

## Reading the Cards

At five-fifty a.m., the smell of reheated fryer grease competes with the smells of burnt diner coffee and lard-packed biscuits. The scents are intimately familiar, if not always pleasant. This morning, Cassie's gut goes a little uneasy when the odors hit. She pauses, steadying herself in the kitchen doorway, and takes a few deep breaths before reaching for a freshly laundered apron from the diner's supply shelf.

The queasiness subsides but a memory surfaces, and suddenly she's back in a hospital waiting room. She can't remember which one; there were so many. The pediatrics wing at mealtimes often smelled like this, like her parents' diner, when orderlies hustled food carts down the corridors and anxious parents fidgeted with cardboard cups of never-finished coffee. Just blend in the scent of urine, the metallic odor of blood. Add some disinfectant, a dirty diaper or a touch of vomit, and it's pretty much the same.

She shudders and mentally pinches herself back into the diner's back kitchen. Next to the baker's rack, her husband slouches, reading, over a plastic table, a piece of cheap lawn furniture designated as their breakroom spot.

"Put the book away, Luke. Time to fry." She drapes a black cook's apron over his shoulder and touches a gentle finger to his dark chin stubble. His eyes blink a few times as he shifts his gaze up from the open textbook. Sometimes, when he's moving between worlds like this, she's not sure he recognizes her immediately. He's just turned twenty-three, but when did he last see an optometrist? Do they have enough money for that?

He reads so much. Maybe it's just eyestrain.

His eyes look glazed-over, faded like a dried-out lawn that once was green but is now brown. Worn down, quiet, waiting for winter.

She needs him here in the present, so she bumps his shoulder with a hip. He yawns and flicks his left thumbnail against his index finger a couple of times, like brushing off dirt. It's how Luke pulls himself out of a mind-drift. His hands are rough and chapped from all the dishwashing, but the pad of his index finger, where the thumbnail strikes, looks especially tender. He stretches his lank body and tucks a paper napkin into chapter seven of John Merriman's *A History of Modern Europe, Volume Two*, liberally marked with yellow highlighter.

Cassie hears the diner's front door creak as the earliest customers push in. She watches through the gap in the swinging doors as they pull off masks, claim stools at the worn, chrome-edged counter, and slide into split-plastic booths by the windows. Overhead fans rotate lazily, attempting to stir the already-humid, mid-September air into a breeze.

Luke seems to be back in the here and now, so Cassie walks through to the front with her order pad out and her smile on. Pull on gloves, secure the mask. Move a coffee pot to the back burner, start some decaf. Line up mugs and pour the fire chief's coffee right away, before he sits down, because he's always rushing. This crowd doesn't need menus, and the specials haven't changed in years. She listens, nods, confirms orders. Keeps the smile in place because customers expect it.

At the grill, head cook Marcus is cracking eggs, flattening strips of fatty bacon, slapping out sausage patties, pouring pancake batter. A former Army mess cook with

elaborate tattoos and no patience for slackers, Marcus wields his forks and spatulas with angry energy.

“Where you been, man?” he calls back over his shoulder. His dark eyes squint above his NASCAR-logo mask. “We got hungry people. Oil’s hot. Drop those home fries and make ‘em sizzle. And we need toast. Make that white bread go brown, fry boy.”

“And get that mask on,” he adds. “At least where people can see you. You get us shut down again, I’m puttin’ *you* in the fryolator.”

Finally on his feet, Luke wraps apron strings around his narrow waist and creates an awkward knot that he’ll have to re-tie twice by six-thirty. He fumbles a disposable mask into place, then shakes out frozen potato chunks. The hot oil roils and spits as he drops the wire baskets into the fryer wells.

From the front of the pass shelf, Cassie and the other server, a square-built mid-thirties woman named Raven, slide scribbled order slips to Marcus. Eggs and toast, white bread only. Pancakes with cheap syrup, fat-laden local sausage, and burnt-crisp bacon. Grits. Store-bought blackberry pie and achingly sweet chess pie. Lots of homefries.

The Shotswell Diner Gas & Groc has been here forever, just like Cassie’s family has been here forever. She’s spent her whole life here. At age six, she was laying out silverware and napkins. At twelve, she cleaned restrooms and brewed coffee. She graduated to waitressing at fifteen, burger-flipping at sixteen. Now, at twenty-two, it’s all of that plus paying vendors and balancing accounts. Schoolwork, social activities, and occasional nights out were always sandwiched in between hours at the diner.

