

The Space Between

Ninety-nine percent. The thing about ninety-nine percent is that it isn't one hundred percent. So when you hear that something is ninety-nine percent effective, what you're not hearing is that you're one percent screwed.

I'm sitting at the edge of the examination table. My bare feet dangle between the outstretched stirrups they were in not too long ago. The backs of my thighs are stuck to the table's leather because I've been sitting here in my underwear and this ugly blue paper gown for thirty-four minutes wondering what the hell I'm going to do now.

Only, I'm not really wondering because realistically I've only got one choice so I'm just thinking about people like Grant and how we'd done everything the right way, but I guess only ninety-nine percent right because now something is wrong. I think about tiny cells giving over to more tiny cells and asking myself, realistically, how many tiny cells can even accumulate in seven weeks? Probably millions, the pessimistic voice in my head tells me. I think about how some people call this cell multiplication a miracle, but also how cancer grows in this exact same way. So maybe they're wrong and it's just a tumor—and shouldn't we just call it that anyway because the context is the same: it is not supposed to be there.

My mind flexes in and out, reliving the exact moment Dr. Hoff asked me when I had my last period. My cheeks had gotten hot. I didn't remember. I was usually pretty regular, but I couldn't remember having it this whole last month. Dr. Hoff handed me a cup and told me the bathroom was two doors down.

Ten minutes later she left the room so that I could "consider my options." I wanted to scream about a million awful things after her in the most abrasive tones. But this is not Dr.

Hoff's fault. I tell myself it's not mine either but I only half believe it. I should get up and leave, but I can't move, so I just sit thinking about those tiny cells leeching off of my everything—my food, my air, my energy, my own cells that were tiny leeching cells only twenty-two years ago.

My eyes mist over as they've done countless times over the past hour. I think about when I was little, how my mom used to say I could be an actress because I could build a wall of tears that would never fall.

“Look at those big brown eyes,” she'd say. “You'll break hearts, baby.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and exhale slowly through my nose. I try to drown out the sound of the ticking clock in this sterile room that I've invaded and made unsterile, and wonder if that is supposed to be ironic or something. With my lower lip in between my teeth, I let my anxiety hum through my body for a second longer. My arms draw tighter around myself and I wish that Grant were here to hold me. I'm terrified because I love Grant but I hate him right now and I'm so afraid that he is going to hate me.

The door opens my eyes snap wide. The medical assistant who rooms patients seems shocked to see that I'm still here. Behind her a woman in a track suit holds the hand of a small child, and I wonder if the track suit woman can tell because she is a mother and shouldn't mothers be able to tell each other part? I can't ask my own mother this. I wonder if track suit woman can tell that right now I'm thinking that I never wanted to be a mother. The medical assistant is looking at me expectantly and I realize that she must have been talking to me but I wasn't paying attention.

“Oh, uh, sorry,” I say. “Sorry. I was just about to leave.” I eye my clothes that have been haphazardly folded on the chair beside the examination table, and glance back up at the medical assistant. “Sorry,” I say again because I feel stupid.

“Sure, hon,” the medical assistant says. She looks like a mother, too—about the age of a mother who would have a daughter my age that she called “hon.”

“You take your time getting dressed, okay?” she says. She turns and as she closes the door, I can hear her say to the young mother, “Well, sweetie, we’re going to reroute down the hall.” She probably calls her hypothetical daughter sweetie, too.

I check the clock. I’ve been sitting here for forty minutes now. Time to get up. I peel my thighs from the exam table and walk to the sink. A small square mirror is placed on the wall behind it, and for once I’m happy that I’m a little shorter than average height. At five-foot-three, I’ll never have to stare into those things directly. I easily avoid my own reflection and feel thankful for such small reprieves as I turn on the cold water. I don’t want to see if knowing this has given me any noticeable changes—what would I see if I dared look at my face? I tie up my hair into a low, messy knot, and lean into the porcelain to splash water over my face. The coldness drips down cheeks, my lips, my chin. I drag a wet hand down my face to clear any remaining water droplets, and watch the water circle down the drain.

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As I leave the doctor’s office, my pocket starts to vibrate. I pull out my cell phone. The screen reads “Grant Allston” over a picture of Grant and I making silly faces with photo booth props from our college graduation party. Suddenly, we look so young. My stomach plummets and I fight the urge to ignore the call.

“Hello?” I answer.

“Charlotte,” he says, using my full name in a low, playful voice like he does when he is fake reprimanding me, “did you forget something?” Whenever Grant says my name it’s like every single hair on my body reaches out like his voice is something they can touch, and they really, *really* want to touch it. I usually revel that feeling, but right now I’m afraid that if all my body reacts like that, those stupid cells would multiply exponentially. I’m annoyed that he almost made *it* grow more, but I try to hide it in my voice.

“What did I forget?”

“I thought you were going to call me after your appointment,” he says.

