

Mother Material

Fiction | 4,993 words

The x-ray tech smiled and gestured at the screen, two pointy canine teeth peeking out from the hood of her lip like an amicable vampire.

“There’s your baby. See the heartbeat, there?”

Leah was surprised to find her eyes dry at the proclamation. She didn’t smile or frown or meet the techs’ gentle, but direct, eye contact. Instead she studied her fingernails, wondering whether the cluster of cells growing inside her were responsible for their recent beanstalk like growth.

“You’re about six weeks along. Everything’s looking normal from what I can see. Would you like a photo?”

“Of what?” Leah said.

The tech made a funny noise, somewhere between a cough and a clearing of the throat.

“Of your baby, miss?”

“Oh, no thank you.”

She was decidedly less gentle after that, letting the rag scrape the tender skin of Leah’s belly as she removed the cold goop, not bothering to turn the lights back on as she let herself out into the brightly lit hallway.

The monitor glowed blankly in the dark, not looking much different than it had when the grey mass the tech referred to as Leah’s ‘baby’ was displayed.

As Leah was wrapping up work around 10:30 pm that evening, an incoming email lit up her screen: *Schedule Your Follow Up, Now!* She imagined the pointy-toothed technician typing the

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note herself, quietly disgusted after discovering Leah had snuck past the distracted women at the front desk, who were so engrossed in a debate about the caliber of various coffee chains that they didn't notice her, nor the waiting room full of expectant mothers who could no longer consume the caffeine they so desperately craved.

“But, like, Dunkin is classic, you know? None of that Frappuccino bull. Give me a large iced coffee, dude, that's it! Oh, excuse me, miss? We need to schedule your follow up,” one of them called after her, but she pretended not to hear as she slipped out the door.

An image of a pomegranate cut in perfectly two filled the screen, its glossy red seeds nestled together in little clusters. *6 weeks, your baby is the size of a pomegranate seed. Click below to book your follow up appointment!*

The line repeated in her brain the rest of the week, a whisper from some far off place. She practiced saying it aloud, trying strings of words to see whether she could make it feel more true. “I'll need information about maternity leave,” she announced to an empty elevator Tuesday morning.

“I'm eating for two,” she mumbled as she waited in line at sweetgreen on Wednesday.

“Mom, I'm having a baby,” she repeated to her reflection Thursday morning, dotting concealer under her puffy eyes.

Janet would know something was up the minute she saw Leah's blinking on the screen, as the pair almost never spoke outside of their perfunctory weekly calls. Leah called every Sunday while Janet and Bob drove from church, the phone balanced on the center console between them, set on speaker.

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Their conversations were formulaic: they'd ask after Leah's job, compare the weather in New York (chilly, or hot) to the weather in Georgia (hot), share an anecdote from the morning's sermon.

"How was your sermon today?" Bob would ask, operating under the assumption his daughter still attended church.

Leah would mumble a response, wondering whether he noticed her answer was always a sloppy regurgitation of his. When Janet was feeling frisky, she would share a piece of mild gossip.

"I'm not sure if you heard, but the Attisons moved over to a house in Cordele. Something about Mr. Attison losing his job."

Of course, Leah would not have heard. She hadn't kept in touch with anyone from Macon since she went off to college nearly 10 years ago, hadn't visited outside of a quick jaunt for Christmas.

"Interesting," she'd reply, and the conversation would come to a neat close.

At the news of a baby, Janet and Bob would simply ask whether Leah had begun making plans for a wedding.

By the time Friday arrived, Leah was so exhausted that she slept through the Uber ride from the office to dinner. Damian was already crammed in a corner table by the time she arrived.

"My beautiful boss lady," he said, standing a full head taller than her 5'9 frame to kiss her on the lips.

"Sorry I'm late, crazy day at work."

"Per usual, right? Just playing. I ordered half a dozen oysters to start, heard they were bomb here. And a bottle of Caymus."

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The oysters came out first, and the sight of the glistening blob on the half shell made Leah's saliva tangy and thick. Damain didn't notice; he slurped and sucked as he recounted his day.

"The main investor's son also went to Pratt, so he, like, loved me right away. And when I mentioned I'd need \$200k to get Blythe going, the dude didn't even blink."

