

BASTER

by Jeffrey Eugenides

FRESH COMPLAINT

The recipe came in the mail:

Mix semen of three men.

Stir vigorously.

Fill turkey baster.

Recline.

Insert nozzle.

Squeeze.

INGREDIENTS:

1 pinch Stu Wadsworth

1 pinch Jim Freeson

1 pinch Wally Mars

There was no return address but Tomasina knew who had sent it: Diane, her best friend and, recently, fertility specialist. Ever since Tomasina's latest catastrophic breakup, Diane had been promoting what they referred to as Plan B. Plan A they'd been working on for some time. It involved love and a wedding. They'd been working on Plan A for a good eight years. But in the final analysis—and this was Diane's whole

point—Plan A had proved much too idealistic. So now they were giving Plan B a look.

Plan B was more devious and inspired, less romantic, more solitary, sadder, but braver, too. It stipulated borrowing a man with decent teeth, body, and brains, free of the major diseases, who was willing to heat himself up with private fantasies (they didn't have to include Tomasina) in order to bring off the tiny sputter that was indispensable to the grand achievement of having a baby. Like twin Schwarzkopfs, the two friends noted how the battlefield had changed of late: the reduction in their artillery (they'd both just turned forty); the increasing guerrilla tactics of the enemy (men didn't even come out into the open anymore); and the complete dissolution of the code of honor. The last man who'd got Tomasina pregnant—not the boutique investment banker, the one before him, the Alexander Technique instructor—hadn't even gone through the motions of proposing marriage. His idea of honor had been to split the cost of the abortion. There was no sense denying it: the finest soldiers had quit the field, joining the peace of marriage. What was left was a ragtag gang of adulterers and losers, hit-and-run types, village-burners. Tomasina had to give up the idea of meeting someone she could spend her life with. Instead, she had to give birth to someone who would spend life with her.

But it wasn't until she received the recipe that Tomasina realized she was desperate enough to go ahead. She knew it before she'd even stopped laughing. She knew it when she found herself thinking, *Stu Wadsworth I could maybe see. But Wally Mars?*

Tomasina—I repeat, like a ticking clock—was forty. She had pretty much everything she wanted in life. She had a great job as an assistant producer of *CBS Evening News with Dan*

Rather. She had a terrific, adult-size apartment on Hudson Street. She had good looks, mostly intact. Her breasts weren't untouched by time, but they were holding their own. And she had new teeth. She had a set of gleaming new bonded teeth. They'd whistled at first, before she got used to them, but now they were fine. She had biceps. She had an IRA kicked up to \$175,000. But she didn't have a baby. Not having a husband she could take. Not having a husband was, in some respects, preferable. But she wanted a baby.

"After thirty-five," the magazine said, "a woman begins to have trouble conceiving." Tomasina couldn't believe it. Just when she'd got her head on straight, her body started falling apart. Nature didn't give a damn about her maturity level. Nature wanted her to marry her college boyfriend. In fact, from a purely reproductive standpoint, nature would have preferred that she marry her *high school* boyfriend. While Tomasina had been going about her life, she hadn't noticed it: the eggs pitching themselves into oblivion, month by month. She saw it all now. While she canvassed for RPIRG in college, her uterine walls had been thinning. While she got her journalism degree, her ovaries had cut estrogen production. And while she slept with as many men as she wanted, her fallopian tubes had begun to narrow, to clog. During her twenties. That extended period of American childhood. The time when, educated and employed, she could finally have some fun. Tomasina once had five orgasms with a cabdriver named Ignacio Veranes while parked on Gansevoort Street. He had a bent, European-style penis and smelled like machine oil. Tomasina was twenty-five at the time. She wouldn't do it again, but she was glad she'd done it then. So as not to have regrets. But in eliminating some regrets you create others. She'd only been in her twenties. She'd been playing around was all. But the twenties become the thirties, and a few failed relationships put you at thirty-five, when one day you pick up

Mirabella and read, "After thirty-five, a woman's fertility begins to decrease. With each year, the proportion of miscarriages and birth defects rises."

