

Mrs. Mucharski and the Princess

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“Pretty lady have pretty baby,” were Mrs. Mucharski’s first words to Laurie on her triumphal return from the hospital. They seemed to print the necessary ceremonial flourish over the general, confused joy of the occasion, shaping the moment as delicately and permanently as the pink, kid-leather frames in which Vic, a few weeks later, enclosed the first photographs of Laurie and the baby on the hospital steps.

It was not only that she had spoken perfect truths—for neither camera nor film could make out mother and daughter as anything other than pretty figures in pretty-coloured clothes—but also that Mrs. Mucharski’s accent had somehow rarified the triteness of the compliment, so that she seemed to be performing an incantation or rendering some magical phrase out of an old folksong. R’s trilled; A’s lolled; V’s huffed; together they summoned images from opulently illustrated editions of Russian fairy-tales. Laurie assumed that the housekeeper, with her Slavic cheekbones and tongue had issued from the Eastern-European hodge-podge: Czech, Bulgarian, Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian—it didn’t much matter which. She was foreign and intricately so; independent from her employers both in the shape and tone of her speech, so that when Mrs. Mucharski spoke it was, for all her drab clothes and spare face—which had certainly never been pretty—as though she were addressing her equals.

Perhaps, Sheila, had hinted, the woman was an ex-princess or at least of noble blood, fallen

from good fortune after some natural or historical disaster, and forced to work for her bread like a hard-luck heroine in a fairy-tale. It had been Sheila, ever the indispensable sister-in-law (married for the second time to a Lebanese computer-salesman who claimed, himself, to come of a royal house) who had suggested Mrs. Mucharski when the pediatric nurse the agency had engaged fell through.

“It’s a blessing in disguise, Laurie,” Sheila had urged. “Whatever do you want a nurse for—you can manage all the care for the baby yourself, that’s child’s play (Sheila had four of her own) as long as you’ve got help in the house: you know, for cooking, cleaning, laundry, all the drudge work. And Mrs. Mucharski’s a gem—a pearl, positive. She’s not just a peasant from off the boat, with sweaty armpits and a moustache: she’s a lady. And she’s honest as the day—of how many Portuguese or Vietnamese people can you say that? She *works*, she doesn’t just laze around and chitter-chatter. And she’s not expensive, either, expecially compared with what you’d have to pay for a pediatric nurse—.”

The money, Laurie had interrupted, would be no problem; Vic insisted on the best, and, as Sheila would know, he could afford to get it. This was not just random bitchery; Laurie had, more than a trifle guiltily, wanted someone who could look after the prospective baby for a few hours every day, so that she could escape downtown once in a while; shop, meet friends for lunch, unwind and unbond a bit after her preg-

nancy. Sheila would have clucked at this, nattered about *La Lèche* (she still had a two-year old tugging at her breasts) and how money was just no substitute for mother-love—so Laurie had deflected her by lighting a little flare of sibling rivalry and had then pounced with: “But if this Mrs. Mucharski is so good, then why isn’t she registered with one of the big agencies? It’s not that I don’t trust your judgement Sheila, but after all, where a newborn baby is concerned....”

“That’s not her style,” Sheila had squealed: “she’s a classy housekeeper, believe me; she likes people to come to her—and she’s choosy. Look, Laurie, she may not *want* to work for you at all: *she* doesn’t need the best that money can buy; some of us plain poor people make do very well without—oh, what the hell, I want to help you out. She’s not with an agency, I guess, because—I’ve never asked her straight out, she’s not that type of person—because there might be some slight problem with Immigration.” Here Sheila’s voice had gone all sweet and snaky through the telephone coils: “Not that there’s anything fishy—she’s straight as a ruler, is Mrs. Mucharski, and she’s been in Canada—oh, for years and years, but—well, it seems that she just never did the proper bureaucratic things when she arrived—you know, all that kaboodle with red and pink and blue tape. Besides, she’s sensitive about her age—I mean, God knows how old she is, you can’t just tot her up as if she were rouged to the hilt and dyed her hair gentian violet. Fifty-five, sixty-five—who knows? But she can do things, Laurie; why, you’ll be just astounded”—Sheila seemed to blow the vowels of the word in and out as if they were a blob of masticated bubble-gum—” at the things she’ll do for you.”

