

BACHELORETTE

*We have lingered by the chambers of the sea/ By sea girls
wreathed with seaweed red and brown/ Till human voices wake us,
and we drown.*

--T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

On a warm night in early September, a police officer, decked out in tear-away pants and a pair of fuzzy handcuffs, strutted through Franny Dowling's front door. He was followed closely by his "MC", a sulky woman in a small fedora hat and dirty white flip flops who greeted the group of boozy, giggling women with a grunt, plugged in her strobe light, and retreated to a dark corner to sip bottled water and glare at the unfolding scene.

"Hands behind your back," instructed the stripper, whose name had been listed online as Cadence, as he dragged Frannie's younger sister, Eileen, into the middle of the room. "I hear you've been a very bad girl."

Within seconds, most of Cadence's clothes were off, and shiny things hanging from his body glinted off the flash of the

strobe light: nipple piercings, chain link underpants, tooth caps. Eileen, who was wearing a pair of pink flashing penis-deedly boppers, one of which stood at attention like the alert ear of a rabbit, and one which sagged down post-coitally over her right eye, was violated in a variety of ways, then cast aside as Cadence proceeded to hump his way around the room, attacking other squealing victims. Soon enough he was mincing over to Frannie, menacing her with his nightstick. She tried to resist, to reason with him, to beg, but all her pleas were drowned out by Britney Spears' warbling threat, "You want a piece of me?"

He climbed on top of her in a nightmarish cloud of body spray that smelled faintly of insecticide, the hoop in his nipple grazing her cheek.

"Are you ready to be searched?"

"Actually, you know what, as a high school teacher, I don't really feel comfortable--"

Her argument went unfinished as she was now dealing with the more immediate problem of being spread eagled in a dress, her thighs clenched around his bare ass, her feet about level with her own ears. The only thing separating her face from his penis was a thin layer of tiger print nylon, and Frannie was

reminded, as she dipped and dodged Cadence's genitals, why she despised bachelorette parties so much: the canned sexuality, the prescribed sassiness, the hen-like shrillness, the matching t-shirts, the cosmopolitans sipped from veiny, flesh-colored dick straws. But as the maid of honor, she also understood that if she treated Eileen's marriage and all the events leading up to it with anything less than total enthusiasm, she was at risk of coming off as the pathetically jealous single older sister. And so, despite her own troubles, Frannie had put on her best smile and had dutifully ordered the cases of Pinot Grigio. She had made the corned beef dip. She had baked a phallic-shaped cake and frosted it in exquisite detail right down to the brown chocolate sprinkles of pubic hair. She had hired Cadence. And she had reserved a table at Martini Ranch, where later that night, her memory, bludgeoned to dysfunction by Cook's champagne, became a funnel that grew dimmer and dimmer, dwindling into complete nothingness around the time she mounted the mechanical bull.

She had come back to life around noon the next day, when the funnel of memory began to widen in graduating layers of clarity, offering an explanation as to how the snoring shape she'd woken next to had made his way into her bed: how she, softened by champagne along with several shots of electric blue

liqueur, had found "Tim" not just charming but also rather attractive, how she'd learned that she and this Tim shared a love of Bruce Springsteen, Mexican food, and schnauzers (all of which, she would realize only in the unforgiving light of day, are not exactly fringe interests. Thousands, if not millions of American men love *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, tacos, and small, bearded dogs: did that mean she should fuck all of them, too?); and how she had stumbled home with him after last call, where they'd crawled into her bed to half-heartedly tug on each other's privates before passing out.

Leaving the snoring shape in the bed, she dragged herself into the bathroom to look for some aspirin. Exhausted from the effort, and from the headache that she could feel all the way in her molars, she lay down on the floor with her cheek pressed soothingly against the bathroom tiles, where she drifted off into a lovely half-dream filled with chandeliers and Elizabethan dancers: a roomful of bowing and twirling and stolen, ardent gazes. Her freshmen had just finished act two of *Romeo and Juliet*, and the wide-eyed romanticism of the play had seeped into Frannie's dreams, which were soon interrupted by a gentle knock on the bathroom door. Her eyes fluttered into wakefulness as it creaked open and she looked up, smiling dreamily. Tim stood above her, naked and white. From her vantage point,

supine on the floor, all she could see was the pendulous underbelly of his ball sack and the black pits of his nostrils.

