

## ON MONDAY OF LAST WEEK

Since Monday of last week, Kamara had begun to stand in front of mirrors. She would turn from side to side, examining her lumpy middle and imagining it flat as a book cover, and then she would close her eyes and imagine Tracy caressing it with those paint-stained fingers. She did so now in front of the bathroom mirror after she flushed.

Josh was standing by the door when she came out. Tracy's seven-year-old son. He had his mother's thick, unarched eyebrows, like straight lines drawn above his eyes.

"Pee-pee or a poopy?" he asked in his mock baby voice.

"Pee-pee." She walked into the kitchen, where the gray venetian blinds cast strips of shadow over the counter, where they had been practicing all afternoon for his Read-A-Thon competition. "Have you finished your juiced spinach?" she asked.

"Yes." He was watching her. He knew—he had to know—that the only reason she went into the bathroom each time she handed him the glass of green juice was to give him a chance to pour it away. It had started the first day Josh tasted it, made a face, and said, "Ugh. I hate it."

"Your dad says you'll have to drink it every day before dinner," Kamara had said. "It's only half a glass, it would take a minute to pour it away," she added, and then turned to go to the bathroom. That was all. When she came out the glass was empty, as it was now, placed beside the sink.

"I'll cook your dinner so you will be all set for Zany Brainy when your dad comes back, okay?" she said. American expressions like "all set" still felt clunky in her mouth, but she used them for Josh.

"Okay," he said.

"Do you want a fish fillet or chicken with your rice pilaf?"

"Chicken."

She opened the refrigerator. The top shelf was stacked with plastic bottles of juiced organic spinach. Cans of herbal tea had filled that space two weeks ago, when Neil was reading *Herbal Drinks for Children*, and before that, it was soy beverages, and before that, protein shakes for growing bones. The juiced spinach would go soon, Kamara knew, because when she arrived this afternoon, the first thing she noticed was that *A Complete Guide to Juicing Vegetables* was no longer on the counter; Neil must have put it in the drawer over the weekend.

Kamara brought out a package of organic chicken strips. "Why don't you lie down for a bit and watch a movie, Josh," she said. He liked to sit in the kitchen and watch her cook, but he looked so tired. The four other Read-A-Thon finalists were probably as tired as he was, their mouths aching from rolling long, unfamiliar words on their tongues,

their bodies tense with the thought of the competition tomorrow.

Kamara watched Josh slot in a Rugrats DVD and lie down on the couch, a slight child with olive skin and tangled curls. “Half-caste” was what they had called children like him back in Nigeria, and the word had meant an automatic cool, light-skinned good looks, trips abroad to visit white grandparents. Kamara had always resented the glamour of half-castes. But in America, “half-caste” was a bad word. Kamara learned this when she first called about the babysitting job advertised in the the *Philadelphia City Paper*: generous pay, close to transportation, car not required. Neil had sounded surprised that she was Nigerian.

“You speak such good English,” he said, and it annoyed her, his surprise, his assumption that English was somehow his personal property. And because of this, although Tobechei had warned her not to mention her education, she told Neil that she had a master’s degree, that she had recently arrived in America to join her husband and wanted to earn a little money babysitting while waiting for her green card application to be processed so that she could get a proper work permit.

“Well, I need somebody who can commit until the end of Josh’s school term,” Neil said.

“No problem,” Kamara said hastily. She really should not have said that she had a master’s degree.

“Maybe you could teach Josh a Nigerian language? He already has French lessons two times a week after school. He goes to an advanced program at Temple Beth Hillel, where they have entrance exams for four-year-olds. He’s very quiet, very sweet, a great kid, but I’m concerned that there aren’t any biracial kids like him at school or in the neighborhood.”

“Biracial?” Kamara asked.

Neil’s cough was delicate. “My wife is African-American and I’m white, Jewish.”

“Oh, he’s a half-caste.”

There was a pause and Neil’s voice came back, thicker. “Please don’t say that word.”