It had risen for five years now. Tomasina was forty years, one month, and fourteen days old. And panicked, and sometimes not panicked. Sometimes perfectly calm and accepting about the whole thing.

She thought about them, the little children she never had. They were lined at the windows of a ghostly school bus, faces pressed against the glass, huge-eyed, moist-lashed. They looked out, calling, "We understand. It wasn't the right time. We understand. We *do*."

The bus shuddered away, and she saw the driver. He raised one bony hand to the gearshift, turning to Tomasina as his face split open in a smile.

The magazine also said that miscarriages happened all the time, without a woman's even noticing. Tiny blastulas scraped against the womb's walls and, finding no purchase, hurtled downward through the plumbing, human and otherwise. Maybe they stayed alive in the toilet bowl for a few seconds, like goldfish. She didn't know. But with three abortions, one official miscarriage, and who knows how many unofficial ones, Tomasina's school bus was full. When she awoke at night, she saw it slowly pulling away from the curb, and she heard the noise of the children packed in their seats, that cry of children indistinguishable between laughter and scream.

Everyone knows that men objectify women. But none of our sizing up of breasts and legs can compare with the cold-blooded calculation of a woman in the market for semen. Tomasina was a little taken aback by it herself, and yet she couldn't help it: once she made her decision, she began to see men as walking spermatozoa. At parties, over glasses of Barolo

(soon to be giving it up, she drank like a fish), Tomasina examined the specimens who came out of the kitchen, or loitered in the hallways, or held forth from the armchairs. And sometimes, her eyes misting, she felt that she could discern the quality of each man's genetic material. Some semen auras glowed with charity; others were torn with enticing holes of savagery; still others flickered and dimmed with substandard voltage. Tomasina could ascertain health by a guy's smell or complexion. Once, to amuse Diane, she'd ordered every male party guest to stick out his tongue. The men had obliged, asking no questions. Men always oblige. Men *like* being objectified. They thought that their tongues were being inspected for nimbleness, toward the prospect of oral abilities. "Open up and say ah," Tomasina kept commanding, all night long. And the tongues unfurled for display. Some had yellow spots or irritated taste buds, others were blue as spoiled beef. Some performed lewd acrobatics, flicking up and down or curling upward to reveal spikes depending from their undersides like the armor of deep-sea fish. And then there were two or three that looked perfect, opalescent as oysters and enticingly plump. These were the tongues of the married men, who'd already donated their semen—in abundance—to the lucky women taxing the sofa cushions across the room. The wives and mothers who were nursing other complaints by now, of insufficient sleep and stalled careers—complaints that to Tomasina were desperate wishes.

At this point, I should introduce myself. I'm Wally Mars. I'm an old friend of Tomasina's. Actually, I'm an old boyfriend. We went out for three months and seven days in the spring of 1985. At the time, most of Tomasina's friends were surprised that she was dating me. They said what she did when she saw my name on the ingredient list. They said, "Wally

Mars?" I was considered too short (I'm only five feet four), and not athletic enough. Tomasina loved me, though. She was crazy about me for a while. Some dark hook in our brains, which no one could see, linked us up. She used to sit across the table, tapping it and saying, "What else?" She liked to hear me talk.

She still did. Every few weeks she called to invite me to lunch. And I always went. At the time all this happened, we made a date for a Friday. When I got to the restaurant, Tomasina was already there. I stood behind the hostess station for a moment, looking at her from a distance and getting ready. She was lounging back in her chair, sucking the life out of the first of the three cigarettes she allowed herself at lunch. Above her head, on a ledge, an enormous flower arrangement exploded into bloom. Have you noticed? Flowers have gone multicultural, too. Not a single rose, tulip, or daffodil lifted its head from the vase. Instead, jungle flora erupted: Amazonian orchids, Sumatran flytraps. The jaws of one flytrap trembled, stimulated by Tomasina's perfume. Her hair was thrown back over her bare shoulders. She wasn't wearing a top—no, she was. It was flesh-colored and skintight. Tomasina doesn't exactly dress corporate, unless you could call a brothel a kind of corporation. What she has to display was on display. (It was on display every morning for Dan Rather, who had a variety of nicknames for Tomasina, all relating to Tabasco sauce.) Somehow, though, Tomasina got away with her chorus-girl outfits. She toned them down with her maternal attributes: her homemade lasagna, her hugs and kisses, her cold remedies.

