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Tragic Routine

Olivia Voegtle

Step one: Spot the drops of blood mixed with urine in the toilet and/or feel the blood soaking through your jeans and try not to panic as you clean yourself up and blink back tears

Step two: Stop panicking because spotting is normal and panicking makes everything worse.

Step three: Lie down and, above all, resist the urge to call Michael. He's usually at work and it might be a false alarm. He shouldn't be bothered. He should never be bothered.

Step four: Drink the bitter tea Michael's mom prescribed the first time you miscarried and pray to a God you don't believe in that maybe this time it really is no big deal and that doing everything right will finally pay off and your baby won't disappear from your body and with it, all hope of being happy.

It was 7:13 PM. And Alissa was eating dinner.

The steak was higher quality than she usually bought, and she had broken out candles to set the mood. She had even wrestled into that tight black dress Michael had bought for her a couple of years past even though it was itchy and too tight across the butt.

Michael had noticed none of this.

He was instead sitting numbly across from his wife running over the last moments of the workday when Sabrina had come into his office for an after-hours "meeting." The notes from said meeting were the streaks of Sabrina's foundation on his collar, the wisps of her perfume in his hair and the tiny abrasion on his left ear where her manicured nails had scratched him.

Alissa had noticed none of these things though and was just about to open her mouth to announce that, "Yes, baby, it's true-we're pregnant," when she found herself back at Step One.

Michael did not immediately notice his wife's sorrow.

He did not even notice her absence from the table. It took a whole four minutes for the sobbing from the bathroom to break into his fantasies of tight pencil skirts and financial reports reeking of Chanel No. 5.

When he did notice, however, he stood immediately. Marital instinct demanded action.

He was prepared to go to the cramped bathroom and kneel beside his wife, and whisper all of the same nothings that he had whispered before on the nights when she realized her womb now held nothing and that she was nothing and that their love was nothing because it was incapable of leading to a child.

And although he knew he smelled of Sabrina's perfume and that there were likely smudges of makeup on his face, he was still going to comfort his wife. It was 7:27 PM.

Michael did love her. He loved her despite the meaningless sex with his secretary and the purposeful sex with his wife that never left her happy until it led to those two pink lines on a plastic stick, and even then didn't really make her happy because those pink lines would give way to streaks of red down her thighs, and streaks of tears down her cheeks.

Michael stood and crossed the kitchen, then stopped.

He waited until the sobbing had quieted so he could think a little clearer.

Michael pushed his chair into the table and blew out the candles. He put his light autumn coat back on, making sure that his keys and wallet were still in the right-hand pocket. Then, he wrote a quick note on the daisy stationery that Alissa always left on the counter by the sink, flicked off the porch light, and drove away.

It was 8:16 AM. And Alissa had not yet eaten breakfast.

She had instead spent the last two and a half hours digging contentedly in the depths of her garden. Her eyes were overwhelmed by the colors of the begonias and lilacs and tulips, her nose was content in their perfume, and her body found itself too at home among the willow trees and supple green leaves to complain of thirst or hunger.

Last night, when Alissa was shielding herself from the knowledge that her husband really wasn't coming back this time, the lolling-tongued irises had chosen to open themselves to this cruel and beautiful world. Now, as she knelt humbly among them, the bruised

blossoms reached over the bounds of their plot to caress her supple brown skin. Alissa rocked on the balls of her feet and rose, the warm sunlight stroking her tear-stained cheeks. Her back and neck ached, but the physical pain was a welcome distraction from the throbbing heart in her chest.

She would have to go back inside eventually and when she did she would see her wedding pictures mocking her from yellow walls, and her bed unslept in, and the closed door to the nursery with the barren crib and the blankets her mother had knitted still asleep in wooden drawers. And the rest of the house would be similarly empty, similarly full of things cast aside... like her. "No point anymore," she murmured as she stepped over the sagging threshold that led into the kitchen. "Just no point at all."

And she was right about this. Because Alissa wanted just one thing.

The one thing that she had thought was hers. The one thing she had thought was guaranteed by the little gold ring on her hand. But Alissa had learned that nothing in life is guaranteed and that instead of being at home, with her, her husband was in the city. Spending money that she wanted to put toward fertility treatments, running his body down on hard liquor and cigarettes, and burying his sorrows in the pale skin of women who were not his wife and could do all the things his wife could not. Foremost of which, was make him happy.