

Wonderful *Girl*

BY AIMEE LA BRIE

2007 WINNER, KATHERINE ANNE PORTER PRIZE IN SHORT FICTION



University of North Texas Press
Denton, Texas

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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University of North Texas Press
P.O. Box 311336
Denton, TX 76203-1336

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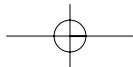
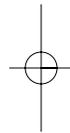
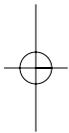
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

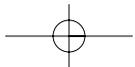
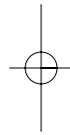
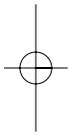
Wonderful Girl is Number 6 in the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction Series

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or establishments or to persons living or dead is unintentional.

Text design by Carol Sawyer/Rose Design

To Donna and Lurye





Contents



Acknowledgments	vii
Ducklings	1
Another Cancer Story	16
What She Should Do	31
Wanted	35
In Mem	49
Runaway	63
Girls	65
Snowball	83
Our Last Supper	98
Six Different Ways to Die in the Windy City!	106
Tribute to an Optometrist	113
Look at the Sky and Tell Me What You See	126
Words to Live By	134
The Last Dead Boyfriend	137
Wonderful Girl	148
Encore	161

Acknowledgments



“Ducklings” was previously published in *Pleiades* and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

“Wanted” was published in *The Cimarron Review*.

“In Mem” was published in *Passages North*.

“Our Last Supper” was published as “Visitation” in *Scribner’s Best of the Fiction Workshop, 1998* and *Spelunker Flophouse*.

“Wonderful Girl” was published by *Philadelphia Stories* magazine and will be published in their up-coming anthology.

“What She Should Do” was published (under another title) in *The Minnesota Review*.

“The Last Dead Boyfriend” was published in *Eclipse*.

“Signs” was published in *Writer to Writer*.

“Look at the Sky and Tell me What You See” was published as “Dressing the Part” in *Strong Coffee and Permafrost*.

“Words to Live By” was published by *Exquisite Corpse*.

“Encore” appeared in *Sudden Stories: A Mammoth Anthology of Minuscule-Fiction* and *Quarter After Eight*.

“Another Cancer Story” was published in *Beloit Fiction Journal*.

“Snowball” was published in *Iron Horse Literary Review*.

“Six Different Ways . . .” was a finalist in the Central *PA Magazine* short story contest.

Ducklings



Marjorie just loves babies! By the time she is twenty, she is going to have four: two girls and two boys. The girls will be identical twins, but she won't be the type of mother who makes them wear matching dresses with white pinafores. Marjorie is well aware of the importance of individuality! She will have their eyes checked routinely. If they are anything like her, they'll need Coke-bottle glasses before they are five years old!

She hangs posters around the neighborhood telephone poles: "Responsible Girl Available for Sitting. Prices may vary." The last line is especially good, because that way, she can ask for more money, if the parents have three kids of varying ages. It isn't wise to become enslaved by a stranger.

Marjorie is twelve, but she is not a child. For one thing, instead of Judy Blume young adult novels, she checks out Betty

2 WONDERFUL GIRL

Crocker recipe books, home decorating manuals, and self-help paperbacks like *If I'm so Wonderful, Why Am I Still Single?* She slices her mother's grapefruit for breakfast, suggests baths with Epsom salt when Mom's eyelids sag, and dyes Mom's hair with L'Oreal burnt auburn every three months, exclaiming, "You look almost as good as new!"

The posters work like a charm. Mrs. Langly from church calls to ask if Marjorie can baby-sit on Friday. Her two regular sitters have the stomach flu. "This Friday?" Marjorie taps a pencil against her forehead. "Hold just one second, please." She pinches the roll of fat overlapping her skirt and mouths "Pig-face" at her wavy reflection in the toaster. She returns to the phone. "This Friday sounds perfect."

Mrs. Langly's breath rushes out. "Is everything okay?" Marjorie asks with what she hopes sounds like concern. She doesn't really want to know the answer, but these are the kinds of questions you are supposed to ask.

A lighter clicks. Is Mrs. Langly having a cigarette? Does she do that around the baby? Doesn't she know how bad second-hand smoke is? "My husband—Bill—has to have emergency surgery. My mother's flying in Saturday to stay with us, so . . ."

