

Nick Miller

Nobody Listened

June, the baby, melted all day, drip by drip, until night when her tired whines came from a pink puddle in the bassinet. Bonnie had been keeping the pills in her jeans pocket now, to grab one whenever nausea set in. They melted slowly under her tongue like shards of ice. Even though the night bleated as hot as the day, even though Spigot scratched a half-inch of wood from the bottom of the door, yapping, barking, and wheezing from his effort, Bonnie managed to put off the racket and the heat for long hours, but as night rose high like a blanket draped over the world, her so darkened her mood. The baby rippled in her bassinet as if someone had dropped in a stone. In a photograph magnetted to the refrigerator, Al, square-jawed in his service blues, kept his eyes on Bonnie while the real, living, breathing Al was gone on a hunting trip with his GI buddies. Keep it together, girl, it kept saying. I'll be back in the morning.

It was 1965. It was Big Spring, Texas. Bonnie was nineteen years old, and there was nowhere to go. The kitchen was a four by six with a range and oven the size of a child's toy. The living room, open and adjoining, and the bedroom they all shared, were sold to them as an *Efficiency*, but Bonnie didn't see anything efficient about rooms so little. She coiled a Joske's catalogue, walked behind Spigot, who frenzied, back shining wetly under the window's nighttime glow, and felt the waters rushing in her stomach finally start to settle. The pill at work.

Sweat rolled from the crook of her elbow and dampened the pages. On wailed baby June, mixed with Spigot's barking and the crush of cars from Highway 87. The thought of a second June inside her stomach, a boy this time, curdling anything she ate, made Bonnie feel very tired.

She ran her fingers over the little bulge of her belly while the cheap, plywood house bemoaned her steps. As the pill mixed with her spit, turned her whole mouth bitter, louder ticked the little hearing-things Al had hidden in the walls. She'd seem him at it when she was pregnant the first time, with baby June. Working for hours on the ladder with three other boys from the base, cutting open the walls, he tucked in pillowy, pink sheets of insulation. They'd gotten extra money on contract from the military to go around and slice open everyone's walls. She'd overheard other women complaining about it in the barracks. Trying out the same gizmos the Russians were using, Bonnie guessed, putting them into their own houses on the base to keep tabs on the young wives. Back then her stomach hurt worse, because back then she didn't have these little pills.

Something whirred within the star-shaped clock hung on the kitchen wall. Inside the yellow, flower-printed sofa, an old man hummed. The ficus plant swallowed a dry lump. As Bonnie coiled the catalogue more tightly in her hand, she sensed the walls leaning in to listen. They glistened with sweat.

They'd been through two AC units, but Bonnie learned that the weather in Big Spring wouldn't lose. When the belt snapped inside the first one, so loud that June burst in Bonnie's arms, the baby bubbled her first word: *Hot*. They were still new then, just down from New York, and she had to put the baby on her hip and walk all the way through her neighborhood, past the trash can row, to the officers' block, where Mr. Biffle and his wife lived. Mrs. Biffle kept yelling at her to shut up that baby, and didn't she know Mr. Biffle was taking his afternoon rest, and she'd have to come back in the evening if she needed to make a transaction. Bonnie gathered that the girls around the base didn't care for the snap in her accent, the way she walked everywhere

fast, as if in a hurry. Eventually, Mr. Biffle sold them a second one, full-priced, but the fan died secretly by way of gradual whooshing, and back in crept the heat. Al got home and sledged the thing to the size of a jewelry box, white-hot with hate for the officers. The beat-in thing sat in the corner of the living room, the plastic ficus in front of it that Bonnie ordered from the Joske's catalogue. It, too, listened to her.

The same catalogue, coiled like a spring in her hand, looked glossy from the spilt-in porch light, and she brought it down against Spigot's back hard enough to squeal him shut. Only the gurgles from the baby, like a fish tank, kept on. Bonnie sucked pill grit from between her teeth. On the refrigerator, Al didn't budge.