His tone made Kamara say “Sorry,” although she was not sure what she was apologizing for. The tone, too, made her certain that she had lost her opportunity for the job, and so she was surprised when he gave her the address and asked if they could meet the following day. He was tall and long-jawed. There was a smooth, almost soothing quality to his speech that she supposed came from his being a lawyer. He interviewed her in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, asking about her references and her life in Nigeria, telling her that Josh was being raised to know both his Jewish and African-American backgrounds, all the while smoothing the silver sticker on the phone that said NO TO GUNS. Kamara wondered where the child’s mother was. Perhaps Neil had killed her and stuffed her in a trunk; Kamara had spent the past months watching Court TV and had learned how crazy these Americans were. But the longer she listened to Neil talk, the more certain she was that he could not kill an ant. She sensed a fragility

in him, a collection of anxieties. He told her that he was worried that Josh was having a hard time with being different from the other children in his school, that Josh might be unhappy, that Josh didn't see enough of him, that Josh was an only child, that Josh would have issues about childhood when he was older, that Josh would be depressed. Halfway through, Kamara wanted to cut him short and ask, "Why are you worrying about things that have not happened?" She didn't, though, because she was not sure she had the job. And when he did offer her the job—after school until six thirty, twelve dollars an hour paid in cash—she still said nothing, because all he seemed to need, desperately need, was her listening and it did not take much to listen.

Neil told her that his method of discipline was reason-based. He would never smack Josh, because he did not believe in abuse as discipline. "If you make Josh see why a particular behavior is wrong, he'll stop it," Neil said.

Smacking is discipline, Kamara wanted to say, and abuse is a different thing. Abuse was the sort of thing Americans she heard about on the news did, putting out cigarettes on their children's skin. But she said what Tobechei had asked her to say: "I feel the same way about smacking. And of course I will use only the discipline method you approve of."

"Josh has a healthy diet," Neil went on. "We do very little high-fructose corn syrup, bleached flour, or trans fat. I'll write it all out for you."

"Okay." She was not sure what the things he had mentioned were.

Before she left, she asked, "What of his mother?"

"Tracy is an artist. She spends a lot of time in the basement for now. She's working on a big thing, a commission. She has a deadline...." His voice trailed off.

"Oh." Kamara looked at him, puzzled, wondering if there was something distinctly American she was supposed to understand from what he had said, something to explain why the boy's mother was not there to meet her.

"Josh isn't allowed in the basement for now, so you can't go down there, either. Call me if there are any problems. I have the numbers on the fridge. Tracy doesn't come up until the evenings. Scooters delivers soup and a sandwich to her every day and she's pretty self-sufficient down there." Neil paused. "You have to make sure you don't bother her for anything whatsoever."

"I have not come here to bother anybody," Kamara said, a little coldly because he suddenly seemed to be speaking to her as people spoke to housegirls back in Nigeria. She should not have allowed Tobechei to persuade her to take this common job of wiping the buttocks of a stranger's child, she should not have listened when he told her that these rich white people on the Main Line did not know what to do with their money. But even as she walked to the train station nursing her scratched dignity, she knew that she had not really needed to be persuaded. She wanted the job, any job; she wanted a reason to leave the apartment every day.

And now three months had passed. Three months of babysitting Josh. Three months of

listening to Neil's worries, of carrying out Neil's anxiety-driven instructions, of developing a pitying affection for Neil. Three months of not seeing Tracy. At first Kamara was curious about this woman with long dreadlocks and skin the color of peanut butter who was barefoot in the wedding photo on the shelf in the den. Kamara wondered if and when Tracy left the basement. Sometimes she heard sounds from down there, a door slamming shut or faint strains of classical music. She wondered whether Tracy ever saw her child. When she tried to get Josh to talk about his mother, he said, "Mommy's very busy with her work. She'll get mad if we bother her," and because he kept his face carefully neutral, she held back from asking him more. She helped him with homework and played cards with him and watched DVDs with him and told him about the crickets she used to catch as a child and basked in the attentive pleasure with which he listened to her. Tracy's existence had become inconsequential, a background reality like the wheezing on the phone line when Kamara called her mother in Nigeria. Until Monday of last week.

That day Josh was in the bathroom and Kamara was sitting at the kitchen table looking through his homework when she heard a sound behind her. She turned, thinking it was Josh, but Tracy appeared, curvy in leggings and a tight sweater, smiling, squinting, pushing away long dreadlocks from her face with paint-stained fingers. It was a strange moment. Their eyes held and suddenly Kamara wanted to lose weight and wear makeup again. A fellow woman who has the same thing that you have? her friend Chinwe would say if she ever told her. *Tufia!* What kind of foolishness is that? Kamara had been saying this to herself, too, since Monday of last week. She said this even as she stopped eating fried plantains and had her hair braided in the Senegalese place on South Street and began to sift through piles of mascara in the beauty supply store. Saying those words to herself changed nothing, because what had happened in the kitchen that afternoon was a flowering of extravagant hope, because what now propelled her life was the thought that Tracy would come upstairs again.