“Oh, sorry. It—it ran long.” I bite my lip. Should I tell him? I quickly debate with myself. No, I decide; I cannot say what I have to say into a cell phone standing by my unwashed Subaru in a doctor’s office parking lot.

“Yeah? Was it because they’re such great conversationalists?” I can hear his smile through the phone.

My mind drifts to last night and our talk about how awkward these types of doctor’s appointments are, because the doctors always try to make idle conversation as they are prodding around your private areas. Grant said he couldn’t understand how anybody would think it’s appropriate to ask what his plans were after college while they had his junk in their hands.

We laughed about this until our cheeks hurt and then we let our clothes fall like petals to the floor. After, Grant dropped his forehead to mine, and said, “So young lady, what does one *do* with a degree in English?” I laughed as Grant settled into my side with his chin tucked into my collarbone, and I remember thinking that people wrote poems about feelings like this. How naïve, I think now; no one writes poems about what happens to the statistically unlucky *after*.

“Charlie? Hello?” Grant’s voice jerks me out of my reverie.

“Oh, god. I’m sorry. I have, uh, really crappy reception. Can I call you later?”

“Sure,” he says after a beat. I can hear the concern in his voice “When?”

“I don’t know, okay?” My irritation breaks through for a minute. I soften my voice,

“Okay? Sorry, it’s just been a long day and reception sucks here. I promise I’ll call you soon.”

“Sure. Guess I’ll talk to you later then,” he says.

“Yeah.”

“I love you,” he says. He needs reassurance, so I say it back quickly and hang up.

The minute I put my key into the car door, I choke out a sob. A throaty wail drags out of my mouth and it sounds far away and not mine. My body folds under the weight of the emotion. My shoulders heave and I gag. Hot tears blur my vision and I dig my palms hard against my eyelids like I’m trying to push each unholy wet bead back into the tear ducts they sprang from.

When I finally win the struggle for breath, I realize that I’m kneeling in a parking lot, and just as this was not the place to divulge secrets, it is neither the place to have an emotional breakdown. I tuck loose strands of hair behind my ears and stand up, brushing phantom tears from my face. Adjusting my sweatshirt, I climb into my car. I text Grant and tell him to meet me at my house when he gets off work. The whole ride home I prepare a speech in my head and hope to any deity willing to hear the prayers of a heathen that I’m not about to lose the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

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Grant and I were about to get an apartment when my mom died last year. Cancer. Cell multiplication has been the recurring villain of my life. Instead of an apartment, I moved home to

help my dad mostly out of only-child guilt. It didn't really matter anyway, because Grant stays over almost every night. Since most of Grant's clothes are in my closet, I'm fairly certain the only reason he goes to the two-bedroom apartment he shares with three other guys is for their weekly poker night. Anyway, I don't mind him being around; it's good for my dad to have another person in the house because it forces him to shower and interact.

The television is the first thing I hear when I open my front door. Muffled voices lead me to the family room, where my dad has fallen asleep. I can see his bald spot over the arm of the couch, one sweat-panted leg is lifted over the back of the couch and the other stretches out in front of him. His snores echo in the open room as he sleeps away another day of his disability leave.

After mom died, Dad suddenly had a bunch of medical issues that keep him from returning to his job in the city. No one calls it depression. I suppose that there are social codes to be followed when dealing with a grieving person, especially if that person is a grown man.

The TV screen, which replays the Main Menu of *The Graduate* DVD every 40 seconds, gives the room a dim blue glow. He goes through phases where he'll watch the same movie over and over again. I don't know why he picks sad romances. The other night, he tried to tell me *The Graduate* is not a sad movie.

"He gets the girl, Charlie," he said. "What is more romantic than that?"

"Okay, but watch their faces in the end. They have no idea what to do, now. They can't even look at each other. They're on the back of a bus to nowhere and they're not smiling. Ergo, not a happy ending."

“Maybe. But not sad either,” he said. “They’re not looking at each other, but they’re looking in the same direction together. It’s real. It’s like jumping into an ocean hoping you’ve got what it takes to stay afloat.”

“That’s stupid.”

“That’s love.”

“Let’s agree to disagree.”

I hope he’s right, now, because I’m sitting here feeling like I’m on the back of a bus to nowhere hoping my love can float.

I press the off button and the screen goes dark. Dad stirs but does not wake. The funny thing is, for the first time, I’m wishing that he would, because I need a parent right now. I need mom.

I feel myself tense with anger. How could she not be here for me when I need her? I don’t even know if I would tell her, but I know that if I decided to she would support me, and if I didn’t she would understand my silence.

Dad coughs and repositions himself; I scowl at his thinning brown hair and walk through the kitchen toward my room.

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The bed is all tangled up. I think about when I left it this morning, after hitting the snooze button one too many times. I crept out from under the sheets, careful not to wake Grant, who was going into work later. For once I wasn’t running late, and I was excited about the thought of

having time to grab a coffee before going into work. I didn't have a care in the world as I stood in front of my full-length mirror just barely eight hours ago and got dressed.