The house leaned when Spigot trundled off. Bonnie dipped her fingers into the crying puddle, threw June onto her shoulder and watched her run down her chest like mercury. Glad—that was it. Glad was how she felt that Al wasn't there while the baby went off like a firetruck siren. If you asked him, she was the one who birthed June, so any noise she made was Bonnie's fault. Likely Mrs. Biffle would agree. She stepped a foot onto a toy truck, one she'd bought for the incoming boy and left on the living room floor, and skated it back and forth while she rocked June. Under her tongue, the pill had eviscerated. To clear her mouth of the foul taste, she took a cigarette from the buffet drawer, lit it with Al's daddy's 8-ball Zippo, and puffed like a locomotive until the crying waned. She slid the smokes and lighter into her jeans pocket.

Once before, Spigot had done the same thing—walloped until Bonnie had to go quiet him with a newspaper. From all that backing, the baby had woke and wailed. But it wasn't the door that time. Spigot was trained on the window, turning up on his hind legs like a circus dog. Bonnie had looked out and seen a set of booted feet, legs, kicking from a neighbor's window like

a docked fish. As if moving in rewind, the man wriggled out, not in, followed by rising spears of white smoke. The strangeness of the scene had stayed with her. When he had come back from his hunting trip, Bonnie told Al if they couldn't afford a wall phone and couldn't afford a car, at least they could afford a pistol. A week later, he walked in with a package wrapped in parchment paper, and Bonnie undid the twine, unwrapping a pearl-handled .22, nickel-plated. It kicked like a mule. And like everything in Bonnie's house, it had its place. Right there in the buffet drawer.

Because, without a gun, what was she to do? There wasn't even housework, not in a home so small. All she had was waiting, she sensed, waiting until Al upped in rank and so did his paycheck. Either that, or for something bad to happen. Thinking about the unending hours, the waiting and waiting, Bonnie couldn't get her blinks right. One eye closed before the other. Plus the pill was waning, and she felt her stomach easing back into a tumble. It also seemed for a moment the baby didn't cry like a baby. She cried like a woman, with labored heaves in and cackling shoulder-shudders out. Wet pooled Bonnie's underarms and behind her knees, where forlorn Spigot brushed his side against her in apology.

Waiting was harder when she carried June. She'd been seasick without anything to take her mind off it. But the morning sickness pills were brand new, and the doctor told her she couldn't take too many. They were good with pain, but better with memory. She could forget all about being pregnant again.

Bonnie patted the baby all the way to the kitchen. In the photograph, the hat pulled down over his cottony hair failed to age Al. Same with the mustache, which made him look none older, she thought, but instead laid his cards straight down on the table. His bit-down seriousness, too, looked to Bonnie like a boy's trick—puffing the chest. She whispered all this in baby's ear while

she rocked her in her arms, and in the measly kitchen, the tone of the baby's crying softened again sounding to Bonnie less like a child's wails and more like the weeping of a woman. She tried to focus on it over the tick of all the secret devices, which whirred like crickets. Spigot tenderly pawed the door, his coal eyes turned to Bonnie.

What she could use was a TV or a radio, even a phone. To call anyone, she had to walk to the barracks, to the pay-phone. And there wasn't a shred of privacy in that. All those men flocking in and out, and the other wives, too. Nobody ever dropped in a second quarter to talk for a while more. Not Bonnie anyway, not even when she wanted to call every New York number she could think of, just to try to hear the city breathing in the background.

The baby felt heavier in her arms, and though she was draped over Bonnie's shoulder, her cries still seemed like they were coming from another room. She squinted and listened. Through the front door, more clearly than anything in her life, Bonnie heard muffled moans. Soft pouting, and shallow, dejected knocks at knee-height. She froze there for a moment, her breath hurrying, catching up with the pace of the crying outside the door.

She poured the baby back into her bassinet, and to her surprise, the puddle was gone. June was pill-shaped, with her daddy's cottony hair, piled up like a used Q-tip. Bonnie hurried back to the buffet table. The pistol was heavy in her hand, and she clicked open the catch to be sure it was loaded. With one hand, she snapped the safety slide, and tucked the gun behind her back, into the waistband of her jeans.

In the kitchen, Bonnie pressed her ear to the door and listened for the weeping woman. It had the start and stop of the subway train that ran under her house when she was a girl in Queens—muffled just like it, too. Bonnie reached for the knob, pulled back the door.

The girl sitting on the porch didn't turn to look at her. Darker than the midnight sky, her hair ran all the way down her back, straight and neatly brushed, nearly sweeping onto the porch steps. Her elbows jutted out, rested against her knees, long and willowy like the rest of her. She cried like a dying engine.