At the table, I received both a hug and a kiss. "Hi, hon!" she said, and pressed herself against me. Her face was all lit up. Her left ear, inches from my cheek, was a flaming pink. I could feel its heat. She pulled away and we looked at each other.

"So," I said. "Big news."

"I'm going to do it, Wally. I'm going to have a baby."

We sat down. Tomasina took a drag on her cigarette, then funneled her lips to the side, expelling smoke.

"I just figured, Fuck it," she said. "I'm forty. I'm an adult. I can do this." I wasn't used to her new teeth. Every time she opened her mouth it was like a flashbulb going off. They looked good, though, her new teeth. "I don't care what people think. People either get it or they don't. I'm not going to raise it all by myself: my sister's going to help. And Diane. You can babysit, too, Wally, if you want."

"Me?"

"You can be an uncle." She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. I squeezed back.

"I hear you've got a list of candidates on a recipe," I said.

"What?"

"Diane told me she sent you a recipe."

"Oh, that." She inhaled. Her cheeks hollowed out.

"And I was on it or something?"

"Old boyfriends." Tomasina exhaled upward. "All my old boyfriends."

Just then the waiter arrived to take our drink order.

Tomasina was still gazing up at her spreading smoke. "Martini up very dry two olives," she said. Then she looked at the waiter. She kept looking. "It's Friday," she explained. She ran her hand through her hair, flipping it back. The waiter smiled.

"I'll have a martini, too," I said. The waiter turned and looked at me. His eyebrows rose and then he turned back to Tomasina. He smiled again and went off.

As soon as he was gone, Tomasina leaned across the table to whisper in my ear. I leaned, too. Our foreheads touched. And then she said, "What about him?"

"Who?"

"Him."

She indicated with her head. Across the restaurant, the waiter's tensed buns retreated, dipping and weaving.

"He's a waiter."

"I'm not going to marry him, Wally. I just want his sperm."

"Maybe he'll bring some out as a side dish."

Tomasina sat back, stubbing out her cigarette. She pondered me from a distance, then reached for cigarette number two. "Are you going to get all hostile again?"

"I'm not being hostile."

"Yes, you are. You were hostile when I told you about this and you're acting hostile now."

"I just don't know why you want to pick the waiter."

She shrugged. "He's cute."

"You can do better."

"Where?"

"I don't know. A lot of places." I picked up my soup spoon. I saw my face in it, tiny and distorted. "Go to a sperm bank. Get a Nobel Prize winner."

"I don't just want smart. Brains aren't everything." Tomasina squinted, sucking in smoke, then looked off dreamily. "I want the whole package."

I didn't say anything for a minute. I picked up my menu. I read the words *Fricassée de Lapereau* nine times. What was bothering me was this: the state of nature. It was becoming clear to me—clearer than ever—what my status was in the state of nature: it was low. It was somewhere around hyena. This wasn't the case, as far as I knew, back in civilization. I'm a catch, pragmatically speaking. I make a lot of money, for one thing. My IRA is pumped up to \$254,000. But money doesn't count, apparently, in the selection of semen. The waiter's tight buns counted for more.

"You're against the idea, aren't you?" Tomasina said.

"I'm not against it. I just think, if you're going to have a baby, it's best if you do it with somebody else. Who you're in love with." I looked up at her. "And who loves you."

"That'd be great. But it's not happening."

"How do you know?" I said. "You might fall in love with somebody tomorrow. You might fall in love with somebody six months from now." I looked away, scratching my cheek. "Maybe you've already met the love of your life and don't even know it." Then I looked back into her eyes. "And then you realize it. And it's too late. There you are. With some stranger's baby."

