

## Unwanted

I look down and I can't see my feet. My feet— where are my—

I untangle them from beneath the sheets and stand up, slithering them into my slippers. I can feel them. I can. I know they are there. I just can't see past my—

I look in the mirror and there they are. Right there, below my ankles. My eyes travel up the rest of my body, calculating, analyzing, taking notes. Something feels *off*. As if my face is slanted like a Picasso painting, but I don't quite remember how it got that way. And I notice my stomach, which is rounder than I remember it being. Much rounder. Like it was a deflated balloon someone blew too much air into, and if I move too quickly it will pop. Though instead of floating up, it's sinking down. It's trying to slide off of me, or rather, it wants to. Or maybe I want it to. I *do*. I want it to drop— to feel fifteen... no, twenty-five pounds roll right off me.

I feel the thing moving inside of me. Inside of that once deflated balloon. I try to picture myself, what I looked like before— I mean eight months ago. Eight months ago when my stomach was flat. I can see that flat-stomached girl in the mirror. She looked so different. She felt differently too. Eight months ago she felt, for the first time in her life, like she was finally getting it together. And now— now she's pregnant. *I am pregnant.*

What I can't remember is how this happened. How did I let my stomach become so bloated? I know I sound delusional, but I'm not. I'm not delusional. Not like Dr. Rollan thinks I am. Or at least, not completely delusional. I mean, I have some common sense, or at least some of a certain type of common sense. I survived enough of health class to know a giant stork didn't stick his head up my twat and lay an egg. I just wish I could remember more of the specifics. I can vaguely remember diagrams I filled out in

high school, something about the fallopian tubes and ovaries and the canal... the cervical canal...

But that's not what's important. I mean, that isn't the point of what I was trying to say, which is that I don't remember how I let this happen. I don't remember how I ended up with this thing floating in my uterus. I remember when he asked me...

He whispered softly to me, "a baby," that's what he said, "a baby."

"What?" I asked. His left hand traced the line of my stomach, and suddenly I felt the urge to—kick. To scream. To run.

"Wouldn't that be something? A baby. Alice, a baby." His voice was so innocent.

"Yeah, I guess that'd be something." Babies weren't something I thought about, or had been thinking about ever. In fact, I make it a point to actively not think about them in my daily life and...

I didn't notice the phone ringing.

Then my answering machine picks up, "Hey Ali, pick up the phone... Ali... Ali, I know you're there, pick up! Listen... I know you don't like to make ordeals out of things. But this is an ordeal! I mean... you're having a baby for Christ's sake. This is normal, Ali, having a baby and a baby shower is normal. It will be good for you. And people, our friends and our family, haven't seen you in a while and, and it would mean the world to Mom..."

It's my sister, Bethany. She loves babies. It's an obsession really, and it extends to all baby related things like onesies and rattles and booties. It's not just baby babies, I

mean it's not just human babies, it's baby chicks, and baby puppies, and baby goats. I think she just likes small things with tiny bodies and big heads.

I don't get it, no... no, she doesn't get it. I tried to explain it to her but— I mean, I tried to tell her that I don't like to think about— well, I don't like to think about their tiny hands and round, bald heads. Seeing them makes me nauseous. Not in a throwing up type of way. No. It just sort of sits there, the nausea I mean. It doesn't go up or down, it just tumbles in the lining of my stomach. And that was before I knew I was pregnant. That was before the pink plus signs and unprotected sex. That was after Hal said, “A baby, wouldn't that be nice?” And I think, somehow, I agreed.

The thing is, I didn't mean to. I really didn't.

When I first found I out I was pregnant I meant to call to— to make an appointment to... or to go to my doctor and— but I couldn't drive and my hands were shaking too much to dial. The phone was too far away— that's what it was. I couldn't call because the phone, I couldn't find it. And then eight months passed, and I still can't find that damn phone.

I rummage through the closet looking for something sharp. All of our coat hangers are plastic. Everything in the house— there is too much plastic. Ever since I— I made a trip to Dr. Rollan's office, our family psychiatrist, because I nicked my hand on a corkscrew opening a bottle of wine. It wasn't intentional, it wasn't— but Hal— Hal thinks it was, and then I started going to Dr. Rollan and he thinks it was, and that's when everything turned into plastic.