At full capacity, the diner seats twenty-eight people. It opens at six and closes at three, six days a week. Friday is payday. On Sundays, Cassie drives her parents to New

Bethlehem Baptist, then sits in the church parking lot reading a romance or juggling their paper-thin finances, while Luke goes to the laundromat to bleach out grease and blackberry stains from their work clothes. Evenings, he reads and re-reads his textbooks while Cassie watches whatever's on network TV.

Once—it seems a long time ago, but it was only three years—they'd had friends and a social life. That was in high school, plus a few months into Luke's freshman year at NC State. But their friends have drifted, or run, away.

Now this Covid thing has settled in. Not the first virus they've dealt with, but still a scary one, and anyway there's no time or money for nights out. Cassie knows it could be worse. It *is* worse for a lot of people. So far, they've dodged the coronavirus. At the diner, she and Luke get regular paychecks, most meals, and bare-bones medical insurance.

With all their work, Luke and Cassie seldom eat lunch at the same time but sometimes Cassie and Raven can grab a burger and share a table together after the noon rush.

Today, a Tuesday, the diner's quiet by two-thirty. Marcus is gone and Luke's out back in the steamy kitchen, scrubbing pans and shoving the last rack of dirty plates through the dishwasher. At the sandwich board, Cassie assembles a BLT and pours a glass of milk. She slides into a vinyl-seated booth across from Raven, who's got her usual cheeseburger and Pepsi.

Raven—birth-named Regina—has been working at the diner for six weeks, since the coronavirus restrictions eased and the diner went back to full capacity. At the start of the pandemic, Cassie's parents moved across the parking lot to manage the grocery part

of the Shotswell Diner Gas & Groc, leaving Cassie and Marcus and Luke to keep the diner going with phone orders, take-out and local delivery. The recent return of the diner's eat-in customers prompted the hiring of their second server.

Raven is "half Cherokee and all country." She wears cowgirl shirts and lots of turquoise, and she dyes her long, straight, pecan-brown hair jet black because "that's what people expect an Indian to have." Raven insists she's inherited psychic skills from her mother's clan. The diner job is just temporary, she tells Cassie, until she gets good enough to go professional. She's memorized *The Eight Must-Have Skills of Tarot Readers* and she's got a website that offers psychic readings on Zoom.

So far, Cassie's managed to avoid having her cards read or her fortunes revealed. But today, as she sits down, she sees a stack of oversized cards positioned face-down near the saltshaker.

Raven pushes her half-eaten burger aside and grins. "Here you are! Hey, I need to practice. I'm almost set up to Zoom, maybe even get paid. I'll do your cards for free, okay?"

Her mouth full of BLT, Cassie shakes her head, but Raven is undeterred. She picks up the cards and begins an awkward sorting routine. The cards are stiff, obviously new.

"I'm shuffling these cards," Raven informs her, "to clear the energy from the last reading. While I'm doing this, you're supposed to think about what parts of your life need clarity. And what questions you want to ask the cards."

Cassie sighs. She moves her sandwich plate and milk glass closer to the wall, to avoid interfering with whatever Raven or the cards might do in the center of the table.

“I just need to eat, Raven. I’m really hungry.”

“Of course you’re hungry! You *should* be hungry, you don’t eat enough for a kitten. Let’s find you some strength, it’s all in the cards. The cards don’t lie. So, first you need to choose three cards.” Cassie doesn’t respond so Raven shrugs and does it herself, turning over the top cards. “The three-card spread, see, this tells us about the question you’re asking.”

“I’m not asking a question. I’m eating a sandwich.”

Raven persists. “This is where you can absorb your emotions. Reflect on the symbols.”

“I can’t reflect if I can’t *see* the symbols, and I don’t *want* to. I don’t know what the symbols mean. I don’t believe any of it anyway. And ‘absorb my emotions,’ what the hell does that mean?” Cassie wants to leave but she also wants to finish eating. And she doesn’t want to offend Raven, who is after all a good worker. If she eats faster, maybe she can get away sooner.

Raven leans forward, trying to catch Cassie’s eye. Cassie ignores her and chews steadily. Swallows. Pushes a stray piece of lettuce into her mouth.

Raven flips over several new cards. “Look!”