Kamara put the chicken strips in the oven. Neil added three dollars an hour for the days when he did not come home on time and she cooked Josh's dinner. It amused her, how "cooking dinner" was made to sound like difficult work when it was really a sanitized string of actions: opening cartons and bags and placing things in the oven and microwave. Neil should have seen the kerosene stove she had used back home with its thick gusts of smoke. The oven beeped. She arranged the chicken strips around the small mound of rice on Josh's plate.

"Josh," she called. "Dinner is ready. Would you like frozen yogurt for dessert?"

"Yes." Josh grinned and she thought about the curve of his lips being exactly like that of Tracy's. She hit her toe against the edge of the counter. She had begun to bump into things too often since Monday of last week.

"Are you okay?" Josh asked.

She rubbed her toe. "I'm fine."

"Wait, Kamara," Josh knelt down on the floor and kissed her foot. "There. That'll

make it go away.”

She looked down at his little head lowered before her, his hair in helpless curls, and she wanted to hug him very close. “Thank you, Josh.”

The phone rang. She knew it was Neil.

“Hi, Kamara. Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine.”

“How’s Josh? Is he scared about tomorrow? Is he nervous?”

“He’s fine. We just finished the practice.”

“Great.” A pause. “Can I say a quick hi?”

“He’s in the bathroom.” Kamara lowered her voice, watching Josh turn off the DVD player in the den.

“Okay. I’ll see you soon. I just literally pushed my last client out of the office. We’ve managed to get her husband to agree to settle out of court and she was starting to linger too much.” He laughed shortly.

“Okay then.” Kamara was about to put the phone down when she realized that Neil was still there.

“Kamara?”

“Yes?”

“I’m a little concerned about tomorrow. You know, I’m actually not sure how healthy that kind of competition is at his age.”

Kamara ran the tap and rinsed away the last streaks of dark green liquid. “He’ll be fine.”

“I hope going to Zany Brainy takes his mind off the competition for a little while.”

“He’ll be fine,” Kamara repeated.

“Would you like to come to Zany Brainy? I’ll drop you off at home afterwards.”

Kamara said she would rather go home. She didn’t know why she had lied about Josh being in the bathroom; it had slipped out so easily. Before, she would have chatted with Neil and probably gone along with them to Zany Brainy, but she didn’t feel like having that get-along relationship with Neil anymore.

She was still holding the phone; it had started to buzz noisily. She touched the protect our angels sticker that Neil had recently placed on the cradle, a day after he called, frantic, because he had just seen a photo on the Internet of a child molester who had recently moved to their neighborhood and who looked exactly like the UPS delivery man. *Where is Josh? Where is Josh?* Neil had asked, as if Josh would have been anywhere else but somewhere in the house. Kamara had hung up feeling sorry for him. She had come to understand that American parenting was a juggling of anxieties, and that it came with having too much food: a sated belly gave Americans time to worry that their child might have a rare disease that they had just read about, made them think they had

the right to protect their child from disappointment and want and failure. A sated belly gave Americans the luxury of praising themselves for being good parents, as if caring for one's child were the exception rather than the rule. It used to amuse Kamara, watching women on television talk about how much they loved their children, what sacrifices they made for them. Now, it annoyed her. Now that her periods insisted on coming month after month, she resented those manicured women with their effortlessly conceived babies and their breezy expressions like "healthy parenting."

She put the phone down and tugged at the black sticker to see how easily it would come off. When Neil interviewed her for the job, the no to guns sticker had been silver, and it was the first thing she told Tobechei about, how strange it was to watch Neil smooth it over and over again, as if in a ritual. But Tobechei was not interested in the sticker. He asked her about the house, details she could not possibly know. Was it a colonial?

How old was it? And all the while his eyes were shining with watery dreams. "We will live in a house like that one day in Ardmore, too, or another place on the Main Line," he said.

She said nothing, because it was not where they lived that mattered to her, it was what they had become.