"Morning," he said brightly, stepping over her. "Mind if I take a whiz?"

Two months later, on the afternoon before her sister's wedding, Frannie sat in her empty classroom with her head on her desk. The ninth period bell had just rung in the beginning of the weekend and in the hallway outside her door, her students were slamming lockers and shouting plans. Outside, tree skeletons rattled and wind blew a fine sift of November snow across the forlorn football field, abandoned since the varsity team's loss in the public league playoffs. During her lunch period, Frannie had agreed to try the cafeteria's new butternut squash soup, which Soula, the Greek cafeteria manager, had pressed on her with maternal aggression, and which had come to her in a Styrofoam bowl, a pureed porridge the color of baby shit and thick enough to stand a spoon in. She'd eaten all of it under the intense scrutiny of Soula's Hellenic stare, and now, as she picked up an essay from the stack in front of her and began to read, she could barely get through the first comma splice before the vomit spurted up her esophagus and belched out all over the desk.

It would be easy to blame the squash soup, but this was the third impromptu vomiting session Frannie had experienced in as many days. Now, she believed, there could be only two explanations for how she'd been feeling lately: either she was pregnant or she was dying.

There was plenty of evidence to indicate the former: she had not had her period since the liaison with "Tim," and for the past few weeks she'd been feeling nauseous and sticky-minded, dreamy. Her breasts felt like they'd been stuffed with lead weights, her hips had warped like paperback pages left in the rain, and underneath her long sweater, her pants were unbuttoned.

It would all seem very obvious, except for one important fact: Frannie had spent a large portion of her pre-teens lying skeletal and hairless in the pediatric oncology ward at Children's Memorial. At eleven, she'd gone into remission, but the residual effects were not just psychological. When she was thirteen, she'd gotten her first period. It was June, her last day of seventh grade, when her mother had sat next to her on the edge of the bathtub, a box of Kotex between them, and explained to her that when the doctors had radiated her cancer to death, they had also killed her healthy ovarian cells. As a result,

Frannie, despite having reached this cusp of womanhood, would never have children of her own.

There was little reason to hope that the doctors were wrong. In high school, she'd met Charlie, and at her prom she'd finally told him about her childhood illness and her resulting infertility; he'd handled it with infinite gentleness, which was understandable given that when she broke the news they were tangled naked together in Kenny O'Keefe's basement laundry room among a mound of damp towels, millimeters away from losing their virginity together. Charlie was a seventeen-year-old kid: the primary message he received from this news was that he could now bang his girlfriend without condoms or consequence. Thus began five years' worth of unprotected sex between Frannie and her first love.

But after college, Charlie got a job at the Board of Trade, surrounded by colleagues who were young fathers, and the muted possibilities of a future with a cancer survivor began to dawn on him. He didn't want to be one of those strange, rich, childless couples. He made up something about people changing and moving in different directions, but Frannie knew the real reason. She'd never felt so heavy, so immobile, so chained irrevocably to the things she thought she'd conquered. When she found out a month later that Charlie was dating someone new, a

spindly blond law student named Madison who presumably had never suffered through a spinal tap, Frannie went on an extended binge of drinking and promiscuity that left her shaky and shamefaced each Monday as she stood in front of her classroom and tried to be a role model. In the four years since Charlie had dumped her and become engaged to Madison, Frannie had gone from one sexual partner to twenty. These encounters were almost always booze-fueled and careless—yet she'd never gotten pregnant. So as she stood over the recycling bin in the corner of her classroom, retching all over a stack of *Great Gatsby* quizzes, she assured herself that it was highly unlikely that one solitary orgasmless romp with some guy whose face she couldn't now conjure and who hadn't even pretended to want her phone number could result in an immaculate conception.

One thing she did know, though, was that something inside of her felt different. For over a decade, the fear that her cancer would return had been ever-present, at times unbearable. But as time had wedged a distance between her illness and her present life, the fear had grown weaker. Lately, she'd forgotten to worry about it at all. So, with a sense of fatalism, she reasoned that this, of course, was when it would choose to come back. But what she decided to do, perhaps to

prolong making that phone call to Dr. Schneider, was take the pregnancy test first. Only then could she rule out every other possibility. She would say nothing, of course, to anyone. Why ruin Eileen's wedding with her dreary mortality?