Marjorie's face turns hot. She has seen Mr. Langly in church belting out "Amazing Grace" in a way that is embarrassing. She vaguely remembers a thick head of hair and bushy eyebrows and maybe a handlebar moustache. Marjorie pictures the doctors in the ER working on his Adam's apple. "Awww . . ." she says, a drawn-out, fake noise like you make when someone tells a bad joke. It is the wrong sound. Perhaps it is not the best time to discuss the hourly rate. "Babies are kind of a hobby of mine." Mrs. Langley says nothing. "So, yes, siree! I'll be there with bells on!"

Jeopardy blares from the black-and-white TV propped on a dinner tray. “Mom? I won’t be around on Friday. I have a job.”

“Okay.” Marjorie’s mother lies in bed, squinting at a picture of a skinny model in an entertainment magazine.

Marjorie switches on the lamp. “Do you need anything?”

Marjorie’s mother shields her eyes like a person coming out of a tunnel. “No. I’ll make dinner in a while.”

Marjorie heats up the Lean Cuisines. What if Mr. Langly bleeds to death and Mrs. Langly is so upset, she crashes her car and then, the grandmother blows to bits in a plane crash on the way to claim the baby? Everyone knows bad luck comes in threes. Marjorie would have to take care of him on her own. She still has her doll crib and that would do until he gets older. She would go to school with purple circles under her eyes, smiling weakly at the teachers when she handed in her assignments, all turned in on time, but with yellow baby-food fingerprints along the bottom. Her English teacher, Mr. Moon, might pull her aside and wrestle the story out of her. Mr. Moon has a soft voice, a football-sized potbelly, and large, light blue eyes that penetrate the soul. Once he discovered Marjorie’s plight, he would say, “Brave girl,” putting his chalky hands on her face and kissing her, maybe whispering into her hair words from an Ogden Nash poem. She turned in a paper about “The Duck,” and Mr. Moon gave her C+ and wrote “Interesting Ideas!” in blue pen on the bottom.

Marjorie has 101 interesting ideas.

The night before the job, Marjorie can’t sleep. Her brain keeps popping up with possible accidents that could occur. She trips on a squeaky toy while carrying the baby and he flies out of her arms and impales himself on scissors. She forgets to lay him down the right way in the crib and he suffocates on a stuffed giraffe. She turns on the oven and the house blows to smithereens.

To distract herself, Marjorie begins making up names for the baby, starting with the letter “M.”

4 WONDERFUL GIRL

On Friday, Marjorie puts on a white button-up shirt and plaid skirt. The skirt is too tight and the buttons don't meet, so she fastens it closed with a safety pin. She and her mother have been on a diet. They eat half a piece of fruit for breakfast, a shake for lunch, and a diet frozen dinner at night. Marjorie's mother is as fat as ever. When Marjorie looks at her, she sees what she could become.

Before she leaves to baby-sit, she tells her mother that she's left the Langlys' number next to a list of what's for dinner under the smiley face magnet on the fridge. "Have a good time," her mother says, turning the TV channels rapidly, each station a blur of noise and brightness.

Marjorie is almost to the Langlys' when three greasy-haired boys from school turn the corner in front of her. She considers cutting across a yard, but one of them spots her, and they start trailing after her on their stupid, too small dirt bikes. "Where you going, Marjorie?" They always pretend to be nice at first.

Marjorie tugs at the hem of her skirt. "Baby-sitting." It's best not to let them know they are getting under your skin. When they throw spitballs at her on the bus, Marjorie lets the wads collect in her hair. She never turns around. At school, she picks the spitballs out and drops them into the toilet, imagining each circle is one of their heads, so when she flushes, she can watch them drown in the bowl.

"Hey, Large Marge!" they call. "Margarine!" Marjorie stares straight ahead, trying not to listen to her thighs rubbing together as she walks. They are just adolescents. She has a womanly figure, and they can't help ogling, because their penises keep clouding their brains. She learned that from her mother. Hopefully, they will die soon and leave her alone.

"Baby-sitting! We've got something for you to sit on!" Ralph has a round, Jack-o-lantern face. "Hey, let's see your award, Margarine!"

He is referring to the Pride Award she won last month for her essay entitled, "How I Helped My Mother Through a Difficult Time." The difficult time Marjorie wrote about was how she studied with her mother to help her memorize the medical terminology for her nurses' licensing exam after Marjorie's father ran off. She wrote about how her mother took night classes for many months and how Marjorie was left at home alone and had to fend for herself.