And so she’d come—the very day after Vic had driven a carefully-breathing Laurie into the maternity hospital—and stayed. By the time Vic had brought Laurie home, Mrs. Mucharski had transcended Sheila’s gushes. It was not an easy house to care for; Laurie had run through a baker’s dozen of different cleaning women in the

year they’d lived there, and all of them put together hadn’t managed to accomplish what Mrs. Mucharski had in that one week. Walls had been washed, curtains brushed, even mending attended to: the heap of scarcely-worn clothing Laurie had thrown into a cardboard box to give to St. Vincent de Paul had been all sorted, salvaged, and put away again.

The ivory-and-turquoise Chinese carpets had not merely been vacuumed, but first washed, combed, and plumed somehow, so that you’d swear no one ever could have walked on them. If you could work enchantments with linseed oil and flannel cloths; Ajax and Windex and bleach, then Mrs. Mucharski was some sort of good fairy out of a story-book, though with her humped fingers and hooked back, she looked much more like a wicked witch, webbed in by some white magic. Perhaps this would explain why, after nursing the baby (for at the eleventh hour Laurie had been converted by *La Lèche*, after all) and putting her down to sleep in the wicker basinette which had once been her own, Laurie should feel Mrs. Mucharski’s sharply-angled face, and grave, strange voice shuttle in and out the weave of her own dreams, that first night home.

II

During the first week of Mrs. Mucharski’s stay, Laurie held court in the mid-mornings and late afternoons. Neighbours, acquaintances from the pre-natal classes she’d attended, friends from work, themselves either babyless or unremarried, or both, would stop by to see the baby and to gossip with Laurie in her upstairs sitting-room, dabbling stockinged toes in the plush ivory carpeting, sipping hot, fragrant teas out of porcelain cups, tearing large bites out of the breads and cakes and buns with which the housekeeper had laden the tea tray. For ever since Mrs. Mucharski’s arrival, the kitchen air had hummed with the warm spice of baking: poppy-seed strudels, shining braids of golden bread, small pastries plumped with cheese or meat crowded

each other on the larder shelves. And as they watched the crooked, neat, old woman come and go, her eyes fixed straight, level, but never meeting any curious glance, her hair braided into a tight, steel-coloured band across the top of her head, Laurie's visitors would nod their heads and whisper about the treasure she had found, and then about her good luck in general. Such a baby, such a husband, such a house, such a housekeeper; what fabulous luck: she was like some princess at the end of a fairy-tale. But Laurie would only laugh, or smile and shake her head so that her thick, tawny-coloured hair fell into her great, coffee-coloured eyes. And if, in her fluted tea-gown, with her peaceful, basinetted baby and her sitting-room jungling with hot-house flowers, she was complacent in her happiness, who could blame her? For what is happiness but a talent for luxuriating in your own given circumstances: circumstances which, Laurie's whole attitude declared, had flocked to her as naturally as birds to a broad-branched tree at evening.

So there she sat on top of her kingdom, like a candied cherry on a peak of flushed meringue, while those of her friends who'd brought their babies scorched their tongues with her tea, remembering their own entropic houses heaped with unwashed, milk-stiff nightgowns and souring baby things, while their own infants fretted, mewled, popped out in nervous rashes, and spat up over their shabby jeans. And the bare-wombed ex-colleagues from the small, expensive shop for which Laurie had been a buyer, cooed over the baby's bonnets and smocked nightdresses, and told Laurie that the both of them looked like an ad for *Ivory Snow*. And Laurie just looked prettily down at the reflection quivering in her full tea-cup, or rang the brass bell for Mrs. Mucharski to come up the stairs with a fresh pot or another plate of lovely things for her guests.

