

(Title: Caution(f)airy Tale)

As soon as Jakia and Tyrone had their very own door to close and lock behind them, they spent all day, every day, intertwined and stuck together, and when they weren't making love they were looking at each other and thinking about it, wondering which positions and delightful tastes and sounds were yet to be explored. And why shouldn't they make love all the time? It was their honeymoon after all, though there had been no wedding or white dress or loving glances or well wishes. No one said, *congratulations, what a miracle, I swear to God y'all two make me believe in love*. What they said was, *Girl, are you crazy? You barely know him! How do you know that nigga won't choke you in your sleep?* And Jakia got very tired of defending her feelings and talking about intuition and magic and all that other sparkly shit when deep down she knew as well as anyone that only time would tell. And it didn't matter anyway because a month later Jakia's money was gone and the honeymoon was over. It was a real relationship now, the kind where one spouse has to say to the other what they don't want to say but needs to be said. Which in this case was, *Tyrone you need to get a job*.

The day they had moved in together – which now seemed like years, instead of weeks ago – her mother told her this would happen. She'd sat Jakia down at the kitchen table while Tyrone worked outside, loading suitcases and boxes into the trunk of her car.

"That boy ain't got his own car? And he ain't got no money?" her mother had asked. But it wasn't a question. It was a foundation upon which she was about to build a premise Jakia did not want to engage or ponder. Her mother marked her silence as an answer.

"Umm hmmm," she had said. "I know he don't, because if he did, ya'll wouldn't be moving in together so fast. He don't have nowhere to go, is that it? And you know I'm not about to let him move in here. So you spent the graduation money your daddy gave you?" Her mother leaned forward, elbows on the spotless kitchen table, hands clasped under her chin. She looked at Jakia and Jakia looked back.

Finally Jakia said, "I love him, Ma. I know he isn't the kind of guy you might have dated but..."

Her mother cut her off. "Oh no, don't try to make this about me. This is about you."

"It's not his fault, Mama. He had a job but he got fired a couple of weeks ago. He's looking for something else."

"I'm sure he is," her mother said, but the position of her eyebrows gave her real feelings away. "How old is he?"

"Twenty eight," Jakia said.

"And what kind of job was it he just got fired from?"

Jakia sighed, listened for Tyrone in the driveway. She was ready to go. "It was a retail job, Mama."

"Management?"

(Title: Caution(f)airy Tale)

“Ma.” Jakia shook her head, looked her mother in the eye. “Where you going with this?” Her mother smiled that sad Mama smile. The kind that says I know something you don’t know and I pray you never have to find out. Jakia felt suddenly afraid, and yet bored of her fear. It was so big that it was redundant.

“Look, I see you’re ready to go and I’m not going to try to stop you and I hope everything goes just the way you want it. I don’t really know him but Tyrone seems like a nice boy. But like I said, this isn’t about me or him. This is about you. That boy ain’t got no money, no job, no prospects, no – did he go to college?”

“He started but he never graduated. But I thought you said this wasn’t about him!”

“And no college education. Which means you’re going to have to take care of him. You been taking care of him. You’re taking care of him right now.” Jakia just looked at her mother, wanting the truth to be different than it was, too ashamed to confirm it, too honest to deny.

“Umm hmmm,” her mother said. “And that’s not his fault. He isn’t lying about who he is. All his shit is right there in the open for you to see it and choose. But you’re lying about who you are. You’re pretending that taking care of him is okay with you but I don’t think it is. Maybe some women really would be cool with it, but I don’t think you are. I don’t doubt that you love him, as far as you know. But right now that love is clouding your senses, and you got some money in your pocket, so you think everything is all good. But that little bit of money ain’t gon’ last, baby. How much you got left, \$3,000?”

Jakia didn’t want to be sitting there, didn’t want to be looking at her mother. Her mother was planting a seed and Jakia willed her soil to harden. “Yeah, about that much.” Except the truth was closer to \$1700.