She stopped by the drug store and bought an EPT kit on her way home from work. She heated up some dinner, called her sister to discuss the next day's hair appointments, and peed on the stick before the 10:00 news. She placed it on the sink and watched, stunned, as the deep blue plus sign clarified itself like magic ink. Positive. She laughed once, a hard, bewildered "ha!"—there being no difference, in this moment, between relief and happiness.

The remainder of her Friday night was spent fielding frantic, excited last minute wedding phone calls from her mom and sister and urinating on sticks. After the fourth positive test, she called Dr. Schneider's office. A night nurse answered the phone.

"Is this an emergency?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I just want to make an appointment. I think I'm pregnant." Frannie was looking at herself in the bathroom mirror as she said it out loud for the

first time, and her own face startled her by suddenly erupting into an elated grin. She didn't know if she wanted to be pregnant. Unlike other women in their twenties, it wasn't something she'd ever been given cause to think about. And there were all sorts of problems to consider: how she would tell her family; how she would track down the father-to-be; how she would raise a child on her own without ever having even babysat. But despite all these looming practicalities, by the time she crawled into bed, a strange contentment had settled over her. The barren, bald-headed child of her past was finally vanquished, replaced with someone entirely new: a woman of soft curves and swelling belly, who breastfed and rocked away tears, who kissed a soft head of swirling hair and put away money in a college fund. Who enjoyed bachelorette parties and baby showers because she was part of the world of women. A tiny white dot that had affixed itself to her womb like a tenacious barnacle had made it so. In the dark quiet of her bedroom's muted carpets and closed curtains, Frannie lifted the hem of her t-shirt. With a single index finger she stroked the velvety skin of her belly.

"Hi," she whispered.

She woke up before sunrise feeling woozy, a cold white moon sterilizing her bed. Her bridesmaid's dress hung in its plastic sheath on the back of her door. Outside she could hear the soft staccato of rain on dead leaves, and immediately felt a pang for her sister. Rain was the one thing Eileen had been worried about when they'd booked the November wedding. She padded out into the darkness, stopping to look out her bedroom window at the dripping trees, and peed in the glow of the bathroom nightlight. Then, squinting in its glare, she wiped herself and held the toilet paper up to her face to consider the dark streak of blood.

She brought her laptop back to bed and began googling: "I'm pregnant. Now what?" "Early Symptoms of pregnancy". "What to expect at seven weeks." According to pregnancycenter.com and WebMD, spotting was a perfectly normal part of pregnancy. There was no need to panic. What she needed to do instead was go back to sleep so that she would be ready for the onslaught of her mother, aunts and cousins, who would be descending on her apartment after the hair appointments, carrying jugs of mimosas and sleeves of bagels, palettes of makeup and aerosol hairspray. But she couldn't. Instead, she lay as still as a corpse for the next four hours, eyes open to the lightening sky, while she analyzed every tremor of her body: every breath, every blink,

and the dull, uterine ache that persisted through everything else, until the sun was up and she allowed herself to get up and take a shower. In the clouds of steam, shaving her legs, she tried out a lullaby. But it sounded like someone who was trying to sound like a mom, so she stopped, looking up at the lacy patterns of mold on the bathroom ceiling and not at the red drops that slipped down her wet thighs and ribboned silently down the drain.

It rained unremittingly for most of the morning and Frannie was kept busy ferrying her sister from the hair salon to her own apartment to the church under a giant golf umbrella. By the time they arrived at St. Mary of the Woods and had picked their way around puddles and into the damp stone foyer, Eileen was a nervous wreck, and the only thing that calmed her down was being told over and over again how beautiful she looked. And it was true: she did look beautiful. Stunning, actually. Frannie thought of those years when her little sister would come visit her in the ICU, looking adorable in her sterilization suit and face mask and charming even the most grizzled oncology nurses when she climbed into Frannie's bed to snuggle. And now, as she watched her little sister float down the aisle in Alencon lace, clutching the arm of their white-haired father, Frannie tugged

at the eggplant satin of her bridesmaid's gown, smiling broadly through a sudden wash of tears.

