

He rubs her back as they suck the blood out of her.

She had walked in staggering — her blonde weave an incredible mess, heels hanging out of clear jellies, a sliver of her bare belly pouring over too-tight tights. It looked like she'd been up suffering all night. I felt a twist of pity when I first saw her like this. But his long fingers are massaging her neck now. He leans bent, with concern rippled on his large forehead. Pity melts.

*Special* is the word. I feel special for witnessing this tenderness he is showing her. Pure feeling couched in speckled linoleum flooring, cream formica tables with aluminum trimming, and the dull green vinyl padded recliner she sits in with rigid discomfort. This intimate moment easily could be lost in all the ugliness of the clinic.

And now — how it happens, I don't know — a second wave of *special* comes over me. I place her.

I haven't been here for very long, only a few months, but I can already match people to the world outside. It's like in that card game Memory: flip a card and search for a match. You have to look back into the past and squint your eyes, or keep an eye out in the future, because every person you come across is a new card to turn over. And once you make a match, hold up the cards and look around to tell someone, anyone:

“Hey! Look what I found! Look how smart I am!”

I know that the cashier at the Yemeni market down on Tele and 30th just had a second child. I saw him and his wife walk out of Postpartum with a pink swaddled bundle and a standard issue car seat. I know that the bartender at Golden Bull with the buzzed side and cherry blossom tattoo above her temple had to quit after losing her left foot in a water skiing accident. I saw her in the elevator and she made a joke about drinking and rope and speed. I wish I could remember it now but I was too stunned to hang onto why it was funny.

This woman in front of me now, I'd seen her working the block out in front of Poor Honey's used furniture. I recognized the blonde weave. I had gone out there a few weeks ago to look for a full length mirror. These last four months I've been living in a new room. I have my blow up mattress and a few piles of clothes and books that I try to keep tidy. I don't mind the lack of furniture really and I like the white blank walls. Makes it easier to think. A cluttered space is a sign of a cluttered mind, right? But I'd been using the black windows of bank buildings to see what my body looked like, and I was starting to think that distorted images that made my legs look stubby probably weren't the best for my self image. Or my actual image.

I went after work and rolled up about forty minutes before sundown. There had been three women standing out front of the warehouse. I wondered why they would pick this gray industrial pocket of East Oakland to fish in, especially since International Boulevard was only a couple blocks up. An old pirate shuffled up to them, and decided to take a rest from pushing his shopping cart of worldly possessions by talking the ear off one of the

women. But she clearly knew who she was and wasn't about to suffer this old fool with anything but a few polite grunts when necessary. Her back was completely turned away from him but the dude couldn't take a hint. She eventually lost all patience and told the other women she was moving. They followed her up the block and around the corner, out of sight. The old pirate walked back to his cart and began pushing along in the opposite direction. In a minute the street was clear, the jangle of the cart growing faint.

I sat in my car with the windows down and observed the scene from across the street. Us young brown women are given access like this. I won't think too hard about why, and you shouldn't either. But if we keep our heads down and avoid eye contact, we can see more shit than anybody. Like the entire world is our porch. Like it's an aquarium we can peer into and watch all the different fish swim by, swirl around and interact. I was mostly paying attention to the woman who seemed to be the leader, but I guess my mind absorbed the details of the other two women without my realizing. I love how that happens.

So I've added one more pair of matched cards to my collection. I've still got it.

I usually feel real bad for all of them: the bruised, the pained, the accidentally pregnant. You see a lot of poor honeys here at the women's clinic at Highland hospital. But watching this sweet scene in front of me now — this man, this woman, this tenderness — I'm licked by loneliness. Is he her pimp? Her brother? Just a good friend? Whatever he is, no one cares for me

like that. Straight up. I used to have a good man who would show up at my door with flowers. He would have rubbed my neck if I needed it. That's all he wanted really.

The phlebotomist pulls out the last needle and the woman is instructed to return to the waiting room. The man holds her hand and slowly leads her from the blood draw station to a seat. He then looks around the room, and not finding what he is searching for, meets my eyes and walks over.

“Is there any place I can get some food?”

“There's a vending machine over by the bathrooms, over there. The cafeteria's in the next building.”

He nods and lumbers off in the direction of the vending machine. He comes back with an armful of chips and a bottle soda. My chest tightens and my eyes sting. I have to look away, up, and blink a lot.

I'm not cut out for this shit.

It's a thought I have nearly every shift here. It's one thing to want to help people, and another to actually have to help them. The first is pure vanity, really. The latter takes care and patience and grace and compassion, and, fuck mane have you met people?

Sometimes people will come rolling through the sliding glass doors in a wheelchair, high on PCP, fuming rank, yanking your arm to do their bidding.

“Do you want to be my caretaker? I pay nine dollars an hour. My son got me a caretaker but that man was a fairy and I’m not gonna let a fairy touch me. I got nothing against them, but I don’t trust them. You know, I never come here to Highland. I can pay for a doctor. I don’t need to be with these people. Are we in the new building? My son was born here at Highland, in a different building. But I never come here. You stay with me. What’s your name, let me see your name on your shirt. Honey, don’t you want to be my caretaker? I pay nine dollars an hour. How much you make here?”

