

Brand New Life

Mary stood in front of the Kingston Clinic, clutching her stomach. She had given up a lot for this chance. She was next to broke, and barely qualified for any decent job. Her husband was “taking a break” after he found out about her decision. He had been so angry when Mary revealed that she had chosen Booker over him, but he just did not want to understand. Mary’s choice was made to give her the greatest possibility of approval, and she knew that deep down, past the anger, her husband comprehended the reasoning behind her decision. Mary breached the doorway and walked through the maze of impossibly clean, white hallways as she tightened her hold on her stomach. 234A. She clutched the scrap of paper on which she had scribbled the room number. She made her way up the stairs and found the room.

It was immediately apparent that Mary had found the right place. Inside sat more than a dozen other women of various shapes and sizes. “Kitty Kalter?” an old woman at a desk behind a glass window called. Miss Kalter stood up and walked to the window. Mary noticed her stomach was far too big for this, lying on the application? Surely she must realize how quickly she would be sorted out. The woman at the reception desk noticed this too. “Ms. Kalter, it says here you’re less than two weeks pregnant?”

“Yes, yes I know it may not seem like it but it just goes to show the strength of my application!” Ms. Kalter patted her stomach and smiled a watery smile. The receptionist *huffed* and directed Ms. Kalter to the door where a nurse was waiting.

Mary approached the receptionist. “Hello, I’m Mary Scofield. I have an appointment scheduled for 2:00?” Mary glanced at the clock. It read 1:45.

“Okie dokie.” The receptionist used an almost intentionally bored voice as she scrolled around on her computer until she found Mary’s appointment. “We’re a bit behind right now. The doctor will be with you in about an hour.”

“An *hour*?”

“That is what I said.”

“All right.” Mary really could not complain. She had nothing else to do today, having taken out a loan to quit her job and live as comfortably as possible. This was the *only* thing that had been on her schedule for the month. Just for a month, as she got pregnant and her fetus developed. She may have fudged the loan application a little bit, made her ability to repay it in reasonable time seem like more of a sure thing than it was. But what was the alternative? Work her retail job? Eight hours a day on her feet while the boss pushed her to meet the impossible quotas he needed to keep the store afloat? No. Her baby would certainly not be viable after enduring *that*. Besides, Mary was a shoo-in. Her child was unique.

Mary sat down in the most secluded seat possible in the corner and studied the women around the room. In the opposite corner sat a group of bleach blonde sorority girls all tittering excitedly to one another, rich enough to do this for *fun*. They were huddling in close to one another but their conversation permeated the room. “It’s whatever though, I already have an abortion lined up for next week.” - “Oh my god where? We’ll get them together!”

Would Mary have to get an abortion? Or would her husband be ok with her keeping Booker’s baby? Probably not. He had been so mad. Mary had toyed with the idea of keeping the child. It should be close to perfect, and Mary wanted children anyway. An abortion would be cheaper in the long run, but Mary couldn’t afford an abortion right now.

Stop. She told herself. It was something she had had to repeat every day for the past two weeks. *You can’t stress, it will go perfect and you don’t have to worry*. Mary counted to ten and took her deep breaths. It had to go perfect.

Mary shook her head and pulled out her headphones. She had brought some podcasts to listen to. Perhaps she could keep her thoughts out of her head for the next hour. She continued to scan the room as a soothing voice in her ear relayed to her the surprisingly interesting reason why the minimum wage was technically now zero dollars. A woman two seats down from the gaggle of harpies muttered over her Rosary while rocking slowly. Next to her, there was another woman reading a novel. This was a good candidate, Mary thought,

slender, tall, no obvious blemishes. Of course, there was a slew of other traits that could be wrong with her, but she seemed confident. Patiently reading her book, she was obviously serious about this. The lavish jewelry that dripped from her wrists, ears, and fingers showed that she was *rich* too. Her outfit must have cost thousands of dollars. *In it for the prestige.*

Next to the woman was Tory. Mary had always liked Tory. She and Mary would always get into very long discussions about music at the family potluc- wait, *Tory?* Mary shoved her headphones into her pocket, picked up her bag and bustled over to Tory who was chuckling to herself about whatever she was reading in her book. Mary sat down beside Tory who cast a sideways glance at her leg before returning to the hilarious passage.

“What are you reading?” Mary leaned in close over Tory’s shoulder and caught the phrase: “She used to say she could taste sleep and that it was as delicious as a BLT on fresh French bread.”

“It’s called ‘The Ya-Ya Sisterhood’.” Tory replied again without looking up.

“Oh, it looks great! Can you tell me more about it?” Mary gave Tory’s arm a playful squeeze and rested her chin on her shoulder. Tory’s brow wrinkled as she turned to finally look at Mary, but as she did her face bloomed into Tory’s wonderful, radiant smile.