At last, however, everyone who could possibly want to see the baby had come and gone, without ever following-up on their promises to return, or

to invite Laurie to their own, less happy houses. Only Sheila kept dropping by, with two or more of her over-fed, contrary children and with warnings about how this honeymoon phase of newborn bliss would last no longer than a pair of stockings. After four such visits, Laurie instructed Mrs. Mucharski to tell Sheila that she was resting any time she called, or that the doctor had forbidden visits from anyone with small, snuffling children. And the housekeeper, for all that Sheila had been her good angel in getting her this job, did as she was told. Somewhat nonplussed, Laurie added this to the list of things she was finding out about Mrs. Mucharski: that her loyalties were strictly professional and temporary, like the jobs she did.

She actually knew very little about the woman, in spite of the fact that, as her visitors failed and the weather tapered into unending, fine, autumnal rain, Laurie spent all her days indoors with only the housekeeper and an increasingly wakeful baby to distract her. One afternoon she'd sat rocking her daughter in a pale, blue-velvet chair, watching Mrs. Mucharski expertly unhook, wash and polish the prisms of the Orrefors chandelier which Vic had brought back from his last business trip abroad. She noticed how the woman's eyes tightened each time she picked up a fragment of the crystal, so clear and slippery-cool it seemed to turn to water in her hands. She saw the small, purplish mole above Mrs. Mucharski's left eyebrow quiver as she knit her forehead at her work; she noticed how her lips seemed to make involuntary tremblings, as though she were praying to herself. And she asked various, unpatterned questions, which were answered as tersely as possible:

"Have you any children, Mrs. Mucharski?"

"No."

"Is your husband living?"

"No."

"What country do you come from?"

"I Canadian, now. Canada my country."

"Have you lived here long?"

"Yes."

And finally, with more irritation than concern, "Mrs. Mucharski, you work too hard—don't you ever sit down and rest for a bit? Sit down now and relax, and just let yourself be for a minute." But the woman had kept silence until, having re-assembled the chandelier and skillfully re-hung it, she turned to Laurie, saying in the odd, encrusted accent, "No, lady. Once I be sit down do nothing, I start think; start and no finish. And then I be finish, too." She'd looked Laurie in the eyes with her own—not large, not beautiful, but somehow fine, precise, judging eyes that rode the slant of her cheekbones, lodging in her face the way a night light settles into a room, illuminating odd patches of ceiling; throwing up soft, distorted shadows. And though Laurie had been opening her mouth to say something, Mrs. Mucharski turned away from her, taking her polishing cloths and the small step-ladder on which she had been standing, and leaving Laurie to the darkening ruin of the afternoon.

III

Whatever it was, over which Mrs. Mucharski refused to let herself think, Laurie wasn't likely to find out. It had happened, at any rate, over there, in that country the housekeeper would not name; that place where history went on, real history, the kind that was someone else's nightmare. When Laurie talked with a certain kind of stranger—hairdressers, or cleaning ladies—she wanted small, clear, coloured bits of information about their lives; certainly no deep pools which might muddy her own bright reflection.

Once or twice, perhaps, she had wondered what it would be like to have everything you possessed wrenched from you, as she supposed had happened to Mrs. Mucharski all those many years ago. House, family, even your language—all gone, for good. But she hadn't a very generous imagination; it stretched no larger than the soft warm smallness of her own skin. Mrs. Mucharski would not talk; Laurie would ask no

more questions, and their silence would be a clean, snowy Switzerland between them, permitting a sure neutrality of emotion. For Mrs. Mucharski no more demanded pity from anyone than she exercised grudges against those who possessed what she presumably had lost. She went about her endless, infinitesimal tasks with the impersonal fidelity of a verger in some large church. While Laurie flitted in and out of the rooms of her house, the woman kept to her work: the cleaning, baking, polishing and putting-away that sent a hum of well-tempered domesticity throughout the household air. And if she never asked to hold or rock the baby; if she never stopped over the basinette to watch the ferocious soundness of the small creature's sleep, or to place a finger in the passionate grip of the baby's toy-like hand, it was, perhaps, only that never having had children she didn't like babies. Lots of people were like that; Laurie didn't mind.