Eileen and Tommy exchanged vows beneath a huge statue of the Virgin Mary. In the darkness of the twilit church, the saint's robes glowed a soft blue, her eyes downcast and full of tragic love. In the years of Frannie's illness, she had always prayed to Mary. Jesus had seemed too distant, too preoccupied with miracles—walking on water and curing the blind and such. Mary's powers had always seemed quieter, more accessible: feminine. It was Mary, not Jesus, who might care enough about the singular life of an unremarkable Chicago teenager to actually cure her. And on this dim altar, with the red votive candles flickering and the rain drumming on the peaked roof, it was easy for Frannie to rediscover the faith she'd had as a kid. As Eileen leaned over to kiss her new husband, Frannie looked up into those ceramic blue eyes and prayed, asking Mary to take away the cramps that were hurting so badly now that she could barely lean down to fix her sister's wedding train.

By the time the reception began, Frannie had soaked through four pads and had begun to understand that most people are never allotted even one miracle in life, and that two is far too much to ask. The bathroom stall at the Sheraton O'Hare became her birthing room, her midwife, the Nigerian bathroom attendant, who

wore her hair in two parted pigtails and who stuck her hand under Frannie's stall and offered a bundle of feminine pads, calling, "You got your periods, girl. I know." She spent the father-daughter dance, the Electric Slide, and the bouquet toss in the far stall, sweat filming beneath her satin armpits and at the nape of her French-twisted hair, flushing the toilet again and again. Emerging at last, her thighs throbbing, she ran into her mother, who was pink-faced, purple-sequined, and carrying an overflowing glass of champagne.

"Where have you *been*? You just missed the Siege of Ennis and Eileen nearly had a fit!" Mrs. Dowling deposited the champagne on the sink, ignoring the attendant who began mopping up the spillage with a loud sigh, and put a sweaty, rose-scented arm around her daughter.

"Mom," Frannie said. The word croaked out of her and she collapsed into her mother's damp bosom, closing her eyes against the sharp appliqué.

"Oh, Honey." Her mother smoothed the hair at her temples that was frizzed with sweat. "I know this must be hard for you. But you'll find him someday, too. I *know* you will. You, more than *anyone*, deserve to be happy."

Frannie let her mother rock her for awhile, while "YMCA" drifted in from the ballroom, and when their moment was over the attendant waved a hand over her supplies, saying, "I got everything you need." Mrs. Dowling wiped the oozing mascara from her daughter's face, slashed blush across her blanched cheeks like war paint, smoothed her hairline with Aquanet. She gave the attendant a five dollar bill.

"Now," she said, putting her arm around her shaking daughter and leading her back out to the party, "Aunt Peggy was saying there's a friend of Tommy's here. He's handsome, employed, and available. Yellow tie. I'm just *saying*. See if you can spot him."

They returned to the reception. Frannie's back ache was only a small wisp of smoke in her spine now. It was all over. For the last dance, the DJ cut the lights and turned on a strobe that spattered light across the floor and ceiling and gave the sensation that the whole wedding party had been moved underwater, the clear surface of the world undulating above them. The men in their dark suits were shadows, but the women were like bright fish flitting around the sea. On the perimeter of the dance floor, or crowded around the bar for last call, were the bachelorettes: eager and doing their mating dances in

bright pinks and purples and blues, shiny satin and spiked heels. Turning around the center, like a perfect pearl in the oyster's mouth, was the bride, her sequins diamond lovely, sparkling in the swaying light. Then there were the mothers, a little wilted in muted prints, some sitting at empty tables with sleeping children sprawled across their laps, others dancing with dutiful husbands. Frannie sat at a table of half-eaten cake slices and watched them all go by. The problem with being a woman, she thought, was that you were always trying to be one of these things: the maiden, the bride, the mother. There was no room for any other kind of fish.

She left the wedding without talking to guy in the yellow tie. Instead, she fell asleep on her father's shoulder in the cab back into the city. That Monday, Eileen left for her honeymoon, and Frannie went to see Dr. Schneider. He told her that if she'd become pregnant once, he didn't see why she couldn't become pregnant again—and perhaps even carry her baby to term. He lectured her on the dangers of STD's and issued her a prescription for birth control pills. And he congratulated her, as he always did, for escaping the jaws of cancer for good. "You really are lucky," he said, and in the months that followed, while she was lying under some man or another, her

birth control pills unopened and untouched in her medicine cabinet, Frannie, hoping, would remind herself of his words.