“I’m a volunteer ma’am. I don’t get paid.”

“Come work for me! I’ll pay you!”

Sometimes people yell racial slurs at you from across the waiting room.

“Speak up girl! Don’t you speak English?”

Bish, I speak three languages and my English is still better than yours.

Sometimes people will slam their canes onto the top of your podium, just nearly busting your teeth as the security guard nearby sits fucking around on his phone.

Let's be real here, people are terrible. They're the absolute worst. But what are you going to do? Helping people is the only chance most of us have for any solid purpose in this world. That and children.

A nurse comes over to my podium. 'Cynthia Lumalang, RN' her badge states. She's never really spoken to me before. Now she speaks. "Michelle just went out to lunch. Have you trained to chaperone?"

Nurses scare me. They never laugh at my wry jokes or smile at my poetic turns of phrase. I've never met a nurse with good taste in music. Or in anything really. They've got photos of their kids in AYSO soccer fits taped up above their desks at the station, next to pastel colored inspirational quotes and lots of heart shaped everythings. Most extra-occupational conversation revolves around their babies. Or lunch. They get excited when someone brings in leftover sheet cake and the familiar "This is my cheat day!" is met with loud laughs. They brag about their deep-fried Thanksgiving turkeys, take sick days as often as they can, and love nothing more than pointing out someone's attitude problem.

They also make this entire ship run, and I feel the full, crashing force of my ineptitude in their presence. As a volunteer, I have to hang around long enough for the nurses to verify that I'm not a complete goon. Only then will they give me something interesting to do. Till then it's only menial tasks: Fetch a patient's charts from another department. Restock the cabinets

with obstetrical towelettes, surgical masks, rubber gloves and all other personal protection equipment. Make pharmacy runs. Stand at the podium in the corner of the waiting room to answer patient questions; no medical advice though!

I was in the odd position of wanting the nurses to like me, but my ego bristled at the thought that I'd be in the category of things that they liked, smashed between cat videos and the sheet cake.

Of course, the hospital hierarchy is there to serve patients. Physicians and surgeons are at the top. Volunteers are underground on this totem pole. I'd been instructed to never bother the doctors. Don't say good morning to them, don't even make eye contact. They're running around fixing people. I'd never chaperoned a male physician before, but this was my chance to rub shoulders with the upper echelons and to see some real shit.

Nurse Lumalang has apparently climbed up a couple rungs on her ladder. You can grow your nails out without fear of puncturing a rubber glove if you've moved onto working mostly admin. Nurse Lumalang's manicured talons clutch a diet Coke in one hand, in the other, a big Michael Kors purse, complete with linked gemstone Mini Mouse keychain. It is clearly her lunch break and she's gunning for the door.

"Sure, I can be a chaperone," I reply.

A woman must be in the examination room when a male doctor is with a female patient, for the obvious reasons. It was less obvious why they called us ‘chaperones,’ as if we were accompanying a prepubescent physician on a school trip to the zoo. No matter, this is a rare opportunity that is available only for us women volunteers and I’m trying to take advantage.

I follow Nurse Lumalang back into the clinic and she introduces me to the doc. Young guy, strong straight nose, thick beard — some kind of Arab I’d say. Really good-looking actually. He is way too busy but still nice about it. He asks my name, we shake hands, and that’s it; we walk into the room.

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What is it about an idiot's face that explains it all? Is it the lack of emotion? The lack of appropriate reaction? I feel like it has something to do with the eyes as well, where less movement overall indicates an absence of general alertness and recognition. Whatever it is, I read it instantly off this girl’s face as I walk into the room.

And she is a girl. I glance over at her chart. Fifteen. April 7, 2003. We share a birthday! She’s exactly six years younger me. I look at her and beam with excitement.

“Oh my gosh!” I half whisper, trying to get her in on the serendipity.



But she gives no reaction to my quiet exclamation, doesn't even look at me, nor does the doctor, so I keep the coincidence to myself. I shuffle backward to stand on the furthest possible linoleum tile in the little room.

The doc gets straight to work. Introduces himself, introduces me, and then sits on the rolling stool, eyes on the computer screen. He types away for a bit, then looks up at the girl.

“Yessica Moreira. Thanks for coming in. How are you today?”

Her jaw moves a fraction. “Fine.”

“You must have gotten out of school early to come here.”

“No. I don't really go to school. It's hella boring.”

“Yeah? What do you do instead of school?”

“Kick it.”

“With your friends?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you drink with them?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do you smoke with them?”

“Yeah. I mean, trees.”

How often would you say?

“I don’t know. I guess a lot. Smoking makes school more interesting.”

“So you do go to school.”

He types for a quiet minute, then pushes himself from the computer to look into her eyes. “So, Yessica, I’ve looked at your tests. You are pregnant. You’re only six weeks along.”

