

Incoming

“Can you help me, please?” says a small, soft voice.

Claire, who has picking idly at a hangnail, looks around. “I’m sorry, I don’t have any change—” she begins, her standard response when homeless women accost her on the street. She is waiting impatiently for the light to change; the Inwood subway entrance is across the street. The appointment is twelve stops downtown, and she has a deep-bellied feeling that she is going to be late.

The girl who spoke blushes, embarrassed. With a shock, Claire realizes that the girl can be no older than sixteen. Her students are that age, and she never knows quite what to say to them, either.

“It’s just—” The girl wrings her hands, then stuffs them hurriedly into her pockets, ponytail swinging. Belatedly, Claire notices the girl is pregnant, and her stomach drops. “I’m sorry, it’s just that someone stole my wallet a few minutes ago, so I don’t have a Metro card, and I’m wondering if there is any way you can give me a swipe.”

Claire does not recognize the rage that sinks into the pit of her stomach like wet cement. She does not feel pity, only disgust. One part of her revels in it; the other is horrified. She glances hopefully at the light, but it hasn’t changed. The avenue is still a cacophony of cabs honking and buses whizzing past.

She tries to school her expression into one of indifference rather than anger, and reaches into her pocket for some change, but instead says, surprising herself, “No, sorry. I’m late for an appointment.” She doesn’t recognize the coldness in her throat, either.

The others waiting at the crosswalk shuffle their feet, uncomfortable. A middle-aged man in a suit scrolling through his Facebook feed stops to examine Claire judgmentally. A Latina grandmother corralling two boisterous little ones glowers at her, but Claire doesn’t care. *Serves her right*, she thinks vindictively. *How could she be so stupid?* The girl looks startled, then shakes her head, her freckles standing out across the bridge of her nose. The light changes.

Before she can stop it, a thought, unbidden, arises from the deepest, most angry part of her: *How can this be fair?* She wants to take it back, somehow, but it’s too late for that. Instead, she turns back and informs her apologetically, “Your shoe is untied.” As if that can make up for it. She half-sprints across the intersection, determined not to miss

the train this time, her labored breathing yet another reminder that her twenties are long gone.

Once on the train, Claire delicately swipes several stray crumbs from a plastic seat and sits, smoothing her skirt. From her purse, she retrieves her latest trashy romance paperback, a compact, and a lipstick. As the subway lurches forward, she pats down the hairs that escaped her chignon along the way, and examines herself. She has that pinched, frowning expression that Luke is constantly complaining about, and it reminds her with a pang of her mother. Her complexion looks sallow in the fluorescent subway lighting. She hastily reapplies her lipstick and puts the compact away, feeling hollow. She checks her watch, wondering if Luke has called to ask where she is yet, glad to have the underground as an excuse for not picking up. The black girl sitting beside her sighs and shifts, uncrossing her legs and adjusting the heavy pre-law textbook across her lap. Claire can hear the music faintly emanating from the girl's earbuds; it sounds like a musical. Across from her, an old man heaves huge, rattling coughs, clasping a cane with shaking, callused fingers.

Are you okay? Claire wants to ask, but she doesn't, knows she won't. If anything, the last twenty minutes have taught her that she is not a person who will help strangers. *Beth was*, she thinks, her chest clenching. Perhaps that had been her sister's problem.

The only other occupants of the downtown A this early are a young man wearing an "I ♥ NY" T-shirt enthusiastically perusing a New York guidebook in Chinese and a pretty young redheaded woman who is— *God help me*—very pregnant. She couldn't be anything less than nine months, Claire thinks, fascinated, noting her swollen ankles and the way her belly button popped through her thin cotton tank top. The train stops at the second station, but no one gets on or off. As the doors close, Claire feels her frustration mount, unable to open her book. She knows Luke hates how desperately she reads these, skims page after page, trying to find romance again in melodramatic declarations and half-assed plotlines rather than her own husband. They both know what it means, why she cries after they fuck. Once, uncharacteristically open, Luke looked at her like an obituary and confessed, closing his eyes, "Damn it, Claire, it just feels so mechanical now."

She wonders if the happy redhead across from her knows anything about ovulation cycles, subfertility and infertility, causation-based problems and mysterious ones, about endless tests and prescriptions they cannot pronounce, that their insurance won't cover. She wonders if that baby was an accident, whether they had tried at all, whether they had cried, whether this smiling woman had ever sobbed on the toilet at 2:00 in the morning, realizing she'd had a miscarriage.

