

Approx. 2,400 words

Tentacle

Bad things happen in hot weather, especially to pregnant women. Last night I dreamt I gave birth to a baby with a tentacle. Yesterday, in a diner flashing an open sign, a server with bluish circles under her eyes and hair tied up with yellow yarn served me an egg sandwich. I snapped at the poor server who might have been supporting her mother, sister, and addict best friend. Hormonal mood swing. She looked down at her regulation white shoes. That's when I told her about my baby with the tentacle. Nothing like pity to alter the energy in the room.

Seriously I hope my baby has all her limbs and functioning organs. Even though I didn't know I was pregnant for the first three months, I've been good ever since. I'm not a drinker but I do slug coffee and I'm fond of chocolate ice cream cones with chocolate jimmies. They look like ants, which brings me to the weather. I'm waiting for the onslaught. This is the time of year when ants take over my apartment. They begin shyly, like the man who wanted to ask me out but started with a conversation about the weather. *Isn't it hot for May?* These kind of conversations will go nowhere. Still I was impressed that an obviously pregnant woman could get a date. I don't wear a ring but that's not an indication of anything these days. I could have said my fingers swelled and I'd be telling the truth. I also might have told him that I don't wear a ring because I'm not married. When I get married, I want a simple white gold band with yellow gold leaves on it. Trees in springtime promise more than I have a right to expect. I'd like a partner like the trees—sometimes inward and bare, other times lush and sexy.

When I awakened, Joel was knocking at my door. 7:45. He has a habit of waking me up and I know it's because he worries about me. I'm the little sister gone wrong.

"Brooke, wake up!" Joel rapped against my pathetic single pane. The apartment is modest by modest standards. The landlord called it an efficiency, which is landlord speak for one room. There isn't much that is efficient about one room unless a person enjoys having breakfast in bed. The bathroom is small enough that the door hits the sink when it is open. Still, the rent is breaking me and I haven't thought ahead about what I'll do when octopus baby arrives.

"Okay. I'm up." I pull my bathrobe around the ratty *Disturb the Universe* tee shirt and panties I'm wearing. Saturday. Why bother getting dressed? Pregnancy is not a fashion statement and I've been minimalist in the maternity attire purchases. Joel loaned me tee shirts. He's six-foot three and lifts weights so those will work until the end.

Joel pushes his way in and plunks a ominous looking juice beverage on the counter between the kitchen and the rest of the room. He's taken to going to LifeJuice on the weekends and he's convinced that juice will save me. Last week it was carrot-kelp-ginger-turmeric. I poured the rest down the sink when he left. I tentatively sip at this one and it's pretty good.

"What is it?"

"Berry-carrot-banana."

That actually sounds like food. I drink some more and Joel's face crinkles into a smile.

"Thatta girl," he says and I feel like I'm the first horse in a race, probably a good metaphor for a very pregnant lady.

Joel kind of half sits and half leans on one of my stools. He's tall so he can stand-sit, his butt only slightly inclined toward the flat part.

"I found you a bigger place," he says, the smile spreading wider.

"But this is an efficiency. It's so.....compact. Easy to clean."

That's when he tells me about the house he bought, how we'll share it. It has four bedrooms and a backyard. Joel is a physician's assistant and he makes good money, something I hope to do again. I work at Sunny Oaks Rehabilitation Center as a physical therapist. I had to switch to part-time because I can't lift and standing all day was causing varicose veins in my legs. Most of my clients are elderly but I do occasionally get hunky athletes like the man who asked me out two weeks ago.

I'm not sure how I feel about living with my brother. He's a good man even though he has terrible taste in women. His marriage to Ryan was a disaster. We all could see her mood swings, the way she would order him around. *Get me an espresso over ice.* She never said please or thank you. Money makes people rude. But Joel was smitten by her spiky haircut and giant brown eyes. They lasted one year. I don't know if he dates anymore. We don't ask each other those kind of questions just like he's never asked me about the father of my little octopus. I pretend she doesn't have a father because the four times I slept with Pierre were that ethereal. Each morning

he would disappear before I awakened, no note, no coffee on the counter. Ghost man. After the fourth time, he never returned though he left behind a gorgeous blue paisley tie. His mobile phone didn't pick up and eventually went to a recording that told me it was not a working number. I knew he worked in a bank but I'd neglected to find out what bank or even what he did. The black hair and blue eyes distracted me. He had a French accent and everyone knows a woman cannot be responsible for her behavior when a man speaks French.

Sometimes I think about Pierre returning but there isn't a single scenario that seems workable. He just shows up one day to get the tie, and we resume our sex-centered relationship only now there's a baby with a tentacle that wants his attention. She can stretch the tentacle across the room, ruffle his perfect hair and slap his olive-complexioned face. He calls her bébé, brushes her tentacle away like a housefly. *I should have known a girl like you would give birth to a mollusk.* I wonder what kind of girl I am—a lady-girl, a red-haired girl. Why, I'm not a girl at all. I'm a full-grown pregnant woman of twenty-nine. I throw the tie at him and tell him to get out. After all, he just called my baby a mollusk. Who needs a man like that?

"You're not responsible for me," I tell Joel. By now I'm sucking down this juice beverage and I can feel the vitamins fortifying little octopus. She's doing flip-flops and then gets the hiccups. It's the oddest sensation having the body inside my body have a bodily function I can feel. I like it a lot.

"Don't start. You think I don't know that? Look. I have the money and I want to help. Besides it will be fun raising my niece. I'm not so good at marriage but I'm great with children."

"That would make a perfect online dating profile. No commitment necessary but great with kids. Lots of takers, I'll bet."

"Seriously, Brooke."