“Umm hmm,” her mother said again. “All I’m saying is, Tyrone’s grown. He probably won’t change. This is who he is. But this isn’t who you are. You’re banking on him getting his shit together later but you missing the fact that it ain’t together now. One day, you’re going to look up and realize this isn’t okay with you. And when that day comes, you’re gonna hurt that boy. And that’s going to be your fault, not his.”

Tyrone opened the screen door, peeked his head in. Both women smiled to blanket the tension but it didn’t work, like an air freshener that underscores, rather than eliminates, the smell of shit. “You ready, babe?” he asked. Jakia nodded and Tyrone held the door open for her. Her mother stood on the other side of the screen door, watching them leave. Tyrone turned suddenly, like he had forgotten something important. “Listen, I want you to know that I love your daughter. And I’m going to take care of her.”

“Jakia can take care of herself,” her mother had promptly replied. “You just make sure you can take care of *yourself*.” And then she had stepped back inside the big, clean, air conditioned house in which Jakia used to live, and shut the door.

(Title: Caution(f)airy Tale)

A month later, the county hospital overwhelmed Jakia. It wasn't surrounded by trees or earth or anything alive. It was a lone structure in the midst of a concrete forest, lush with parking meters rooted deep in asphalt. Cars honked and scuttled by like great, metal animals; the highway snaked and roiled to the west like an ancient river. The peeling exterior was newly renovated, keeping in step with the transformation of the neighborhood. The housing projects had been torn down, replaced by grocery stores with bright lights and three-dollar oranges. The ashy men and pregnant women had been replaced with well-to-do students from far away places, lured by the promise of urban living without the faces and guilt of poverty.

Yet on the other side of the metal doors, nothing had changed. The paint was chipped and faded green. Jakia didn't understand how, even when the hospital was brand new, anybody would have chosen that color. It seemed the color of despair. The floors were filthy and bright orange. The fluorescent lights caressed each spot and streak like a lover. It felt to Jakia as if her skin shrunk into itself to avoid contact with the heavy air, the chemical smell of disinfectant, the under-scent of things that could never be scrubbed away. She wondered how many people had died here.

Tyrone wouldn't come with her even though the hospital was all the way on the west side and the closest free parking space was three blocks away, & she was so weak and tired she took a nap every time she sat still. He told her hospitals were full of germs and made him nervous, and that ever since his grandmother died they made him think of death. Sonia told him her grandmother died in a hospital too, and he should just get the hell over it. And he might have, but then they had a fight about whose turn it was to wash the dishes.

The waiting room was packed with rows of bodies on cracked yellow benches; it bustled with suppressed groans and waiting. A ticket machine towered in the corner. Everyone clutched a small white square printed with a black number. There were no names. Jakia stood as long as she could. She wanted to sit down but there was no room except tucked here and there on snatches of bench between shoulders and jutting knees. Her number was called after the better part of an hour, but only to find out the nature of her emergency.

"I feel faint," she told the copper-haired woman behind the service desk who stared at the clock above Jakia's head. "Faint and dizzy. And so tired. Like yesterday I tried to go to work but I couldn't even--"

"Umm hmm," the woman cut her off, waved her back toward the benches. "Have a seat and listen for your number." Another hour crawled by. Jakia stood near the wall but refused to lean, afraid germs might parachute into her pores. Eventually a corner seat opened up and she sat down and closed her eyes, except she couldn't keep them closed because the lights were so bright and her stomach grumbled. She wanted to stuff her face with something steamy and greasy, a cheeseburger with onions and a side of fried mushrooms, cheese-sticks with marinara sauce, a mug of piping hot chocolate. In the third hour she gave up her cheeseburger dreams and accepted the fact that she

(Title: Caution(f)airy Tale)

would never get out of this room. She counted her change. Selected a feast from the vending machine. Fizzy pop nectar and crunchy cheese chips, chased with two chocolate bars.

