped on it.

Nan closed it, embraced it and stroked the smooth cardboard.

When they got home Nan fell asleep on the couch and remained asleep for the rest of the afternoon. After sunset Johnny went out to buy soup for their dinner and on the way back noticed, on the front page of a *Daily News* on top of a stack at a newsstand, a picture of the front of the funeral parlor and the headline: NEW YORK’S BEST, BRIGHTEST AND FUNNIEST SAY FAREWELL TO HENNY YOUNGMAN.

A little girl, sitting on the carpet in the waiting room, had set up in front of her a collection of plastic dinosaurs along with a Barbie doll in a hula skirt, and a

small stuffed bear. The bear was purple and red and reminded Johnny of the chauffeur bear in his dream, which he did not remember as a dream, but as something that actually happened a long time ago. The girl’s mother, who was pregnant, was seated in one of the rows of chairs across the carpet from where Johnny was sitting, holding a smaller child asleep on her lap.

A copy of *People* magazine lay faceup on the seat beside him with a photograph of Vanna White, in a strapless, floor-length evening gown, on its cover. The little girl held up the hula Barbie so Johnny could see it, and moved its arm to wave hello. Johnny smiled and waved back. She was a beautiful child, no more than five years old. She wore thick glasses and had a yellow Band-Aid on her forearm covered with stars and planets.

The elevator door opened, and both he and the girl watched as a man wearing a business suit and yellow tie stepped out, crossed the room, lifted the *People* magazine off the chair, and sat down beside Johnny.

“It’s raining,” he said. His damp suit jacket smelled like cigarette smoke. “Your wife in there?” he asked Johnny, who nodded.

“Mine, too. This your first?” Without waiting for an answer he said, “I already have a six-year-old boy.” He lifted his feet, one at a time, and inspected his shoes, top to bottom. “She was two weeks late with him. I hope we don’t have to wait that long for this one.”

The man fell silent then, and opened the magazine. Johnny looked back at the girl who had arranged the dinosaurs in rows as if they were an audience facing the bear and the biggest dinosaur, a brontosaurus.

“You know what I hate about *Wheel of Fortune*?” the man said to Johnny. He was holding up the magazine, pointing

to the picture of Vanna White. "I hate it that some really nice person, someone smart and nice, can get all the letters except like maybe one or two, and then they go bankrupt." He shook his head. He seemed genuinely angry. "And then some idiot dipshit who can barely read gets the answer. Ever see that happen?"

Johnny shook his head.

"That's what happened last night."

"Last night?"

"The clue was *Theater complex of New York and home of the Metropolitan Opera*. Know what it is?"

"I don't think so."

"Lincoln Center. The dipshit wanted to buy a vowel but they were all filled in already. You could see him moving his lips as he sounded it out. The only letter not there was the r and I swear, at one point I thought he was going to say Lincoln Continental. He got it just as the buzzer went off, and this sweet, smart young lady goes home with the parting gifts. You know, like carving knives and tickets to some shitty musical and dinner for two at a restaurant where the food's so bad they have to give it away."

Just then a very pregnant woman passed through the doorway leading out of the examination rooms. She smiled at the man beside Johnny and gave him a thumbs-up.

"All Raaaaaiight!" he said, then got up from his chair, met the woman as she crossed the room, leaned over, and kissed her protruding belly.

"And of course he didn't win the bonus round," the man said to Johnny as he was helping his wife into her coat. "The dipshits never do."

The hula Barbie waved at Johnny again, and this time he got up, walked over to the girl, and sat on the carpet beside her.

"It's a wedding," she said. He now understood the arrangement. The bron-

tosaurus and the bear were the bride and groom. She pulled off her Band-Aid and pressed it onto the back of Johnny's hand. "I don't need it," she said. "I was just wearing it because it's pretty."

He thanked her and looked admiringly at it. Up close he could see that the stars and planets had little faces. Johnny wanted to ask her mother, who was smiling at them, if he could pick the girl up, if he could hold her in his arms.

"They're going to have a baby," the girl said, pointing at the newly married couple, at the bear's fat little belly.

"The baby will be half bear and half dinosaur," Johnny said back, stupidly.

"No, no, no," she shook her head. "It's a girl."

"A beautiful one, I bet," Johnny said.

The girl turned, stretched, held herself upright, but remained kneeling. "They just had a checkup," she said, then picked up the hula Barbie and held it out toward him. "This is the doctor."

"I hope everything's okay," Johnny said to the doctor.

The girl rose to her feet, looked at him impatiently, held the doctor so close the hard small face was touching his ear and whispered, "Of course it is."