One time, Marjorie asked, "Does this mean you won't be home to make dinner?" Her mother began weeping, making large whooping noises while Marjorie shifted from one foot to the other, silently repeating, Stupid, stupid, stupid. She didn't mention this particular moment in her essay. The other part she left out was the miscarriage.

When Marjorie first heard the word, she imagined a baby carriage tumbling over, like, whoops, missed the carriage! But it is more complicated than that. First of all, she hadn't even known her mother was pregnant! The essay did not describe how Marjorie helped her mother into the bathroom and held her while she threw up, and how she mopped up the tile afterwards with a Squeegee. It was a lot of blood! Marjorie pretended she was on a game show. The faster she scrubbed the blood off the floor, the bigger the prize—a car, a horse, a new house.

Ralph skids his bike in the gravel, throwing a spray of stones against Marjorie's legs. "Hey, Marge, aren't the parents afraid you'll eat the baby?" The other boys snort and pop wheelies.

Marjorie has thought many times what to do in emergency situations. For instance, don't look a rabid German Shepherd in the eye. She runs as fast as she can (not very), up the sidewalk and to Mrs. Langly's door, waiting for one of them to chase after her, grab her by the neck, and pull her into the bushes. But when she glances back, they have disappeared.

6 WONDERFUL GIRL

She will make a good impression. She will not do anything dumb.

Mrs. Langly answers the doorbell right away. Her smile wavers. Marjorie holds out her hand. "Good afternoon. I am the baby-sitter, Marjorie."

Mrs. Langly shakes Marjorie's hand. "Oh."

The baby blubbers from behind her. "Da, Da, Da."

"My mother taught me how to do baby CPR." This is untrue, but she has seen a diagram. Mrs. Langly is a professional woman. Scarecrow thin, chin-length blond hair, lipstick with liner, a black blouse, neatly pleated gray pants and tiny pearl earrings. "I just love those."

Mrs. Langly's manicured fingernails fly to her ear. "Oh, these. Bill gave them to me for our tenth anniversary."

"My mom has that same outfit," she lies again.

"That's nice." Mrs. Langly checks her watch. "Come in and meet the baby." Marjorie follows her through the door. "The only place we don't allow him is my husband's office. He knows better. He's a good baby." The baby, as if aware he is being discussed, toddles around the corner encased in a baby bumper car, fat legs propelling him across the floor.

"How darling!" Marjorie dislikes the baby immediately. His dark eyes press into his face like raisins, his cheeks puff out, and his arms and legs are doughy, white rolls. He is a gigantic, snowman-shaped Christmas cookie.

"He weighs more at ten months than I did by age one!" Mrs. Langly claps at the baby. "Don't you, chubba-hubbah?" The baby sticks out a fat purple lip. "We love him anyway." Mrs. Langly laughs.

She gives Marjorie a quick tour the house ending with the nursery. The baby's bedroom glows in hushed whites and blues, cozy and dark. It smells like Lysol and poop. Little yellow ducks

Ducklings 7

waddle across the top of the wall and the crib is full to bursting with stuffed animals. Marjorie makes a mental note to take those out before the baby goes to sleep so he won't suffocate.

While Mrs. Langly explains the rules, Marjorie answers, "Right. I see. 10-4," hearing her words like a voice at the end of a bad phone connection. How would it feel to live in this house with Mr. Langly for a husband? Marjorie is dying to find a picture of him. She keeps getting him confused in her mind with a movie actor who wears a moustache. She must know if Mr. Langly has one. If he does, she is in danger of falling instantly in love.

Mrs. Langly winds down and looks at the baby (Is the baby's name Sammy? Stanley? Would they really name the baby Stanley Langly?). "Be a good boy," she tells him. She swivels on her heel to face Marjorie. "I left the number for St. Joseph's Hospital on the refrigerator. In case of anything." Mrs. Langly rearranges the fruit magnets on the icebox: pineapple, apple, banana. "I won't be gone long."

"The baby and I are going to have a splendid time!" Marjorie smiles like she does for school photos, holding the grin longer than is comfortable. The baby glances from Marjorie to his mother, a string of saliva dribbling down his double chin. "Say, 'So long, Mommy.'" The baby whimpers, holding his hands up to his mother.

Mrs. Langly gives him an elephant-shaped animal cracker. "You two stay out of trouble." As soon as she leaves, Marjorie locks the front door.