"Mmhmm," she said, filling her mouth with wine and swishing it around so it coated every crevice, between her molars and around her tongue.

"I'm telling you, I'm so close. Once I secure some funding Blythe will take off and I'll be the next Jenna Lyons!"

She swallowed the wine and ran her tongue over her fuzzy teeth. The waiter appeared out of nowhere and refilled up her glass.

"I'm pretty sure she was the creative director, not the founder."

"Yeah, you're probably right. That's why I love you, always keeping me in check. Actually, I'd like to propose a toast," Damian announced. He picked up his fork and clinked it against the glass until the couples at the surrounding tables glanced over.

"To me and you, Leah Jean Mason. This past year has been the best of my 29-years on Earth. Happy anniversary, baby. Cheers!"

He raised his glass, and Leah did the same, her cheeks burning from the wine and unwanted attention.

"Here, here," said an older man a few tables away, his leggy dinner companion either his wife, his daughter, or his mistress. "To young love!"

They ordered a second bottle of wine, the man bought them a third. The waiter brought over a sampling of bite-sized desserts, tiramisu and Crème brûlée and olive oil cake.

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“Compliments of the chef,” he said.

Damian didn't seem surprised by any of this. First, because he was beautiful, accustomed to strangers fawning over his charred caramel skin and green eyes, the unexpected dusting of freckles peppered across his generous nose. It took Leah a few months to get used to strangers fawning over him, trying to decode his ambiguous racial makeup. Was he Black or white or Hispanic?

Second, because he projected the image of quintessential New York success — young, confident, well dressed. A stranger would never guess that he worked part-time at Whole Foods to cover rent, that he didn't have health insurance, and that none of this bothered him because he considered himself an entrepreneur,

When Damian excused himself to the restroom, Leah slipped the waiter her American Express.

“Charge the wine on this one. Quickly, please.”

The check for dinner was waiting on the table when Damian returned, less \$204.35. He scrutinized the slip of paper with a furrowed brow.

“Damn, New York stays expensive,” he said finally, sliding his Visa into the check holder. “One day I'll be banking off Blythe and we'll be able to afford bougie dinners every night.”

They stumbled into her apartment around midnight, crawling into bed without brushing the red wine stains off of their teeth. Damian kissed her in short pecks, his boner pressing into her thigh with urgency.

“I'm pregnant,” she blurted into the darkness, “a month and a half in,”

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She was supposed to say this in weeks, she knew, because the very currency of time shifted when your body took on another life, suddenly too precious to be measured in something as blundering as months.

He froze, his lips hovering over her bare skin.

“But you drank so much at dinner,” he said.

“Yeah, well, we were celebrating.”

He moved away from her and was quiet.

“We should've been more careful,” he said.

They were never careful. Their first date was at a crowded bar in Soho, and it was Leah's idea to switch to shots after a few rounds of cocktails, the alcohol losing the iron grip that had been clutching her shoulders. By the end of the night, they were bleary eyed and loose. He invited her back to his place, deep in Brooklyn and filled with roommates. She suggested her Midtown apartment instead.

“You got your own spot?” he slurred in the back of a Toyota, his hand resting on her thigh.

“Such a boss.”

It would become one of her favorite things about him, the uncensored way in which he complimented others, without reservation or scrutiny.

She wasn't on the pill and told him as much, so he promptly retrieved a condom before sliding inside her that night. When they decided they would no longer sleep with other people, condoms were used less and less until they were forgotten entirely.

He was careful about his timing, slipping out a few seconds before he came. Sometimes she'd finish him off with her hand, other times with her mouth.

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“That was close,” he’d say afterwards, his long legs tangled up in hers, “we should be more careful.”

She would agree, noting the full box of condoms stashed under her bed.

“Next time, for sure,” he’d say.

The first time Leah heard the word “sex” from an adult’s mouth was during a six-week sex education class in the seventh grade. The class was held every Monday after lunch, with girls shuffling into the gym, boys in the cafeteria.

“The internet has made the world a dangerous place for our youth,” the permission slip from North Georgia Christian Academy read, “and we must educate them about the dangers of fornicaiton.”