Defeated, Cassie abandons the last bite of sandwich. She wipes her hands on a paper napkin, and finger-combs her short brown hair. She’s probably just smeared bacon grease or mayonnaise into her curls, but she doesn’t care.

“Okay, what?”

Raven smiles, delighted. She chooses two cards, taps them with orange-lacquered fingernails, and slides them toward Cassie. “Look, right here. It’s the Lovers, next to the

Empress! Love and creativity! There's going to be—" She pauses. Spreads her hands for dramatic effect. "A baby! There's a baby wanting to get born, wanting to come to you!" She waves the cards in Cassie's face. "I've never turned up that combination before! Wow!"

Cassie stiffens. She leans back, bracing both hands against the formica. "A *baby*? No way. You're crazy, or your cards are crazy. Believe me, I'd know if I was pregnant." She feels her eyes fill and starts to rise.

Raven doesn't notice because she's performing now. Her voice goes sing-songy. "The cards *say*, you are ready to embrace hope again, to renew that great motherhood *adventure*. So, are you *on the path*?" She raises an eyebrow and flashes a share-it-with-me smile.

"No. *No*."

"Seriously, Cass." Raven drops the spiel and leans in. "Have you peed on the stick yet? You have this look about you. Dark around the eyes, but kind of glowing, too. Yeah, there's definitely something hormone-y going on. But," she adds in a big-sister voice, "you are *way* too skinny. Get some weight on those bones, girl."

"*No*." Cassie groans. Dammit, she thinks. Raven means well, but she doesn't *know*. "Look, I think I'd know. And it's not possible anyway. I'm on the patch. So, no. No way."

Raven reaches out a hand, but Cassie looks away, toward the clock on the wall over the grill. Almost three. Time to lock up, cash out and clean up. She stands and sweeps sandwich crumbs off her black jeans.

Her co-worker's voice goes soft with sympathy. "It must be a terrible thing.

Losing a child like you did. I know it was terrible for you, Luke too, but you can't give up. You can try again."

"Who told you? When?" Cassie snaps.

Raven pulls back, offended. "Marcus. A couple of days ago."

"You don't know anything and it's totally none of your business. I absolutely *cannot* get pregnant."

Raven scoops up her cards and slides out of the booth. "Oh, I'm sure you can get pregnant. You had one baby, you can have another. It was SIDS, right? That sudden-death thing that doctors can't explain. It just happens. There was nothing you could've done."

"You really *don't* understand." Cassie is sick of people telling her what she should do. "It's a *must not* thing. Not a *can not* thing. Her name was Sophie and it wasn't SIDS. There were—complications. She was born defective."

"But that's a horrible thing to say, calling a baby defective. Every baby deserves love." She steps toward Cassie and lifts her chin, turquoise earrings trembling and black hair swinging. "Maybe God had plans you don't know about, so he touched your little girl a special way. Then he called her home early."

Damn, Cassie thinks. I've heard that *so freaking many times*.

"That's what the bible tells us," Raven adds firmly. "And that's the point of the Tarot cards, too, you know, finding meaning in all those random things that just seem to happen."

Cassie's throat catches. She spins away, heading toward the kitchen and nearly colliding with Luke, who's standing in the doorway. He wipes chapped red hands on a



damp towel as Cassie pushes past.

“No,” he says to Raven. His voice is flat. “The baby was defective. If something’s born with defects, then it’s defective.”

Cassie flees through the kitchen and out the back. The screen door slaps behind her.

Raven blanches, then turns the other way and barges out the diner’s front door, her long hair swirling. Luke follows her, flips the deadbolt to lock the door, and turns the window sign from OPEN to CLOSED. He leans over the booth where Raven and Cassie sat and wipes the table clean in large, slow circles.

Cassie stumbles across the diner’s weedy back yard and halts, breathing hard. She leans against the wooden shed that houses trash bins and the fry-grease tank.

She sinks to the gravel, wrapping her arms around her knees and collapsing sideways against the shed’s rough boards. She closes hot wet eyes against the brightness of the late-summer day and waits for her heart to slow.

Dammit, she wants a cigarette. But three years ago, when she was nineteen and newly pregnant, she’d promised herself—and Luke, and her unborn baby—that she’d never smoke again. So, no cigarette. She just needs a minute to get herself together so she can go back inside to finish up.

This evening, when she stops at CVS to pick up Luke’s meds, she’ll get a pregnancy kit, too. Just to be sure.