She waits until the car pulls out of the driveway. Then she leans over the baby. He wears a sky blue jumper with white felt rabbits hopping across the front. She touches his crown, searching for the soft spot on him like on a melon. The baby turns his head in her hands, trying to look at her. "I'm going to

8 WONDERFUL GIRL

eat you up.” She puts her nose to the crook of his neck and inhales: sour milk and baby powder. “Don’t make me put you in the microwave.”

Marjorie checks the closets (no fur coat, but two London Fog jackets side by side, baby stroller, vacuum cleaner). She runs her fingers across the CDs, the leather books on the shelves, the silk lilies in a crystal vase on the dining room table. The baby trails after her, his toes grazing the carpet as he lurches and bounces like a pinball against the coffee table, the end table, and the velveteen chairs. Will he tell his parents years later, “Remember that fat girl? She snooped as soon as you left.”

“I’m just taking inventory,” she sprints away from the baby and ducks into the office.

The room is dark, windowless, with a stale smell of burnt coffee and tobacco smoke. There is a mahogany desk with a calendar, the squares marked up with red pen in Mr. Langly’s neat, slanted handwriting. Marjorie traces her finger over the writing. Books, notes, and stacks of paper are arranged purposefully, like in a library. Marjorie picks up a page, reads. “New link between Melville and Hemingway? See Lydia for info.” Who is Lydia? His lover? The former baby-sitter?

She pulls down her shirtsleeve to open the desk drawers. She finds pens, paper clips, more notes, and a maroon bankbook. They have \$10,342.45 in their savings account. Can that be right? If Mrs. Langly dies, maybe Mr. Langly will marry Marjorie. She could nurse him through his mourning, and he might confess he never really loved his wife. The baby would forget all about his real mother and come to love Marjorie instead, and Marjorie could send her mother to Hawaii.

The baby stands in his carrier on the edge of the office with a tsk-tsk look on his face. “Come on in, baby. It’s okay.” The baby takes a wobbling step forward. “No!” she says. He jerks back. “It’s okay,” she says again, gently, but the baby won’t move. She pats

her knees as if she is calling a dog. "It's okay. It's okay." The baby starts toward her again and Marjorie yells, "No!" The baby starts crying. Marjorie lifts him out of the carrier. "I'm sorry. It's okay, you're a good boy."

She heaves the baby unto her hip like she's seen mothers on TV do. The baby is unwieldy and heavy. He keeps wiggling and whining in her ear like a mosquito. "I'm your mother now," she tells him. Also, "There is no Santa Claus." The baby burps. "Your father might die," she says, although she knows this probably isn't true. The baby's head swivels back and forth, and he tries to touch everything they come close to.

Marjorie takes him to the stove to teach him an important rule in safety. The baby reaches forward. "No, no, baby, see it's hot." She puts her hand on the burner and shakes it. "Ouch! You can get third degree burns if you're not careful." The baby gurgles wetly, so she does it a few more times, until she starts to feel like he is manipulating her into acting like an idiot.

"Let's see what's in the bedroom," she jostles the baby up and down like a sack of flour. "Bedroom. Bedroom." The Langly's bedroom has vacuum cleaner marks on the shag carpet and a king-sized bed in the center with a floral, puffy bedspread. Marjorie plops the baby in the center of the bed. "Stay." He flops on his back and stares at the ceiling fan. Marjorie's footsteps leave heavy dark imprints on the thick carpeting. She must vacuum when she's done. "Remind me, Baby."

A long, sleek dresser with a gilt-edged mirror reflects the room, mostly the bed. That's so they can look at each other. She opens a drawer. Mrs. Langly wears silk underwear with lace. Her bras are size 34-B, two sizes smaller than Marjorie's. Mr. Langly's underwear waits in the next drawer: white Fruit of the Loom folded neatly, crotch over the waistband. His actual penis has been on this cloth. Marjorie touches the top pair with her index finger, feeling light-headed.

10 WONDERFUL GIRL

In the nightstand drawer are three Polaroid pictures. The first one is Mr. and Mrs. Langly sprawled naked on the bedspread together. Mr. Langly has the camera held out at arm's length, showing a bare chest with a matted knot of dark, gorilla hair and pink nipples. No moustache. His smile is huge and cartoonish. The other picture shows Mrs. Langly in a red teddy, her head cocked to the side as if she has just heard the distant chime of a bell. In the last photo, Mr. Langly stands completely nude, holding his thing in his hand and smiling at the camera. Marjorie cannot believe it! Mr. Langly's penis. She can't get the phrase out of her mind. It's like having water in your ear. They actually do it in this exact same bed. "Don't look, Baby." The baby bicycles his legs in the air.