The mothers, especially those with daughters, were uneasy about the idea — until they found out the class was created by the wife of one of Atlanta’s most decorated mega church pastors. Even better, the woman would be their daughters’ instructor.

“Y’all probably have all kinds of questions about sex, but I’ve got a story to start us off,” Mrs.Lloyd said on the first day of class, her voice projecting through the gymnasium with precision.

She didn’t sport the same spiky, efficient haircuts and quilted Vera Bradley bags as their mothers. Her blonde bob was perfectly coiffed, her lips painted a suitable shade of frosty pink. She carried a dark brown tote that the girls would come to recognize years later as a Louis Vutton, and she handled the bag with the delicacy of a newborn, constantly tending to it, picking invisible specs of dust from its pristine leather surface.

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“Every young lady starts with this,” she thrust a sheet of paper in front of her face, a large, red heart drawn on in Sharpie. A few girls let out uncomfortable giggles.

‘Don’t laugh now. This is a pure heart. The Lord’s greatest gift! There was once a young lady from a good Christian family, not so different from y’all. Her highschool sweetheart constantly begged her to have premarital sex. Said it’d make her more of a woman. And what did she do?’

The room was silent, all eyes fixed on Mrs. Lloyd as she tore the paper in half, the sound of ripping echoing off the gym floor.

She paused, holding the halves of paper in either hand. The girls held their breath. Mrs. Lloyd closed her fingers around the piece in her left hand, tossing the crumpled scrap at her feet.

“She threw away half of her heart for a boy who never loved her. And all she had left was this,” she said, jutting the remaining half sheet in front of her.

“You’d think she’d have learned her lesson. She was smart! Headed to SMU determined to set her heart back to the Lord. But college was full of temptations. She drank alcohol at a party, let a boy take her home, and with that decision,” she said, tearing the sheet in half again, crumpling the scrap of paper and tossing it on the ground, “she threw away another piece of her heart.

Junior year she met a boy posing as a man. Swore she wouldn’t sleep with him until she had a ring on her finger. He had plans to propose, he promised. But girls, what do you think happened?’”

Mrs. Lloyd stood, arms folded over her ample chest, eyes traveling over the crowd. Leah’s best friend, Brittany, raised her hand weakly, arm bent, five fingers hardly reaching her ear.

“Yes, honey?”

“Did he, um, like, propose?”

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She strode over to Brittany, her heels click-clacking against the glossy floor, and held out a scrap the size of a postcard. She tore it, handing half to Brittany and nodding her head. Brittany complied, gently crushing the paper in her hands.

“No, honey, he sure didn’t.”

As she turned and walked towards the center of the gym, Leah gave Brittany’s shoulder a squeeze.

“After all those mistakes, she finally met her husband. He was a provider, a man of God. He was pure,” she said, her pointer finger shooting up to the ceiling. “On their wedding night, he handed her his entire heart.”

Her voice got quieter so that the girls had to lean forward to hear.

“And in return, all she had left to give him was this.”

The remaining scrap dangled between her thumb and pointer finger, waving around like a miniature flag. Only a sliver of red Sharpie was visible..

“I’m ashamed to say, but that young lady was me.”

Leah’s mouth hung open. Brittany left out a soft cry. A handful of girls looked down at their sneakers, others chomped on their fingernails.

“That’s why I’m here, to teach y’all about the temptations of sex so when you meet your future husband, you’ll have your whole heart to give him. Otherwise he probably won’t want you, and that’s just a fact.”

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Leah left work early on Monday to make it home for *The Bachelor*. Before Damian, she made brash assumptions about anyone who wasted their time watching such terrible TV, but he'd convinced her to give it a shot..

“Anybody home? I bought Mammouns. Two shawarma plates and a side of falafel, in case you might be, you know, extra hungry,” Damian said as he let himself into her apartment dropping the takeout bags on the counter.

“And I sent you a Venmo for half. Man, I can't wait to see who gets voted off tonight! My money's on Hannah B.”

“It's growing arm buds this week,” Leah said, pointing at her belly, “and it's the size of a blueberry.”

She didn't clarify that this information was forced upon her by way of a second email from her doctor's office earlier that day.