They met in university at Nsukka, both of them in their final years, he in engineering and she in chemistry. He was quiet, bookish, smallish, the kind of boy parents said had "bright prospects." But what drew her was the way he looked at her with awed eyes, eyes that made her like herself. After a month, she moved into his room in the Boys' Quarters on a tree-lined avenue of the campus and they went everywhere together, climbing on the same *okada*, Kamara lodged between Tobechei and the motorcyclist. They took bucket baths together in the bathroom with slimy walls, they cooked on his little stove outside, and when his friends began to call him "woman wrapper," he smiled as if they did not know what they were missing. The wedding, which took place shortly after they completed their National Youth Service, was hurried because an uncle, a pastor, had just offered to help Tobechei get an American visa by including his name in a group going for a conference of the Evangelical Faith Mission. America was about hard work, they both knew, and one would make it if one was prepared to work hard. Tobechei would get to America and find a job and work for two years and get a green card and send for her. But two years passed, then four, and she was in Enugu teaching in a secondary school and doing a part-time master's program and attending the christenings of friends' children, while Tobechei was driving a taxi in Philadelphia for a Nigerian man who cheated all his drivers because none of them had papers. Another year passed. Tobechei could not send as much money as he wanted to because most of it was going into what he called "sorting his papers." Her aunties' whisperings became louder and louder: What is that boy waiting for? If he cannot organize himself and send for his wife, he should let us know, because a woman's time passes quickly! During their

telephone conversations, she heard the strain in his voice and she consoled him and longed for him and cried when she was alone until the day finally came: Tobechei called to say that his green card was on the table in front of him and that it was not even green.

Kamara would always remember the air-conditioned staleness of the air when she arrived at the Philadelphia airport. She was still holding her passport, slightly folded on the page that had the visitor's visa with Tobechei's name as sponsor, when she came out at Arrivals and there he was, lighter-skinned, chubby, laughing. It had been six years. They clung to each other. In the car, he told her that he had sorted his papers as a single person and so they would marry again in America and he would file for her green card. He took off his shoes when they got to the apartment and she looked at his toes, dark against the milk-colored linoleum of the kitchen floor, and noticed that they had sprouted hair. She did not remember his toes with hair. She stared at him as he spoke, his Igbo interspersed with English that had an ungainly American accent: "Amah go" for "I will go." He had not spoken like that on the phone. Or had he, and she had not noticed? Was it simply that seeing him was different and that it was the Tobechei of university that she had expected to find? He excavated memories and aired them, rejoiced in them: Do you remember the night we bought *suya* in the rain? She remembered. She remembered that there had been a crackling thunderstorm and the electric bulbs were blinking and they had eaten the soggy grilled meat with raw onions that made their eyes water. She remembered how they had woken up the next morning with onions heavy on their breath. She remembered, too, how their relationship had been filled with an effortless ease. Now, their silences were awkward, but she told herself that things would get better, they had been apart a long time, after all. In bed, she felt nothing except for the rubbery friction of skin against skin and she clearly remembered the way it used to be between them, he silent and gentle and firm, she loud and grasping and writhing. Now, she wondered if it was even the same Tobechei, this person who seemed so eager, so theatrical, and who, most worrying of all, had begun to talk in that false accent that made her want to slap his face. *I wanna fuck you. I'm gonna fuck you.* The first weekend he took her out to see Philadelphia, they walked up and down Old City until she was exhausted and he asked her to sit on a bench while he went and bought her a bottle of water. As he walked back toward her in his slightly baggy jeans and a T-shirt, the tangerine-colored sun behind him, she thought for a moment that he was somebody she did not know at all. He would come home from his new job as a manager at Burger King bearing a little gift: the latest *Essence* magazine, Maltina from the African store, a chocolate bar. On the day they went to a courthouse to exchange vows in front of an impatient-looking woman, he whistled happily as he knotted his tie and she watched him with a kind of desperate sadness, wanting so much to feel his delight. There were emotions she wanted to hold in the palm of her hand that were simply no longer there. While he was at work, she would pace the apartment and watch TV and eat everything in the fridge, even spoonfuls of margarine after she had

finished the bread. Her clothes pinched her waist and armpits, and so she took to walking around with only her *abada* wrapper tied loosely around her and knotted under her arm. She was finally with Tobechi in America, finally with her good man, and the feeling was one of flatness. It was only Chinwe she felt she could really talk to. Chinwe was the friend who had never told her she was foolish to wait for Tobechi, and if she told Chinwe how she did not like her bed but did not want to get up from it in the morning, Chinwe would understand her bewilderment.