Bonnie stepped through the screen door, let it swing back and smack against the frame. The girl whipped her head around. She had a face like meat on a hook. One eye was sunken in, with rings of black like waterlogged tree-bark cascading her cheek. A line of blood connected her nostril to her thin, pale lips. Between them, an unlit cigarette dangled. The other eye squinted at Bonnie, drowsy and confused.

Bonnie felt her heart flutter, looking at the discolored face. "Who are you?" she asked.

She reached in front of her face and snapped a lighter once, twice, three times, each sending up only a spark, which glinted in reflection from her blood-caked eye. She shook it and tried again, but the cigarette would not light. The girl slapped her hand against the porch step and swore.

Bonnie felt like swearing back at her for cussing on her porch, in front of her house with her baby, but it was nothing the child hadn't heard before.

"Nobody listens to me and I just hate it," the girl said.

Bonnie said, "You had better get out of here," but the girl didn't move, just began crying again.

Bonnie sat next to her on the porch step and looked more closely at her face. She was a skinny beauty, and had, where it wasn't broken, skin the color of rice paper. Her cheek was cut, and under the glow of the yellow porch light, whatever was oozing shimmered. From her neck,

swinging and flashing was a fat, jeweled locket. The blood looked like carnival paint, the same kind Al had paid for an old woman to draw over Bonnie's face in Parsippany, before they ended up in that little field by the creek, six months later done with high school and baby-carrying, married, and seated in the back of a sweaty GI bus headed for the armpit of the Chihuahuan Desert. The girl looked like someone Bonnie had seen on that bus, too, but she couldn't be sure.

"Can I see your lighter?" The girl reached out her hand, quivering in the night air.

"You can start with your name," Bonnie said. "What's your name?"

She patted her pockets. "That son of a bitch took my good lighters."

"If you have a problem, you can go down to Mrs. Biffle's. That's what the wives do, when you have a problem." Bonnie felt her stomach get mad at her words. From her pocket, she pulled one of the little morning sickness pills and stuck it under her tongue. "Mr. Biffle is the operations officer. His wife is Florine. Mrs. Biffle. Don't you know her?"

The girl turned again to Bonnie. "Are you stupid?" Spit misted Bonnie's forehead. "Are you bat-shit stupid? I'll go tattle and hear about how hard my husband's job is. Then take an extra one at home for all my trouble. You must be stupid or something."

"I'm not stupid," Bonnie said calmly, as if with practice. "They can sell you an air conditioner or anything."

The girl's face looked like it could drip off her skull. From inside the house, she could hear the ticking start up, could hear the machines listening in. Overhead, whispers sidled down the telephone lines. Bonnie leaned close to the girl's ear. She was staring off into the road, and Bonnie could smell something like maraschino cherries on her skin, sweet and stale.

"Nobody listens to me anyway," she said.

Bonnie tried to focus on the girl's face. "Does he listen to you?" she asked. "Is he listening now?"

"Nobody listens to me," the girl hollered. "That's the whole sorry reason for all of this. Nobody listens or does what I say. I've got half a mind to go take his sorry hammer and knock the plaster off his walls. And steal the pipes. I'll rip out all them pipes." She knocked the back of her head against the door behind her.

"I've been thinking about doing that too," Bonnie whispered. "When Al's not home. Pulling out all the wires."

"Come on. Let me see that lighter," the girl said.

Bonnie looked up at the telephone lines cutting across the sky. The clouds were huddled together, brewing in the gun-steel blue air.

"They probably already know," Bonnie said. "So we might as well go tell Mrs. Biffle. They already know so we might as well try to save ourselves and go tell Mrs. Biffle what your husband's done."

"No husband of mine. I mean it. Nobody. Nobody at all." She rubbed her locket between her fingers.

"I'll file the report. I'll say I heard it happening. That way you won't catch hell for it," Bonnie said, standing. "You just got to tell me your name."

The girl flicked the lighter in front of her face again and again.

Bonnie left the girl on the porch and pushed the door inside. In the house, in her bassinet, baby June was a puddle again, and Bonnie had to pour her onto her shoulder. The baby was so hot, but at least asleep in her arms. She filled a glass with water from the tap and sipped away the

bitter taste the pill had left, and after she put it in the sink, she reached behind her and stroked the pearl handle to the gun tucked into her jeans, made sure it was secure.

