

“How many of those sticks are you going to pee on? We’ve almost gone through two boxes.”

“Almost?”

Bill gave the box of pregnancy tests a little shake.

“There’s one left.”

The door to the toilet parted slightly and Pat thrust her arm out.

“Give it to me. Now!”

He’d barely gotten the stick out of the box before his wife snatched it from him like a starving ape grabbing through the bars of a cage for a banana.

Bill shook the box hard. One last time to be sure it was completely empty (God forbid, he’d been mistaken and a rogue stick went to waste), took aim and high tossed it across the bathroom. Boom! Right into the center of the trashcan, or “basket” (as he thought of it), the pink box went.

He fist-bumped the air.

“Yesssss!”

He shoots, he scores!

Bill had been playing this game his whole life. Trash Hoop, he liked to call it, and he was pretty good at it, too. Sometimes at parties, friends would egg him on to show off his skills and he had to admit that he enjoyed the back slapping and shoulder punching he got after he’d hurled something, at just the right speed and force to send it directly into any open receptacle in the vicinity, even a kitchen sink.

Pat thought he was crazy, but he didn’t care. He’d really gotten good at his party trick in college, when his buddies would test him out on a regular basis, meaning almost every night after they’d had a few, and he was always game.

Since there were four guys living together, they required a substantial trashcan for the amount of waste they produced, and at some point, somebody’s mom had purchased an industrial sized aluminum beast, which they used as the “hoop”.

One of the guys would set it up at a fairly close distance to start off with and after he landed one beer can (or bottle), they’d move it further and further away, until they reached the wall on the other side of the dump of a house they shared. Then, they’d shove the can up against the wall and back up, half-way across the room

and mark off a line on the floor where he had to stand and do free throws until he finally missed and the game ended.

Secretly, he hated it when the game was over, because the whole time he'd be shooting, in his mind, he wasn't Bill the Poly Sci Major anymore, he was Michael Jordan, or Magic, or LeBron, in all their glory, bagging one shot after the other, and man, he loved that feeling. Pat thought he was crazy, but he didn't care. It was a rush. Even if he'd been reduced to tossing nothing more than the shell of a pregnancy test box into a designer wicker "wastebasket" as Pat referred to it.

He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror over the sink, and as usual, was thrown by the sight of his balding head. He still hadn't gotten used to it and without thinking, reached up and rubbed his scalp, his fingers accidentally stumbling upon a patch of stubble towards the back...the only remaining proof that he'd once had any hair to begin with.

Maybe Pat would shave it for him when they were finished. But that depended on her mood, of course.

He glanced down at his wristwatch...the gold one his dad got when he retired. Good old dad. He'd shit his pants if he could see Bill standing around waiting and waiting and waiting on his wife.

"Always a pushover for the ladies, weren't you, Billy boy? A real mama's boy, huh?"

The sound of his father's gravely voice and the stench of old whiskey and stale cigarettes seemed to fill the room.

"Whipped. That's what you are, boy. Little wifey's the boss around here, ain't she? He he he. Goddamn...what happened to your balls, son? Oh wait, you never had any, did ya?"

Bill squared his shoulders.

"Well, Dad, for your information, I *do* have some balls, real big ones...and they're quite happy, thank you very much."

The sound of his own voice startled him and Bill shook his head to get his dad out of it.

Sure, Pat could be bossy. Big deal. Nobody's perfect. He wasn't exactly a prince to live with himself. And, unlike his dad, who'd destroyed any love that ever came his way, Bill was no fool.

Pat was special, even though she'd never seemed to realize it. Before they got married, guys were falling all over themselves to date her, but for some reason, she'd picked him.

He still couldn't believe it.

It wasn't like there hadn't been plenty of women, but Pat...she was something. He was a goner the first time she smiled at him and heard that purring voice of hers. Deep. Like she knew things he didn't. Mysterious things.

Bill's thoughts drifted back in time, but before they went anywhere significant, his phone rang and he almost tore his pants when he shoved his hand in his pocket, fumbling like a mad man to find the mute button as fast as he could. Whoever was calling would have to wait. It looked like everything would have to wait, including the movie they'd been planning to see that night.

He checked his watch again. If they didn't get going soon, they'd never get a decent seat. He had to move this along.

"Babe?"

He tapped the door lightly.

"Honey?"

No response.

He bit his lip and realized it had been too quiet for too long and that silence could only mean one thing. He was in for a rough night, a rough couple of days, or even a month or two.

He balled up his fist and took a fake swing at the wall.

When they started this business, she'd leave the door open and they'd talk the whole time, but around the fourth time, the door had gradually started to close--a little more with every try. Not all the way...but enough

that he really couldn't see much of her anymore. Even so, he knew what was going on. The whole scene played out in his mind as if he were right there in the room with her.

While she peed on the last stick, she'd be hunched over, panties loose around her ankles, studying all the other sticks she'd spread out before her on the floor in a neat semi-circle.

Waiting.

Watching.

They'd been through this routine way too many times. He wasn't sure how much more he could take and he sure as hell knew Pat was hanging on by a thread. She'd been optimistic and hopeful at first, and when she got pregnant right off the bat, it was the greatest. When she miscarried a month later, he thought it would kill her.

She was alone at home, painting the baby's room when she started bleeding, but she didn't call anyone. Refused to believe it was happening. After work, he'd found her crumpled up on the floor of the guest room closet, whimpering, her white summer dress soaked in blood. She was in such bad shape, the ambulance guy had to sedate her just to get her out of the house. Afterwards she cried non-stop and didn't get out of bed for a month. It was as if her life had drained out of her with the baby and Bill was sure he'd lost her. She wouldn't talk, wouldn't eat, and in an ironic, hateful little twist, he'd wound up taking care of her just the way he'd imagined taking care of their baby, had he lived. He fed her, sang to her, cradled her-did anything and everything he could think of to try to bring her back. He never thought she'd recover, thought she was lost to him. She blamed herself. Started talking shit about how God must not think she was fit to be a mother and he didn't want her to have a baby. She wasn't good enough. Something was wrong with her. She even threatened to hurt herself, which scared the crap out of him. It was brutal.

