

in her armpit. "I read an article that said something about certain chemicals in some lotions that are toxic to babies. I'll email it to you from work."

She fills the inbox of a Hotmail account I gave her, one I haven't reliably checked since the summer after college.

But these little crescent moons. They're sharp on the edges where they were cut, dull and smooth along the convex top. Holding them, it feels like somehow there's a way to make her be here now, to move back to where we were a few months ago, like moving back to an old apartment. Its an irrational thought but I've been having those more lately. I don't know why its amazing to me that I'm touching her now, a part of her she discarded. Like me

The kid runs across the room to where I'm slumped in the corner, the vacuum still roaring. I wipe my cheeks off on my shirtsleeve, not catching at all what he's saying to me. He's got two hands on one of those water games, the plastic ones that look like sea monkey kits where you shoot jets of air to toss little rings through the water trapped inside. The rings are flying off the spires as he shakes it, babbling on under the vacuum cleaner sound. He slaps a palm on the switch and it makes its dying motor sound. All the rings but one are off the spires.



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they'd vacuum up all the cells and grow a new her and me and Aidan that I'd run into her as that I haven't hanging around town either. Not beasts carved from flimsy ivory. She never painted her nails since we had the kid. I'm not looking for them, on my knees cleaning the edges of the living room, but I find them.

She's still here, in a way. The dust on the edges of the molding and on the rim of the light switch plate is probably 30 percent her neuron bomb got dropped and we were all wiped out and archeological crews from a future civilization came through here studying, reconstituting the dead from what we touched,

She's somewhere, not far but not right here again in this house. Would we remember each other?

Especially with her friends. Reconnaissance units Stacey and Jennifer. They come as a pair with some kind of decoy object, typically some-thing suspect. Rabbit-eared plastic covers for the outlets

A home knit scarf delivered in early August. Jenn and Stacey, in and out my door ferrying 43 thrift store volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica for Aidan. The kid is four. Last Wednesday they showed up with no-bake cookies as I was paying the sitter. "Vegan no-bake cookies," Jenn noted. The visit's intent was transparently investigative. Nostrils flared discreetly to check air quality. Furniture was sat on gingerly, inspected with hands and given a test bounce. At one point, I could of sworn I saw Stacey measuring Aidan's dimensions with palm lengths.

"So..."

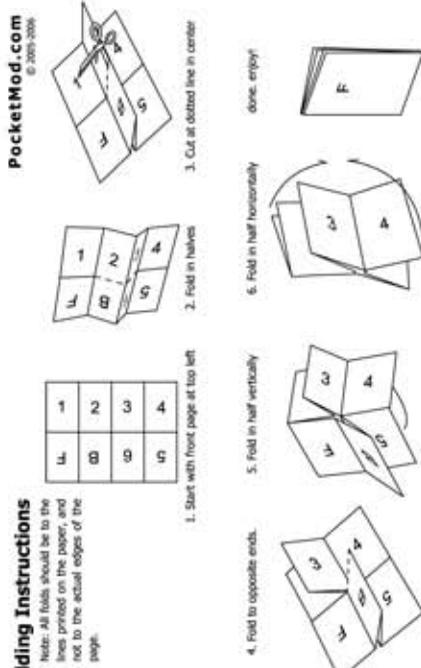
It is my role to prolong the awkwardness, to shape the silence between words into an invisible

arrow that pointed at the door. Leave, you harpies. Whatever promise is written to her in some sympathetic vibration of your ovaries where a more motherly throw should be, that promise is invalid and invading my life. I looked at the kid, leaning against the bookcase, bouncing his butt on the second shelf, watching the scene like it was television.

"Are you using this lotion on Aidan?" Jenn said from the bath-room while wetting a washcloth. I tried to calculate the demerits they'd issue for the dry skin under his nose and a pale crust of this morning's oatmeal at the corner of his mouth. She rounded the corner and pulled him to her with a tight grip on his shoulder, swabbing his face with the washcloth, the suspect bottle of lotion tucked

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