“A blueberry? Already? Damn! I gotta text my ma, she'll get a kick out of this, “ he said, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

“You told Wanda?”

“You know I can't keep a secret from her, Lee. She knew something was up the minute she called last week.”

“But we haven't even decided what we're doing yet.”

“And she totally gets that, I swear. But I figured she could help you out, give you some motherly insight.”

Leah would rather get a root canal than ask Wanda for advice on motherhood. She was a crass woman, proudly proclaiming her status as queen of the house, constantly calling on her husband

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and three adult sons to refill her glass of iced tea or to rub the soles of her feet. When someone said something she didn't agree with, she'd stare pointedly, her face puckered in a huffy expression.

Damian was jabbering on, attempting to convince her that Wanda could be of great help now that she was in on "their little secret".

"She feels sorry for you since you don't have sisters or anything. She knows Janet is traditional, feels bad that you can't talk to your own ma about it."

"I didn't want to talk to anyone's mom about it, Damian, especially not yours."

He looked stricken, like she'd slapped him across the face with an open hand.

"I'm sorry, okay? I just figured you could use some girl talk. I was trying to help."

She didn't have anything left to say, so she simply left the room. In the bathroom, she splashed cold water on her face, stared at her haggard reflection in the mirror.

At 8:00pm Damian turned on *The Bachelor*. Flat bellied women pranced around the Carribean as Damian dug into his dinner, making a loud smacking sound as he chewed. He reached over, helping himself to Leah's untouched pita, his eyes glued to the TV.

Her anger mounted with every commercial break, her hands clenched in tight fists, fingernails piercing half moons into the flesh of her palms. The girls on the show were fighting over a man with the personality of a celery stick, and Damian was eating loudly and he'd never have to worry about what the food would do to his chiseled figure.

"Only three roses remain. Who will Jake send home? You'll find out, after the break."

Leah picked up the remote and turned off the TV. Damain's head snapped over.

"Don't you want to see who gets sent home?"

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“No. I really don’t.”

She didn't bother washing her face before climbing on to her bed, knowing sleep wouldn't come.

Eventually Damian joined her, curling his body around hers.

“Love you, Lee,” he said, “and I’m really sorry. I’ll tell my ma to forget I said anything, okay?”

“Okay,” she conceded, because she was too exhausted to muster anything else.

When she was certain he was asleep, she wriggled out of his embrace, made herself tea, brought her laptop into bed to finish some work. Afterward, she scrolled through Instagram and was served an ad for Melatonin gummies, accompanied by the deafening sound of waterfall noises, the abrupt sound causing her to spill her tea as she fumbled to turn the volume down.

Still, Damain slept. No noise, no matter how loud, would wake him.

The seventh graders learned a lot in sex-ed: you couldn’t get pregnant from blow jobs or tongue kissing. There was another way to have sex, but it was a first class ticket to hell.

“No matter what the boys tell to you, ladies, anal sex is an abonation. You may not get pregnant, but you will get AIDS.”

“What’s AIDS?” Susie asked. The girls erupted into giggles, though none of them knew either.

“AIDS is a disease God created to punish acts of impurity, And there is no cure.”

They learned about other STDS, too. Herpes, chlamydia, syphilis.

“Every time you have sex with a new partner, your chance of contracting an STD goes up 85%,”

Mrs. Lloyd said. “You might think I'm exaggerating, but we’re going to do an experiment to prove it.”

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She picked three girls to help her pass out little wax cups filled with clear liquid, like the ones Leah used to wash her mouth out at the dentist.

“Each of y’all are going to swap with three other ladies. I’ll demonstrate.”

Mrs. Lloyd held a cup in each hand, pouring all of the liquid from one cup to the other, back again, then splitting it evenly between the two.

“You have ten minutes. Go.”

The gym erupted into a flurry of activity, popular girls flocking to one another, less popular ones littering the outskirts of the crowd. Leah mixed with Brittany, Susie, and a new girl whose name she couldn’t remember. When time was up, everyone took their seats.

Mrs. Lloyd came around with a medicine dropper, adding a single droplet into each cup.