She is just admonishing herself, Beth's voice telling her *cut the shit, Claire, you can't know people's stories* when the train squeals to a stop, but the doors do not open. Everyone glances around, confused, realizing that they are not at a station, that only the darkness of the tunnels underground stretch infinitely, a maze of darkness and scrawled graffiti. Claire swallows hard. The Chinese man hesitantly closes his guidebook. The girl next to her removes one earbud. As if on cue, the pregnant woman touches her belly, a quick twinge of pain passing across her face.

The silence is long and loud. Without knowing why, Claire can feel her heart begin to pound, a small bead of sweat forming on the nape of her neck.

A bell chimes cheerfully, and a robotic, automatic voice swells from the train's intercoms. "We are being held momentarily by the train's dispatcher. We apologize for any delays. Thank you for your patience." The girl slams her textbook closed, sighing, then brightens. "Guess I don't have to go to class" she says, smiling at the speaker as it begins its vague announcement again.

She can hardly believe it. It's just her luck. They were supposed to hear the test results at today's appointment. She and Luke both took the day off for it; he was going to be so pissed. Maybe it'd just be a short delay. Surely a delayed train was as good an excuse as any for arriving fifteen minutes late.

"It will be all right," says the old man to the nervous pregnant woman, smiling gently. His voice is slow, as if he had considered each word, and his accent is Eastern European.

The redhead smiles warmly, extending a small, freckled hand. "I'm Emily," she says to him.

"Viktor," says the old man, clasping it and leaning heavily on his cane. Claire wonders if she should introduce herself, too, but decides not to. She is still waiting

hopefully for the train to start moving again. The young man across from her looks around and asks a question in Chinese that nobody appears to understand.

Five minutes pass, then ten. The automated message begins again, and Claire rolls her eyes. “We are being held —” It stops and the conductor, with a cheerful Long Island lilt to his voice, interrupts, “Hey, guys, sorry about this. Should be just a few minutes. I’ll let you know if I hear anything on the radio, our train seems okay.” At this, Claire feels a rush of relief. She realizes she was clutching her paperback, white-knuckled, practically bending the binding.

The girl—Desiree—taps her neon fingernails anxiously against the hard edge of her textbook, which begins to annoy Claire after awhile, though she’d never say anything. The tourist (whom Viktor is able to slowly coax his name, “Lijie,” out of) begins to look particularly panicked. Claire can hardly imagine being trapped in a tiny, hot subway car full of people you can’t communicate with, unable to understand the announcements on the intercom. What a fucking nightmare. Desiree, as if thinking the same thing, begins to draw a series of small, explanatory pictures in a notebook from her backpack. Claire’s heart sinks. Beth would have done something like that, too. She notices Emily wince again, and her stomach flutters.

She clears her throat. “Are you all right, Emily?”

The woman across from her tries and fails to conceal the alarm that crosses her expression. “I’m fine. It’s just—”

The irritating bells chime again, and the same Long Islandian voice crackles into the train, but this time he sounds much more solemn. “Hello everyone, sorry again for the delay.” Everyone, even Lijie, who surely can’t understand what he’s saying, falls still and waits nervously for the explanation, like ancient worshippers waiting for the Fates to decide their future. In that moment, Claire hopes desperately that’s it some kind of simple, mechanical thing, nothing to worry about. Something minor enough to get them to the next station and off this damn train. She feels hotter than she knows it actually is; her skin crawls. Maybe she can still make this appointment, and she and Luke will finally learn why they can’t make a baby, no matter how they try. The conductor continues, “There’s no easy way—” She exchanges a confused look with Desiree, then Emily. “Look, someone jumped. There’s—there’s...” the man stops, and Claire tastes bile.

“multiple areas of the track...to clear...They said emergency responders are on the way, but it affected three other trains and something big is going on aboveground so—” Claire clenches her hand; jagged, bitten nails bite into soft, sweaty palms. “Anyhow, it’s going to be a few hours, I’m so sorry.”

“Hours?” Emily gasps, and for a moment Claire wonders, distantly, if it was actually herself who spoke.

“What if we have to pee?” Desiree demands of no one in particular.