Tomasina was shaking her head. "I'm forty, Wally. I don't have much time."

"I'm forty, too," I said. "What about me?"

She looked at me closely, as though detecting something in my tone, then dismissed it with a wave. "You're a man. You've got time."

After lunch, I walked the streets. The restaurant's glass door launched me into the gathering Friday evening. It was four thirty and already getting dark in the caverns of Manhattan. From a striped chimney buried in the asphalt, steam shot up into the air. A few tourists were standing around it, making low Swedish sounds, amazed by our volcanic streets. I stopped to watch the steam, too. I was thinking about exhaust, anyway, smoke and exhaust. That school bus of Tomasina's? Looking out one window was my kid's face. Our kid's. We'd been going out three months when Tomasina got pregnant. She went home to New Jersey to discuss it with her parents and returned three days later, having had an abortion. We broke up shortly after that. So I sometimes thought of him, or her, my only actual, snuffed-out offspring. I thought about

him right then. What would the kid have looked like? Like me, with buggy eyes and potato nose? Or like Tomasina? Like her, I decided. With any luck, the kid would look like her.

For the next few weeks I didn't hear anything more. I tried to put the whole subject out of my mind. But the city wouldn't let me. Instead, the city began filling with babies. I saw them in elevators and lobbies and out on the sidewalk. I saw them straitjacketed into car seats, drooling and ranting. I saw babies in the park, on leashes. I saw them on the subway, gazing at me with sweet, gummy eyes over the shoulders of Dominican nannies. New York was no place to be having babies. So why was everybody having them? Every fifth person on the street toted a pouch containing a bonneted larva. They looked like they needed to go back inside the womb.

Mostly you saw them with their mothers. I always wondered who the fathers were. What did they look like? How big were they? Why did they have a kid and I didn't? One night I saw a whole Mexican family camping out in a subway car. Two small children tugged at the mother's sweatpants while the most recent arrival, a caterpillar wrapped in a leaf, suckled at the wineskin of her breast. And across from them, holding the bedding and the diaper bag, the progenitor sat with open legs. No more than thirty, small, squat, paint-spattered, with the broad flat face of an Aztec. An ancient face, a face of stone, passed down through the centuries into those overalls, this hurtling train, this moment.

The invitation came five days later. It sat quietly in my mailbox amid bills and catalogues. I noticed Tomasina's return address and ripped the envelope open. On the front of the invitation a champagne bottle foamed out the words:

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Inside, cheerful green type announced, "On Saturday, April 13, Come Celebrate Life!"

The date, I learned afterward, had been figured precisely. Tomasina had used a basal thermometer to determine her times of ovulation. Every morning before getting out of bed, she took her resting temperature and plotted the results on a graph. She also inspected her underpants on a daily basis. A clear, albumeny discharge meant that her egg had dropped. She had a calendar on the refrigerator, studded with red stars. She was leaving nothing to chance.

I thought of canceling. I toyed with fictitious business trips and tropical diseases. I didn't want to go. I didn't want there to be parties like this. I asked myself if I was jealous or just conservative and decided both. And then, of course, in the end, I did go. I went to keep from sitting at home thinking about it.

Tomasina had lived in the same apartment for eleven years. But when I got there that night it looked completely different. The familiar speckled pink carpeting, like a runner of olive loaf, led up from the lobby, past the same dying plant on the landing, to the yellow door that used to open to my key. The same mezuzah, forgotten by the previous tenants, was still tacked over the threshold. According to the brass marker, 2-A, this was still the same high-priced one-bedroom I'd spent ninety-eight consecutive nights in almost ten years ago. But when I knocked and then pushed open the door I didn't

recognize it. The only light came from candles scattered around the living room. While my eyes adjusted, I groped my way along the wall to the closet—it was right where it used to be—and hung up my coat. There was a candle burning on a nearby chest, and, taking a closer look, I began to get some idea of the direction Tomasina and Diane had gone with the party decorations. Though inhumanly large, the candle was nevertheless an exact replica of the male member in proud erection, the detailing almost hyperrealistic, right down to the tributaries of veins and the sandbar of the scrotum. The phallus's fiery tip illuminated two other objects on the table: a clay facsimile of an ancient Canaanite fertility goddess of the type sold at feminist bookstores and New Age emporiums, her womb domed, her breasts bursting; and a package of Love incense, bearing the silhouette of an entwined couple.