“Mary! Holy shit!” Tory shoved her bookmark into her book and gave Mary a tight and loving hug. She placed a hand on Mary’s chest and exclaimed. “Where have you been? Seems like we only run into each other at those get-togethers!”

It was true, Mary hadn’t seen her cousin since the family potluck four months ago. She loved Tory, one of her favorite relatives, hell, favorite *friends* Mary had. But work was killer and Mary had been saving for this, taking all the shifts she could. It was amazing that Tory was here!

“So what are you here for?” Mary asked, although the question fell flat the moment she asked it, they were here for the same reason.

“Same thing you’re here for, right?” Tory looked at her bashfully. “I’m gonna give ‘em my baby!” Tory karate chopped her midriff with both hands as she said this.

“Duh!” Mary smacked her head and laughed. Of course Tory had done it, but Mary asked anyway. “Why?”

“Same as you girl! We got the same hDEC2 gene!” Yes. The gene that was Mary's trump card. The gene mutation that let her, Tory, and most of their family sleep only five hours a day and feel rested. Mary was not even capable of sleeping more than six hours. It was her ticket, what guaranteed her a spot.

The door opened. A sobbing Mrs. Kalter stepped out, rubbing her eyes with one hand wailing. “I swear! I **swear!** It's only been a week and a half!” A doctor held Mrs. Kalter's shaking shoulder.

“I'm sorry.” He was saying. “That's just not what a two-week pregnancy looks like. I'm sorry, sorry.” The doctor repeated his timid apologies as he led Mrs. Kalter out the door and shut it behind her.

“Margo Tulip!” A portly woman on the other side of the room stood up clutching a gigantic purse in one hand and an enormous bag in the other. She waddled up to the front desk and the doctor that had led Mrs. Kalter out tapped Mrs. Tulip on the shoulder and led her back through the swinging door to the office.

“Ooh well that was interesting!” Tory whispered to the back of Mary's head.

Mary, who had not been smiling as the ordeal played out quickly fashioned a grin and turned back towards Tory. “Yeah! I *knew* she wasn't less than two and a half weeks! Did you see that bulge!?”

Tory nodded eagerly and leaned in. “I feel kinda bad for her though. I'm nervous! I keep thinking I've messed something up, or something will go wrong.”

Mary was not paying close attention as she looked around the room at the onlookers “Yeah...” she sighed. She then toned down her voice until it was barely audible and leaned in close to Tory. “Do you think the next lady will make it?” Mary scrunched up her shoulders and now her grin was one of genuine mirth. Tory never failed to revert Mary back to their high school

days when the pair would sit in the corner of class and gossip to each other about anyone and everyone in the school.

“Hell no! D’jyou see her?”

“Yes! Yes! She looks like she’s got three babies in there!”

Tory let out a *squawk* of a laugh, causing the room to stare the pair down. She composed herself and leaned back in, grinning. “I can’t believe the people who are trying to do this, I mean, what are they thinking! At *least* hit the gym before trying to compete with every woman in U.S.!”

Now it was Mary’s turn to *squawk*. She didn’t care anymore though. Tory was the best and Mary could not believe she had not called her. They only lived about twenty minutes away from each other if the traffic was good. Too busy with work, and then the baby, and all of Mary’s endless excuses.

“Hey, do you want to grab coffee later? I’m still not going up for another 45 minutes. There’s a cute coffee shop I saw just down the block. I can meet you there.” Mary tried to invite her nonchalantly, in a way that did not sound like Tory was the only friend she had.

“Girl you know we can’t have coffee!” Mary’s timid smile fell - *of course*. But thankfully, Tory grasped Mary’s hand and said. “You’re right though! We *have* hang.” Tory sat up straight and tapped her cheek. “Hey you know there’s this place right near me that sells soda! Like, every kind you could think of. It’s wild, I know, but we can’t do anything fun! I swear after this thing we are gonna hit up a bar!”

“You’re getting an abortion?” Abortions were still legal, technically, but legal ones were far more expensive than they had any right to be.

“Abortion? No! Imma make it! Are you kidding? A gymnast! Dean’s list! My genes! Not to mention I fucked Booker too! I *cannot* lose. Do you understand? I’ve got so much riding on this.”

"Booker?!" Mary should not have been surprised, they had all gone to high school together. Booker had practically put out an ad for himself on social media after the competition had been announced.

"Hell yeah he's a fuckin Adonis!" -*set the national high school swimming records in half a dozen categories and three more in college*- "He went to an ivy league." -*biomedical science and engineering double major at Columbia University*- "Doesn't get sick or some shit." -*two reported illnesses since he was ten*- Tory let out a cackle that seemed to shake the building from its very foundation. "Don't tell me you have your husband's!" Tory clasped her hands over her mouth. "I- I didn't mean it like that. Shit, I *like* your husband but..."