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Four years earlier, high school sweethearts Cassie (voted Most Popular and Cutest) and Luke (Brainiest and Most Likely to Succeed) believed they’d mapped out the

perfect path to their future. The day after graduation, two weeks before their wedding, they wrote it all down on a heart-shaped, lace-trimmed card and gave it a title: “Lucas and Cassandra—Our Life Together.”

Cassie used her pretty schoolgirl cursive, so rarely taught anymore, to write out their goals: Work, School, Family. Luke added some optimistic budget figures. They signed their names with flourishes and posted the card on the refrigerator in the single-wide trailer they rented from her parents.

Cassie’s mom and dad were pleased but skeptical. You’re marrying up, they told her privately, but you’re both too young.

Luke’s parents had wanted him to get his degree and start teaching before getting tied down. Three months after the wedding, they moved with Luke’s younger brother Ethan to Miami. His father said he’d been offered a new position in his insurance company, but Cassie suspected they wanted to move farther from the new in-laws, her dad the service station manager and her mom the grocery clerk.

According to “Our Life Together,” Cassie would work full-time at her parents’ diner while Luke worked part-time and earned his teaching degree at NC State. There was a teacher shortage, so Luke was sure he’d land a job right after graduation. High school, history, his passion.

After Luke began teaching, Cassie would acquire a two-year certificate from the community college. Something in healthcare—nursing, dental assistant, lab tech—she was a little vague about exactly what. In six years of working hard and saving money, they’d be on track to buy a house. Something older, a starter home in a good neighborhood. Then children. Two, maybe three.

Except this happened: Eight months after signing the “Our Life” plan and the marriage license, during freshman spring break at his parents’ place in Miami, Cassie learned she was pregnant.

Well, okay, Luke said. The first baby is a few years ahead of schedule. Our parents will help. We’ll manage.

“If it’s a boy,” Cassie said, “we’ll name him Ryan, after my grandfather.”

“If it’s a girl,” Luke said, “I get to choose, so we’ll name her Sophie, for my grandmother. Sophie means ‘wisdom and light.’”

The baby, a premature girl born blue-skinned and weak on a gray December morning, arrived with a third of her brain missing. Microcephaly, the obstetrician said, shaking his head. She’ll have trouble swallowing. There’s nerve damage. She has a hearing problem, and her eyes don’t track properly. She may live a few months, maybe longer.

A few days after the birth, when the overwhelming shock had subsided to a pervasive general despair, Luke and Cassie named her Sophie anyway. “We need to stay positive,” Cassie told Luke, before she fully understood what lay ahead.

“Pray,” Cassie’s mother urged them. “You’re not praying hard enough.”

“Luke has to leave school,” her father said. “and work full-time at the diner. We’ll cover the rent, that’s the best we can do.”

Luke’s parents sent them a Christmas card with a check for five thousand dollars. They said nothing about their first grandchild. They did not visit, or call, or answer Luke’s emails.

The doctors endlessly interrogated Cassie and Luke about their health history and

sex lives. What about measles, strep, flu, HIV, syphilis, meningitis? Did you use condoms, birth control pills, antidepressants? Smoke, drink? Heroin or cocaine or meth or marijuana?

And then: What about travel? Have you heard of Zika virus? When you were in Miami, were either of you bitten by a mosquito? Did you have any flu-like symptoms? Zika can be transferred from person to person during sex, did you know that? Did you know the fetus can be infected through the mother?

She remembered having a headache and a rash, the day after snorkeling in Key Largo.

If it was Zika, the doctors couldn't confirm it now. Earlier tests might have revealed something.

That was when Luke blew up in the pediatrician's office, yelling and shoving furniture until security was called.

"So," he'd screamed, "we're *fucking guilty*? Guilty of going to Miami to see my parents, guilty of having sex while married? Guilty of not getting tested earlier for a virus we didn't even *fucking know about*?"

Anti-depressants were prescribed for Cassie, mood balancers for Luke, and many, many drugs for Sophie to control epilepsy, improve breathing, and ease the near-paralysis in her limbs.

Cassie and Luke spent their days in terror and chaos. Your baby will need round-the-clock care, the patient liaison said. You'll need to learn about Medicaid. What's covered, how to file, where to get nursing services and durable medical equipment. Here's instructions for feeding her, a list of what she needs every day. Sensory exercises

and home-based PT. Later, she'll need botox injections to relax her stiffened limbs, glasses for vision correction. Hearing aids and cochlear implants.