Soon she was called to another line, to the gatekeepers with pen swords and clipboard shields who let only the most desperate pass. When it was Jakia's turn the man asked, "Why have you come in today?"

She told him, just like she told the woman two hours before, "I feel dizzy, I feel faint, I feel hungry all the time, even after I've eaten."

"Are you pregnant?" the man asked. She remembered Maxine's words from earlier in the week – *Don't forget, you have to pretend like you don't know what's wrong with you. Play dumb. You need them to diagnose you so you can get in the system.*

"I don't know," Jakia told him.

"Have you missed a period?" the man asked.

Jakia admitted that she had. "So you're pregnant then?" he said, raising his pen. This man with a new texturizer and a superman curl in the middle of his forehead was about to diagnose and dismiss her.

Jakia raised her voice slightly. "I *said* I don't know."

The man raised his eyebrows but the s-curl didn't move. Jakia pictured him in the morning, fingers black with Pro-Style gel, getting that curl just right. He made a note on a form and put it in a growing file on his desk. "Have a seat," he told her. "Listen for your number."

An hour later she was called again, this time to a triage station in the corner of the room partitioned by a flimsy white curtain. She stuck out her tongue for the thermometer and rolled up her sleeve. A heavy woman in tight scrubs recorded her blood pressure. She had a wide, thick afro and wore a cross around her neck on a thin gold chain.

"Your body temp is 98.2 degrees," she said, "And your blood pressure is 95 over 80. That's too low honey. You pregnant?" Maybe it was the fact that they were away from the scatters and clusters of people. Maybe it was the nurse's jelly roll lap that reminded Jakia of her favorite aunt. Maybe it was being called Honey after hours of answering to Number 46. Jakia wanted so badly to tell this woman the truth. She suspected the nurse would tell her, Oh Honey, everything will be okay. If that happened, Jakia knew she wouldn't be able to stop herself from breaking down. She shrugged her shoulders, avoided the woman's eyes. Lied again.

"I don't know," Jakia said.

The woman pulled a specimen cup from a metal tray and wrote Number 46 on the side. "Go pee in this," she told her. She pointed to a line on the cup. "Make sure it's at least up to here."

(Title: Caution(fairy Tale)

Forty minutes later a voice boomed over the loudspeaker, "Number 46, report to the lab on the 2nd floor."

When the elevator doors opened, Jakia had to remember where she was. Gone were the bright lights, the neon floor, the yellow cracked benches and pea green walls. Gone was the legion of bodies. Instead there was soft lighting, a sea of empty, deep blue chairs, pale blue walls with pictures of flowers. She was still a number, but since she was the only person here, the number felt like a name. Almost immediately she was summoned behind the big beige doors, down the tranquil hallway, to the sterile room. The doctor arrived moments later.

"So," he said briskly. "You're pregnant. Congratulations." His expensive watch nestled in a patch of thick hair at his wrist and he glanced at it, as if confirming the presence of a person inside her took up too much of his time. Jakia suddenly felt very small. She saw herself through his eyes – black, meaty, poor, multiplying.

"Thank you," she said in a quiet voice, but he was already talking again, rushing through his script.

"So you don't do drugs, right? No smoking? No one in the house smokes?" Jakia shook her head, picturing the joint she'd taken two hits of this morning to keep the creeping nausea at bay. It was too easy to lie in this place.

The doctor was still talking, hadn't even paused to hear a reply. He ticked the list of do's and don'ts off his fingers – "No smoking. No drinking. Only one cup of coffee a day. No tuna or sushi. Drink plenty of milk and water. Eat cheese. Lean meat. Fruit. Vegetables. Exercise. Get lots of sleep. The receptionist will give you the list. Here's a prescription for prenatal pills. Take one every day, preferably at the same time," he said, scribbling in his pad, ripping off the sheet and placing it on the table next to Jakia, ignoring her outstretched hand.

"Make an appointment with your primary care provider as soon as possible. You'll need one prenatal visit a month until your eighth month, and you'll need to go every two weeks." He put his hand on the door. "All set, then?" he asked.