So that when things started to go wrong, bit by little bit, it wasn't as if Mrs. Mucharski had somehow witched the house, disordering the baby's routine or souring Laurie's milk. Yet it had been at her that Laurie snapped one morning when, with nothing to look forward to all day but a baby to feed and change and bathe, she had lain spread-eagled over the brass-bound double bed, pressing reddened eyes into the comforter. Her stitches still twitched painfully when she bent down; her belly hadn't yet lost its pregnant puffiness, and her breasts, which once had been as small and snowy as apples were now long, darkened with railroading veins; the nipples puckered. They hurt her, as she gasped out short, hard sobs; and then they began to leak warm dribbles of milk through the cups of her nursing brassiere, past her peignoir and into the comforter. Sitting up, she fished her reflection from the floor-length mirror that hung across the wall from the bed. She wanted other images, that easy icon of new motherhood that had been beamed at her from every magazine cover, every ad for baby oil: some sixteen-year-old model simulating maternity with a downy-diapered

baby who would toddle off and let her be once the photography was finished. To be fresh, untouched, still virgin, somehow; free to create and float appearances; without always that anchor of small, vulnerable, all-demanding flesh she'd thought to have shed as patently as she'd shed the rubbery plate of after-birth in the delivery room.

All the mirror gave her back was her own, blubbered face; the damp patches making twin bulls-eyes of her breasts, and —Mrs. Mucharski's slight, hooked figure, laden now with armfuls of floaty stuff resembling clouds which had spun through rainbows. "Lady," she was saying, "lady; your things: I be washing two, three times; try clean...." The flounced and ribboned foamy things were the nightgowns Laurie'd taken into hospital with her—stupidly, for they'd all been scarred by ugly thick stains from the blood clots and discharge she had passed after the birth. She flushed and took the things from Mrs. Mucharski's arms; she crammed them into an open drawer and shoved it shut, ripping one of the peignoirs as she did so. It shamed her to have had this old woman handle her things, her very blood; to have had her see her things, unclean like that. It was an intimacy she could not bear, and so she turned petulant, shouting, "Get out, go away—and leave my things alone. I don't want you to touch my things ever again: do you understand?"

Mrs. Mucharski nodded, but her eyes seemed to hook onto Laurie's face; when she walked out she left a certain dark mustiness of disapproval behind. Laurie stood up, and threw a pillow at the shadow the old woman had left behind her; why should that sour-faced witch be judging her with those small, hard eyes? Who did she think she was—whose house did she think this was? And she pushed her head into the comforter again, choking on her sobs; it was all Mrs. Mucharski's fault; if they had got the nurse, the lady the agency had lined up for them, she would be free, now; she'd have someone with whom to

leave the baby—she could go out, downtown, see her friends, live like she'd used to. She would show them all: she'd wean the baby, fire Mrs. Mucharski, hire a proper nurse....

But then the house would fall to pieces; and Vic would complain; and the baby was hers—she didn't want to give it up to some paid stranger. So Laurie had risen from the bed; washed her face and changed her dress, and taken the baby for a walk outside, avoiding Mrs. Mucharski as though the woman really were a witch who'd walked into their house from some ogre-ridden fairy-tale instead of from the city bus. Jumpy, nervy, she found it difficult to push the high-wheeled, bouncy carriage straight along the sidewalk. Instead of lying back like a little oyster in a flounced shell, the baby whimpered, screw-faced, in the frilled sleeping-suit Laurie had dressed her in. Above her head the baggy clouds kept threatening rain; she saw a few steel pins dance off the hood of the baby-carriage, and so she turned back in the direction of her house. Never before had she felt quite so leaden at the thought of reaching her front steps; the fluted columns, the fake Georgian portico, the glossy shutters which were nailed against the brick and which, even if they could have moved, would never have shut flush together—all those were not even unique in their prosperous pretence: every fourth house along the new-developed block had features parallel, and just as false. They'd moved here because of the baby—Vic wanted three children close together—because of the baby, this baby crying raucously as Laurie fumbled with the catch of the carriage hood, getting the lace of the sleeping-suit entangled with the wingbolt in the process. Incompetent; useless—she wouldn't have made it even as a nanny, she despaired, feeling the hot prick of tears under her eyelids. At last she got the baby free, just as the rain gushed down.