I rip Hal's clothes to the floor and nothing. Nothing. Until I get to his tux. The one he wore on our wedding day, and finally, metal. I push the wire against my palm to

flatten it out. It seems necessary that it should be flattened. Playing with the wire in my hand, I glance in the mirror, as if it is a diagram of the inside of my vagina. I am trying to map it out to— understand where— and how— this would—

I squat. For a long time, I squat, feeling the metal wire between my fingers. I trace around the heap that is my stomach and down my thigh. *Why did I wait this long— eight months before I—* I press the wire against its lips, my vagina's lips, and try to remember what I have forgotten from my high school anatomy class.

I end up on the floor. My legs are sprawled out in front of me. And there is a wire hanging out of my vagina. Something I can't— not think about. I hunch over a bit so I can see what's there— how deep I could— how far I could see up there. But my stomach is in the way, my fucking stomach. I can't see a thing.

And it is cold— the wire.

It feels like nails in there. Like my vagina itself is rusting. And everything hurts. Everything. I suck in my breath to stop my vocal chords from— I cry and clench my stomach and I pull, I yank it out of there. I bleed, but only a little. It, the blood, clings to my leg as it spreads, but it's not enough. That's when I hear Hal's car pull up in the driveway.

My muscles are locked in some type of contortion, and I cannot move for fear I will crack or dislocate something. My cheeks are sticky. I am not crying, but my cheeks are sticky and I want to—

The front door creaks open.

Nerves sew my tongue to the inside of my cheek. I can't speak. I can't imagine how I could—

“Hey honey, I’m home.” I hate how he says that, he sounds like Dick Van Dyke and I’m no– no Mary Tyler Moore or– or Donna Reade.

“Sweetheart?” He’s looking for me in the kitchen, a place I would never be. I scrape off the blood and throw the hanger in the bathtub. I wash my hands and my face and my hands again. I close the bathroom door behind me.

“Sweetie?”

“I– um– I’m in here.” The blood– there’s blood. On the floor... What do I... I move the rug aligned by the sink, it’s white. Why is it fucking white? I watch as the edges turn pink. It’ll have to be good enough for now. I look for something to absorb the blood. But I have forgotten where I put my pads. Instead, I use toilet paper. Then I crack open the door.

He is lying on the bed, his chin sticking up towards the ceiling with this big grin on his face. I walk towards him and he kisses my stomach.

“How was your day?” My day? I can’t tell him about my– He looks at me long and hard. His stare is magnetic and his voice is round and smooth.

“What’s wrong?”

I do not answer. He sits on the bed and touches my leg. I love when he touches my leg, or at least I used to.

“Baby, tell me.” Funny how he uses that word– how he calls me–

“I can’t– I– I–.” He stares at me all sympathetic like a real Jimmy Stewart sort would.

“What, what’s wrong?” he asks. I touch my stomach hesitantly. I try to be kind like he is...

I shake my head, “I don’t uh... I don’t know.”

“Come on, Dr. Rollan talked about this. We have to communicate. Otherwise, I can’t help you.”

“Well, maybe I really don’t know what’s wrong, huh? Or maybe— maybe there’s nothing wrong. I mean, why do you assume that—” I want to say something productive—to explain to him that I just can’t have this—

“You don’t look like there’s nothing wrong. You look sad.” His voice is quiet, which is something I’ve always liked about him. He always knows when to be gentle. Not too gentle that he makes me feel irrational and fragile. But just enough gentleness as not to scare me away.

“Maybe I am sad,” I sigh.

“Why?”

“I’m pregnant,” I say. I thought he would protest that. I thought he would say something like... *good mothers aren’t sad when they are pregnant...or... it’s unhealthy for the baby...* Clearly there’s something wrong with me if I’m sad and pregnant. And he might’ve been right. Maybe there is... But he didn’t say anything...

So I continue, “I’m pregnant and I— I’m fat. Gettin’ fuller by the second. I— I’m— I can’t see my feet. Aren’t you concerned that I can’t see my feet?”

“Of course not. I think it’s beautiful. You are beautiful.”

“No. No. That’s not it. That’s— it’s not what I mean.”

“What do you mean?”

“I feel unfamiliar. I don’t— I don’t look like myself. It’s not about... oh, never mind...”

“No, what is it? I want you to tell me.” And I can tell that he does. He really wants to understand.

“It’s too much. Everything is— It— it deforms me.” Hal doesn’t know what I mean and I can’t blame him, but my words are too tangled to explain that—

“The baby will come soon...” He says this because he thinks it’s comforting, “and then everything will go back to normal.”

“Not the pregnancy. The baby. The baby is too much, I— I don’t want to be a mother.”

And that did it. I finally shook him. Finally caught him off guard. Stopped him in his tracks. He didn’t know what to say to me.

“What?”