Now I undress. I shake off my blazer, and pull my plain black t-shirt over my head. Standing in a bright blue bra, jeans, and white converse, I look at myself for the first time since Dr. Hoff told me. I don't look any different. I watch my reflection flatten her hands against her stomach so that the tips of her fingers are just underneath the belt seam. I imagine what it would be like to look down and see a big round belly instead of my feet. My reflection's fingers curl into fists and I think about punching myself hard enough to break apart that clump of tiny cells before they pull any more cells into their orbit. I feel my fingernails in my palms. My hands drop to my sides. I know what I have to do.

I crawl into bed and pull the covers up over my head and say, "I'm scared, mommy" even though no one's in the room with me. I feel embarrassed for having said this out loud. What good did that do? My cheeks are hot and wet with tears. I cry into my pillow and fall asleep.

I wake up to the sound of the front door opening. I'm in bed in my bra and jeans and converse, and I'm thinking this is not how I want to look when I say the things I have to say. I quickly pull my shirt back on. When Grant walks in, I'm making the bed.

He's tall in the doorframe, standing in his old "CORNER CAFE" work t-shirt, only the vinyl letters are cracked and peeling so it reads "COPNFR C FL." The sleeves are short and fall just above his farmer's tan on his arms. He didn't shave today so he's got a dusting of stubble around his chin and cheeks. His dark brown hair sticks up at different angles, as though he's ran his hands through it a couple of times. He cracks a smile.

"Hey," he says, coming toward the bed.

"Hi," I answer.

“It’s just going to get messy again when we sleep in it later,” he says, repeating his age-old argument of why he thinks making the bed is pointless. He hops on the bed, smirking, halting my progress. “Or maybe we won’t sleep,” he says, suggestively lifting his eyebrows.

His words make my stomach drop and I back away from the bed and look at him, unsure where to even start. I can read the worry in his eyes. He pats the light green comforter beside him. “Come here,” he says.

I walk over to him and stand between his legs, putting my hands on his jeaned thighs. My hands are hot and sweaty and I wonder if he can feel them through the denim. His arms come around me automatically and he pulls me close. I put my forehead on his shoulder, and I can feel him breathe against my ear.

“You okay?” he whispers. I shake my head. He leans back to look at me and his arms come up to cup my face. I watch my fingers run along the veins of his forearms, and he lifts his palm to tilt my face toward him. Looking into his eyes is almost unbearable; my eyes well up. Stupid tears, don’t they ever run out? I cup his sandpapery cheeks between my hands.

“What is it, Char?” he says softly. “Your dad?” I shake my head again. “What’s wrong?”

Grant moves his head toward mine and kisses my forehead. I lift my lips to his and whisper against them the word that I’ve been dreading to say out loud because saying it makes it real and irreversible and mine. “Pregnant.”

I don’t give him time to digest before I throw my arms around his neck repeating apologies. Crawling into his lap like a small child, my tears fall into his soft brown hair and my hand against his chest charts the seismic activity of his heart, as if its beating alone can confirm whether or not he still loves me.

After a minute, he rubs my back, then reaches up and pulls my elbow from around his neck and I'm thinking the worst until he kisses me.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Stop saying that," Grant says.

We lay down on the bed, looking at each other, lost in our own thoughts. He doesn't smile anymore. I can see the knowledge turn in his mind, and how he tries to hide that he's looking at me differently but he can't. For the first time, I can understand why the Bible says knowledge is evil.

He tucks my hair behind my ear. "I'll pay," he says, after a few minutes. I nod, thankful that he didn't ask me what I want to do, that he knows me, and that he already knows what we have to do.

"I'm scared," I say.

"Me too," he says. We fall back into ourselves. He shifts so that he is lying on his back and pulls me toward him so the back of my neck is over his skinny bicep and we are both staring up at the cottage cheese ceiling. The little nooks and cracks of the textured ceiling make me think of hiding and mysteries and sacred spaces, and how my small childhood bedroom holds my biggest adult secret. I thought telling Grant would make it smaller, each of us holding half of this huge thing, but how it feels like two secrets instead, and still separate. I think about cells and statistics, the meaning of luck, and why my mom had to die. After a while, Grant grabs my hand and squeezes it tight.

"I love you," he says, in a tone I can't place.

"I love you, too," I say, and we close the space between us. He kisses my lips chastely, and then my forehead. We fold our bodies together and just hold each other, but it feels different

this time. The air fills up with things we're too scared to say out loud. It radiates in waves around us like a force field, with all the tangled up love and fear and sadness. I feel like my heart is going to burst because it all feels as big as the future, which is too much for two people in one bed.

We're facing the unknown, wondering, "Now what?" We're jumping into the ocean. Maybe if we pretend enough that nothing is going to change, it won't. Maybe if we pretend enough that everything will be okay, it actually will be.