“Is everything okay, Miss Emily?” Viktor asks, but Claire is as aware of it as if it is happening in another car. She feels the loss of Beth again, sharp and sudden and deep, though it had been over a decade, and her sister hadn’t jumped. A deep, unhealed ache reminds her that somewhere, someone is feeling the way she’d felt when they’d found Beth.

“No, I don’t think so,” Emily replies nervously, wrenching Claire forcibly from her own anxiety. The other woman glances down at her huge belly, cheeks pink from embarrassment. “My son, Isaac,” she continues in a soft voice, “was born three years ago. I was only in labor two hours.” Her breathing hitches, a slight sheen of sweat forming across her forehead. “My OB said that this baby will come fast, too. As I was leaving my apartment, I thought I felt a contraction, but I wasn’t sure. But then I felt another when I sat down, but my due date isn’t until next week, but I figured I’d get off at the next stop anyway...” She’s rambling, but Claire hardly notices. She feels her stomach plunge somewhere down by her toes. “And call my husband and doctor. But now...I’m fairly sure.”

Claire is speechless. Beside her, Desiree hops to her feet, her textbook and drawings tumbling to the dirty floor. “Well, shit, lady!” she cries, gaping. She sounds just like Beth, Claire thinks hollowly.

Viktor looks horrified, but still has the decency to touch Emily’s hand and say, “It will be all right, dear. We will figure something out, don’t worry.” He rises to his feet with difficulty, easing up with his cane, then uses it to bang noisily on the window, shouting for help. Claire winces at the sound, still wordless.

Lijie notices all of this with alarm and wide-eyed confusion. Desiree retrieves her notebook and begins to pantomime, gesturing wildly and pointing toward Emily, who grimaces, then nibbles a fingernail. If anything, the tourist looks even more confused.

Claire watches Viktor's banging almost distantly, wondering just how many people are trapped on this train, on other cars. She wonders if they're also banging on the windows, like aimless fish in an aquarium bumping again and again against the tank. *Can anyone even hear us?* And if they could, would it matter? Even if they could get off, they weren't even at a station. It wasn't as if they could toss Emily out the window and point her in the direction of the hospital. Claire knows these tunnels are nearly lightless, a labyrinth of graffiti and drifters and urine stains, rat poison and fragrant garbage. Eventually, Viktor stops banging.

Desiree tries to make a phone call, even though they all know it won't go through down here. She frowns, then brightens, rushing over to the emergency call box and waits, fists clenched. She waits, tapping her foot impatiently, for what feels like a century. "Hi!" She says to someone at last. "Look, we need some paramedics ASAP... Yes, I understand there's a lot going on right now. But to be honest with you, this lady is about to shit out a baby so it'd be *hella* prime if we could get some professionals down here... Uh huh, I hear you, but—" Everyone watches her hopefully. "I don't think we *have* an hour... Yep, we'll do our best. Thanks again. You *suck*." She slams it down. Desiree notices them watching and bites her lip. "Apparently, they're really understaffed between the stuff down here and aboveground."

"Murphy's Law," Emily mutters, whitening. "The truth is... I really feel like I have to push."

Claire swallows down her resentment toward Emily, her fear of her imminent diagnosis and the missed appointment, and her uncertainty in her ability to do this at all. She knows that none of it matters. Emily is going to have a baby on this subway before the paramedics can make it, Claire can just tell. What mattered is getting them both out of it safe—maybe if she can do that, this nightmare can change, somehow, to just a funny story someday. She feels, in an odd way, as if she is in a movie rather than real life, but she supposes that would involve taxicabs rather than subways, anyway.

“Emily, we have to deliver your baby.” Claire says simply. Somehow, she has erased all of her own fear from her voice—she sounds more confident than she can ever remember, to her own ears. “I’m going to need all of your help to do it.”

Four pairs of eyes stare at her, shocked, as if she is an alien species that has shown up in Central Park.

Finally, Emily clears her throat. “Are you... a doctor? A nurse?”

Claire laughs, though the situation is anything but funny. “Well, no. I’m a high school biology teacher, but...I teach sex-ed to the kids, a whole unit on pregnancy and birth so I, um...know the mechanics.”

Desiree says matter-of-factly, “That sounds sketchy as hell. We need to get this lady off this subway to some doctors, or wait for somebody qualified to show up and help.” Claire notices that she had clasped her mass of hair off her neck with three crisscrossed colored pencils.