“No, no that’s not what I meant.” *Wasn’t it?* “I’m just afraid— afraid of not being a good mother, that— that maybe I’m too fucked up to be one. I don’t want to fuck this baby up. It deserves a shot, a shot at normality.”

“This baby has the best shot. It has us.”

“That’s what I’m worried about. I can’t give this baby what it needs, I have nothing to offer.”

His voice becomes soft like he’s talking to my stomach, but he’s not because he’s staring intently at me, “It’s okay to be nervous. I know it’s hard to picture but—” Nerves. Sure, yeah that’s it. His eyes are steady.

“You do want this, don’t you? I mean, this was our decision. This is what *we*—”

“Yes, of course,” I say because it would be horrible to say otherwise.

Not that I would've said otherwise, or should've— I do *want* this baby. I have to want this baby. I have to love this baby— to convince myself to love this baby. That is my duty as a mother.

After I told Hal about it, about the pregnancy, it somehow felt more permanent. It was as if I was more pregnant after I told him than I was before. I kept thinking about aborting the thing, which wasn't something I should have been thinking. So I made an appointment with Dr. Rollan. In the meantime, I tried to keep my mind distracted with details. I even counted the seven different shades of yellow on the wallpaper in our kitchen. And then I counted the tiles on ceiling in the waiting room of Dr. Rollan's office.

Dr. Rollan's receptionist was some new guy with a face that looked accidentally flat. It was as if at some point it had been rounder, but the turbulence of life just sort of chipped away at it. His voice was monotone. I wondered if when his face was rounder if he was more charismatic. Then I wondered what depressed him? What caused his face to be so flat? Maybe he had kids and... and then I stopped myself.

“What can I help you with?” he asked.

The receptionist kept staring at me like he knew something about me. He knew that my thoughts were psychotic— that I was no good in the head. Maybe he'd even call the hospital. The one I stayed at last time. After the corkscrew incident. They would look me up in their system. Pull out their records from a few years ago. And Nurse Keller could tell him that I was the type of patient who hid her pills under her tongue. He'd say that I shouldn't be trusted. Even though it wasn't true. I never hid my pills. I promise, I swallowed them all.

“Do you have an appointment?” he rephrased. I shook my head and started crying. I wasn’t crying too loudly. I wasn’t trying to make a scene or at least I tried really hard not to. But my eyes were leaking onto my face and they wouldn’t stop. It was flooding. My face was flooding. The receptionist didn’t say anything, but he was staring right at me. He was waiting for me to do something.

“Alison, my name is...” and that was enough for him to look me up in his computer.

I walked into a big room. Dr. Rollan’s office always seemed grotesquely large. Nothing was new about his office. Nothing is ever new about his office. He was leaning slightly to the left in his chair with a meaningless expression on his face. His hands were neatly folded in his lap as if he had patiently been awaiting my mental breakdown for months.

I sat on his brown, leather couch. I unconsciously put my hand on my stomach and looked down. I noticed that my breathing had become irregular. I couldn’t control my lungs. They were moving too quickly and I couldn’t slow them down.

“I want it out I– I need it gone,” I blurted.

“What is it that you want gone?” he asked matter– of– factly. He waited for an answer, while he rolled his thumbs in circles around each other. “Is it the baby? Do you want the baby gone?”

“Yes. No. I don’t...” My face felt red. I tried to force my breathing into a pattern, breathe in 1,2,3,4... breathe out 1,2,3,4... Dr. Rollan observed me from a distance and jotted notes in a leather-bound book with an overpriced pen.

“Is it really the baby you want gone, Alison? Or is it something else... An unwanted feeling you have perhaps? How have you been feeling lately, Alison?” He crossed his legs. Left over right. I bet he always crosses his legs left over right.

“Yes, yes I have.”

“Can you describe them to me? Perhaps you’re having feelings of guilt...”

“Sure, I mean there are things that I am– that I feel guilty about.” I try to breathe deeply through my sentences so that they sound steady and complete. He takes more notes. “I think– I think I feel more regret than guilt like– like this was a bad idea and I knew that this wouldn’t work– that something about it didn’t make sense and– and” I choked on the sentence.

“Just breathe,” he says. I do, but I still feel the same. My problems are too imaginary to breathe through. They’re too made up. I make them up. I don’t mean to but– but I can’t help it sometimes.

That’s what sent me to the hospital the last time– when my dad died, it just felt like this huge thing– this huge vortex was planted in my– in my stomach. I just– I sometimes imagine things bigger than they are and my brain is– is too unbalanced to... If my brain had the right chemicals in it– I would want this baby.