On the porch, the girl glowed yellow. She stood when she saw Bonnie, leaning her hand against the screen door to keep from buckling. They started walking. When Bonnie stepped from the porch, she felt a wash of relief. Maybe she imagined it, she couldn't tell, but something like a breeze, hardly detectable, pushed over her.

“Come on,” Bonnie whispered. “This way.”

The pale girl followed, wobbly-legged, like a newborn animal. Pressed into her waist, Bonnie again fingered the cold steel of the gun, felt it wiggle lower with each of her strides. The base rolled out before them like a shantytown, shoebox-looking houses in a line at either side, a swath of dirt road painted down the middle, snaking all the way to row of trashcans, maybe fifty of them, before the bigger shoeboxes where the officers slept. The barracks in the distance always kept its lights on, where Mr. Biffle kept his office and there was the payphone. A blue light radiated from a porthole window in the side of the building. It was a little hill—not what Bonnie would've called a hill in New York, but here, it was a hill—that overlooked tickets of brush, palmy cacti, and a whole field of hairy sand sage giving way to transmission towers in the distance. Each house had a porch light, the same as Bonnie's, and they glowed yellow in unison like a landing strip. The baby looked away from her, and Bonnie imagined June was counting all the little yellow porch lights they passed.

There were no trees, no leaves, but Bonnie swore she heard wind pushing through them. The land reached out flat forever as they walked past the GI houses. Most doors were closed, lights out, but some women stood silhouetted by their open doors, smoking and fanning

themselves, draping baby clothes and uniforms over their porch rails. Each open door they passed closed, it seemed to Bonnie, as the two women and baby went past.

In Jamaica, Queens, Bonnie never saw such flatness, her eyeshot was always jagged with buildings and concrete and people. Not here, where the sky seemed to wrap around the tan land and hold it in place, like a drinking glass turned to trap a spider. Only the sand sage tossed their heads from time to time.

“Say, could you give me that lighter?” In her pale lips, the cigarette tottered.

Bonnie looked past the base where the transmission towers stood like giant steel men waiting for a train. She saw the wires that ran from one to the next when clouds pushed over and the sky pulsed behind. Heat lightening illuminated the shoulders of clouds. In her arms, the baby turned and tucked her head into Bonnie’s neck. She could feel June getting heavier in her arms.

“If I had a dollar every time I asked something and nobody listened. Every time I said something and got ignored. If I had a dollar every time.”

“For god sakes,” Bonnie said. “Here.” She held the baby on her hip and fished in her pocket for the lighter. Al’s daddy’s lighter glinted the houselights, the eight ball like a bullet hole.

“Say, thanks,” the girl said, but didn’t light her cigarette. She just pushed her locket to the side, reached into her shirt neck, and tucked the lighter into her bra. “Nobody ever listens to me or does nothing for me. I should’ve known Jimmy’d do it. It was right there in the paper. I follow these things closely.”

Watching her long limbs, gawky and tossing while she walked, Bonnie wondered if that’s what such big openness did to a person. With so much space to grow, there was no telling how

someone would end up. Not her, not growing up in New York, where you were lucky, you had enough space to shoot up.

“What’s your sign?” the girl asked.

Even the trees had ties on them, sometimes black tubes made out of plastic, that shaped them as they grew and kept them in place. But still, she’d learned to be compact from living there, and when Bonnie walked, she was neat and quick. She wondered about the baby, sleeping in her arms, about how she would become in this place. She imagined seeing what the baby saw, all those porch lights suspended and glowing down the line, like pixies frozen in midair. It all turned an even shade of black, stinking, when they reached the stretch of trashcans.

“See, you don’t even listen,” she said.

The sound of churning, rocks spat against a chassis, echoed from behind them. Bonnie turned and saw two blinding high-beams cutting slowly across the darkness and landing on the faces of houses. Her stomach gurgled. She continued to walk the dirt road as the headlights turned on them. Groaning as if the muffler had been chopped off, the truck rounded the bend.

“Shit,” the woman said, her cigarette still pinned between her lips. “Shit. Give me that lighter.” Her fat locket kicked back the light.