Marjorie must check how the baby's penis compares. She unsnaps the jumper, pulls back the stickies, and whips off the diaper. The baby's penis is a tiny thumb, Mr. Langly's more like a paper towel roll. The baby fixes his black eyes on her. "What?" She tickles his stomach and pee shoots straight into the air, splashing Marjorie's hand.

Marjorie runs to the bathroom to get a Kleenex. She pauses to look inside the mirrored medicine cabinet and finds: Dr. Scholl's foot powder, a make-up bag, extra toilet paper, super-absorbency tampons, a douche, hot rollers, soap and shampoo from Holiday Inn.

There is a muffled thump followed by a mournful wail. Marjorie drops the soap and streaks back to the bedroom.

The baby has landed face first on the rug. He waves his arms and legs, wiggling like a turtle. When she picks him up, she sees a red bump swelling in the center of his forehead. She carries him into his bedroom and sets him on the diaper-changer. He squawks. Marjorie grabs the Johnson's baby powder and squeezes it in the middle. "Look, baby, look!" The baby stops crying to

watch the powder whoosh and fall in to the floor. "See there? Snowflakes! It's Christmastime!"

She squeezes until the powder is almost gone, and the baby shows his gums, the red welt a shiny cherry on his forehead. She could put a Band-Aid on it, but maybe the bump should be allowed to breathe. She carries the baby into the Langlys' bathroom and rummages around the cabinet under the sink. She finds Mrs. Langly's flowered make-up bag and applies a thin coat of Max Factor foundation over the lump. "You're a movie star!" She holds the baby up to the mirror by his armpits. His legs buckle and straighten, buckle and straighten, as if he were a marionette. She adds a circle of blush. When she's finished, he has been transformed into a dwarf baby from *The Wizard of Oz*. After the welt goes down, she will wash his face and put on Bactine in case of infection. Until then, he'll just have to be glamorous.

The phone rings. Marjorie jogs with the baby to the kitchen. "The Langlys!" Silence. "Hello? Hello?"

"Hey, Margarine!" She hangs up. It rings again. "Can we come over, Margie?" She slams the receiver down and then picks it up, unplugging the phone cord from the socket.

Marjorie fits the baby into his highchair. In the cupboards are: Triscuits, Wheaties, Nutri-Grain bars, pasta. The inside drawers of the refrigerator are crammed with celery, fresh red apples, and a head of lettuce. Jars of Gerbers march across the shelves, the faces lined up in a row like a miniature baby army. Marjorie shakes one called "Plum Dessert." The baby reaches out, fingers splayed like a starfish.

"Plum Dessert" tastes a little like plums, a lot like water. The baby jiggles up and down in his highchair and hits his hands on the tray. "You want some?" Marjorie airplanes the spoon through the air. The baby darts forward, taking the spoon down his throat. He gags. "Whoops," Marjorie pats his back. When people really

12 WONDERFUL GIRL

choke, they cannot cough or speak. "Good boy." The baby howls and his arm flies out, knocking the jar out of Marjorie's hands. It crashes, but doesn't break, splattering purple juice across the white tile floor. "Damn it to hell." This is what Marjorie's mother says when things go wrong. Marjorie has never sworn before, but it feels right, fitting. "Damn it. Damn it. Damn it."

She takes the screaming baby into the living room. Her arms and legs feel numb, but the clock over the mantel tells her she has only been there for half an hour. Time certainly does not fly!

A figure glides by the front window. Marjorie freezes. Another someone runs past and ducks behind the bushes. She cannot think what to do. What's the number for the police? She should know this, but really, she is stupid. She tiptoes to the front door. Dirt bikes sprawl across the front lawn. A knock on the window, followed by a low laugh. Marjorie can feel her heart in her chest. Such rapid heartbeats can signal what's known as a myocardial infarction. The baby wants down, but she clutches him to her chest. He wails loud enough for the neighbors to hear and call the police. "Shush, shush, shush," she tells him, but his skin moves between crimson and white, tears and snot streaming down his face. The foundation runs down the baby's face, causing a splattering of tiny red dots to appear, probably an allergy to the make-up. "Be quiet. Please, I beg of you!" She crouches by the sofa, the baby tucked under her arm.