I stood there as my pupils dilated. Slowly the room bodied forth. There were a lot of people, maybe as many as seventy-five. It looked like a Halloween party. Women who all year secretly wanted to dress sexy *had* dressed sexy. They wore low-cut bunny tops or witchy gowns with slits up the sides. Quite a few were stroking the candles provocatively or fooling around with the hot wax. But they weren't young. Nobody was young. The men looked the way men have generally looked for the past twenty years: under threat yet agreeable. They looked like me.

Champagne bottles were going off, just like on the invitation. After every pop a woman shouted, "Ooops, I'm pregnant!" and everyone laughed. Then I did recognize something: the music. It was Jackson Browne. One of the things I used to find endearing about Tomasina was her antiquated and sentimental record collection. She still had it. I could remember dancing to this very album with her. Late one night, we just took off our clothes and started dancing all

alone. It was one of those spontaneous living-room dances you have at the beginning of a relationship. On a hemp rug we twirled each other around, naked and graceless in secret, and it never happened again. I stood there, remembering, until someone came up from behind.

"Hey, Wally."

I squinted. It was Diane.

"Just tell me," I said, "that we don't have to watch."

"Relax. It's totally PG. Tomasina's going to do it later. After everybody's gone."

"I can't stay long," I said, looking around the room.

"You should see the baster we got. Four ninety-five, on sale at Macy's basement."

"I'm meeting someone later for a drink."

"We got the donor cup there, too. We couldn't find anything with a lid. So we ended up getting this plastic toddler's cup. Roland already filled it up."

Something was in my throat. I swallowed.

"Roland?"

"He came early. We gave him a choice between a *Hustler* and a *Penthouse*."

"I'll be careful what I drink from the refrigerator."

"It isn't in the refrigerator. It's under the sink, in the bathroom. I was worried somebody *would* drink it."

"Don't you have to freeze it?"

"We're using it in an hour. It keeps."

I nodded, for some reason. I was beginning to be able to see clearly now. I could see all the family photographs on the mantel. Tomasina and her dad. Tomasina and her mom. The whole Genovese clan up in an oak tree. And then I said, "Call me old-fashioned but . . ." and trailed off.

"Relax, Wally. Have some champagne. It's a *party*."

The bar had a bartender. I waved off the champagne and

asked for a glass of scotch, straight. While I waited, I scanned the room for Tomasina. Out loud, though pretty quietly, I said, with bracing sarcasm, "Roland." That was just the kind of name it would have to be. Someone out of a medieval epic. "The Sperm of Roland." I was getting whatever enjoyment I could out of this when suddenly I heard a deep voice somewhere above me say, "Were you talking to me?" I looked up, not into the sun, exactly, but into its anthropomorphic representation. He was both blond and orange, *and* large, and the candle behind him on the bookshelf lit up his mane like a halo.

"Have we met? I'm Roland DeMarchelier."

"I'm Wally Mars," I said. "I thought that might be you. Diane pointed you out to me."

"Everybody's pointing me out. I feel like some kind of prize hog," he said, smiling. "My wife just informed me that we're leaving. I managed to negotiate for one more drink."

"You're married?"

"Seven years."

"And she doesn't mind?"

"Well, she didn't. Right now I'm not so sure."

What can I say about his face? It was open. It was a face used to being looked at, looked into, without flinching. His skin was a healthy apricot color. His eyebrows, also apricot, were shaggy like an old poet's. They saved his face from being too boyish. It was this face Tomasina had looked at. She'd looked at it and said, "You're hired."

"My wife and I have two kids. We had trouble getting pregnant the first time, though. So we know how it can be. The anxiety and the timing and everything."