“Shit what?” Bonnie turned to face the truck, which was nearing their side, and stepped back from the road. She brought the baby close to her body. “What’s shit?”

Even in the lowlight, Bonnie could see that the paint had all but rusted off the truck, which wore the color of rock-dust even on its windshield.

“Keep on, let’s go,” the girl said, and Bonnie followed behind.

Bonnie hiked the baby higher on her hip to keep up. “I’m a Leo,” she whispered.

The truck evened up with them, and though the inside of the cab was dark, Bonnie could feel eyes on her, could hear the ticking of little machines.

The breaks squealed as the truck slowed to a roll next to the girl. Bonnie walked behind nervously, ducking closer to the trashcans, the shadows thrown over the road by the tall, faceless moon. The window rolled down as the truck rolled slowly next to the girl, and from the opening rose wisps of smoke. When the voice came out, it surprised Bonnie. It sounded like a little boy's.

"Sue," he said from inside the blackness of the cab. "Come on, baby, what're you doin'?"

The girl kept walking, her hands balled into little fists, and head down, straight toward Mr. Biffle's office and the little port light. Bonnie strained to hear what they were saying.

"I'm being nice, Susan Jean, Jesus. Now get in the truck."

"Piss off," she said, and waved her hand as if swatting a mosquito. "I'm done with nice. Nobody listens."

The truck crunched the rocks it rolled over, and Bonnie hurried to stay within an earshot. Overhead, veins of blue tore across the sky. She could feel the baby getting heavier in her arms, felt the little thing shake when the thunder bleated.

"You're done with me?" He laughed loud, like a cough. "You, of all people, are done with the only one who loves you? Who feeds you? Get your drunk ass back in the truck."

Bonnie tried to keep pace but felt the baby weighing her arms. She tossed June up onto her hip again. Closer to Mr. Biffle's, Bonnie could see between the houses where, in the distance, a whole field of sand sage swayed in the wind like hair underwater, bowing to the farther transmission towers with their heads in the sky. It smelled like coming rain.

The truck kept up its slow roll. “You expect me to chase you after what you done? A new uniform’s thirty dollars, Suzie girl, and I know you think I’m made of money. Can pay for any of the shit you decide to light fire to. But no ma’am, no sweetheart, that’s just not the way it is.”

“Piss off. Nobody listens.”

Suddenly, the truck headlights cut off and the road in front turned a new shade of black.

“I’ve got a tire iron on the seat next to me you’ll listen to,” he said.

She started to run, but her legs tangled together and she hit the ground and went still.

Again the truck cranked and slammed to a stop next to the fallen girl. Bonnie ducked into a shadow, crouching to slide into the darkness. Through the cans next to her, she could smell the garbage rotting in the heat. The baby fussed little giggles and a burp while Bonnie bounced her to keep her quiet.

For a moment, none of them moved. Not the truck, not the girl, not Bonnie. Only the heavy baby squirmed in her arms. Then the door squawked open. From the driver’s side, a stocky shadow hurried around the truck and opened the other door. His shadow grew as he walked to the still body of the girl in the road, and though some of him was lit by the high moon, Bonnie could see no features in his face. The man knelt before her, tried scooped her up like a calf, but groaned.

A flash in the sky lit him up. A boy’s face, scared, brimmed by a cap. Rain stippled her arms. She could hear the boy speaking sweetly to her on the ground, but couldn’t make out any of his words. Then fell the thunder. Like boulders moving in the sky. With no wait, another flash of lightning threw across the sky, and there was the truck, slithering down the road in light rain.

By the time the thunder sounded, Bonnie found herself crouched next to the trashcans, her baby sitting on her hip and crying mercilessly, and her gun in her hand, and the pain in her stomach awake. In the street, she could see only the outline of the girl, a bundle of darkness etched in dirty yellow. She hurried to the street, watched the heap of shadows grow as fast as the nauseous feeling inside her stomach.

Up close, Bonnie saw that the girl had been rolled over onto her back, and there a was a stitch of wet dirt between her lips. Bonnie lowered herself on her knees, still cradling the baby. The blood from her nose was more now. Something else seemed different about the girl, though. It was her neck, her bony and jutting throat, no longer adorned by the jeweled locket. Bonnie leaned an ear in close and heard that the girl was breathing.