Mary shooed Tory's concern away. "No, I fucked Booker too..." Her voice trailed away as she descended into thought.

"Whaaaaat? Damn, he was getting around! My friend Debbie tried too but she never got pregnant."

The door next to the reception desk opened again and Ms. Tulip stepped out. She kept it together better than Ms. Kalter, but the tight lips and glassy eyes betrayed her results. "Tory English," the receptionist's voice rang out.

Tory wriggled in her seat and straightened her dress as she stood. Mary noticed her expression was blank, despite her confident posture. She squeezed Tory's wrist and smiled at her. "It'll be ok."

"I know." Tory replied sharply. She sighed. "Sorry, I'm more tense than I thought. Can you hold this for me?"

Mary took Tory's purse and nodded.

"TORY ENGLISH." The receptionist called loudly, staring directly at the pair. Tory shuffled over to the receptionist. They exchanged some very brief words until a doctor opened the door to let Tory in.

Mary rifled through her purse and donned her headphones. The soothing voice came on to continue to talk to her about the biotechnical revolution that they were in the throes of, and why that meant they had an unprecedented number of people re-entering the workforce after what would now be considered a very early retirement. She tried to let the words engulf her, but Mary was too deep in her own thoughts.

Tory was a perfect candidate. She was a straight-up athlete. Went to college *with* a scholarship for jumping or some shit. Though she dropped it, as most people end up doing. College was so damned expensive. And Mary would have to go back to her old job, stocking shelves, keeping her head just barely above water as rent rose steadily and her wage stayed the same. Her and her husband would have to move out if she wanted any chance at paying back her loan; they were already in a bad neighborhood. Mary did not know if she could handle them moving into one of the enormous, utilitarian “affordable” housing monoliths downtown. Everyone she knew that had moved downtown had stayed, and sank slowly into the debt of the hidden costs of living, only able to work the “gig” jobs that were predatorily based within walking distance of the monoliths, which could give you as many or as little hours as they wanted based on demand, which the supply severely outweighed. It was a trap, a pool of quicksand, the shore of which Mary knew she had dipped her toes into the moment she had taken out the loan for this fetus. What choice did she have? She was only a single step from that quicksand, surviving paycheck to paycheck and still above 50% of the population because she was not yet drowning in debt. Mary had squandered her chances at working for profit some time around freshman year of high school, or so she was told. Employers now tracked your performance the moment you were placed into the school system, they were able to, so they did. America's population had so many people and only enough good jobs to keep the top few afloat, or so they were told. Mary and others had their own, very public suspicions about the system, but they were easily ignored.

Tory would be selected for the Kingston child, and they only needed one fetus to be absorbed by their baby to give it the hDEC2. It was the United States' first foray into genetic manipulation on children. Using a technique developed by Dr. Abigail Kingston, they would be able to transfer the favorable traits from more than a dozen fetuses onto one fetus in-vitro - Dr. Kingston's child. It was based on a phenomenon that already occurs in nature. In the first couple weeks of pregnancy women might have two fetuses but, under the right conditions, one fetus will "absorb" the other, creating a human "chimera". One person with two distinct sets of DNA in their body. Depending on where you take the DNA sample from.

The Kingston Child would have over a dozen sets of DNA and being that this was a proof of concept, the inventor of the technique offered her own child as a guinea pig. This meant that the project had the power of the Kingston family's entire fortune and prestige behind it, they could afford to take no chances. So the bounty was set high to find the very best DNA available in the United States. Mary would never have thought about attempting it. Taking that much time off of work was just unthinkable. Mary was likely already replaced. But it was her mother, of all people, who insisted that she get a physical examination and mentioned the family's uncanny ability to function on such a small amount of sleep. After an affirmative physical exam and a bit of research into her genetic mutation, Mary had to conclude that she was unique - one in 10,000 - and young enough to take advantage of this opportunity. She would most likely be offered a spot and retire. She would be invited to every social event the Kingstons ever threw. She wanted to have children of her own, she could send them to college with the best recommendations and still have enough money to spend the rest of her days in a comfortable, middle-class community. It made her giddy to think of what she was able to do with that much money.

But Tory was a better candidate.

Mary worried at the clasp on Tory's purse. She could feel the panic building. There was only one person in the United States who would be a better candidate. *Stop.* Mary retreated

back to her routine to calm herself. She breathed deeply, counting her breaths as they shook out of her. But there was no comfort. Mary was not a shoe-in. It wouldn't go perfect. Mary felt the tears welling in her eyes. She had fucked up. She never should have quit her stupid job. Mary could not help but let out a sob. She buried her face in her hands to hide from the rest of the room as the voice in her headphones reminded her that statistically, it had been people in her exact demographic that had voted for this situation.