"Your wife must be a very open-minded woman," I said. Roland narrowed his eyes, making a sincerity check—he wasn't stupid, obviously (Tomasina had probably unearthed

his SAT scores). Then he gave me the benefit of the doubt. "She says she's flattered. I know I am."

"I used to go out with Tomasina," I said. "We used to live together."

"Really?"

"We're just friends now."

"It's good when that happens."

"She wasn't thinking about babies back when we went out," I said.

"That's how it goes. You think you have all the time in the world. Then boom. You find you don't."

"Things might have been different," I said. Roland looked at me again, not sure how to take my comment, and then gazed across the room. He smiled at someone and held up his drink. Then he was back to me. "That didn't work. My wife wants to go." He set down his glass and turned to leave. "Nice to meet you, Wally."

"Keep on plugging," I said, but he didn't hear me, or pretended not to.

I'd already finished my drink, so I got a refill. Then I went in search of Tomasina. I shouldered my way across the room and squeezed down the hall. I stood up straight, showing off my suit. A few women looked at me, then away. Tomasina's bedroom door was closed, but I still felt entitled to open it.

She was standing by the window, smoking and looking out. She didn't hear me come in, and I didn't say anything. I just stood there, looking at her. What kind of dress should a girl wear to her Insemination Party? Answer: The one Tomasina had on. This wasn't skimpy, technically. It began at her neck and ended at her ankles. Between those two points, however, an assortment of peepholes had been ingeniously razored into the fabric, revealing a patch of thigh here, a glazed hip bone there; up above, the white sideswell of a breast. It

made you think of secret orifices and dark canals. I counted the shining patches of skin. I had two hearts, one up, one down, both pumping.

And then I said, "I just saw Secretariat."

She swung around. She smiled, though not quite convincingly. "Isn't he gorgeous?"

"I still think you should have gone with Isaac Asimov." She came over and we kissed cheeks. I kissed hers, anyway. Tomasina kissed mostly air. She kissed my semen aura.

"Diane says I should forget the baster and just sleep with him."

"He's married."

"They all are." She paused. "You know what I mean."

I made no sign that I did. "What are you doing in here?"

She took two rapid-fire puffs on her cigarette, as though to fortify herself. Then she answered, "Freaking out."

"What's the matter?"

She covered her face with her hand. "This is *depressing*, Wally. This isn't how I wanted to have a baby. I thought this party would make it fun, but it's just depressing." She dropped her hand and looked into my eyes. "Do you think I'm crazy? You do, don't you?"

Her eyebrows went up, pleading. Did I tell you about Tomasina's freckle? She has this freckle on her lower lip like a piece of chocolate. Everybody's always trying to wipe it off.

"I don't think you're crazy, Tom," I said.

"You don't?"

"No."

"Because I trust you, Wally. You're mean, so I trust you."

"What do you mean I'm mean?"

"Not *bad* mean. Good mean. I'm not crazy?"

"You want to have a baby. It's natural."

Suddenly Tomasina leaned forward and rested her head

on my chest. She had to lean down to do it. She closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. I put my hand on her back. My fingers found a peephole and I stroked her bare skin. In a warm, thoroughly grateful voice, she said, "You get it, Wally. You totally get it."

She stood up and smiled. She looked down at her dress, adjusting it so that her navel showed, and then took my arm.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go back to the party."

I didn't expect what happened next. When we came out, everybody cheered. Tomasina held on to my arm and we started waving to the crowd like a couple of royals. For a minute I forgot about the purpose of the party. I just stood arm in arm with Tomasina and accepted the applause. When the cheers died down, I noticed that Jackson Browne was still playing. I leaned over and whispered to Tomasina, "Remember dancing to this song!"

"Did we dance to this?"

"You don't remember?"

"I've had this album forever. I've probably danced to it a thousand times." She broke off. She let go of my arm.

My glass was empty again.

"Can I ask you something, Tomasina?"

"What?"

"Do you ever think about you and me?"