The droplet transformed Leah’s liquid from clear to a toilet bowl cleaner blue, and Mrs. Lloyd looked at her knowingly before moving on to the next girl. When it was over, she made her way to the front of the room.

“If your cup contains blue liquid, please stand up.”

Leah’s stomach did a somersault. She arose slowly, as did several girls around her.

“When I handed out these cups, only five of y’all had STDs.” Mrs. Lloyd said. “You each had intercourse with three partners. And yet, look how fast it spread.”

Though no one reacted at the moment, the story spread fast, and soon everyone knew about the experiment.

“Yo, Leah, I heard you were a blue cupper,” Bryce said after homeroom.

“Susie might be the preacher's daughter, but she gets around,” Matthew announced in the hallway.

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“Blue cup Brittany looked at my junk!” George shouted on the bus.

Someone wrote a list entitled *THE BLUE CREW* and taped it up in the cafeteria during lunch.

Leah shouldered her way to the front of the crowd, scanning the sheet for her name.

“How come there are no boys on here?” she said.

“We didn’t have to take the slut test,” Bryce said from behind her, “it’s only for girls, duh.”

It was Friday, four days after the Bachelor, and Leah was wading through a fog.

“There’s a blatant mistake in this formula! How the hell did you miss this?” her boss said.

She wanted to snap back, to say that she was pregnant and hadn't slept in four days, that maybe he shouldn't have hired his underqualified nephew whose work she was responsible for correcting on a daily basis.

“Sorry about that, it won’t happen again,” she said.

Before leaving the office, she printed out a diagram she found on the internet, snatching the warm sheet of paper off the printer before anyone noticed. She didn’t look at the page until she was out of the elevator, through the revolving door, ten blocks away from the office.

8 weeks, a raspberry. This week, it develops webbed fingers and toes!

9 weeks, a cherry. Now considered a fetus, developing a digestive tract!

10 weeks, a kumquat, eyeballs!

Leah blinked hard, twice. She beelined to a trashcan at the end of the block, her nostrils filling with the familiar stench of sharp, sweet garbage. She tore the paper in half, then in fourths, shredding each piece into scraps and letting them flutter into the trashcan like snowflakes.

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“We need to make a decision,” she said when Damian arrived. “Let’s make a pro’s and con’s list.”

“I’ll type it up,” he offered, but Leah insisted a written list would be more visual, so he found a pen and paper instead.

“Cons, we’d have to abandon our careers,” Leah started.

“I wouldn’t say we’d abandon them,” Damian said, “we could still work.”

“You could still work. Caldon Partners is a shark tank. I’ve got four different Princeton bro’s gunning for my job. They’d replace me in a heartbeat if I needed maternity leave and my last seven years would be for nothing.”

“That’s not true. You’ve made your money and got VP, that’s plenty to be proud of! You could always find another finance job.”

“Not necessarily. VP is the hardest level to transition out of and my skill set wouldn’t hold at a typical finance job. And I’d take a massive pay cut if I left investment banking.”

“Yeah, but we don’t need much. We could live a simpler life, you know?”

“No, I don’t. Babies are expensive. Doctors, school supplies, college. How would we pay for all that? With your part time job and my pay cut? In New York?”

“Well yeah, we’d probably leave New York,” he said, as if it were obvious.

“Where else do you think I’d find these high paying jobs? Detroit?”

“Let’s try a pro. Pro, our baby would be hella cute,” he said.

“Not a great reason to bring another life into the world.”

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“Pro, we’d be bonded together for life. You know I love the thought of that, baby,” he said, planting a kiss on her shoulder.

“Con, you’d have to put Blythe on hold. No more part time job, no more free time to pitch investors. Are you willing to endure that?”

“Of course,” he said. “Blythe will be there when I’m ready for it. I could be a stay at home dad, watch the baby, do some work while it's napping, reverse those gender roles and let my boss lady keep shining.”

He smiled at her, the same toothy smile that made her swipe right on his Hinge profile all those months ago, the one that made it easy for him to move about the world existing under the assumption that things would work out, without much planning or effort, because didn’t they always?