She called Chinwe and Chinwe began to cry after the first hello and *kedu*. Another woman was pregnant for Chinwe's husband and he was going to pay her bride price because Chinwe had two daughters and the woman came from a family of many sons. Kamara tried to soothe Chinwe, raged about the useless husband, and then hung up without saying a word about her new life; she could not complain about not having shoes when the person she was talking to had no legs.

With her mother on the phone, she said everything was fine. "We will hear the patter of little feet soon," her mother said, and she said "*Ise!*" to show that she seconded the blessing. And she did: she had taken to closing her eyes while Tobechi was on top of her, willing herself to become pregnant, because if that did not shake her out of her dismay at least it would give her something to care about. Tobechi had brought her contraception pills because he wanted a year of just the both of them, to catch up, to enjoy each other, but she flushed one pill down the toilet each day and wondered how he could not see the grayness that clouded her days, the hard things that had slipped in between them. On Monday of last week, though, he *had* noticed the change in her.

"You're bright today, Kam," he said as he hugged her that evening. He sounded happy that she was bright. She was both thrilled and sorry, for having this knowledge she could not share with him, for suddenly believing again in ways that had nothing to do with him. She could not tell him how Tracy had come upstairs to the kitchen and how surprised she had been because she had given up wondering what kind of mother this was.

"Hi, Kamara," Tracy had said, coming toward her. "I'm Tracy." Her voice was deep and her womanly body was fluid and her sweater and hands were paint-stained.

"Oh, hello," Kamara said, smiling. "Nice to finally meet you, Tracy."

Kamara held out a hand but Tracy came close and touched her chin. "Did you ever wear braces?"

"Braces?"

"Yes."

"No, no."

"You have the most beautiful teeth."

Tracy's hand was still on her chin, slightly tilting her head up, and Kamara felt, first, like an adored little girl, and then like a bride. She smiled again. She was extremely aware of her body, of Tracy's eyes, of the space between them being so small, so very



small.

“Have you ever been an artist’s model?” Tracy asked.

“No ... no.”

Josh came into the kitchen and rushed to Tracy, his face lit up. “Mommy!” Tracy hugged him and kissed him and ruffled his hair. “Have you finished your work, Mommy?” He clung to her hand.

“Not yet, honey.” She seemed to be familiar with the kitchen. Kamara had expected that she would not know where the glasses were kept or how to operate the water filter. “I’m stuck, so I thought I’d come upstairs for a little while.” She was smoothing Josh’s hair. She turned to Kamara. “It’s stuck right here in my throat, you know?”

“Yes,” Kamara said, although she did not know. Tracy was looking right into her eyes in a way that made Kamara’s tongue feel blubbery.

“Neil says you have a master’s degree,” Tracy said.

“Yes.”

“That’s wonderful. I hated college and couldn’t wait to graduate!” She laughed. Kamara laughed. Josh laughed. Tracy riffled through the mail on the table, picked up one envelope and tore it open and put it back. Kamara and Josh watched her in silence. Then she turned. “Okay, I guess I better get back to work. See you guys later.”

“Why don’t you show Josh what you’re working on?” Kamara asked, because she could not bear the thought of Tracy leaving.

Tracy seemed taken aback by the suggestion for a moment, then she looked down at Josh. “Want to see it, buddy?”

“Yeah!”

In the basement, a wide painting leaned against the wall.

“It’s pretty,” Josh said. “Right, Kamara?”

It looked like haphazard splashes of bright paint to her. “Yes. It’s very nice.”

She was more curious about the basement itself, where Tracy practically lived, the slumping couch and cluttered tables and coffee-stained mugs. Tracy was tickling Josh and Josh was laughing. Tracy turned to her. “Sorry it’s such a mess in here.”

“No, it’s fine.” She wanted to offer to clean up for Tracy, anything to remain here.

“Neil says you’ve only just moved to the States? I’d love to hear about Nigeria. I was in Ghana a couple of years ago.”

“Oh.” Kamara sucked in her belly. “Did you like Ghana?”