It seemed as though her key unlocked some stranger's house; the reflections of newly-polished brass and copper, the pristine arrangement of the

furniture, threw foreign gleams and shadows over her memory of how things used to be inside the house—her house—before Mrs. Mucharski had arrived. Everything had changed so—the breezy calm with which she'd first assumed responsibilities about the baby while in hospital; the regal control she had assumed to have over the running of the house. Such unexplained, disastrous differences—what could these be but a counter-spell to her accustomed happiness, her certain luck? This would be the reason why the baby, instead of nuzzling blindly towards Laurie's breasts and latching on to the warm jets of milk, had now begun to pull away and squirm, or set up a baffled cry after a few furious sucks. This would explain why, if she did feed well, she would in half-an-hour's time, shudder awake, her chin a-quiver and her tiny legs drawn up. Fretting, starting at the least irregular noise; whining unless she were carried up against your shoulder, her head crooning into the hollow just below your collarbone, the baby had begun to keep poor Laurie up half the night and all the day.

Throughout that first distempered week Vic tried to spell her off and on but he hadn't enough time; he was working late these nights on a big project for which his company had just contracted, and which it couldn't afford to neglect. When Laurie complained of lines and shadows under her eyes, of taut nerves and listless boredom, stuck at home all day and night with a whining baby, he'd barked at her: "What else have you got to do besides look after the baby and yourself? Mrs. Mucharski runs the house, I pay the bills, you nurse the baby. Look, she's not a doll, of course she'll cry some of the time; all you've got to do is mother her, so go on—what are you, unnatural or something?"

Over the telephone the doctor had impatiently collapsed Laurie's inquiries as to baby-tranquilizers as though they were so many tottery bowling-pins. "Colic," he diagnosed, "colic pure and simple. It comes on suddenly like that,

in the third or fourth week—it'll last maybe two or three months, and then disappear as magically as it came. You'll just have to cope—the way your mother did with you, and hers with her. Get a sitter in, from time to time, to give yourself a break." But Vic's reproach had armoured Laurie; when he'd returned one lunch-time from yet another business trip, with a dozen cream-coloured roses and tickets to a play, and an offer from Sheila to baby-sit if they couldn't engage a sitter from the agency, Laurie had hurled the roses at him, thorns and all, and locked herself into the bathroom of the master bedroom, while Vic explained the intricacies of post-partum depression through the bathroom keyhole. And all the time the baby kept up a siren-wail of discontent, until Vic had had to break off his suasions and go pace the upper landing to a slow, womb-tempo with his fractious daughter in his arms, and his wife sobbing into the dry Jacuzzi at the hopelessness of it all: what sitter would be able to stand more than half-an-hour of that unceasing, plangent misery? Finally Vic had paced the child to sleep; he put her delicately into her basinet, terrified of shattering the fragile shell of her sleep. And then he'd padded down the stairs, closed the front door silently behind him, and returned an hour later with a year's hoard of Similac in the back seat of the car.

Perhaps it was because he advanced upon her with a tin and bottle opener as if they were a bayonet that Laurie shouted, when she really could have laughed; perhaps it was because she'd hardly slept the night before that she grabbed the Similac out of her husband's hands and threw it at the ceramic tiles of their bathroom floor, from where it bounced up into the mirror that spread-eagled over the vanity, slashing it into a hundred scintillant ribbons. And then they both began to scream, so single-mindedly that neither heard the baby waking up and joining in.