“Wake up, wake up,” she said, jostling the girl’s shoulders. “Come on, get up!” she said, but the girl didn’t move. Her head flailed loosely, muscles dead. Bonnie lifted her hand and smacked the girl clean across the face, as hard as she could. There was a loud clap, and, at the same instance, another breach of lightening overhead. But she didn’t wake up. The slap only opened her mouth and slicked Bonnie’s hand with the girl’s blood.

She could run for help, she thought, all the way to Mr. Biffle’s. She could get him if he was in, or make a call at the pay-phone. She didn’t have any money. Plus, there were snakes. She couldn’t leave the girl. But she knew the weight would be too much—both the girl and the baby—and her stomach was turning bad. That was how it went after a few of the pills. She couldn’t take the pain once it came back. And with the sight of blood, she thought she’d throw up, right then and there. She stood and looked down at the barracks and beyond to the officer’s houses,

feeling a great whoosh of dizziness. The porthole light wobbled, blue and distant, and Bonnie guessed it at least another half-mile.

Could she just leave? Bonnie wondered. Could she walk away? She glanced down the road at the houses she'd passed. Each of them was dirty and squat, with slivers of dust lawn between them, not like the skinny, terraced homes in New York clustered tight together. Up the streets, the officers houses didn't look much better, but they stood a head taller, cleaner. Something to aspire to. Something to lose. She looked down at the girl, at her obliterated face. Who would recognize her, even if Bonnie did do something? She was just another girl, married into Big Spring, memorable only because she was so easy to forget.

"Miss," Bonnie heard the girl whisper from the ground, both the sunken and the good eye closed. "Miss." It sounded like a snake slithering through the mesquite. Bonnie knelt next to her again and shook her shoulders. She lifted her so her head was just above the ground. The girl's unhurt eye cracked open.

"Miserable bitch," the girl said.

Bonnie dropped her.

She coughed. "Nobody does anything." Her voice was weak and distant. "Listen to me. Give me your lighter."

Bonnie took up the girl by her shirtfront. Her face was smeared over with blood and confusion. Trying to pull her to her feet, Bonnie felt the girl stiffen. She wouldn't move. "What the hell's wrong with you?" Bonnie said, pulling.

"I'm not going anywhere with you." The girl smiled, and her teeth were sparse and blackened with blood. "What are you, stupid?"

Bonnie dropped her again and heard the cllop of the girl's head against the dirt road and a grunt. She rose up and hoisted the baby onto her hip. If Al came home now and saw this. Her standing over a strange woman, gun tucked in to the back of her jeans and the baby in her arms. The snakes could have the girl, she didn't care.

“Little girls,” Bonnie said, “get beat all the time.”

She looked down at her for a moment, counting the breaths it took to walk away.

She turned, and the baby started to cry as she walked. Over her shoulder, the girl cried too, softly, from the ground. She was saying something about listening. If it was New York, she would've never even walked off the porch. She would've locked the door and called the police, squeaky clean. The porch-lights all looked like indictments to her. Out here, anything could kill you. Bonnie was almost at the houses again when she stopped.

She walked back to the girl and knelt beside her. The baby's crying lined up with the girl's, and there were huffing silences large enough for Bonnie to fit inside of, to for a moment fall asleep. Bonnie pulled the gun out from the back of her jeans and rested in on the girl's stomach, then picked up her hand and placed it over the handle. She leaned in to whisper something to her—one last thing—but she could feel her heartbeat in the pit of her stomach, and no words came to her. She only hesitated there for a moment, her face next to the beaten face of the strange GI's wife.

When she got back to the house, she wasn't sure if she had walked or run, only knew that moon wasn't visible through the her bedroom window, only knew that the morning was halfway home. She didn't want to wait for Al to get in, so she showered herself and washed the baby, then lay in bed with a pill under her tongue until the heat felt like it melted off her in thick sheets.

When she woke, it was before morning. The sky outside the window was breaking the color of prickly pears, and Bonnie felt sweat on her face and soaked into the sheets around her. Her hands shook. She had done something wrong. Next to her, Al snored facedown in a pillow. His hairy back faced her and smelled like salt and booze. Bonnie felt the contents of her stomach, the beginnings of the new baby, rushing in circles. She remembered the girl lying half-dead in the middle of the road. The gun resting on her stomach. Al would wake up in a few hours, and then it was only a matter of time before he found the gun was gone. Or, worse, news around the barracks about a dead woman found with a nickel-plated .22 on her stomach. They could trace the papers back to Bonnie. And the girl, that poor girl, beaten and robbed. What would they think? What would he do, she wondered, but she already knew.