Cassie's determination to remain optimistic dissolved in fury, shame, and a fierce urge to dig her nails into the face of every doctor who peered at their daughter in pity or fascination.

Luke went the other way, falling into numb silences and a deep despair. He showed little interest in his daughter, touching her only when necessary. He disappeared into his textbooks and dropped weight. He sagged under the pain of their daughter's burdens as they sat in endless waiting rooms and moved slowly through the halls of hospitals, and doctors' offices, and the infants' ICU.

When Sophie was eight weeks old, they brought her home to their two-bedroom mobile home. She was accompanied by a day nurse, a truckload of medical equipment, and a list of upcoming appointments.

"It *has* to get better," Cassie told Luke. They'd figure out how to live with this, and they'd find a way to pay off the crushing medical bills. Go on food stamps and welfare. Declare bankruptcy.

At nine months, Sophie began having seizures. Misfiring nerves cause oxygen deprivation, the pediatrician explained, so Sophie needed a unit to deliver oxygen through a cannula while she was awake and a face mask while she slept. The mask had to be strapped over her face each evening and checked every two hours, because she sometimes cried and thrashed and knocked it off. They borrowed a baby monitor and set the volume on high.

The doctors were encouraged by Sophie's progress, so they updated the

prognosis. She might live for four or five years, maybe longer, if no other complications surfaced.

A week after the oxygen compressor took up residence next to Sophie's crib in the cramped second bedroom, Cassie noticed that "Our Life Together," the beautiful lace-trimmed card, was gone from the refrigerator. Neither mentioned it.

They learned how much good nursing care costs, and how little they could afford it. So they juggled schedules and budgets and took care of their daughter themselves. They moved through their days in great chunks of silence, Luke tending to fryolators and dishwashers, Cassie tending to Sophie's never-ending care. At night they took turns checking her breathing mask, every two hours, faithfully following the doctors' orders.

Cassie and Luke discovered comfort only by finding each other's bodies in the glow of a nightlight, after checking Sophie's oxygen or changing her diaper. Then they came together into an urgent, grim coupling that left their skins slick with sweat and their faces swollen with hot tears.

Sophie lived for almost two years. During that time, Cassie's parents gave them free rent, the use of an old car, a weekly bag of produce from the grocery, and two meals each day at the diner.

Her mother added a heavy dose of prayer and veiled suggestions that Cassie and Luke must have done something sinful to bring such a terrible burden onto themselves and their families.

Her father stayed mostly silent and mainly invisible, working the gas pumps and stocking the shelves at the store. Tending to business so they'd all have a roof over their heads.

Former friends called once or twice, then disappeared. There were no invitations to a night out—what was the point—and little reprieve from the never-ending care that Sophie required.

“You’d think my mother’s minister would show up, at least,” Cassie told Luke on Sophie’s first birthday. “All those church dinners she’s organized. Maybe this is supposed to drive us to the church. Or maybe everyone’s afraid that our bad luck will rub off.”

“It’s the ultimate ‘fuck off,’” Luke said. “We screwed up, we messed up our perfect plan. What did we do to deserve this? Must’ve been something really bad, right?”

They did everything the doctors said, but in her two years of life, Sophie never met a single milestone listed in the discarded baby books.

One morning just before dawn, a week before Sophie’s second birthday, Cassie found the oxygen mask hissing softly in a corner of the crib, next to her daughter’s unmoving body.

Cassie stared at her daughter and breathed out a long-held sigh.

Luke had left a half-hour earlier to run errands before he began his shift at the diner, so Cassie was alone with Sophie during her favorite time of day. She leaned over the crib, cupped her daughter’s strange dark head in her hand for one last time, and gazed out the window at the light of just-dawn. A morning star was fading in the east. Venus or Saturn, Cassie thought. Luke would know. She’d ask him later.

She switched off the baby monitor, disconnected the oxygen tank, and gently tucked the yellow baby blanket around her daughter’s head so that the misshapen skull was hidden.

She waited by her daughter's crib until the star faded in the light of the rising sun. Then she called 911.

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Several hours after fleeing from Raven, Cassie's home alone. She sits on the toilet and opens a test kit, reads the instructions on the card, and pees. She holds the stick with a shaking hand. Two lines appear: one dark, one a little lighter.

The second kit, a different brand, tells her the same thing.