“Very much. The motherland informs all of my work.” Tracy was tickling Josh but her eyes were steady on Kamara. “Are you Yoruba?”

“No. Igbo.”

“What does your name mean? Am I saying it right? Kamara?”

“Yes. It’s a short form of Kamarachizuoroanyi: ‘May God’s Grace Be Sufficient for Us.’”

“It’s beautiful, it’s like music. Kamara, Kamara, Kamara.”

Kamara imagined Tracy saying that again, this time in her ear, in a whisper. *Kamara, Kamara, Kamara*, she would say while their bodies swayed to the music of the name.

Josh was running with a paintbrush in his hand and Tracy ran after him; they came close to Kamara. Tracy stopped. “Do you like this job, Kamara?”

“Yes.” Kamara was surprised. “Josh is a very good boy.”

Tracy nodded. She reached out and, again, lightly touched Kamara’s face. Her eyes gleamed in the light from the halogen lamps.

“Would you take your clothes off for me?” she asked in a tone as soft as a breath, so soft Kamara was not sure she had heard correctly. “I’d paint you. But it wouldn’t look much like you.”

Kamara knew that she was no longer breathing as she should. “Oh. I don’t know,” she said.

“Think about it,” Tracy said, before she turned to Josh and told him she had to get back to work.

“Time for your spinach, Josh,” Kamara said, in a voice too loud, and went upstairs, wishing she had said something bolder, wishing Tracy would come up again.

. . .

Neil had only just begun letting Josh have chocolate sprinkles, after a new book claimed his sugar-free sweetener was carcinogenic, and so Josh was eating his dessert of organic frozen yogurt dotted with chocolate sprinkles when the garage door opened. Neil was wearing a sleek dark suit. He placed his leather bag down on the counter, said hi to Kamara, and then swooped down on Josh. “Hello, bud!”

“Hi, Daddy.” Josh kissed him and laughed when Neil nuzzled his neck.

“How did your reading practice with Kamara go?”

“Good.”

“Are you nervous, bud? You’ll do great, I bet you’ll win. But it doesn’t matter if you don’t because you’re still a winner for Daddy. Are you all set for Zany Brainy? It should be fun. Chum the Cheeseball’s first visit!”

“Yes.” Josh pushed his plate aside and started to look through his schoolbag.

“I’ll look at your school stuff later,” Neil said.

“I can’t find my shoelaces. I took them out in the playground.” Josh brought out a piece of paper from his bag. His dirt-encrusted shoelaces were tangled around it and he pulled the laces apart. “Oh, look! Remember the special family Shabbat cards my class was working on, Dad?”

“Is that it?”

“Yes!” Josh held the crayon-colored paper up, moving it this way and that. In his precociously well-formed hand were the words *Kamara, I’m glad we are family. Shabbat shalom.*

“I forgot to give it to you last Friday, Kamara. So I’ll have to wait till tomorrow to give it to you, okay?” Josh said, his face solemn.

“Okay, Josh,” Kamara said. She was rinsing off his plate for the dishwasher.

Neil took the card from Josh. “You know, Josh,” he said, giving the card back, “it’s very sweet of you to give this to Kamara, but Kamara is your nanny and your friend, and this was for family.”

“Miss Leah said I could.”

Neil looked at Kamara, as if seeking support, but Kamara looked away and focused on opening the dishwasher.

“Can we go, Dad?” Josh asked.

“Sure.”

Before they left, Kamara said, “Good luck tomorrow, Josh.”

Kamara watched them drive off in Neil’s Jaguar. Her feet itched to go down the stairs, to knock on Tracy’s door and offer something: coffee, a glass of water, a sandwich, herself. In the bathroom, she patted her newly braided hair, touched up her lipgloss and mascara, then started down the stairs that led to the basement. She stopped many times and went back. Finally she rushed down the stairs and knocked on the door. She knocked again and again.

Tracy opened it. “I thought you’d gone,” she said, her expression distant. She was wearing a faded T-shirt and paint-streaked jeans and her eyebrows were so thick and straight they looked fake.

“No.” Kamara felt awkward. *Why haven’t you come up since Monday of last week? Why have your eyes not lit up at seeing me?* “Neil and Josh just left for Zany Brainy. I’m keeping my fingers crossed for Josh tomorrow.”