Jakia cleared her throat. "When am I due?" she asked. "He turned the handle before he realized she'd spoken, and then released it, not bothering to hide his irritation." "What?" he asked. Jakia wanted to cry. "I said, when am I due?"

The doctor whipped a circle cardboard calendar from his pocket. "When was your last period?" he asked.

Jakia thought back. "The end of June," she told him.

(Title: Caution(f)airy Tale)

He spun the circular pre-natal calendar around, a gameshow host gearing up to announce her prize. "Looks like the tail end of March." His hand was back on the door handle. "Okay," he said. "Your primary care physician will answer any more questions."

"I don't have a primary care physician," she blurted. "I had insurance in college but I graduated, and I don't get benefits at my job."

The doctor waved his hand dismissively. "Sounds like you need a medical card then. Ask the receptionist for a welfare packet. I really must go." And then he hurried away, as if her condition was contagious.

The welfare packet lay unopened on the kitchen table for four days before Jakia finally opened the damn thing. But what else could she do? She needed food and the government had food. She needed health care and the government had health care. It made sense to get help when help was offered but the word scared her. Welfare. Was she supposed to start smoking cigarettes? Dye her hair a ridiculous color and tie it up with a silk scarf? Pop out six more babies and cuss them all out in public? Put hot cheese sauce on her Doritos and wash them down with neon-colored quarter water and a pickle?

"Girl you so fucking racist," said her best friend Maxine told her over the phone. "You know those are stereotypes, right? About your own people?"

"I know," Jakia said. "I'm stressed. I'm tripping. Don't mind me."

"That was really messed up," Maxine said again.

"I know."

"I mean, shit!" Maxine said.

"I'm sorry," Jakia told her.

Maxine went on. "And you know statistically, there's more white folks on welfare than black folks."

"I know," Jakia said again.

"And you ain't even getting welfare, you just getting food stamps and a medical card. Welfare is when they give you cash, Miss High and Mighty."

"I know!" Jakia said for what felt like the thousandth time.

(Title: Caution(f)airy Tale)

"Don't get testy with me," Maxine said. "You the one who said the shit in the first place. See that's what's wrong with folks. Always want to talk about the stereotype but get mad when somebody want to point out the facts."

Jakia's line beeped. "Hold on," she said. Jakia clicked over. It was an automated message saying her phone bill was past due. "She switched back to Maxine.

"Girl, what the hell happened to my life?" she asked.

Maxine laughed. "Ain't that the truth. Girl, the same thing that happened to me and every other woman. Wanted some good love and good dick and got a baby. What else is new?"

Tyrone promised to come with Jakia to her first prenatal appointment, but he got a last minute job interview. Jakia was disappointed that he wouldn't be with her, but she was overjoyed that he might return home employed. She tried not to let it show, however; she didn't want to put too much pressure on him. She got up early, determined to make sure Tyrone had a good day. She cooked a big breakfast – fried potatoes, turkey bacon, toast with jelly, grapefruit, coffee. While she cooked she imagined how things might be with two paychecks in the house, how much money they could save for the baby once Tyrone started paying half the rent. Jakia looked down at her stomach. It was growing, but it looked like a beer gut, not a baby. There was none of the obvious firmness that her best friend Shay assured her would come later. Tyrone's income would free up her money for a much needed shopping trip. All her clothes were too tight.

His interview was at eleven; she had the food on the table by eight thirty so he would have plenty of time to eat, shower and get dressed. She thought they could sit at the kitchen table and eat together, pray together, ask God to bless their food and the endeavors of their day. But when she called Tyrone to the table, he was busy on the computer. He asked her to bring it to him and she did, thinking he might be printing his resume or looking up the directions to his interview, but he was on Facebook. Jakia set the plate down.

"Thanks, babe." Tyrone said, not looking up. Before she made it back to the kitchen to fix her own plate, Tyrone called her back. "Do we have any barbeque sauce?"