How can this be? She's been careful, never late with a new patch.

But she knows the odds: slight, but not impossible.

The memories rush back, and she knows how it will be. The exhaustion, the strange longings, the simultaneous hunger and nausea. The weight gain, the heavy breasts. Backaches, euphoria, and random crying jags. Then the feelings of power and strength and purpose.

But this time, everything will be painted with fear—an overwhelming, deeply personal knowledge that tells her she can vow to do everything right and still have everything go horribly wrong.

She wanders into the kitchen, opens the fridge and stares. Closes it without knowing what she was looking for. It's eight-thirty and Luke will be home soon, back from the coffeeshop where he uses the wi-fi to upload his homework for his single online class.

The door swings open. Luke slides off his backpack, pours a glass of water and sinks onto the faux-leather loveseat. On the TV, he finds a college football game. Neither Luke nor Cassie cares about football, but this is what's on.



Cassie picks up the remote and mutes the game, readying herself. She sees he's doing that thing with his fingers again, flicking a thumbnail.

They both speak at once. Luke says, "My dad called."

Cassie blurts, "I'm pregnant." Not how she'd planned to say it.

They stare at each other. Her gray eyes are wide, his hazel eyes are half-hidden by a shock of coffee-colored hair, uneven where she'd trimmed it for him. He didn't shave today, maybe not yesterday either. It's endearing, the stubble. Did he even hear what she said? Distracted, she reaches up to touch his chin.

He frowns, pulls back just a little, and starts again. "Dad called. His friend can give me a job in his tech company's research library, something to do with organizing archives. Full-time but flexible hours, so I can go to school, too. And there's benefits. You can—you could get a restaurant job anywhere, right? Dad will help with our rent for a couple months, too."

He breaks off, staring at her. "But you said—what?"

"I'm pregnant. I took the test, twice." She fights tears. "You know I've been careful! And Miami? Really? I hate Miami. You hated Miami before—even before Sophie."

He takes her hands in his rough ones. "It's a chance to get our life back on track."

That's exactly the phrase his father would use.

"But *Miami*? Remember the Zika virus? And now it's coronavirus. We're not vaccinated yet. We're safe here, or at least as safe as anywhere. I'm not going anywhere while I'm pregnant!"

"Then maybe you need to be—not pregnant." He drops her hands and looks at the

TV, where many small people in uniforms are running in slow motion across impossibly green grass.

She grabs the remote, switches off the TV. “Pregnancy,” she says, “is not a ‘me’ thing. It’s a ‘we’ thing. You’re saying that *we* need to be not pregnant.”

“I—we—can’t do this again.” He looks at her now, imploring. “The risk—it’s too much. I know it’s a small risk, that the same thing would happen again, but—I’m not cut out to be a father. Maybe *we’re* not capable of being good parents.”

She doesn’t know which *same thing* he’s talking about. Their daughter’s birth, or their daughter’s death?

“Luke,” she sighs. “I get it. And part of me agrees, yes it’s so painful but yes, I can see why we should—terminate. I’m just so afraid, of everything.” She sags into his shoulder but her eyes are still dry. “And I have to tell you something, about Sophie. The day she died.”

He slips an arm around her waist and pulls her in.

Cassie’s words are muffled against his gray sweatshirt. “When I found her, in her crib, I just stood there for the longest time.” She pulls in a breath, still holding back tears. “When her skin was cold and I knew she was gone, that’s when I called 911.” Pause. “I was slow, I took my time. Do you understand?”

She clings to his narrow chest and lets the tears come. Beneath his shirt she feels the sharp, hard points of him—his shoulder, ribs, elbow, hip. We’re both spread so thin, she thinks, there’s nothing holding us up. Thin and flat, like cardboard boxes that have been scored and crushed, waiting to be recycled into something completely new.

He gently brushes a curl back from her face, then runs a finger across her

collarbone to the deep hollow at the base of her throat.

“Ah well,” he sighs. “It doesn’t matter. Didn’t you wonder why Sophie’s mask was off? The strap was loose. You never asked me about that. Or why the sound was switched off, on the monitor.” His face creases into a small, sad smile. “Like I said, I don’t think we’re cut out to be parents.”

He waits until her tears are no more than hiccups and sobs. Then he leads her into their bedroom and helps her undress. They make love, slowly and tentatively, like the first time, years ago under the bleachers at midnight after the homecoming game.

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