# MY BABY

By Dorothy West

One day during my tenth year a long time ago in Boston, I came home from school, let myself in the back yard, stopped a moment to scowl at the tall sunflowers which sprang up yearly despite my dislike of them, and to smile at the tender pansies and marigolds and morning-glories which father set out in little plots every spring, and went on into the kitchen. The back gate and backdoor were always left open for us children, and the last one in was supposed to lock them. But since the last dawdler home from school had no way of knowing she was the last until she was inside it was always mother who locked them at first dark, and she would stand and look up at the evening stars. She seemed to like this moment of being alone, away from the noise in the house.

We were a big house. Beside the ten rooms, and the big white-walled attic, there were we three little girls and the big people, as we used to call them. Father, our mothers, grandpa, and the unmarried aunts. Presently, as I shall tell you, there were two more little ones. Grandpa used to say that if we lived in the Boston Museum, which was the biggest building grandpa had ever seen we'd still need one more room. That was a standing joke in our house. For besides this permanent collection, there were always visiting relatives and friends, for we had a nice house, and we were a hospitable family. My room was the big third-floor front bedroom. Mostly I shared it with mother. I remember everything in that room, the big brass bed that had been father's wedding present to mother, the wicker settee and the wicker rocker and the wicker armchair, that had once seen service in the parlor until superseded by mahogany, and now creaked dolefully on damp nights, making we think of ghosts. There was a built-in marble wash-stand in the room, and I think mother was very proud of this fixture. There were taps for running hot and cold water and on Saturdays and Sundays and holidays the hot tap was really hot. The New England winters were cold then, and although our old-fashioned house had a furnace that sent up some semblance of heat through the registers, there were coal stoves in nearly all the rooms. In my room was a little pot-bellied stove, and I knew how to tend it myself. At night I would sift the ashes and bank the fire, and in the mornings I would scoot out of bed onto the freezing carpet, run to the stove, bang the door shut, open the drafts, race back to bed and lie on my belly doing my algebra until the room had warmed enough for me to dress.

My room, for some reason, became the hub of the house. I think it was because that little pot-bellied stove was one of the only two on the top floor. And whereas I left my window for mother to open, so I wouldn't cool off the house before it was bedded down for the night, my cousin, in whose room was an ancient, evil, ugly stove, let her fire go out, flung open her window, and shut her door against intruders. At night everyone came into my room to warm himself before going to bed, and an aunt stopping in to toast for a moment before my banked fire and finding another aunt present would fall into conversation, and by and by all the other members of the family, except father and grandpa who couldn't come in their nightshirts, would drift in and settle in the wicker furniture, and the rocking chair would swing back and forth, and someone would ask, *is that child asleep*? And someone would answer, *if she isn't, she'd*

*better be*. They would sit there until the banked fire gave out no more heat. Then they would sigh and heave themselves up, and their heavy bodies would pad out of the room. Mother would crack the window and let in the stars and turn out the flickering gaslight. Sometimes she slipped in beside me, sometimes not. I would lie and listen to the creaks and groans of the many bedsteads, and it seemed to me a fine and safe thing to have a big family.

That day in my tenth year when I came home from school, my mother was not in the kitchen. This seemed odd, for the children in our Irish neighborhood were often bellicose, and mother stood ready at all times to rush out and rescue us. I could not fight when I was a child. I shook too much and was too ashamed. But my mother and the cousin who was eleven months older than I were great battlers. It was wonderful to hear my mother tearing into an Irish termagant with a sailor's tongue, and to see my girl cousin triumphantly straddling a thirteen-year-old bully. My mother and my cousin were so much alike that sometimes I had the mean thought that I was not really my mother's child. And oddly enough, my mother's sister was shy and soft and dark like myself. My cousin and I used to wonder quite seriously if our mothers, for some reason, had switched us. When I could not find my mother in the kitchen, I went softly down the hall to the parlor. I did not call her in the fear that if there were company, I would be summoned. The parlor door stood open but my cautious peeking revealed no one inside. Suddenly, I heard movement in the upstairs sitting room. I went back down the hall and up the back stairs, and sitting down on the top step, I had a clear view of the front room. Now, looking back, I do not remember the room's furnishings. I can only recall that almost center in the room was a big table-desk that had once been in father's office, and beside this desk sat a strange white woman with a little brown girl in her arms. I could not see my mother, but I was aware of her presence in that room. Grandpa was probably in the grandfather chair, chewing tobacco, spitting into a tin can when it was summer and into the stove when it was winter, not listening to the conversation of the women. My father and my widowed aunts were at work.