"For what?" Jakia asked.

"For the potatoes," Tyrone said.

"Did you even taste them? They're delicious. I seasoned them perfectly."

"I'm sure you did," he told her. "But I just like my potatoes with sauce. It's nothing personal. I still love you." Tyrone laughed.

(Title: Caution(f)airy Tale)

Jakia brought him the plastic bottle from the fridge and he turned back to the computer. She stood behind him quietly, watched him bury her masterpiece in the thick, reddish-brown liquid, watched him shovel three forkfuls into his mouth without taking his eyes from the computer. Jakia sighed, went back to the kitchen table and ate alone. The apartment was quiet except for eating and drinking sounds, and intermittent clicks of the mouse and keyboard.

Jakia looked at the clock on the microwave when she was finished eating. It was ten minutes after nine. "Babe," she called, "Where did you say your interview was again?"

"On the northside," he told her. "Around Foster and Kedzie."

"You better get a move on then," she said. "You need to leave by a quarter to ten."

Tyrone was silent for a moment. "I got this," he said finally. "I don't need you to watch the clock for me."

"Ok but you aren't watching it..." Jakia said under her breath.

"What did you say?" Tyrone asked from the other room.

"Nothing," she said.

Jakia sat at the kitchen table another twenty minutes, gazing out of the window and sipping coffee. A crushing disappointment in Tyrone sank deep in her chest. *He's going to be late*, she thought. She folded her arms and put her head down on the table. *He's never going to get a job*. Jakia felt tears rising. She sat up quickly and wiped her eyes with the heels of her palms. If Tyrone found her crying now, he would miss the interview for sure.

"Oh shit!" he exclaimed suddenly from the other room. "It's 9:30!!" He flew past Jakia into the bathroom and slammed the door. Two minutes later he emerged wet, his lower half wrapped in a yellow towel. He scurried back past her to the bedroom, leaving a trail of wet footprints on the kitchen floor. Jakia sipped her coffee again and shook her head. She stood up and got a paper towel, dropped to all fours and wiped up the splatters and drops. Just as she was settling back into her chair by the window, she heard Tyrone holler, "Fuck!!!" She winced at the frustration alive in the sound. Still, she debated whether she should offer any help. Since he *got this*, and all. But her conscience eventually won.

"What's wrong?" she asked, walking towards the bedroom. Tyrone had laid his suit across the bed but it was so wrinkled that it wouldn't lay flat. He stood there with his fists clenched and his brows gathered. He had nothing on except a sleeveless gray t-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts. She couldn't be mad at anyone in their underwear. She put a hand on his shoulder.

(Title: Caution(f)airy Tale)

“My damn suit is wrinkled,” he said. He picked it up and threw it back on the bed, disgusted. “I should have pulled it out and looked at it last night. I don’t have time to iron and twist my hair. And I can’t not iron. And I can’t not twist my hair.” He looked over at Jakia who was biting her lip. “Please don’t say ‘I told you so.’ I know I should have started getting ready sooner.”

Jakia slapped his arm. “When I’m trying to help, let me help. Shit.”

“I’m sorry.” He kissed her cheek and then put his lips against her ear. He whispered, “Can you iron for me?”

Jakia laughed. “Don’t sweet talk me and then put me to work.” She laid the suit across the bed as flat as she could. She pulled the iron down from the closet and plugged it into the outlet closest to the bed. Nothing happened. She plugged it into the outlet on the other side. Still, nothing happened. Shit, she thought. Something must be wrong with the iron. She threw off her robe and headscarf and pulled on yoga pants and flip-flops.

“Where are you going?” Tyrone asked.

“To the store,” she called over her shoulder, walking toward the door. “We need a new iron.”

“You gotta be fucking me!” Tyrone said as she closed the door.

Twenty minutes later she was back home with an iron. Except she was pissed off because the damned thing had cost thirty dollars, and since Tyrone was running late, she didn’t have time to try another store. *Thirty fucking dollars for an iron, she thought. Don’t make no goddamned sense.*

Tyrone could tell she was frustrated when she came back through the door. “What happened, babe?”

