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Later

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Later

Milly washes and dries her hands while twisting her neck to read the instructions on the cardboard box for the third time. She always thought pregnancy tests took three minutes, but the instructions tell her to wait five. “Probably more accurate,” she mutters to the box. Pinching the box between two fingers, she turns it parallel to the counter’s edge, then slides it square into the corner. The test waits patiently, a clean strip of white centered on top. With a bit of toilet paper, Milly wipes up the lavender-scented scum under the soap dispenser and the minty crust under the toothbrush cup. She smoothes the wrinkles out of the hanging towels. Four minutes and forty-five seconds.

It took the microwave in Milly’s childhood home two minutes and forty-five seconds to pop a bag of popcorn. Mom would always make Milly and her sister tidy up as much as they could during those 165 seconds before movie night. Milly’s sister would go for the crumb-covered counters. She had three years of hand-eye coordination development to lord over Milly, and she was proud of her mastery of dragging a washcloth in a snaking line to scoop up all the “mouse food,” as Mom called it.

Milly preferred the living room. She believed having someone see her clean spoiled the purity of the results. She wrangled toy horses and red Lego blocks and Barbie clothes, carefully combing the speckled shag carpet with her fingers after she’d cleared the toys away. She knew Mom would swear if she accidentally stepped on a tiny pony hairbrush. In the corner of the room was a low table where Milly dumped her armfuls, enjoying the chaotic but now contained pile of plastic baubles. Folding blankets was a tricky task for her child’s wingspan, but she compensated by setting the throw pillows at pretty angles, imitating the cover of Mom’s magazines. In two minutes and forty-five seconds, Milly’s sister would jump onto the couch and negate Milly’s work, but the process remained sacred ritual.

Milly leaves the bathroom and walks down the hall into the living

room, catching a whiff of the previous tenants' habit of burning incense. She moved into the one bedroom apartment only two weeks ago. The walls are sparse. Almost nothing has moved from the exact position it was placed in after being taken out of its box.

Milly swings her arms back and forth, snapping her fingers and looking around. Mark's gloves are lying on the floor next to the couch, but she does not touch them. Instead, she turns to the bookshelf and starts pressing on spines. Most of them are already flush to the back of the shelf but a few slide farther in with a pleasing chunk. Chunk goes Jane Eyre, chunk chunk two translations of The Odyssey, chunk the Thomas Pynchon, a present from Mark whose spine never got cracked, chunk chunk the pop fiction Mark liked to say he was going to burn one day.

A vision of a very different living room lights up in Milly's mind. Her coffee table is full of chubby plastic toys with teeth marks. Baby books are stacked on the lowest shelf, books about fruit and bears that talk. A pile of clean but long-cooled clothes takes up half of the couch, little white socks slipping off onto the floor. The baby bobbles in a Johnny Jump Up in the doorway, its face a blinding blast of white light.

Milly shakes her head, but slowly slides the books off of the bottom shelf and stacks them on top of the bookshelf next to the bird clock, the kitschy type that emits a different bird song every hour. Mom gave it to her. Three minutes.

Before the bright vision fades completely, she goes to the kitchen, takes out paper and a pencil, and writes down what she sees: Door locks. A breast pump. Bottles. Shoes so tiny they look like sample models of the adult shoes. A play pen. A mobile hanging from the ceiling fan, never used because of its steady, maddening click. The mobile has stars and birds, Milly can see, lots of blue.

That doesn't seem right to Milly, because girls run in her family.

Two minutes. She shoves the list away from her. It bumps into Mark's travel mug, which falls onto the floor with an angry metallic sound. Milly leaps up and swears at the splatter of coffee. Usually the pad of paper would not have hit anything, but Mark came over two days ago.

Mark leaves behind objects like the previous tenants left their incense.

“You left your gloves here,” she said to Mark on the phone yesterday. She was sitting at the same table, filling in her calendar for the coming months. Dentist 2 PM in blue. Water houseplants in orange. Jeannie and Michael’s Wedding in pink. She had not asked Mark to be her plus one.

“Have fun with that account, that lady deserves to get hit by a train—what’d you say, Miranda?” He was calling from work. He always called her from work. He also always called her by her full name.

Milly drew a tiny red X on the day she should have gotten her period. Three days ago. “Your gloves. And your mug. You left them at my place.”

“Yeah, I’ll pick them up later—no, I’m serious, she’s a complete bitch.”

The splatter of coffee has oozed under one of the chairs. Milly blinks, and the coffee pales, turning into something white and mushy. The chair is green now, with a red tray on which two chubby hands smack a bowl up and down. White mush flies almost as high as the ceiling.

Milly turns away from the coffee, the mush, to make tea. When she makes tea she feels like she is pretending to be the type of woman who makes tea in times of stress, rather than actually being her. That woman has an exotic, but not illegal pet, like a lizard, and she paces when she’s overwhelmed, instead of lying on the floor staring at the popcorn ceiling. She doesn’t have popcorn ceiling, she has skylights. That woman wakes up craving a cigarette, but heads for the tea kettle and the jars of loose-leaf tea instead. Milly has never smoked, and she uses an electric kettle. A lot of her tea has been pocketed from hotel breakfast buffets.