My mother and the woman spoke in low voices, and I did not hear anything they said. I wished I could see the baby more clearly, for I loved babies. She was good, hardly stirring, and never uttering a sound. Presently the woman rose. I scrambled down the back stairs as quietly as I could. That night at supper my mother asked us how we would like a baby boy and girl to play with. We were wildly excited, for we were beginning to think we were too big to play with dolls and it was hard not to have something to fondle. *Well, we'll see*, said my mother and sent us out front to play, with grandfather at the parlor window to watch us so that the roving bands of Irish boys from Mission Hill way would not bother us. We know that the big people were going to talk about the white lady and wanted us out of ear-shot.

The day the babies came is as clear in my mind as if it were yesterday. It was a Saturday. We had not come home from dancing school, held in the spacious home of a Negro woman who had known a better day, where we were taught parlor dancing by a young and lovely Irish girl, whose mother accompanied her to class because some of the seniors were boys of eighteen, and our teacher was only twenty-one. She was engaged and was not interested in the boys at all except as one boy danced better than another. Nor were the boys interested in her since they were all in school and there

were several prettier girls in the class. Now it seems strange that we had a white dancing teacher, but in those days it was the fashion. If you went to a Negro teacher, it was an admission that you could not afford to pay a white one.

When we rang the front bell, mother came to the door. She smiled and said that the babies had come, and that they were to sleep with me because my bedroom was the biggest. My cousins raced upstairs to see the newcomers. I stayed behind to ask questions. Actually I could not bear the exquisite moment when I would hold two real babies in my arms. I asked my mother how long they would stay. She said they would stay indefinitely for their mother had gone to work to support them. She was, in fact, going to work as nursemaid for a friend of my unmarried aunt's employer. I asked my mother where their father was. She hesitated for a moment, then said that their father had not been very good to them, and that was why they were here, and I must love them a lot so they would not miss their mother too much.

With my heart bursting with love for these babies, I went slowly upstairs. Finally, I reached my room, and I heard my cousins crowing delightedly. At the foot of my bed sat a little boy in pajamas. He looked about three. His hair was very blond and curly, his skin very pink and white. He looked like a cherub as he bounced about outside the covers and chattered in utmost friendliness to my cousins. I started toward him, for I wanted nothing so much as to hug him tight. My cousins began telling me excitedly what a darling he was. I was almost upon them when suddenly I stopped. I did not do it willfully. Some force outside me jerked me to a halt. The smile left my face and involuntarily I turned and looked toward the head of the bed. There was that baby girl, staring solemnly at me. I went slowly toward her. I had forgotten the boy was on earth. I stood above her. She was no more than two. Her hair was as curly as the boy's but softer and longer and brown. Her wide serious eyes were brown, too. She was copper-colored. In all of my life I have never seen a lovelier child. I do not know how long we stared at each other unthinkingly. As clearly as if I had spoken aloud, I heard a voice inside myself say to the inward ear of that child, *I am going to love you best of all*. Then I turned away without touching her and in a minute had joined my cousins who had already decided the boy would be the most fun.

The months passed, and the girl and I became inseparable. When I came home at half-past two there was her little face pressed to the window-pane, and no one had told her the time. From the moment I entered the house, I was her mother and she was my child. Their own mother came to see the children on the one day a week that she was free. But she was so young, only twenty-one and she had been caring for babies all week, and so after a few minutes with them, mother sent her out to see her young friends. My mother treated her like a child which seemed odd to me then. I learned that my mother was her aunt by marriage, and that she remembered the day she was born. I was told she had played with us when we were babies just as we played with her children now. I knew then that she was not white.

The hard winter had set in when father had to shovel a path from the house to the sidewalk before we children could leave for school. The snow was banked as high as our shoulders. There are no such winters now. We were little girls and we wore boys' storm boots that laced to our knees as did all the other little girls. We wore flannel shirts

and drawers that made us itch like mad and red flannel petticoats. Some bitter mornings the bells sounded over the city which meant it was snowing too hard for school. The babies scarcely left the house that winter, for mother said they were packed with cold. I think the house was warmer than it ever had been, and sometimes father grumbled about the cost of coal. Grandpa gave the babies a mixture of white vaseline, lemon juice and sugar. Mother borrowed my allowance money regularly for patent medicines. They worked on those children all winter. When it was spring, it seemed that Grandpa and my mother had succeeded, for the children had gained and grown taller.

