

Estranged

"Did I tell you?" Mother says. "Fanny Peatrow got engaged."

"Good for Fanny."

"Not even a month after she got that teller job at the Farmer's Bank."

"That's great, Mother."

"I know," she says, and I turn to see one of those lightbulb-popping looks of hers. "Why don't you go down to the bank and apply for a teller job?"

"I don't want to be a bank teller, Mama."

Mother sighs, narrows her eyes at the spaniel, Shelby, licking his nether parts. I eye the front door. We've had this conversation so many times.

"Four years my daughter goes off to college and what does she come home with?" she asks.

"A diploma?"

"A pretty piece of paper," Mother says.

"I told you. I didn't meet anybody I wanted to marry," I say.

Mother rises from her chair, comes close so I'll look her in her smooth, pretty face.

"Now, I talked to Fanny's mother and she said Fanny was practically swimming in opportunities once she got that job."

I'll never be able to tell Mother I want to be a writer. She'll only turn it into yet another thing that separates me from the married girls. What I needed to do was find an apartment in town, the kind of building where single, plain girls lived, spinsters, secretaries, teachers. But the one time I had mentioned using money from my trust fund, Mother had cried-real tears. "That is not what that money's for, Eugenia. To live in some rooming house with strange cooking smells and stockings hanging out the window. And when the money runs out, what then? What will you live on?" Then she'd draped a cold cloth on her head and gone to bed for the day.

And now she's gripping the rail, waiting to see if I'll do what fat Fanny Peatrow did to save herself. My own mother is looking at me as if I completely **baffle her mind** with my looks, my height, my hair.

"It's all about putting yourself in a man-meeting situation where you can "

"Mama," I say, just wanting to end this conversation, "would it really be so terrible if I never met a husband?"

Mother clutches her bare arms as if made cold by the thought. "Don't. Don't say that, Eugenia. Why, every week I see another man in town over six feet and I think, If Eugenia would just try..."

She presses her hand to her stomach, the very thought advancing her **ulcers**.

I slip off my **flats** and walk down the front porch steps, while Mother calls out for me to put my shoes back on, **threatening** ringworm, mosquito encephalitis. The inevitability of death by no shoes. Death by no husband. I shudder with the same left-behind feeling I've had since I graduated from college, three months ago. I've been dropped off in a place I do not belong anymore.

"... here you are twenty-three years old and I'd already had Carlton Jr. at your age..." Mother says.

Abridged from Kathryn Stockett, *The Help*, 2009

baffle her mind : to cause someone to be completely unable to understand or explain something

ulcers : *ulcer*

flats : flat shoes

threatening : *menacer*