Joel knows me well enough to know it's not possible for me to be serious, especially about this. Besides being pregnant is silly. It looks as if I ingested a large, round object and it makes me waddle. What could be more ridiculous?

I duck into the bathroom to pee and change my clothes. I keep them in the miniature chest there because efficiency doesn't mean privacy even though they both end with "cy". The doorbell rings. Yes, there's a doorbell though Joel prefers to pound on the pane of glass with his sizable knuckle.

I cannot imagine who else would drop by on a Saturday morning. Our parents live in California, enjoying their retirement in a little condo overlooking the Pacific. My best friend Nora is currently on Cape Cod with her husband. Did I get a package? Maybe it's a darling layette set for my baby cephalopod.

I hear low voices. Men, definitely men. Maybe Joel's arranged a marriage for me to save my honor. *Meet your husband, Brooke. I've chosen him from a pool of twenty applicants who want to marry pregnant women. He has good teeth and a steady income.* I brush my teeth. It's never a good idea to meet ones' prospective mate with bad breath. When I crack the door, I can't believe it. Pierre is chatting it

up with my brother as if four months and a disconnected phone were simply an oversight. *Oh, merde! I forgot to call for one hundred and twenty-two days. My bad. And do you still have my favorite tie—the one with the swirls that look like sperm?*

When I make my grand entrance and it is definitely a grand entrance these days, Pierre looks shocked. His perfect skin is dancing around blotchiness. God, this bébé will be gorgeous if she takes after him. It's not like I'm hideous but he is right out of the New York Times fashion section. He doesn't wear clothes; he owns them and shapes them to do his bidding. He doesn't comb his hair, he tousles it and it falls perfectly over his unlined forehead.

"Who's the lucky man?" Pierre moves forward in that distinctive way of his, half dancer, and half gigolo.

"You are," I say. "Welcome back, Daddy."

I honestly thought Joel was going to trip over his own humongous feet. I guess it's hard to think of your sister bedding some dude, even one as breathtaking as Pierre. Yes, Joel. Women are that shallow. Pierre's eyes close nearly to slits as if he is thinking about his next move. It's not often I render men speechless.

"How do you know?" he finally asks.

"Hmmm. I'm guessing based on the fact that you are the only possible candidate. You're welcome to pay for DNA testing."

Pierre has one of those complexions that doesn't seem to redden but I sense he's uncomfortable. I straighten my back, which pushes out my belly even more.

"By the way, where the hell were you? I mean, things seemed to be going okay and then you disappeared instead of just sneaking in the early hours. "

"Business trip. France," he says. "I travel sometimes."

He states this matter-of-factly as if fucking women and then disappearing for months is a normal way for adults to have relationships. Maybe I'm the delusional one. Joel looks like he wants me to shut me up and get rid of Pierre at the simultaneously. Good luck, buddy.

"No worries. I wasn't expecting to marry you. I like coffee in the morning and lightly buttered toast and the disappearing act...well, it didn't work for me. This wasn't planned but here I am and here she is." I point to my absurd beach-ball belly.

"It's a girl," he says as if repetition is an art form.

"Yes. The wonder of ultrasound. Joel here bought a house. We're going to raise her. You can kick in some child support and get on with the serial dating thing," I say, thinking about the yard and a sandbox I planned to build for the bitty octopus. Better not to tell him about the tentacle dream.

Pierre looks both angry and relieved. Only a Frenchman can do this with so little affect. I'm sure he'll want DNA testing and he'll probably find a good lawyer who will make him look poor so the child support can be minimal. I don't care about any of it.

"Monique," I say. "That's what I'm going to call her." A brief moment of inspiration.

Pierre's lips are a thin line and he's doing the slit-eyed thing again. Hard to dismiss a baby with a name. Monique kicks me. I think she's trying to get her father's attention. Joel will be enough of a male role model and I'll lay in a supply of reliable birth control once I venture into the dating scene again. Pierre makes up an excuse about a friend he promised to see. To his credit, he gives me a working phone number and pecks me on the cheek. I hand him back his tie.

"What an asshole," Joel says when we hear his car pull away. 'But hot, very hot."

It's pretty strange to have my brother rate the guy I had casual sex with, even if it did result in a pregnancy.

"Yeah. Monique is a lucky girl. We'll have to keep her under lock and key until she's twenty-five, right?"

By the time I went into labor on a rainy July night, we had closed on the house. My stuff was still in boxes but Nora threw me a baby shower so we had a room set up for Monique, complete with gender-neutral outfits, a changing table, and crib. No one told me that this really hurts. The classes were all about breathing and having a supportive coach, like that's the only thing I'd have to worry about. I visualized Monique slipping out like the little mollusk she is but the tentacle kept catching on my vaginal walls with their suction cups. Fuck you, Pierre. I yelled *merde* more times than I can remember until finally it was over. She was born and the pain stopped as abruptly as plane touches down on a runway. We had arrived at our final destination. A nurse with what looked like mosquito bites all over her arms handed

me a white blanket wrapped bundle. Black hair, teeny nose, dreamy open eyes. I unwrapped her slowly until two small perfect hands flailed at me. No tentacle though I suspected now that one might appear to reel me back in whenever I tried to venture away from responsibility. I thought briefly of my unwitting sperm donor, Pierre. I kind of wished I had kept the tie so I could give it to Monique some day. *Your father wore this before he disappeared over the Atlantic or he was wearing this tie when his car crashed on Interstate 80.* Better not to have any vestige of the past. No baggage. *I didn't actually know your father but I've been told he was aristocratic, and deathly allergic to mollusks.* Monique looked at me through her long lashes and one tiny fist closed around my finger; a pact.