Viktor swears in what Claire thinks is Czech, then replies, “Desiree, I am not sure that will be possible.”

Claire adds, “If Emily’s first son came that fast, this baby probably will, too.” She’s sure she’s read that somewhere, though she isn’t quite sure where.

Emily bites a nail, clearly deliberating her limited options. Her cheeks are red and she grimaces quickly in pain. Claire checks her watch—she knows she needs to time how far the contractions are apart.

Finally, Emily gives a small nod. “Okay,” she says, meeting Claire’s eyes only. They are huge and brown, and fill with tears. She sets her mouth and nods again, to herself, quickly swiping her eyes. Claire has never felt so trusted in her entire life, not even the day she married Luke. Her stomach wraps itself into knot over knot.

Everyone looks to her expectantly, as if she is their soccer coach or something. She clears her throat and stands up, her book flopping unnoticed to the floor. She notes Desiree’s candy-colored watch. “Desiree, the last contraction happened about 80 seconds ago. Emily, let Desiree know when you feel another one so she can keep track of the space between them, and how long they last.” She looks, desperately, around the train. Lijie is glancing between them, skimming an English-to-Chinese phrasebook that he had

drawn from his industrial-sized backpack. Claire notices he also has a huge container of hand sanitizer latched to one of the zippers.

“Oh, thank Jesus,” she says with relief, motioning for it. Lijie agrees, and she has everyone pass it around. She removes her wedding ring, several bracelets, and her watch, and tucks them into her purse, then spends the next four minutes rubbing the pungent chemicals into her skin. It isn’t a sterile sink with soap and warm water, but it’s better than nothing.

“Contractions are about five minutes apart, lasting for 56 seconds,” Desiree reports to her, when she’s done. Claire nods; there’s still time. Maybe this train will get moving or the paramedics can make it in time, after all.

Next, she collects Viktor’s worn down parka and Desiree’s transparent plastic raincoat with bright pink decorative zippers.

“Forever 21 chic,” Desiree explains with a wink, handing it over.

“Um, okay,” Claire says, squinting at her. She arranges Lijie and Desiree’s backpacks as a barrier, then Viktor’s thick parka like a mattress padding (she hopes). She squirts the rest of the hand sanitizer onto Desiree’s raincoat, coating the entire surface as best she can. Viktor and Emily watch her work, trying to conceal their skepticism. As she folds everything into place, patting it to test the comfort, Claire admits to herself the irony. Here she is, a hopelessly barren biology teacher, delivering a baby on a stopped subway. *Thank you, universe, for yet another reminder.*

Lijie stands, says something more in Chinese, then hands her his travel pillow, looking like a hopeful, floppy puppy.

“Thank you, Lijie,” she says, smiling and accepting it.

“You are welcome!” he says slowly, grinning.

“Okay, just a few more things.” she says to Emily, then looks questioningly at Desiree.

“Three and a half minutes apart, 70 seconds long,” she says.

“Thanks. Okay.” Claire says. “Do you happen to have any pads?”

It turns out the college student does. She also borrows Viktor’s thin fleece vest he was wearing over his plaid button-down.

She glances at her limited array of tools, swallows, then walks to where Emily sits, sweating, gulping the water bottle Viktor handed her. She sits next to the other woman, looking at her solemnly.

“I am not a doctor,” she says quietly. “But I am going to do my absolute best to get you both out of here safely, okay? You can trust me.” She hopes she can trust herself. Exhaling, she clasps Emily’s shoulder, who closes her eyes. When she does, Claire notices that her lashes are long and coppery, nearly invisible from afar. “I’m not going to lie to you, Emily. This is going to hurt like hell without an epidural, and it’s going to be a lot of work.”

Emily meets her eyes. “Okay. Please—”

Claire isn’t sure what she’s going to ask, but she senses that she doesn’t want to know. “I know. I will.” she lies, hoping it’s enough.

When she stands, Emily has left behind a warm puddle of unimaginable depth, like floodgates have opened. She looks, more than anything, embarrassed. Claire and Desiree help Emily out of her pants. Her contractions have become longer, more painful, and as they gently slide her out of her panties, she screams. Her fists clench and her nails, chipped with blue polish, dig into the softness of her palms until they bleed. Claire feels heavy with fear. *What if I can’t do this? What if they die?*

Viktor politely averts his eyes. She notices, inexplicably fascinated, that the other woman’s thick, curling pubic hair is as red as the hair on her head.