She’s silent. Not a muscle moves in her face with the news. One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three.

“You have options, you know. And you don’t have to decide right now. I can give you the resources to terminate this pregnancy if you feel that you are not ready for a child. The abortion pill is very effective before 8 weeks.”

“I’m keeping it,” she says flatly.

“Ok. It’s your choice.” The doc turns to the screen and resumes typing.

I focus on Yessica’s temple and pour all my psychic energy into silently speaking with her. Woman to woman, our birthday

connection — whatever I can call upon, I beam my frantic concern into her head.

Girl, you are 15. You have to understand this isn't good. What kind of life will you live? For the rest of your youth you will be a slave to this child. Live some life before you give it all up. Please, try not to be an idiot. Please.

“How's your family life?” asks the doctor. “Can you tell me about where you're living?”

“It's my moms, me and my bro.”

“Do you feel safe there?”

“Yeah.”

The doctor pauses to read off the screen then looks to Yessica.

“I see your father passed in July. I'm so sorry to hear that. How has it been since?”

Yessica is silent.

Doc moves on. “Did you tell your mom that you thought you were pregnant?”

Yessica does not break her silence.

“OK, well if you feel comfortable, I think you should talk to her about this. It may not be easy, but you don’t have to do this alone,” said the doctor, maintaining eye contact. “And the father. What’s he up to?”

“We’re good. We’ve been together for a minute.”

“Were you using any methods of birth control?”

“Look. Whatever happens happens. You know what I’m sayin?”

And, with that, I’m done.

No. I have no idea what you are saying Yessica. How do you completely give up control? I’m here terrified of the question of whether to ever have a child. I’m mulling all the known unknowns — What will happen to my body? My free time? How will I pay for a kid when I can barely make my rent? My not yet existent career? My youth? And the responsibility of another life! How will I pack their school lunches? How will I protect them from poisons and pesticides? And what kind of world would they be born into? Is it even okay to have children anymore with global warming already disrupting the seasons that our farming practices are based on? I don’t want my children to burn. I don’t want them to drown. Why aren’t you afraid? Did you want this?

And then a thought snaps the stream: maybe a dream isn’t being thwarted here, but is in the gestational stages of being lived.

I tried to see Yessica as her mother might. I looked at her long shiny black hair and the beautiful red tone of her skin, radiant even under these damp fluorescents. Her dark eyes are steady in that unmovable moon face; baby fat cheeks still intact. Her small pretty hands grip the edge of the examination table. They're so small. She's not yet glowed up, but she will be soon.

Yessica's mother probably had not been any different at her age. But, I imagined, she would have gotten wiser with age. She probably wasn't much older than me, but was certainly wiser. She'd raised a child — albeit a child who would now give forth to another child. What have I done?

And this young dumb girl in front of me now will have raised a child herself by the time she is my age. To the edge of toddlerhood. In a sense, Yessica was reaching her milestones early. She's a prodigy, really.

This baby will give her life perfect meaning, and with such little thought on her part! It will have more meaning than mine, that's undoubtable. It would simplify everything to have to nurture and feed and care. I can't imagine having such focus. I'm interested in everything and I want to be involved with it all. My efforts flit from one activity to another, in a perpetual state of distraction. This girl is a monk, really. A Zen saint.

And what could be more beautiful? From youth unto youth, a link added onto a chunky gold chain, ever moving, softly clinking. She's an artist.

Yessica has made her choice. She will give birth to her sun. She's Mary, really. A child queen herself, she lays her life down at the alter of the divine.

Mary probably wasn't too smart either.

Then who am I to pity the fool? All my anxiety about my future gray days and my struggle — How will I live a good life?! — I could relax and give to an endless summer instead. Our lives revolve our centers, whether handed down, chosen, or created. Her life and my life still spin around our centers, but now hers spirals out, and around and around, center around center, a harmonograph figure born from the swinging pendulums of every new generation, thin gold ink gliding on the plane of time, spun out and out and out, and on and on and on.

And I'm here, spinning like a solitary top, a dark perfect circle imprinted deep into a page, and nothing more.

The physician finishes up quickly. He asks Yessica a few more questions and enumerates the risks of teenage pregnancy, all the while her dumb bovine eyes look out through her slack face muscles. Orbicularis oculi, Levator labii, Risorius, Masseter, Zygomaticus major, Orbicularis oris, Procerus. Not a twitch. He gives her a physical, pelvic exam and Pap, tells her that she has to come in again for blood tests and an ultrasound, that he'll set her up with an obstetrician, and that's it. I fulfill my role as chaperone and this child is going to have a baby.

I smile at Yessica before leaving the room, and with it I try to telepathically pass on all the understanding I've just come to. You have made a big life decision! How awesome is that?!

She returns nothing.

I ask to take a break once I'm on the other side of the door. I walk, to the elevators, down, through the ER waiting room, blow through the sliding doors, across the parking lot, across the street, and still I keep going. I wish I could walk forever. Walk away from all of this humanness, from this weight, from this whole sorry cycle, out into the rain.