

## The Cycle

Anne could barely breathe past the darkness in her heart, but she forced a few gasps, managed a moan, and gripped the back of his neck like she was drowning and he could save her.

As his rhythm increased, she raked her fingers across his sweaty back, listening to his raspy breath, waiting for it to be over.

“Yes, Helen,” he whispered, “Look at me.”

No. She had her own rules, commandments she would not break. She wrapped her legs around his waist and arched her torso to the point of righteous pain, tilting her head back towards the wall where she could keep her eyes closed. She grabbed his biceps and dug in her nails. Images splattered across the surface of her mind: a closed door at the top of the stairs, boxes hidden in the basement, pastel ribbons and cake, her husband with shaking shoulders, ovulation sticks and needles, smoking pregnant teens...

Her anger gave her strength and she whipped her rage into the grinding pumping action between her legs, straining her body against her sense of self, and then the inevitable pause as she imagined millions of lives exploding into potential being. Then the collapse.

She kept her legs wrapped around him and stroked his hair, encouraging him to relax, to wait.

“Are you okay?” His voice was gentle, and she felt unreasonably irritated by his attention. She didn’t want him to care, even though she had chosen him because of his kind nature. He had the right blend of looks and temperament.

She smiled and pulled his head to her neck. “Yes.”

He nestled in, and she forced herself to bear the weight silently, shallow breathing for as long as she could, until biology took over.

“Oops, there I go.” He laughed self-consciously. “You ready?” She nodded and he slid out and rolled onto his back. She pulled the covers up, hoping to keep warm and still for as long as possible. Tears pricked at her eyes, but she couldn’t cry. Crying was not allowed. Not here, not for this.

“Be right back,” he said, and he hummed his way around the foot of the bed, disappearing into the bathroom. He returned with a white hand towel, which he presented to her with a deep bow. “M’Lady.”

“Such a gentleman.” She took the towel and placed it gently between her legs.

“Would M’Lady be needing anything else at this time?”

She shook her head, afraid to voice a lie. Somehow, she could smile and nod and even make her eyes sparkle on command, but her voice had a habit of wavering. She found it easier to speak as little as possible. It was surprising how far she could go without words.

He had already had his chances to give her everything she needed. All she wanted now was a quick escape. He crawled back into the bed beside her, and she released her hold on her body, allowing him to pull her into his embrace. Here, she could look away, imagine she was somewhere else.

She listened to his breaths slow and deepen. When he finally rolled away from her heat, she slipped from the covers and gathered her clothes. Her husband would never believe how stealthy she could be, how quietly she could dress in the dark and wisp out of a hotel room without disturbing the sleeping man in the bed. Joseph was always shaking his head at how she could continually bump into furniture that hadn’t moved in a decade.

This was different, though. Here, she was Helen, somebody new. A nobody. In the morning, the man in the bed would be surprised to find his quiet and cute girlfriend of three

months had disappeared in the night. He might always wonder what had happened to her, this woman he fell for over internet chats and late night phone calls. Maybe, he would feel heartbroken for a while, afraid to take risks like flying to other cities to be with a woman he can only meet in hotels when she is temporarily in the country. Eventually, though, their three weekends would fade into memory, and she knew he would find someone new. Men like him were hard to find.

She would move on, too. For a moment, as the elevator descended to the ground floor, Anne allowed herself to hope, to believe that this might be the last one. For a moment, she drifted into happy visions of surprising Joe with this glorious miracle. They would toast with sparkling juice and send mental “fuck-yous” to those doctors who took their money, put them through inconceivable hell, and gave them nothing but negatives.

When the doors opened, she dropped her hand from her abdomen and shook herself back into her dark reality. There was no time for dwelling. When it was over, it would all be worth it.