Will

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My husband looked so happy. “That’s great,” he shouted, then reached over to hug me, but stopped when he saw my face. My sparsely filled eyebrows must have been furrowed again, giving me away. The skin around Christopher’s brown eyes crinkled with worry. “What’s wrong? Aren’t you happy about it?” After all, it wasn’t an accident. We’d been married for three years and we’d both agreed recently to start a family.

Christopher removed his suit jacket, having just returned from the office. After spending the entire day at home by myself, I’d pounced on him as soon as he’d opened the front door. Then I’d blurted out the news.

“I am.” I glanced at my bare feet, then watched him slip off his brown oxfords. I didn’t want to seem ambivalent- so ungrateful. “I just thought it would take longer.” My husband put his arms around me, and I peered over his shoulder, my chin resting on the yoke of his white dress shirt. I stared at the hallways mirror hanging slightly askew on the whitewashed wall. I could smell the clean scent of starch, and I wondered what would become of my life now.
I’d heard a lot about how so many women in New York City were infertile, how difficult it was to conceive. It took us three weeks. I never bought a fertility kit, took my temperature or counted the days of my menstrual cycle. With a snap of the fingers, presto- we were going to have a baby I was surprised by the speed of it, but more than that, I felt a kind of dread- and this filled me with shame. Children were blessings, everyone knew that.

I would not describe myself as having been a happy child- more like morose and slightly goofy. Far too tall for a Korean girl, I wore my oversized eyeglasses slung low on my rounded nose, my black hair bobbed. My tiny oval eyes bore a pinched expression as if I had lost my way. I was the middle of three girls in an immigrant

family. Our parents worked six days a week in their small wholesale jewelry store in midtown Manhattan while my sisters and I went to the local public school, did our homework and waited for them to return safely to our brown brick apartment building in Elmhurst, Queens.

Each night, we'd hear the jangle of keys opening our apartment door; then Mom and Dad would walk in, remove their coats and shoes and separate from one another. Mom marched straight to the kitchen to finish cooking the dinner that my oder sister had started preparing and Dad would go to the living room, collapse into the maroon sectional sofa from Seaman's and read the *shin-mun*. My younger sister would fetch him a clean ashtray form the kitchen counter, and he'd pat her head. The only sounds in our rented one-bedroom apartment were the clinks of pots and pans coming from the narrow galley kitchen and the rustle of Dad's newspapers. The metallic smell of Benson & Hedges filled the air as the three of us, heads down, did our homework and waited for dinner.

Our parents were always tired; my sisters and I felt sorry for them. Though they never said it, we felt like we were an enormous burden- needing lunch money, new sneakers and jeans, and handing them countless school forms having to be read and signed in English. I didn't think about it then, but I can imagine now how scared they must have been to move to a new country, start a small business they knew nothing about and raise three little girls- all with only a modest knowledge of the language.

In Korea, Dad was an account executive who moved from job to job because he fought with his bosses. Mom was a minister's daughter who taught piano to the neighborhood children. born to well-off families from the opposite sides of a small country, both Mom and Dad had been sheltered from roughness and poverty as children. The war changed everything for them. At age sixteen, Dad left his hometown in the North and never saw his mother again. Unable to shake his fear and hatred of that war, he insisted on bringing us to America- a country, to him, full of romance and possibilities.

I was seven when our family immigrated; my mother was only thirty-five. After just a few months in New York, her white and pink skin faded.l Her glossy chestnut hair began to gray. After her bath, I'd occasionally help her pluck the white hair form her head with a pair of old-fashioned eyebrow tweezers. In the following years when

there were too many white hair to harvest, she turned to Loving Care hair dye from the drugstore.

From the moment she arrived home from work until the rest of us went to bed, Mom as in motion. Her childhood home in Pusan had been filled with servants, and in our home in Seoul, I remember the country girls who lived with us to help Mom with the housework while she earned money as a piano teacher. In America, she worked twelve- or thirteen hour days, cooked our meals and kept our house tidy. But in those long years in Queens before my parents used their savings to buy a big house in the New Jersey suburbs, I can't recall seeing my mother smile or tease or laugh at a joke, even on holidays. For Mom and Dad, life in America was somber- to succeed, you had to be vigilant, sacrifice pleasure and endure.

As a young girl, I decided that I didn't want to marry or have children. I didn't even like to be around babies or toddlers- they seemed so needy and useless. So I studied very hard, earned gold stars and, when I had spare time, wrote and published essays for a Korean newspaper. My teachers told me that in America you could do anything you wanted. I paid attention to successful people in books and magazines and on television. My favorite writer when I was fifteen was Sinclair Lewis. He had gone to Yale, so I applied and, amazingly, I got in. I formulated a plot for my life: I would be a single professional with money of my own, wear nice clothes and live in a beautiful apartment in Manhattan. I would invest my savings, retire early and write novels and plays. I would not take care of anyone else.