In her crib on the other side of the room, the baby whimpered and began to fuss. As quiet as she could, Bonnie sat up and snuck out of bed. She slid on a pair of jeans under her nightshirt, scooped the baby in her arms, and bounced her silently to the kitchen. Looking out the screen door, Bonnie swallowed a pill with a glass of tap water, and watched the red morning threaten. She could see the roof of the barracks in the distance, and a few patches of the road snaking toward it, and the sad, enormous transmission towers backed by sky.

The clouds came to her as if on a conveyor belt, and at the same moment, the baby began to cry. She had to go check for the girl, for the gun. Bonnie felt something alive and fluttering inside her stomach when she slipped out the screen door, careful to glide it back into place without slamming, without waking Al. The sky was still dark to the west, where the branches of morning light hadn't yet reached.

Overhead, the telephone lines whispered. The porch-lights were mostly on still, and road tumbled, curling in on itself like the funhouse she and Al had traipsed through at the carnival, afterwards. She remembered looking into the strange, trickster mirrors, seeing them distort like the road was in front of her, seeing herself bloated like a balloon in the middle, then stretched high enough to touch the ceiling. Al too was different, stretched and distorted and changed, and they walked hand in hand, still not knowing what inside her had already begun to bloom.

As she rounded the bend, she saw that the girl was gone. Where Bonnie had left her, she could see nothing, only a half-hearted snow-angel left in the dust. She walked until she stood over it, could see the long, straight trail the girl's hair had swept. She scoured the road for the gun. She ran from one side to the next, searching every inch of dust, running her hands over the sad stalks of grass that grew thinly from cracks in the earth.

When Al had first got her the gun and taken her to the range, she held it too close to her face, didn't expect such a kick. She had a bad black eye, not as bad as the girl's, but bad still. Al had laughed while she dabbed her bleeding cheekbone with the bottom of her blouse. Now she was searching for it, that thing that made her bleed.

Morning light shined off its muzzle, sitting there in a tangle of dried mesquite, and the glint caught Bonnie's eye. She crouched to see it, the handle spotted with bits of blood, rippled by the lines of the girl's fingertips. She hadn't realized how beautiful the gun was, and looking at it shining in the dead brush, Bonnie felt a bath of relief, the same kind she'd felt when they first clicked on that second AC unit, and the fans spun and the little ribbons danced toward her and, for a moment, the air was no longer still, but instead rushing toward her as if it wanted to be closer to her body. She wrapped her fingers around the gun and stood.

When the breeze pushed through, she smelled the dry air of Texas as if from an incinerator.

To the west, a line of black smoke eddied toward the cloudless sky. Bonnie squinted to see through the distance, walking back along the long line of dark trashcans. She shuffled her feet along the dirt road, back toward her house. The GI's doors were opening. Women in nightgowns, some with their hair up in curlers, stared with open mouths at the rushing smoke in the distance. Past her own roof, she could see more of it. Like snakes circling one another up and up.

Around the bend, Bonnie saw the house burning. She heard children snickering around the legs of their mothers, looking up at the spire of flame, the house grown tall from it, bones of crumbling black. Flames lapped at the sky. She heard it churning, a dry *tick, tick* mixed with the whispering telephone lines, secrets sneaking from home to home. A window blew out and glass rained onto the road like buckshot, jetted into the stucco wall of the house next door. As Bonnie walked, slow as the Texas women, cradling her daughter and the blood-speckled gun, flames ate the little house, taking everything up and up into the sky.

The baby was so heavy. She stopped and set June down in the dust, then, she closed her eyes. Standing there, she repainted it all in her mind. She could form the fire, item by item, by only hearing its gargle and snap. In her mind, it blazed gloriously. The soot floated down around her ankles, around the baby, and the filthy smoke rose higher than the roofs, higher than the telephone lines, where billows mixed with the black lines of the rippling dawn like watercolors. She saw it all until she couldn't tell what was what. Until she had no idea.