The girl was as much a part of me now as my arm. She had grown even closer to me after the long, uncertain winter. I had forgotten the years when she had not been with me. I could not imagine a life without her. As young as she was, and as young as I was, there was an understanding between us of amazing depth. The family remarked our oneness. Her own mother knew without jealously that the baby loved me best. Death came on her quietly, and on what mild spring breeze it could have blown we never knew. There was a day when she whimpered and sucked on her thumb, a habit we had broken. I do not remember if the doctor came; I only remember that it seemed to me I could not bear to see her lying there, not whimpering now, but still sucking on her thumb with nobody telling her not to, and her eyes enormous and with a look of suffering.

Then one day - it may have been the next day, it may have been the next year, for the pain I suffered with her - my mother wrapped her up and took her to the hospital. When mother had gone, I slipped out of the house and trailed her like a little dog. It was a short walk from our house to the Children's Hospital. Mother went inside, and I stood on the sidewalk opposite and stared up at the hospital windows. I guess the waiting room was on the second floor, for suddenly I saw my mother in line at a second floor window. She did not see me, and I cannot say if the baby saw me or not. She lay listlessly in mother's arms pulling on her thumb. I stared at her with my hands pressed tight in prayer until they had passed out of sight. Then I ran home and crawled under the bed and lay there quivering, unable to cry, until I heard mother's weary step in the hall.

We children ran to her, and when we saw she had returned without the baby, we could not bear to ask her what the doctor had said. She would not tell us. She only said the doctor would take good care of her and that she would soon be well. It is so long now that I cannot remember how long it was. Perhaps a week passed, perhaps a month. One night in my sleep I heard the front door bell or the telephone ring. The next thing I remembered was the soft sound of my mother's sobs. I sat up and stared at her. The boy's blond head lay on the pillow, his face sweet in sleep. My mother looked at me. I do not know why she had come into my room unless to reassure herself that there was life in death. She came to me and hugged me tight, and said in a choked whisper that the baby was dead. Then she straightened almost sternly and told me to go back to sleep. I did not cry. I just felt surprised for a minute and then went to sleep almost instantly.

I was ten and I was smart for my age. I had been told that the baby was dead, and I had seen the grown-ups strained faces, but did not know what death was. The last time I had seen the baby she had been alive. It was not until I looked down at her little white coffin that I knew that she was not. Had she died without pain, she might have looked otherwise. But the sudden swift disease had ravaged her. A bandage covered her eyes, and the agony had left its mark on her mouth. She did not look like a sleeping child. Perhaps the undertaker had not yet perfected his art. This was death unbeautiful and unmistakable. The only mourners were my family. The mother came home with us that night. I remember her white, frightened, little-girl's face, and my mother's tenderness. She did not go back to work. There was a week of family conferences, for we children practically spent the whole week outdoors.

Then one day we came home from school, and the boy and his mother had gone. My mother said they had gone far away to another city. She talked to us very seriously, and her eyes were filled with sadness and something that looked like shame. Her words came out slowly, as if reluctantly. Sometimes she could not look at us. She said the boy and his mother would never come back. They had gone away to begin a new life. If anyone asked us about them, we must say we had never known them. We knew by her face that we must not ask any questions. We went away from her, and we could not play, nor could we look at each other. So summer came again, and an aunt from the South came to visit us, bringing her two little boys. My cousins had a child apiece and were wildly happy. Mother and the aunts were happy, too, for they had not seen their sister in years.

One day a strange dark man came to our house and talked in an angry voice to my mother. She talked back to him the same way she talked to the Irish termagants. I heard her tell that man that his baby had died because he had neglected it. She told him that his wife and son had gone away, and thrust him out of the house. Sometime after that a letter came for my mother. I saw her hands tremble when she opened it. She did not say anything to us, but that night she read it aloud to her assembled sisters. My cousins were in the attic playing with the two little boys, and my mother thought I was with them. Actually I was lying underneath my bed, crying for that dead baby. There was not a night for a good six months that I did not cry for her. When I heard my mother and my aunts, I crammed my fist into my mouth. How could I tell them I was crying for a child I was supposed never to have heard of?

My mother and the aunts settled in the wicker furniture. Somebody carefully shut the door. Then mother read the letter. I do not remember everything it said. All that I remember is something about a marriage, and something about a new life, and something about a husband's being white. Mother opened my little pot-bellied stove, thrust the letter in, and struck a match to it. Suddenly the sisters silently converged and watched the letter burn. When the letter was ashes, mother shut the stove door. I heard my unmarried aunt murmur, *God help her to be happy*. Then they filed out, and one of them called upstairs sharply for the children not to make so much noise. They went back downstairs.

I took my fist out of my mouth, and I cried even harder, for now there was much more to cry about.