The only thing I never considered was love. I met Christopher when I was twenty-two. After I finished law school two years later, we married. He had come from enormous privilege, the only child of a regal Japanese mother and an American diplomat father. My husband didn't believe that life had to be an unrelenting struggle filled with difficulties and betrayals of history for which you prepared by sewing gold coins in the lining of your coat. There could be fun and comfort in this life. To me, such ideas were extravagant, exotic, utterly unfamiliar. From the outset, it was obvious to me that I believed in work and he believed in grace.

Right after our honeymoon, I started my job as a corporate lawyer. I was at the office eighty to ninety hours a week, easily billing sixty. Sometimes I worked forty to fifty hours straight through, without going home to shower or change my clothes. After a year of this, I started to fantasize about selling lipstick at the Bergdorf's

counter. At least salesgirls went home when the store closed. I never knew when I could go home. The more work you did, the more work you were given. I was a newlywed- I wanted to go to the movies with my husband on Saturday nights and cook dinner for us now and then. On Sunday nights, I'd cry hopelessly because I'd have to begin another week of endless work, or so it seemed to me. Christopher asked me why. Why would I keep doing something for so many hours if I didn't like it? He said, Quit. We could live on a lot less.

I said no. I couldn't just quit. I'd spent three years in law school. My parents had sacrificed almost twenty years working in that tiny jewelry store to put me through college and law school. As a junior institutional salesman at a Wall Street firm, my husband earned less than I did. I wanted to be a writer, but that wasn't a real job. No one paid you while you wrote a novel, and one book could take years and years. I heard Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace* eight times. I stayed at that firm for another year.

I wondered if I'd enjoy my job more somewhere else, so I changed law firms. The new place was worse: I had to prove myself again. I worked there for fifty days, and after billing my first three-hundred-hour month- a feat I'd once dismissed as urban lawyer myth- I quit. There wasn't enough money in New York for me to work that way, and even so, I didn't care about money enough; I would not endure it anymore. I had written and published in high school and college, but had stopped in law school and for the two years that I practiced. After I quit my job I bought a computer and a printer. I wrote a very rough draft of a novel. I found an agent. I still needed to learn a great deal about writing, but I felt hopeful- not just about my new career, but about my revised plans for my life. My husband and I talked about having a child.

Perhaps I could be a mother if someone like Christopher was my child's father. He didn't scream, get depressed or fall apart. Not like me. What would a child who was half-Christopher and half-me be like? In my marriage, I felt loved and cared for and attended to. This support made me think that perhaps I could love a child even though I hadn't felt loved as a child. My husband said we would have a wonderful life even if we never had children, but would he always feel this way? I now had doubts about the plot I'd hatched as a young girl. I hadn't planned to get married, yet my marriage had turned out well. Perhaps the same would occur with having a

child. I went off he Pill. I primed my body for a baby. I gave up caffeine, exercised in moderation, took prenatal vitamins. We stopped using condoms. Three weeks.

I was pregnant, but I couldn't imagine *my* life as a mother. All I could see was the image of my mother- the whirling dervish- with half a dozen arms spinning in the air, each hand performing a different task. So I tried to focus on the pregnancy itself- on the physical requirements of this life growing in my body. I tried to follow the guidelines of the pregnancy books, but I kept falling short. I could not swallow another glass of grayish skim milk. I never ate any yellow vegetables, and my favorite foods- refined sugar and fat were no-noes. I felt tired all the time, but I resented taking naps. I was so sleepy that I couldn't read anything serious or write anything good. I was angry- my writing schedule was becoming a joke. I knew it would only get worse when the baby came. I was a bad mother, and my baby wasn't even born yet. I go piercing migraines for the first time in my life. Extra Strength Tylenol did nothing for me. I lay across my sofa, wet washcloths on my forehead, and hoped the pain would pass.

During each checkup at the doctor's office, I noticed an increase in my weight. Having previously struggled with a weight problem and lost the extra pounds, I did not want to be fat again, *ever*. The idea of gaining forty pounds was devastating.

I could not admit these feelings which seemed, even to me, grossly superficial and selfish. I did not tell anyone I felt this way. I was too smart, too nice, too with-it, too spiritual to be this vain, this self-conscious, this ungrateful. Everyone was overjoyed that we were having a child. My parents and my in-laws were ecstatic. My sisters were ready to spend a fortune on toys and baby clothes for their future niece or nephew, I was no longer me, I was merely the silent medium for the next generation.