"Wally, don't." She turned away and looked at the floor. After a moment, in a reedy, nervous voice, she said, "I was really screwed up back then. I don't think I could have stayed with anybody."

I nodded. I swallowed. I told myself not to say the next thing. I looked over at the fireplace, as though it interested me, and then I said it: "Do you ever think about our kid?"

The only sign that she'd heard me was a twitch next to her

left eye. She took a deep breath, let it out. "That was a long time ago."

"I know. It's just that when I see you going to all this trouble I think it could be different sometimes."

"I don't think so, Wally." She picked a piece of lint off the shoulder of my jacket, frowning. Then she tossed it away. "God! Sometimes I wish I was Benazir Bhutto or somebody."

"You want to be prime minister of Pakistan?"

"I want a nice, simple, arranged marriage. Then after my husband and I sleep together he can go off and play polo."

"You'd like that?"

"Of course not. That would be horrible." A tress fell into her eyes and she backhanded it into place. She looked around the room. Then she straightened up and said, "I should mingle."

I held up my glass. "Be fruitful and multiply," I said. And Tomasina squeezed my arm and was gone.

I stayed where I was, drinking from my empty glass to have something to do. I looked around the room for any women I hadn't met. There weren't any. Over at the bar, I switched to champagne. I had the bartender fill my glass three times. Her name was Julie and she was majoring in art history at Columbia University. While I was standing there, Diane stepped into the middle of the room and clinked her glass. Other people followed and the room got quiet.

"First of all," Diane began, "before we kick everyone out of here, I'd like to make a toast to tonight's oh-so-generous donor, Roland. We conducted a nationwide search and, let me tell you, the auditions were *grueling*." Everybody laughed. Somebody shouted, "Roland left."

"He left? Well, we'll toast his semen. We've still got that." More laughter, a few drunken cheers. Some people, men and women both now, were picking up the candles and waving them around.

"And, finally," Diane went on, "finally, I'd like to toast our soon-to-be-expecting—knock on wood—mother. Her courage in seizing the means of production is an inspiration to us all." They were pulling Tomasina out onto the floor now. People were hooting. Tomasina's hair was falling down. She was flushed and smiling. I tapped Julie on the arm, extending my glass. Everyone was looking at Tomasina when I turned and slipped into the bathroom.

After shutting the door, I did something I don't usually do. I stood and looked at myself in the mirror. I stopped doing that, for any prolonged period, at least twenty years ago. Staring into mirrors was best at around thirteen. But that night I did it again. In Tomasina's bathroom, where we'd once showered and flossed together, in that cheerful, brightly tiled grotto, I presented myself to myself. You know what I was thinking? I was thinking about nature. I was thinking about hyenas again. The hyena, I remembered, is a fierce predator. Hyenas even attack lions on occasion. They aren't much to look at, hyenas, but they do OK for themselves. And so I lifted my glass. I lifted my glass and toasted myself: "Be fruitful and multiply."

The cup was right where Diane had said it would be. Roland had placed it, with priestly care, on top of a bag of cotton balls. The toddler cup sat enthroned on a little cloud. I opened it and inspected his offering. It barely covered the bottom of the cup, a yellowish scum. It looked like rubber cement. It's terrible, when you think about it. It's terrible that women need this stuff. It's so paltry. It must make them crazy, having everything they need to create life but this one meager leaven. I rinsed Roland's out under the faucet. Then I checked to see that the door was locked. I didn't want anybody to burst in on me.

That was ten months ago. Shortly after, Tomasina got pregnant. She swelled to immense proportions. I was away on business when she gave birth in the care of a midwife at St. Vincent's. But I was back in time to receive the announcement:

*Tomasina Genovese proudly announces
the birth of her son,
Joseph Mario Genovese,
on January 15, 1996.
5 lbs. 3 oz.*

The small size alone was enough to clinch it. Nevertheless, bringing a Tiffany spoon to the little heir the other day, I settled the question as I looked down into his crib. The potato nose. The buggy eyes. I'd waited ten years to see that face at the school-bus window. Now that I did, I could only wave goodbye.