

By the time Robert turned eighteen, he had accomplished a few other things: totalled a car (belly up like a crawfish turned upside down) in the ditch just off the main highway; a night in jail after a DUI; and gotten his highschool sweetheart pregnant. All that Catholic guilt created a strange set of events. Robert and his girl eloped a few weeks after she told him about the baby, before she started showing. They had played doctor in the bed of a neighbor's truck on cinder blocks when they were seven and eight, though were far from childhood sweethearts. Instead, Robert and Carlene played as equals, two rough-and-tumble little feral boys covered in mud. She was stronger and taller than him, sometimes holding him down by sitting over him, threatening a dangle of spit hovering between his eyes until she recalled it, far back into the caverns of her sinuses, like a yo-yo. In that warp of childhood, he was grossed out and engrossed by her, which meant that he both wanted to be her and be with her, always.

She was, also, the clever one: gifted at science, math, and would've done things had classes other than Home Ec been available to her. She read the Farmer's Almanac cover to cover, read anything printed on paper or other materials she could get her hands on--the ingredient lists on packaged foods, the seed catalog, two different local newspapers.

Something in the cunning, self-preserving part of her had created a false set of dates to present the 9 months of incubation, just so she didn't have to talk about it with her Catholic family. At her calculation, a fully-baked regular-sized baby would come out nine weeks early, an easy fib that maintained her virginity. She loved a good story.

But all the math and web of lies weren't necessary: she lost the baby a month after they were married, the Friday before they were planning on telling the family.

At the family crawfish boil: "When y'all gonna give me grandbabies." Robert's mama didn't even end it in a question because it was a demand. Carlene snarled a tight-lipped "dunno," a response that planted the seeds of her being unfit for motherhood: a cold, curt woman.