“How dare you! How dare you interfere with the way I nurse my baby! She’s *mine* to feed; I have nothing else to do, remember? You leave us alone—”

“Leave you alone to starve her? What kind of a mother are you if you don’t even know your baby’s starving? The doctor—”

“Screw the doctor—he wouldn’t even come and look at—”

“Of course he wouldn’t pay a house call just to hold the hand of some spoiled suburban princess—”

“You’re the one—you’re the one who wanted to come to these christ-bitten suburbs. Remember those three kids you wanted to have, ‘close together?’”

“I remember; and I wish right now that we’d never—”

“Don’t say it, don’t, Vic—”

And, as is the way of such things, they frightened each other into arms so tight and quick they almost squeezed themselves breathless. Laurie made little, whimpering sounds, and Vic kissed the top of her head, and the quivering domes of her eyelids, and it was another fifteen minutes before either was quiet enough for Vic to loose his arms and say, “We’d better get Mrs. Mucharski in to sweep up all that glass....”

But when they looked for her, Mrs. Mucharski was nowhere to be found—neither in the kitchen, nor in the laundry room, nor in the slightly stuffy, somewhat damp bedroom which had been prepared for her in the basement of the house. Suddenly terrified, Laurie gripped her husband’s arm and whispered, “Vic—oh, Vic—the baby? What if she’s gone, and kidnapped the baby? It’s been known to happen—and she never liked the poor little thing, and—.”

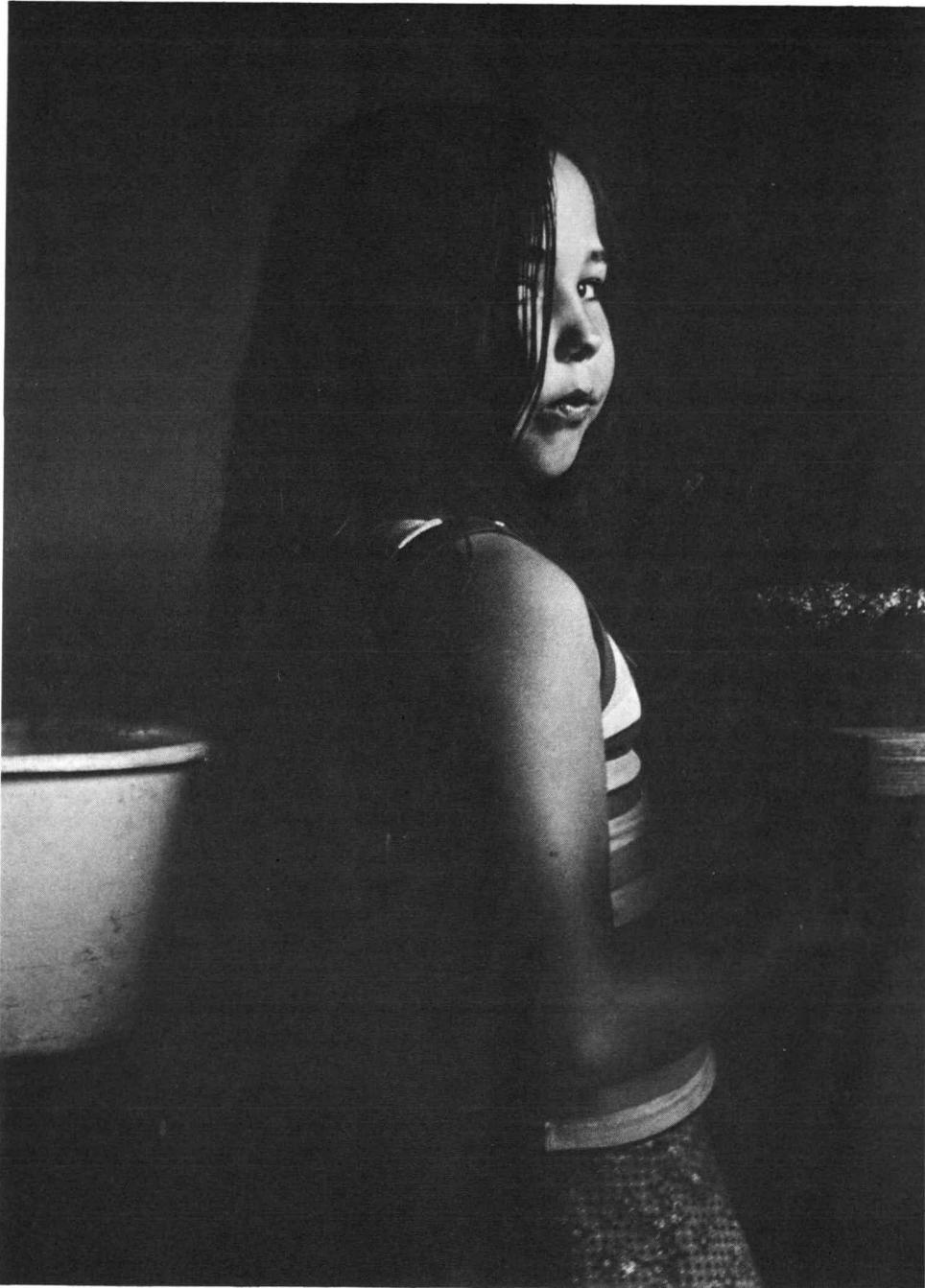
Vic told her not to be an idiot, but, all the same, he raced ahead of her up the two flights of stairs to the top floor where the baby had her small and separate room. They opened the door, but froze on the threshold, like a pair of children discovered in flagrant misdeed. For there, in the

