My mother used to say that a name tells more about a person than would an hour spent in the same room with him. "If you ever have children—God forbid—" she would advise, "give them good, strong names. Don't buy into this androgynous garbage. If a boy is named Leslie, you might as well put him in a dress." She classified my friends Susan and Margaret without ever meeting them ("A phony and a know-it-all, you mark my words..." ). "Abigail" and "Amos" were her definition of charming names, and I often wondered why she'd called me "Judith," an insipid moniker I'd swapped for "Judy" without delay. The switch was anything but smooth: Teachers and friends' parents kept slipping up with "Now, tell me, Judith..." or "So, how is Judith these days?"

"Judy!" I would hiss through gritted teeth. My mother said Judy was a feisty name.

Perhaps I should explain about my mother, for—between her occasional pearls of wisdom and the fake pearls she wore out to dinner on the weekends—not even her name would give you an accurate description. Feminism mixed with...well, misogyny was her game, and when I was a little girl she would smooth my hair and proclaim: "Judith, men are like dogs—you should pet only the ones you keep on a short leash, because you can never tell where the others have been rolling." Indeed, only a deep fondness for the male gender could have prompted this axiom...plus the fact that Mother rarely practiced what she preached.

Take Amos, for example, who cropped up during my junior year of high school. Amos was my mother's "soon-to-be fiancé," an impossibly dense fellow whose intellect never strayed beyond, "So, how 'bout them Patriots?" and "Woudja pass the beans?" Still, the mule somehow attracted women like my mother who thought they could change him into a prize pony. He would slouch around the house in his boxers, leaving a trail of dirty socks and crumpled Budweiser cans in his wake. A year of living with us gave him the run of the place—he'd taken to calling me "squirt," and, when he thought no one was looking, guzzling milk straight from the carton. Easy-going Susan was accustomed to his vile presence, but I sidestepped inviting Margaret to our house for any reason.

Margaret herself never mentioned a preference for men, though her strict Catholic upbringing gave Susan and me no room to wonder. Pet names were also a no-go, but she did permit the occasional "Peggy"—a nickname that gelled with our musketeer reputation: "Judy, Peggy, and Sue" sounded more affable than "Judith, Margaret, and Susan," which, as Susan pointed out, resembled an applicant list for a convent rather than a schoolgirl posse. Margaret might have succumbed to the nickname due to our cheeky chants of "Are you there, God? It's me, Margaret," but Susan assured me that our friend didn't listen to us half the time anyway, as she thought us damned pagans and assumed we were talking about sex.

The object of my own affections these days went by the name of Freddy Baldwin (or, as Susan and the entire football team called him, "Freddy Bear"). The name Frederick subjected him to petty jokes, but I, his worshipper, wholeheartedly supported his choice of "Fred."
"Judith," my mother would say, casually filing her nails over the waste bin, "who's this Freddy I keep hearing about? Is he attractive? Can you keep him on a short leash?"

"Judy!" I hissed through gritted teeth, frowning at the stupid potato I was having no success peeling.

"What?" My mother blinked. "Oh, yes, your epithet—God forbid...." She continued her manicure with a flourish. "So, this Freddy—Baldwin, is it? Did I hear Susan say something about the two of you...'going steady?'"

I rolled my eyes. "Going steady? Is this you pretending you're down with the lingo?"

"Don't be a smart ass," my mother snapped, "or I'll knock some lingo into you!" She held the nail file in her hand like a dagger, and I winced—my mother was touchy about both men and lingo. "Well?" she barked. "Is he good-looking?"

"He plays football," I tried, edging carefully away from her.

She snorted.

"And he's good at Chemistry..."

"I bet," she muttered.

"He's smart," I continued defensively, "even if he's not James Dean."

"What does your friend Margaret think of this Freddy?" she asked. My mother was very concerned with what Margaret thought of men, even if Margaret wasn't. Apparently Margaret, in my mother's eyes, knew the meaning of the phrase "short leash."

"Oh, you know Peg," I scoffed. "She thinks high school dating is a sin—just an excuse to fool around and have illegitimate babies."

My mother swayed over the waste bin, appearing oddly seasick. "Illegitimate babies?"

"Oh, c'mon, Mom," I laughed. "You must trust me more than that!"

She squinted at me. "Hmm," she said. "Hmm...Fred Baldwin, eh? Think I'll need a look for myself...."

Susan liked Dallas. Dallas was also on the football team, making Friday night games convenient spectacles for both my two best friends and me. Margaret, oddly enough, liked sports, though her insistence on bringing needlework to the bleachers suggested otherwise. While Susan and I hollered, "Run, Dallas, run!" and "Kill 'em, Fred!" Margaret would hum happily and knit even faster, egged on by the jubilant squeals of the crowd.

My mother found football players overrated.

"Look at those little cheerleader tramps," she observed, gesturing at the blue and yellow pom-poms just visible from our place in the stands, "throwing themselves all over the varsity studs. They'll grow up to be lushes, every one of them."

"I'm puttin' money on the green team," Amos piped up. Our school's colors were blue and gold.

My mother kept shooting furtive glances at Margaret, who was busy knitting. She opened her mouth as if to speak to Margaret, and then wordlessly closed it. My mother was a devout atheist, and I suspected she was dying to notify Margaret just exactly what she thought of Catholicism.
Only at halftime, when Amos disappeared for concessions and Susan was busy waving at Dallas, did my mother deign to address Margaret: "So," she said, "are you one of those Christian zealots who ring my doorbell every Tuesday and pitch me that 'Jesus loves you' crap? Because guess what: I'm not buyin' it!"

I buried my head in my hands. Margaret blinked.

"And you know what else?" my mother went on. I could tell she was starting one of her harangues—her fists were clenching and unclenching, and little pink splotches appeared on her cheeks. "Sorry to break it to you, honey, but there is no God! I mean, where's the divine music? Is the sky opening up? You see any burning bushes around, huh? Why aren't people getting _smote_?"

"Mom," I said gently. She raised a hand to silence me. I could almost see the smoke billowing from her ears. Even Susan was watching now.

My mother waggled her finger in Margaret's face. "I'm not going to raise my children Christian, either, so don't even start. You can preach hellfire all you want, but don't you dare tell me how to raise my kids. Think my children aren't as good as you because we don't go to church? Because they weren't conceived in marriage? I'll bet Judith here could dance circles around your...your pious purity!"

Amos had returned with hot dogs and Mountain Dews. He stopped in his tracks and considered the scene. The game had begun again. Fred had scored a touchdown, putting our school in the lead, but nobody was paying attention.

My mother's eyes suddenly grew wide. She bit her lip and looked from Margaret to me to Susan to Amos, and then back to Margaret again. Margaret had resumed her knitting, forming the bulk of what appeared to be a very small sweater. My mother stared, then said:

"Is that a sweater...for a baby?"

Margaret nodded.

My mother grabbed Amos's arm and pulled him toward her. The smile on her face was uncanny, the first I'd seen in a long time. Amos, as usual, looked puzzled.

"This is Amos," my mother said fondly, squeezing his shoulder. "What do you think of him, Margaret?"

Margaret looked at Amos, who was squinting at my mother.

"How about..." my mother said to Margaret, almost shyly, "making us a Christmas present of that sweater? I'm having a baby, you know. In April." She turned to me, beaming. "Think of it, Judith: You'll have a little sibling!"

Susan and I gaped at her. Amos looked as if he'd been walloped over the head with a baseball bat. Margaret smiled sweetly and asked, "What are you going to name it?"