The electric kettle whirs steadily as it heats up. Milly can see the clock on the microwave out of the corner of her eye.

The green numbers shift. Zero minutes.

She doesn’t move, except to pluck a teabag from the oversized jar on the counter. She starts to tear open the paper square, but stops, staring past it at a different tea bag that, unlike the one in her hands, reads

“caffeine free.”

Tea has caffeine. Pregnant women can't have caffeine. Caffeine, or lunch meat, or alcohol. No emptying litter boxes. No soaking in hot tubs. No breathing paint fumes. What about residual incense fumes? The coffee splatter is the color of dried blood. Could you absorb caffeine through your skin? Milly opens the fridge and pulls out white wine, deli turkey, and diet soda, goosebumps popping up on her arms. She wants to throw them out, but she can't until she looks at the test. Two minutes past now.

The coffee must be cleaned up first, with a wet rag. On her hands and knees, Milly can see the dust and mouse food under the cupboards. Seven minutes ago she wanted the test to take only three minutes, but now she wants it to take three hours. She would wipe up all the dust and crumbs, organize the pantry, wash the rugs and the sheets, vacuum the carpets, sweep off the balcony, sort out the old clothes she no longer wears, fluff the couch cushions, scrub the tile behind the toilet, drive to the store for the items on the list on the fridge: crackers and toothpaste and bacon and cream cheese. Then she could be ready.

The coffee-stained rag makes an ugly wet sound as it lands in the sink. Milly allows herself one last diversion. She washes her hands as thoroughly as if the coffee really had been dried blood.

As she turns around, Mark knocks on the door.

He said “later” yesterday, so Milly reasons this is only fair, even as her limbs turn cold.

“Later as in tonight?” Milly said yesterday, squeezing the phone between her cheek and her shoulder as she hung her completed calendar back on its nail.

“Tonight? No, probably not tonight.” One of Mark's coworkers yelled something that made him laugh. “Don't worry, I've got her under control.”

“Well, tomorrow I have some errands to do.” She pressed the tip of her finger against the calendar, covering up the red X, then took it off.

“Miranda. I'll figure it out.” His voice moved away from the speaker. He was looking at his phone, reading the length of the call, Milly

knew. “You know I’m not supposed to take long calls at work. I’ve gotta go.”

The electric kettle bubbles quietly, then clicks once as it powers off. Milly stares at the door, not breathing. The bright-faced baby in the high chair looks at her and opens its mouth to babble for more white mush, but Milly moves into the living room before it can cry out.

To get to the bathroom, she must pass by the front door. She edges around the couch, stepping over Mark’s gloves. He knocks again, louder, and Milly feels her phone begin to vibrate in her pocket from his call. The buzzing seems loud enough for Mark to hear, so she slides the phone under one of the throw blankets, muffling the sound.

She steps past the end table, and down the hall she can see the speck of white on the bathroom counter that is the test. She is an arm’s length from the door, but she has to look down to keep herself from noisily tripping on shoes. Mark must be able to hear her heartbeat.

“Miranda?” The knob clicks as he tries it, and Milly freezes even though she knows it is locked. She shuts her eyes, her face bright and hot. If she opens the door, she has to explain the test, but if she explains the test, Mark can look at that white stick first instead of her. He can serve the child more white mush, and bring Milly a cold can of soda to press against her cheek.

Milly has a vision of Mark balancing the white-hot child on his hip as he rinses out bottle after bottle, milk splashing bright in the metal of the sink, but the scene wobbles, darkens.

“I know you’re in there, I saw your fucking car outside!”

The vision melts away. Milly’s mouth is open, her tongue poised against her top teeth—liar, it’s in the garage!—but she stops herself from yelling and moves away from the door. The child is sleeping in the bedroom, glowing like a night light as she passes by. As she takes the final steps to the bathroom, the things at the edges of her vision blur. Her framed diploma, the crack in the bathroom doorframe, and the gray hand towel all prepare to be transformed, to be given new meaning by the results of the little white stick. The bathroom walls are painted an indigo shade called “Pacific Plum.” Today the dark color feels as bright as a late

summer sky. The white scoop of the sink is like the sun.

She blinks, and she can hear her eyelids fluttering in time with the drum of her heart.

Plus. Like Jeannie and Michael's invitation said: plus one. Milly plus one baby.

Pregnant.

She sits down on the edge of the tub, as if already bearing extra weight. The smell of the lavender soap turns into the creamy smell of bath water. The bright child splashes behind her, fingers squeaking against the sides of the clean tub. Without looking, Milly reaches her arm back and touches the top of the little girl's head, strokes the downy hair that is warm and wild and alive.

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