Except Leah knew life wasn’t like that. Good looks and indifference wouldn’t change the fact that Damian was terrible with money and made very little of it, leaving be the earner and the bookkeeper of their shared life. He hated early mornings, didn't know how to parallel park or how to scramble eggs without drying them out. He kept his clothing in piles on his bedroom floor, his mom paid his phone bill. He didn’t floss and he didn’t have 401k. When Leah told him how much money should be squirreled away by 30, he simply laughed.

None of this bothered her before, not in any detrimental way. His flaws were endearing, leveling out his good looks and magnetic charm. But the image distorted through the lens of prospective fatherhood, a broken kaleidoscope that made her temples throb.

Leah didn’t say any of this. Instead, she said, “I just don’t know if I’m mother material.”

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He froze, his mouth slightly open, and unwound her clenched hands, bringing his lips to each open palm.

“Of course you are, baby. You’d be a great mother.”

“I think I need some air,” she said, extracting herself from him. She stood up and headed towards the door. “I’m going for a walk.”

“Can I join?”

“No, I need a second to think,” she said. “I’ll be quick.”

“Okay,” he said, his eyes trailing from her face down to her belly. “I love you, Lee.”

The last week of sex-ed was the most memorable, as the girls learned about a topic so forbidden that their mothers had to sign a special permission slip beforehand.

“We’ve learned a lot over these last six weeks,” Mrs. Lloyd said. ”Y’all have grown so much, and now you’re ready to learn about a truly unforgivable sin.”

Years later, after Tammi Lloyd had amassed hundreds of thousands of followers as a faith-based influencer, it would be this lesson that haunted her. A former student would recall the story to a predominant media outlet, the headline reading: “How a fear mongering pastor's wife turned anti-abortion rhetoric into a social media empire,” causing her to lose her paid partnership with Fossil.

“Let me ask y’all this; what’s the worst crime you could ever commit?”

The girls said: lying, cheating, stealing, but none of those were correct. Leah raised her hand meekly.

“Yes, honey?”

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“Is it murder?” Leah said.

“Exactly! Did y’all know there are cold blooded murderers walking free as we speak? Young women all over the country.”

The girls gasped, unable to conceive such a statement.

“But they can’t escape the all knowing eyes of Jesus, and he’ll remember their sins when they show up at the gates of Heaven, begging to be let in.”

Even then Leah had her doubts about the existence of God, but the promise of being shut out of Heaven made her shiver.

A projector was wheeled in by the school janitor. He flickered out the lights on his way out.

A side by side picture filled the large screen; an ultrasound on the left, a cherubic baby on the right. He had milky skin and plump, rosy cheeks, his eyes dazzlingly blue. The girls let out a chorus of “awwwwwws,”

“Sweet baby, y’all agree? A perfect angel. Before he arrived on this Earth, he was just a blessing in the womb,” Mrs. Lloyd said, motioning to the screen.

“Like all babies, he was innocent. He didn’t demand much. Babies never do.”

She clicked to the next slide; a handsome man with a neat blonde haircut and a square jaw, a stethoscope around his neck.

“Maybe he’ll grow up to be a doctor. Maybe he’ll cure cancer, save millions of lives. He’ll be a good husband and a father. He could even be your husband, ladies!”

She walked a few steps away from the screen, clicking to the next slide.

Leah gasped at the photo, a tiny, purplish body curled in the palm of an adult sized hand.

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“But he won’t have the chance to grow up. He won’t get to cure cancer because he was aborted before he got the chance to live,” she clicked to the next slide, “by this woman.”

The image looked like the sort of woman who might live in the trailer park in town. Her mousy hair was wild around her face, eyes bloodshot, a missing front tooth.

“This woman is a murder,” Mrs.Llody said, her voice transforming to a guttral growl. “She chose not to use birth control and instead of taking responsibility she murdered her baby.”

Mrs.Lloyd assured the girls that no matter how much this woman begged the Lord for forgiveness, no matter how many healthy children she birthed later in life, she would never be forgiven.

Later that night, 12-year-old Leah dreamt she was digging in her backyard when her shovel hit something soft, like the flesh of a banana.

She stepped back to survey the ground and found purplish bodies, no larger than her pet guinea pig, dotting the yard. The unborn babies lie nestled in the dirt, their eyes closed, fists clenched.

She woke with a start, sweaty and shaking.