old, curly-maple platform rocker, which Vic had had specially refinished for his wife, sat Mrs. Mucharski, her steel-coloured hair woven into a tight crown upon her head, her sturdy, shabby shoes rooted deeply in the carpet-fluff, her fine, hard eyes enclosing the face of their little daughter, to whom she was feeding milk out of a baby-bottle, while chanting some low, deep song which had no words, just a soothing, strange throb: ay-yah-ah; ay-yah-ah. And it was not until the whole bottle had been finished, and the baby’s eyes were closing in a gassy smile at some bright image on the undersides of her eyelids, that Mrs. Mucharski rose, brought the baby over to Laurie’s limp arms, and surrendered her, saying, “This baby hungry; be cry, no can sleep.” And she walked more in stateliness than arrogance away from them, down the corridor and stairs to some empty portion of the house.

When Vic had showered—after picking up the shattered glass off the ceramic tiles—and dressed, and returned to work; when Laurie had bathed, and as if in way of penance, dressed in one of the few dullish things she had, and come downstairs to the kitchen, it seemed as if nothing had really happened. Mrs. Mucharski was at the worktable, kneading dough. Laurie listened to the sounds of the woman’s hands slapping and shaping the pale damp-looking mass; then, angry at her own awkwardness, she walked a little too quickly to Mrs. Mucharski’s side, so that she bumped into the table, and caused to woman to leave off her kneading for a moment, just to absorb the shock. Into that freed space, Laurie plunged:

“She was hungry; she’s sleeping beautifully now. I guess I haven’t enough milk of my own for her. They say that often happens, when you’re upset or tired. The books say that—you know—?”

Then Mrs. Mucharski’s face became some arching bowstring that would at last be plucked and fired:



Sara, July, 1975
Tamara Farrow, (Sackville, N.B.)

"You know nothing."

The words went into Laurie the way a bee's sting does: barbed, so that each attempt to pull it out only blunders into other flesh, making new points of pain. That pain was wholly foreign, inexplicable; why should this woman, come in to do the cleaning, and thus to spare Laurie fatigue and fuss, possess the power to cause sharp, even if small, suffering? Yet, staring into the woman's face, seeing the way the skin puckered about the eye-sockets, and how her own image gaped in the distorting mirrors of Mrs. Mucharski's eyes, Laurie seemed to be tugging slow words out of flesh that had scarred and hardened over:

"I be having twin babies; girl and boy. I be in camp; no food, no water, nothing; filth, everywhere, filth and empty, dead, everything. I be have"—and here she dropped her eyes to the kitchen counter, as if searching for something; she finally picked up a paring knife, with which she had scraped some carrots: "I be skin, bone, no more fat on me than this knife, but I feed my childrens, I make milk from my body, for giving my babies—"

She stopped, all of a sudden, as if someone had seized the knife from her hand and had begun to trace her backbone with it. The knife had simply dropped from her hands, which she had involuntarily stretched open as if to feel her way past some obstacle, in some obscurity.