"It's not your fault, and it doesn't matter. I'm okay if it's just you and me," he'd told her one night, thinking he was being reassuring. Boy, was that a mistake.

She'd jumped out of bed and paced around the room ranting about how she was sorry to say it, but 'just you and me,' just wasn't good enough! What about their plans? What about being a mother? What about having his child? And what about the baby they lost? She lost? What about him, Bill? What about him?

Her words made his heart pound so hard, he thought it would bust out of his chest and it wasn't easy resisting the urge to shout, "I'd rather have you!" But, he kept his mouth shut, instead. A good move, it turned out to be, because as it does, life went on and in spite of the dark moments that still haunted her, one rainy Sunday afternoon while they were curled up on the sofa together watching an old movie on cable, he realized they'd somehow eased back into the life they'd known before "the incident", as Pat referred to it. When it hit him that she would be okay, relief flooded his senses and the breath it seemed like he'd been holding tight in his chest for over a month, felt finally safe to release.

Not too long afterwards, he almost choked on his spaghetti when Pat shyly mentioned that she might be ready to try again...if he wanted to, of course. Somehow she didn't seem to notice how he struggled to swallow or how long it took him to smile and say, "Yes, sure, honey. Of course we should."

She'd smiled that smile, which made him feel warm inside. He wanted to make her happy.

So, here they were again, but her brave front was beginning to crack, and he didn't know how much longer she could hold on. Plus, none of his always wrong and bumbling attempts to comfort her could compensate for those random moments when the devastation she experienced every time she saw a pregnant, tatted up teenager pushing a stroller at the mall threatened to crush her fragile façade. "Why can they get pregnant and I can't?" she'd wail, or seethe, either getting a murderous look on her face or breaking into sobs. Now he was sure she was coming unglued, which made him feel...what was it? Helpless? Afraid? Yep, that was it. He was afraid. Not about the baby business. He was afraid...for her.

He rubbed his scalp. Little beads of sweat had gathered on the top of his head. He had to do something. The silence...and being shut out was overwhelming. Perhaps some humor was in order. Bill ran through the arsenal of tried and true tension busters he'd relied on in difficult situations, puffed up his chest and loudly launched into his best Pink Floyd impression, singing (if you wanted to call it that), the first line or two of, "Comfortably Numb".

*"Hello, hello, hello...Is there anybody in there? Can anybody hear me? Is there anyone at home? Da-dum...da-dum, da-daum...and yada-yada-yada-dum-dum...um,*

*you know*

*I*

*can never*

*remember*

*the words to this song.*

*Right,*

*honey?"*

He ended his off key ruination of one of Pat's all time favorite tunes on the lowest note he could muster, coughed and prayed for a response. Usually, she'd be howling...but, nothing.

Ever so slightly, he touched the door, making sure it didn't open. That would piss her off for sure. Not a peep. His jaw began to clench up. His fear came back, but it had turned to dread and morphed straight into full on anger in under a second.

To hell with those stupid sticks and pee and sperm and eggs and idiot doctors that don't know why we can't get pregnant! He hated those little plastic pee pee sticks-and their double blue lines. Two lines equals baby. One line equals utter misery. Those little plastic fuckers ruled his world and he was sick of it. Why did the whole thing have to be so damned hard?

He wanted to shove the door open, grab Pat up and drag her out of the house...away from all the pain, the waiting...the watching, and the damned, infernal waiting.

His eyes darted around the room settling on his reflection again. He was pale and sweaty. Not good. Not a good look at all. He wiped his face with the back of his hand and cleared his throat. Suck it up now, Bill. Be supportive. Don't mess it up when she comes out-if she ever comes out.

He practiced making a casual smile, which made him look like a crazed hyena. Way too many teeth.

Get your game on, man. He jumped up and down in place and shook his body around like a basketball player loosening up for a game, put on his best cocktail party smile and once he felt like he could maintain it, took a deep breath and turned towards the door, planning to open it and tell her enough was enough.

But, he didn't have to. The door was wide open and there she stood.

Her panties were still around her ankles, skirt bunched up at the knees, and her eyes were blood-shot and as big as saucers. A creepy mix of tears and mascara dribbled down her cheeks leaving streaks on her face.

He couldn't get a read on her expression, which made him shudder. Without thinking, he took a step back away from her, instantly regretting it. A wave of nausea welled up in his gut and a single thought stood out in his mind.

God Almighty-she's completely lost it.

Still maintaining some distance, he placed a shaking hand on the doorframe to steady himself.

A whisper like a baby kitten's meow came from her mouth. Unable to make out what she was saying, he tentatively leaned towards her. Then, she stepped closer and leaned in so close that the heat of her breath warmed the side of his face. He froze. When she spoke again, it was a whisper, only this time it was a little louder, and clearer.

"They're positive, Bill. Every single one."

She held the sticks up for him to see.

Her words took a moment to sink in and when they did, he thought he might collapse, but was quickly able to get a hold of himself when she began to smile that smile.

He grabbed her and they kissed and he swung her around.

And after they'd screamed and laughed and danced a happy dance until they both wound up on the floor in tears, he yanked the sticks away from her, and taking his time, tossed each one into the trash can across the room, never missing the "basket" a single time.

"Bye-bye you little fuckers!" he yelled, as he fist-bumped the air.

Trash Hoop.

He shoots, he scores!

The end