“You’re panicking. And that’s...” he clears his throat, “that’s normal. A baby is a big change. It is important to document how you feel so we don’t have another...” and again Dr. Rollan clears his throat, “Alice, you really need to work on managing your emotions. A new life entering the world can feel as emotionally burdensome as when a life leaves this world. Do you agree?” He was referring to the corkscrew incident. He was referring to my dad.

SURPRISE. They all yell surprise. Because I guess it was supposed to be a surprise. My sister approaches, dragging me into a crowd of strangers.

“Happy baby shower!” she exclaims and gives me the most suffocating hug. She blabs on about the remodel of the house and how adorably small the baby will be when it comes. Then she hands me off to some stranger, who isn’t supposed to be a stranger, who I’m supposed to have known from my childhood, who wants to see my ultrasounds, as if that’s something I carry around in my wallet.

Eventually, I settle at a mostly empty table on my sister’s patio eating sandwiches that are made out of vegetables and whole wheat bread, my two least favorite things in the world other than...

“Ali, stop whining. Be happy. You’re pregnant. That’s a good thing, remember?” My sister reminds me before being whisked away by some friend of hers. I take big bites of small sandwiches to avoid conversation. It would be impolite if I talked with my mouth full. Then my mother hurries towards me with a relative on either side.

“Ali, darling, Miss Figg is dying to see you, dying!” My mother pushes me in opposite directions of the house. I see faces, so many different faces of people I barely know, almost know, and haven’t talked to in years. I smile and I don’t talk about therapy, or the type of anti-depressants they have me on. I don’t talk about how there is a poison in my stomach like a gas that’s suffocating my organs and pinching my skin, which feels like a knife twisting in my left side. Not enough to break my skin, but just enough to—

I want to make a fit. Smash some of my sister's expensive china on the floor. Watch it shatter into small broken pieces. But I don't think it would help any so I smile because at least smiling makes my mother happy.

"Oh the baby! When's the baby due?" some fat lady chortles. I'm not sure which one though because their voices all sound the same to me— they all blur together.

"If you will excuse me," I breathe through the sentence slowly so my head will stop aching. I rush into the bathroom as lady— like as I can. I close the door. Sitting on the toilet, I stare at my stomach and cry, and cry. My face bloats up. There's a knock.

"Someone's in here!"

"I know you're in there, silly. Come out it's *your* party." It's Bethany. Of course it's Bethany.

"I'll be out in a minute." She knocks on the door twice. "I said I—" Bethany walks into the bathroom.

"What's the matter with you?"

"What do you mean what's the matter with me? What's the matter with you barging in here—"

"You always do this. You hide away in your little corner...doesn't matter what other people— what other people went through to make this—"

"I never asked for this! I never— I don't — I never said I wanted any of this."

"This baby isn't just *yours*! He slash she is a part of the whole family. Damn it Alice! Is it that awful to spend time with us?"

"It's not *my* baby."

"What d'you mean?" I step towards her and hold her arms, shaking her.

“No, I’m telling you, it’s not my baby.” I sink to the floor.

“How could?– Do you mean it’s not Hal’s? Are you– did you have an affair?”

“Of course it’s Hal’s! It’s more *his* than it is *mine*.”

“Oh, don’t say that. I’m sure you just need some– ”

“I don’t want this baby.” She sinks next to me on the floor and squeezes my hand.

I squeeze her hand back.

“You... don’t want this baby?”

“I don’t want it.”

“Why?”

“ Because I– I hate it. I can’t stand it– I– I tried to love it, I did, I swear, I did.”

She stares at me for a moment.

“Do you want to talk to Mom?”

“Not really, no–”

“I never know what to do when you’re like this.”

“You don’t *need* to do anything.”

“I’m going to get Mom.”

I clench my teeth and wait for my mother to coerce me to play baby bingo or some other dumb party game. Then there is a knock on the door.

“Alice?”

“Yes?”

“Why don’t you come out? We can say our goodbyes and go home.” When I open the bathroom door, Hal is leaning against the wall. He straightens himself up and gives me a hug, rubbing my back, making circles between my shoulder blades.

“Thank you,” I whisper. He squeezes me tighter because he know that’s what I need right now, a tight squeeze.

When we arrive home, Hal hangs up his jacket and I kick off my shoes.

“Sorry about the party,” I say.

“What’s there to be sorry about?”

“About leaving early. About everything.” Hal unzips my dress.

“Well you know there is only so much I can handle of your sister. You were really doing me a favor.” He only says this to make me feel better. And it does make me feel better. I pull his hand onto my stomach and kiss his cheek.