They help her onto Claire’s makeshift bed. Emily’s bright hair sticks to her forehead with sweat as they lower her to the floor. Claire’s improvised preparations suddenly seem so thin and useless, when the unsterile floor is so close. “I need to push,” she says again.

Emily calls for Viktor. He lowers himself down to her with effort, grasping her hand and gravely meeting her eyes.

“I know we’ve just met,” Emily snuffles, her voice wavering. “But I’m scared.” Desiree takes a long, deep breath, then begins to comb Emily’s sweaty hair from her forehead and cheeks, drawing it into ponytail with a neon hairtie from her own wrist.

Claire notices that Emily is beginning to hyperventilate. “Emily, you can do this. You were built for this.” It’s all she can think to say, but she can tell it means more to herself than it does to the other woman.

Viktor tries a different tactic. “Women have delivered babies outside of hospitals for thousands of years and they didn’t need any fancy equipment.” Claire agrees, but all the comment reminds her is that women have *died* in childbirth for thousands of years before hospitals. This makes her only less sure. Some part of her is still hoping that somehow she can escape this, that the train will start moving or the paramedics will make it, that this won’t be on her. But most of her knows that it’s close, and that it’s her responsibility now.

Emily nods, biting her lip, tears tracing down her cheeks, bracing under another long, painful contraction, her body a hard line of muscles tightening under pain. She begins to settle herself on her back, even though the pain there is obviously intense.

“No, no, that’s going to put a lot of pressure on your back,” Claire explains, feeling like a teacher again. “We should try squatting first, to put gravity on our side.”

“Wow, *Grey’s Anatomy* has lied to me for so many years,” Desiree mutters.

Now, each contraction is a long, painful squeeze. Claire arranges Emily like she is squatting over an invisible toilet, tasking Desiree to support her back, keeping Viktor on hand-holding. She hands Lijie the fleece vest, miming a baby so he knows what she’ll need from him.

Feeling a bit strange, Claire peers up Emily’s cervix, trying to gauge the dilation, knowing that she is no doctor. She is on autopilot, because if she really allows herself to process what she’s doing, she’ll fall apart, and she is the only person here even partially qualified to do this. She can see the bloody crown of the baby’s head, and her stomach solidifies into concrete.

“Emily, keep pushing,” she says, trying not sound panicked. Emily looks like she might vomit, which Claire figures is the only way this could get any worse. But somehow, her body knows what to do

Viktor squeezes her hand, mumbling soothing words in Czech. In that moment, being a mother herself feels more distant and alien than it ever has. Looking at Emily is like looking at a mirror and seeing another person’s reflection, and her heart sinks. She doesn’t need a diagnosis to tell her what her body already knows.

Emily pushes, but nothing happens, her entire body straining with the effort. Sweat pours down her cheeks like tears. She yells

“Again,” says Claire softly, her heart hammering.

Emily is soaked in sweat, but she pushes again, yelling. Claire can see skin stretch and bulge and tear.

“Come on, Emily,” says Desiree in her ear. “You can do this!”

“A couple more pushes, then it’ll be over, okay?” says Claire, hoping it’s true.

“Breathe with me,” Viktor adds, coaching her through slow, even breaths as she pushes again. Sweat pours off her, but there is something very alive and organic about it, Claire thinks.

It’s down to the minute, she knows. Maybe it will be like the movies, she will place a bloody baby on a tearful mother’s chest, who will take its first gasping breath, and the onlookers will cry. Days later, Emily will thoughtfully name the baby Claire, even if it’s a boy. Maybe, though, she only thought she saw a head, maybe the baby will be breech, and she will not know what to do. Maybe it will not cry. Maybe she will have to carefully unwrap an umbilical cord from its neck. In that moment, in the pause before the inhalation, anything could happen.

Claire thinks of she and Beth playing as children on the beach, vacationing in California, millenniums before her sister took her own life. They swam so far from the shore that the water was cold and a deep blue, like a bruise. Tired and red-cheeked, they began to swim back to the beach, but she remembers fighting against a forceful riptide that pushed them back out.

She can hear her little sister’s voice as clear as if it was coming from beside her. *Stop fighting it, Claire. Just swim with it.*

And as Emily gives a final, painful push and the train lurches forward, Claire closes her eyes, and, at last, she does.