“This damned thing cost thirty dollars!” She plugged the cord into the wall and waited for the metal to heat.

“Babe, you didn’t have to spend that much money.” He walked to the bathroom to check his hair in the mirror.

“What was I supposed to do? This was the only one they had. You can’t go to an interview in a wrinkled suit.”

She began ironing the right pant leg. It was hard to get the iron to smooth the creases right because the bed was too soft. She wished she’d thought to buy an ironing board when they first moved in. How was she supposed to be somebody’s mother if she didn’t even have an ironing board? *Daddy ain’t got no job, she thought. Mama ain’t got no ironing board. Kid ain’t even here yet and I done fucked it already.* Jakia took a deep breath and pressed her palms to her eyes. When she’d gotten herself under control, she started on the left pants leg.

(Title: Caution(f)airy Tale)

Tyrone came back from the bathroom. "Well, I definitely appreciate it," he said. He kissed her on the forehead and then moved behind her to wrap his arms around her waist. "I appreciate you," he said.

Jakia patted his hand. "Thanks babe. C'mon, you gotta hurry up." She handed him his pants and started on his shirt. In the middle of ironing his suit jacket, she heard again, "Fuck!" She set the iron down and rushed into the next room. "What is it now?!"

Tyrone stood facing the narrow mirror mounted on their living room wall. His tie was bunched loosely in his fist. "I can't get this fucking thing-" he shook the tie in the air - "to fucking work right!" He sat down on the couch and put his head in his hands. "Fuck it man. I'm not going to fucking make it." He reached up to unbutton the top button on his shirt. Jakia felt panic rise up in her chest. She needed him to try. She rushed into the office and sat down at the computer.

"What are you doing?" he called from the living room. Jakia was typing too fast to answer.

"Babe! What are you doing?"

"I'm Googling 'How to Tie a Tie.' Come here," she told him. "I found a step by step explanation with pictures."

"Man, I'm not about to..."

Jakia lost her patience. "Yes the fuck you are! After I done cooked breakfast and spent thirty damn dollars on a damn iron and sat and ironed your whole damn wrinkled damn suit! The least you can do is tie your damn tie!"

Tyrone sighed heavily from the couch. A moment later she heard his footsteps moving toward her.

"Move," he said. Jakia got up from the chair. Three minutes and six steps later, Tyrone was finally ready to go. It was ten fifteen. He looked at his watch and sighed again. "There's no way I can make it in 45 minutes, huh?" he asked.

"Not a chance," Jakia told him. It took Herculean strength not to cuss him. She rooted around in her purse. Handed him the car keys.

"Are you sure, babe?" he asked. "I don't want you to have to go to the doctor on the bus."

"You can't miss your interview," she reminded him. "And you can't be late. I'll be fine. It's only one bus."

When the door closed behind him, Jakia turned around and looked at her apartment. The breakfast dishes were in the sink, a clump of leftover potatoes was stuck to the skillet. Tyrone's plate was still

(Title: Caution(f)airy Tale)

by the computer, next to an open bottle of barbecue sauce. In their bedroom, clothes were everywhere. Apparently Tyrone had pulled out every button down shirt he owned before finding one he liked. His wet towel was in a heap on the floor, as were the clothes he'd taken off before getting in the shower. Jakia looked at the clock on the bedside table. It was 10:23. Her appointment was at noon. She'd planned to clean up before heading out, but now that she was taking the bus, she needed to leave by eleven. If she didn't jump in the shower now, she'd be late. She sighed from her toes. Suddenly she heard a key turn the lock. Tyrone's face peeked around the door.

"Babe," he said, "Can I get some gas money?"

Jakia went back to her purse, handed him two five dollar bills. When he closed the door again, she took in a deep breath, counted to ten as she exhaled. She wasn't trying not to cry anymore. She was trying not to scream.