“You feel that hon?” I say, “He’s kicking, he’s really kicking.”

“Or she, could be a she.”

“Maybe...”

“Wouldn’t that be wonderful?” Hal doesn’t mean it as a rhetorical question, I know that, but I pretend he does and I kiss him. The only thing I am sure about is that I love him and maybe that’s enough. Maybe... We fall asleep with my face nestled under his arm, and I feel safe for a while until I try to roll closer to him, but I can’t because my stomach is in the way.

I try to fall asleep, but my eyes are stretched wide, I physically cannot close them. Then I remember the bloodstain in the bathroom. I tiptoe out of bed. I watch him for a moment to make sure his eyes don’t blink. To make sure that he’s asleep, really asleep. Quietly, I close the bathroom door behind me, I pull on my yellow cleaning gloves and scrub off the blood on the tile floor.

But it's still on the rug. I make circles with my arms, but it is only pinker— I push into the fabric, but it won't— I can't. I scrub, sanding down the palm of my hand in the process. As I scrub, I try to picture myself with a baby, but every time I try. it seems a bit distorted— except Hal, I could picture him.

In fact, Hal looks good with a baby in his arms. But it's a picture that I'm excluded from, so what happened... What happens to *me* once this baby is born? Will Hal love me the same? Will he still look at me like— like some romantic Nicholas Sparks character— What if he's just using me? Using me for my stomach. To grow things. To grow babies, I mean. Maybe he doesn't need me after that... Maybe... No... No... I'm crazy, I know I'm crazy I— My stomach hurts, it aches. I push my entire body weight over my arms to apply pressure— to apply force to the scrubbing, but it only causes me to collapse. I feel lightheaded. I need some food.

I move into the kitchen and make myself a snack. I pull out a jar of peanut butter. *Maybe I'll have an apple.* I look for a knife. I find something plastic that will probably only break against the counter. I search the cabinets for something sharp. The room is spinning, or maybe I'm spinning. All I know is that there are too many moving parts I can't concentrate on—

I find a knife with the pots and pans at the bottom of the cabinet. I go to the fridge, take out an apple, and pull out a cutting board. I place the cutting board on the counter and the apple next to the cutting board. I pick up the knife. I place it back down. My hands are shaking. I can't— I have to keep them still. I can do this. I pick up the knife, but it slips through my hands and I feel the blade cut into my finger as I try to catch it.

I feel the blood oozing out and my body falls back, but the kitchen counter catches me. I gag, but nothing comes up. I need to throw up. Maybe I can spit the pain out of me. Maybe I can get it out. The kitchen won't stop spinning— but maybe— maybe if I get rid of it— I— I— I need to— to leave I— I hold my breath, hoping it will stop the room from spinning, but it makes everything worse. I pick up the knife and clench it in my fist for clarity because something about it feels stable. I run my fingers over the blade of the knife, feeling its ridged edges. I trace my stomach with its blade. I graze the knife over my skin and can feel my flesh poking out from beneath. I dig the knife further, but it hurts and I scream, sinking to the floor.

I hear rustling, I hear his footsteps, I— I scream again.

Hal comes rushing in, “Alice, Alice! What’s wrong?” I sob gripping his arm real hard.

“I’m sorry. I’m so.. so... sorry.” My vision swirls into patches of glowing black dots. My husband mumbles something to me. My head feels extremely heavy and I see the little— black— black dots...grow bigger and bigger...black dots....

“I’m sorry, so...”

I wake up to chatter. Lots and lots of chatter. Too much chatter. And some mention of a baby. And some mention of blood. Did I lose it? Is it gone? Am I? No... Is the baby? I feel a pain searing through my stomach. I scream. Or I at least I think I do. My hearing is distorted like bad radio reception and everything feels fuzzy. I love Hal, I hope he knows that. I hope he knows that I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I really didn't.

And there are those black dots again. Growing bigger and bigger. I try to tune into what they— to what the doctors are saying. Something about a lot of blood. They keep talking about all of the blood. That *she* is losing a lot of blood. I think it's mine. I hope it's mine. I try to see what is happening, but I can't see past the black dots. They adhere to each other, growing bigger and bigger.

For the first time since I became pregnant, I can feel my feet underneath me. And I feel lighter, about ten pounds lighter. I notice that the muscles in my back feel less twisted. I feel a vacancy in my stomach. They got the baby. I know they got the baby. I'm not making this up. I'm not imagining it. They got her and they set her free. I hope it's girl. Hal always wanted a girl.