"Mmm!" the baby blubbers. "Ma-mmm!"

A car splashes through a puddle and Marjorie hears it slow in front of the Langlys' yard, then a horn honks and deep-voice bellows, "Get out of there!" The boys scatter like birds from the bushes. One of them stops long enough to lob a tomato at the window, and it splats bright red across the glass.

Marjorie carries the baby to the living room mirror. "Look, look, who's that naughty baby crying for no reason?" Marjorie's

ponytail has fallen down and purple juice dots her white shirt and glasses. She is so ugly, and the baby is so ugly, and the baby hates her. He pushes away from her chest with hard fingers as though she is a monster. "That's enough!" She won't hit the baby, because the Langlys would just be the kind of people to keep a hidden camera on the bookshelf. Marjorie grabs the baby carrier and tries to stick him into it. He kicks and squirms, so she jams him inside. He screams even louder, a high-pitched, keening, baby-murdering noise. "Shut up!" She yanks his foot through the holes. The baby lays his head on the tray, sobbing. Marjorie feels tears rise in her throat. "Quit being so melodramatic," she tells the baby, but he continues wailing like someone at a funeral.

A drop of sweat slides down Marjorie's arm. She drags the baby carrier across the room. "Here, baby. I'll let you go into the office." The baby picks his head up, as though he understands her. "You want the office?" His eyes widen and he shakes his head. "It's okay, I'll let you go in. Just don't tell your mommy." The baby moans. "What?" Marjorie drags the carrier toward the door. The baby hiccups and starts crying again, holding his hands up to Marjorie, which makes Marjorie feel like sobbing too. "Why don't you want to go in there?" Marjorie pushes the baby across the office. The baby bellows again, and tries to turn around. She leaves him in the middle of the floor, surrounded by papers and books. "Everything is okay!" she yells through the shut door, feeling a hard knot of shame in her stomach.

Things to do: Vacuum, mop, wash front window, baby needs a bath, get him in his nightclothes, dinner. She lies on the sofa, turning the volume up on the TV until the baby crying is a faint echo.

Marjorie dreams of babies—all in little white bonnets with round, fat faces. They waddle and quack through a grassy meadow. Her job is to keep them from toddling off a nearby cliff into the

14 WONDERFUL GIRL

Atlantic Ocean, but there are too many. They pop out of the ground faster than dandelions. She sits one down, and three more lumber off in different directions. The waves hitting the rocks below make a musical crash, luring the babies to the edge like the Pied Piper.

Mrs. Langly stands over her. At first, Marjorie hopes that this is part of the dream. No, Mrs. Langly is real, although her suit jacket is wrinkled and black smudges of mascara ring her eyes. She shakes Marjorie. "Where is the baby?" She searches behind chairs and under the sofa. Marjorie points to the office.

Mrs. Langly returns with the baby over her shoulder, knocked out cold in a deep sleep. "How did he get in that room? Get up." She pulls Marjorie by her arm into the office.

The book stacks have toppled, and Mr. Langly's papers fan across the carpet like big pieces of confetti. "Do you see this?" Yes, she sees. Marjorie straightens a book splayed flat on the ground, *The Canonization of Moby Dick*.

Mrs. Langly darts into the living room, where she perches on the edge of the sofa, rocking the baby too fast. "I cannot believe this. I tried calling you. Who were you on the phone with for so long?" Mrs. Langly has a flat, shiny look in her eyes like a person who has been in an accident. The medical terminology for this condition is "doll's eyes." It was on her mother's test.

"Do you want me to fix you some tea?" Marjorie asks. Mrs. Langly holds onto the baby like he's a life preserver. Something bad has happened to Mr. Langly. Worse than running off with Lydia. "Tea coming right up!"

"I don't believe it." Mrs. Langly's cheek twitches. "I don't."

Marjorie goes into the kitchen. She uses paper towels to mop up the plum juice from the floor. She takes a blue coffee mug from the cupboard. Blue is a soothing color. It can actually lower your blood pressure by two points. She drops a cinnamon apple teabag into the blue mug. When the teakettle whistles, Marjorie

Ducklings 15

will fill the cup three quarters full, adding a little cold water from the tap so Mrs. Langley won't burn her mouth. She will put the cup on a saucer and add a little honey to make it sweet. She will sit by Mrs. Langley while she drinks her cup of tea.

This, after all, is something she knows how to do.