Laurie gave another tug: "What camp, Mrs. Mucharski, where?"

The old woman turned away, picked up her dough again, and began bruising it with the palms of her hands. Her words were precise, but barely loud enough for Laurie to hear:

"Far away—not in your country. Labour camp. Prison camp. No understand, lady."

"And your babies, Mrs. Mucharski? What happened to your little girl and boy?" Laurie had to ask, had to determine the facts, had to pull and tug to get free from that first sting. Mrs. Mucharski did not look at her; instead she stopped her kneading, and put floury hands up to her head—a gesture which seemed as if it should end in her fastening a strand of hair, but which finished with her putting hands over her ears, saying,

"I have no babies, no babies, none." She looked up at Laurie, still covering her ears. "I have—nothing. You understand, lady; you understand, now?"

And then, as if her throat were a machine gun she had loaded, which continued to spatter long after Laurie had quit the room:

"No babies; none, none, none—,none, none, none—"

She told Vic, that night, something of what had happened, but couldn't make him understand what had upset her so. "Poor old woman," he'd said—or something like that. And when, before going to sleep in the big, brass-bound bed, she'd pulled at his arm to say "But, really—you don't think all that happened, do you? It's not true—the way she said it?", he only rubbed her hand briefly, muttering, "How can I tell? Look, it's ancient history, and another lifetime altogether. Besides, it's none of our business. Go to sleep, Laurie, you need your rest."

But before she could get to sleep, Laurie heard the baby crying: she got out of bed without turning on the lights, not wanting to wake her husband. Feeling her way along the corridor and up the stairs, she made her way to where the night lamp was shining in her baby's room. Carefully, slowly, steadily as she moved, it seemed a long, long way off, that small light at the very end of the landing. As she came nearer, though, it seemed to split into two gleams. The light be-

came two eyes inside a lantern that was no lantern but a skull, a bone cage, which lengthened, link by link into an entire skeleton. It was a woman's skeleton, it seemed: inside the rib cage were two small, skeleton babies, clinging to the ribs with fingers no thicker than a hair, and nuzzling at the space between the bones. And the skeleton-woman was putting two arms out to Laurie, whether to brace herself against, or to embrace her, she didn't know; for now there were her husband's arms round her instead, and his hands stroking the thick, toffee-coloured hair from her eyes, and his voice saying soothing, comforting things that had no meaning but which made handles for her to grab while she told him her nightmare.

"She's not real, is she? Is she?", Laurie kept repeating, her face pressed into her husband's shoulder. "Because if she is real, then how can I be, too? And in the stories it's the old woman, the witch, who goes up the chimney or dances in red-hot shoes till she dies, so that everyone else can keep on happily, ever-after—." And Vic kept crooning, "Of course not, of course; you're all right, it's just hormones; ancient history—she'll go tomorrow, we don't need her anymore, we'll tell her tomorrow—."

But in the morning it was Mrs. Mucharski who stood in the front hall, her cracked vinyl bag packed, her eyes impassive as she announced that she would be going, as neither of them needed the other any more. She folded her five weeks' wages into her small handbag, refusing Vic's offer of a drive to the bus stop. She would walk, she said—she preferred to walk.

From an upstairs window, holding her baby snug in her arms, Laurie watched Mrs. Mucharski leave the shelter of the porch and walk down the steps, along the sidewalk, and around the corner, until she disappeared. The image of her equal, opposite reality flickered just for a moment, then vanished, as if it had been no more than a blade of shadow on a windy day.