“Yes.” There was something in her demeanor that Kamara feared was an irritated impatience.

“I’m sure Josh will win,” Kamara said.

“He just might.”

Tracy seemed to be moving back, as if about to shut the door.

“Do you need anything?” Kamara asked.

Slowly Tracy smiled. She moved forward now, closer to Kamara, too close, her face against Kamara’s. “You *will* take your clothes off for me,” she said.

“Yes.” Kamara kept her belly sucked in until Tracy said, “Good. But not today. Today isn’t a good day,” and disappeared into the room.

Even before Kamara looked at Josh the next afternoon, she knew he hadn't won. He was sitting in front of a plate of cookies, drinking a glass of milk, with Neil standing beside him. A pretty blond woman wearing ill-fitting jeans was looking at the photographs of Josh posted on the fridge.

"Hi, Kamara. We just got back," Neil said. "Josh was fantastic. He really deserved to win. He was clearly the kid who had worked the hardest."

Kamara ruffled Josh's hair. "Hello, Joshy."

"Hi, Kamara," Josh said, and stuffed a cookie into his mouth.

"This is Maren," Neil said. "She's Josh's French teacher."

The woman said hi and shook Kamara's hand and then went into the den. The jeans dug into her crotch and the sides of her face were stained with a too-cheery shade of blusher and she was nothing like Kamara imagined a French teacher would be.

"The Read-A-Thon ate into their lesson time, so I thought they might have the lesson here and Maren was sweet enough to say yes. It's okay, Kamara?" Neil asked.

"Of course." And all of a sudden, she liked Neil again and she liked the way the blinds sliced up the sunlight coming into the kitchen and she liked that the French teacher was here because when the lesson started, she would go down and ask Tracy if it was the right time to take off her clothes. She was wearing a new balconet bra.

"I'm worried," Neil said. "I think I'm consoling him with a sugar overload. He's had two lollipops. Plus we stopped at Baskin-Robbins." Neil was whispering even though Josh could hear. It was the same unnecessarily hushed tone that Neil had used to tell her about the books he'd donated to Josh's pre-K class at Temple Beth Hillel, books that were about Ethiopian Jews, illustrated with pictures of people where skin was the color of burnished earth, but Josh said the teacher had never read the books to the class. Kamara remembered the way Neil had grasped her hand gratefully after she'd said "Josh will be fine," as if all Neil needed was to have somebody say that.

Now, Kamara said, "He'll get over it."

Neil nodded slowly. "I don't know."

She reached out and squeezed Neil's hand. She felt filled with a generosity of spirit.

"Thanks, Kamara." Neil paused. "I better go. I'll be late today. Is it okay if you make dinner?"

"Of course." Kamara smiled again. Perhaps there might be time to go back down to the basement while Josh ate his dinner, perhaps Tracy would ask her to stay and she would call Tobechei and tell him there had been an emergency and she needed to take care of Josh overnight. The door that led to the basement opened. Kamara's excitement brought a dull throbbing to her temples, and the throbbing intensified when Tracy appeared in her leggings and her paint-stained shirt. She hugged and kissed Josh. "Hey, you are my winner, buddy, my special winner."

Kamara was pleased that Tracy did not kiss Neil, that they said "Hi, you" to each

other as though they were brother and sister.

“Hey, Kamara,” Tracy said, and Kamara told herself that the reason Tracy seemed normal, not absolutely delighted to see her, was that she did not want Neil to know.

Tracy opened the fridge, took an apple, and sighed. “I’m so stuck. So stuck,” she said.

“It’ll be fine,” Neil murmured. And then, raising his voice so that Maren, in the den, would hear, he added, “You haven’t met Maren, have you?”

Neil introduced them. Maren extended her hand and Tracy took it.

“Are you wearing contacts?” Tracy asked.

“Contacts? No.”

“You have the most unusual eyes. Violet.” Tracy was still holding Maren’s hand.

“Oh. Thank you!” Maren giggled nervously.

“They really are violet.”

“Oh ... yes, I think so.”

“Have you ever been an artist’s model?”

“Oh ... no ...” More giggles.

“You should think about it,” Tracy said.

She raised the apple to her lips and took a slow bite, her gaze never wavering from Maren’s face. Neil was watching them with an indulgent smile, and Kamara looked away. She sat down next to Josh and took a cookie from his plate.