In spite of everyone else's happiness, I grew more terrified. I feared becoming one of those people who talk only about their children, never see films, have a rotten social life, never read history books and live in a toy- and diaper-littered apartment. I had quit being a lawyer, hoping to become a writer, not a mother. And how could I forget that when I was little, my mother never had any time for her piano, her books or for laughter?

Eleven weeks into my pregnancy, my doctor could not find the fetus's heartbeat using a stethoscope with a built-in microphone. She instructed me to get an

ultrasound examination at a nearby clinic. There was a slight possibility that something could be wrong: Fibroids could be blocking the fetus's heartbeat, or the fetus could be in a strange position. But she said not to worry, she was explaining these things at length only because she would not be there; another physician, who I didn't know, would see me.

My husband and I went together for the ultrasound. I undressed and lay down on the examining table. The doctor proceeded to project an image of the inside of my uterus on a monitor. In the dim room I tried to be still while a latex-sheathed probe was inserted in: "Be a good girl and don't fidget." It was so quiet in that room, so quiet that I felt dizzy. Minutes later, the doctor mumbled something to his assistant, who turned on the overhead lights. He told me that the fetus had expired. He didn't know why.

After the doctor left the room, Christopher and I cried. He helped me to get dressed and said very little- that it would be all right, that he loved me very much. He was sad, too, but I didn't do much to comfort him. Once again, i felt silenced, not just by my guilt this time, but also by my grief. I wondered if it was possible to have ended a life merely by having doubts about its beginnings.

Christopher returned to the office, and I went home and phoned my best friend to tell her what had happened. Finally, I confided that I hadn't been happy about being pregnant and I wondered if such feelings could have contributed to losing the pregnancy. Next time, I told her, I'd push such negative thoughts from my mind.

What an arrogant thing to think, she said. She repeated it again, *arrogance*.
I was stunned. She might as well have kicked me. My friend was usually a fountain of sympathy. She told me that my fears had nothing to do with it ~~*I* had nothing to do with it. It was nature, science, God~~ it wasn't meant to be. Regardless, it wasn't my will that mattered. The truth of her statements wounded me. I told her that I was tired and got off the phone.
When I saw my obstetrician the next day, she said that I needed to have a D&C procedure to clean out my womb and see if everything was all right. Then I should wait at least three months before trying again. Chris said he would accompany me, but I told him no. I don't know why exactly; a part of me felt that I'd failed him somehow. I was ashamed of another test,another procedure, another required step in the process of one big disappointment. I asked my mother to come with me.

The anesthesiologist told me to count backward. That is all I remember. After it was over, I woke up on a plastic-sheeted operating bed, blood pooling around my hips. My mother held my hand while I sobbed, and though I knew that it didn't make any sense, I felt that I was being punished for my arrogance- for believing that motherhood was elective, not selective.

As a girl, I had asked myself if I ever wanted to be a mother, and I had answered no. I'd assumed that I could be a mother and I could refuse that role because its burdens seemed so great. And I had to ask myself now, as a young, married writer who had just lost a pregnancy: Did I *never* want to be a mother? And my answer was no.

My mother had seemed so sad to me when I was growing up. How can I say this without offense? I didn't want to be like her, and I didn't want her life. I didn't always want to be second or third or fifth. Mom was beyond reproach. She was giving, patient, kind, fair, reliable and extremely competent. I would never be so selfless.

This is even harder to say- I was disappointed with my good mother because she did everything she was supposed to do except to seem happy that I was born. Her sadness and fatigue due to the overwhelming demands on a working mother of three children in a foreign country were without question well justified. But I had needs as her daughter- including the need to see her happy. If my mother wasn't happy, I wondered, then how could I be happy? Nothing I did or could do would ever redeem her sacrifices- this much I was beginning to understand. No lives were equal. She and Dad were far happier now in their retirement, but I still sensed her unarticulated regrets. These were my fears: One day my child would feel the need to make my life whole through her accomplishments, or worse, as an adult, she would be unable to remember me ever smiling at her as a little girl.

Mom had given up so much- too much, I thought. But I knew that her strength and continued presence had given me the ability to create a better life for myself. Would a life without enough hope and happiness for another generation be a better life- or would it just be a simpler one?
I didn't want to adopt a new plan, hatch a new plot or invoke a new will for my life. Instead I was aware of a wish, a prayer, a hope: in time, to be a decent mother who

was happy about being one.

Whether I could be a mother at all was uncertain, at that moment; it was simply out of my hands. I had to forget my plans, my fears, my schedule, and just wait and be open to the uncertainty. There was nothing for me to do. In a way, I was relieved.