The door to the office opened and Mary gasped and wiped her eyes, trying to hide any evidence of her tears before Tory could walk across the room. It didn't work, of course.

“Oh my God! What's wrong!” Tory jogged over, took a seat next to Mary and placed an arm around her. “Don't worry! It's not that bad!” Tory gave Mary a hug and rubbed her arm. “Honestly it's not that bad, the doctor asks you a bunch of questions and scans you. There's a more thorough test later, I'm taking mine in a few days.”

Mary could do nothing but shake her head.

“Don't worry, I'll stay with you. You got this. Are you breathing deep?” Mary gave a shuddering, much-needed, inhale and Tory squeezed her tighter.

They sat like that in silence as another person went in and out of the doctor's office. Mary could not bring herself to say anything, and Tory reassured her that she did not have to.

Finally, Mary brought herself to speak as the shrill voice of the receptionist calling her name brought her out of her daze. “Your purse.” She said in a weepy voice as she handed the bag to Tory, Mary had been hugging it tight to her chest like she was a kid with a stuffed animal.

“Oh thank you. Here, I'll take yours as well.” Tory smiled and Mary gave a numb nod but she was lost in thought.

The previous person left and the voice of the receptionist cut through, what Mary felt, was palpable tension. “Mary Scofield!” Mary stood suddenly, tearing away from Tory's grasp. Tory patted her on the back as she rushed to the receptionist's desk. She offered some words of encouragement, but Mary was too lost in thought to hear them.

The doctor was kind and enthusiastic. He scanned Mary's stomach with what looked like a toy laser pistol and asked her a few extremely personal questions. Her health was good, she had not had alcohol for months, and she and her family had no history of chronic diseases. He was surprised when she mentioned her hDEC2 gene and asked her whether there was anything else he should know. The father was a good candidate. Yes, Tory was her cousin. He scheduled another appointment with her three days from now. Mary thanked him and left, a plan forming in her mind.

Tory was standing next to the door and followed as Mary exited.

"That was intense!" Tory's giggle rang throughout the silent hallway and cut short when Mary did not answer. "Girl what's wrong? It was rough, but you're being such a bummer, didn't you get another appointment scheduled?" Tory jostled her with an arm.

Mary gasped as she lost her balance a bit and grasped Tory's hand. She came to a stop, patting Tory's hand. Mary turned her smile back on. "Sorry, it just took me by surprise. It's funny you spend months planning it and I guess you're just never ready." Tory smiled a relieved smile and stopped to hug Mary. "I got another appointment scheduled on Monday." She managed to say through Tory's hair.

And it was back to normal. They fit many missed months of laughter and joking in the fifteen minutes it took to walk to Tory's car, and whiled away another twenty as they stood there in the midday sun, sitting on the hood and leaning on each other as they recounted highschool mischief.

"Do you want a ride?" Tory ended up asking. Mary quickly shook her head, having not forgotten their meeting later that day.

"No." Mary lied. "I have my own."

"Well I'll see you soon then!" Tory grinned wide and gave Mary another hug. "I'm gonna head right over! I'm so glad we got to see each other!"

"I'll probably be a half hour. Sorry."

“No problem! I'll see you there!”

Mary left Tory waving at her back as she walked to the bus stop.

Mary arrived at the soda shop clutching at her stomach again. She could almost feel the baby trying to kick its way out, though it was way too early for that. The place was quaint. It tried to mimic the vibe of a French coffee shop, with wrought iron seating and red-checkered tablecloths, underneath a soft, bright orange and white striped awning. The air was a little too still, the sun beat down a little too harshly from the cloudless sky, but that meant nothing but an excuse for Mary to wear her new sundress. Tory was seated, tapping on her phone, at a metal table on the sidewalk in front of the shop. She stood and waved as Mary approached. Mary did not wave back.

“I haven't gotten anything yet, let's go inside. I love this dress! Where did you get it?”

“Online, honestly can't remember where.” Tory rubbed the dress fabric between her fingers as they stepped inside before Mary stopped and cried out: “Oh my God!”

The inside of the soda shop was breathtaking. It was deep, a bar ran along its full length dividing out about a third of the already narrow corridor it was in and left only cramped seating next to the wall-length windows. Behind the bar, about half of the wall was covered in old-timey looking taps with handwritten labels on most of them, written in a petite cursive scrawl. Above the taps was a chalkboard with a slightly larger version of the cursive naming all of the available sodas and their prices. Above the chalkboard was a three foot tall mural that wrapped around the room depicting key scenes of the Odyssey but with a bottle of soda shoehorned in somehow.

A woman stood at the far end of the bar tapping at her phone underneath a depiction of Odysseus's crew drinking lotus flavored soda. “What can I do for ya?” She called across the bar.

“Ohhh I dunno, just looking right now.” Tory called back as she studied the menu.

“Well, let me know when you do.” The waitress meandered her way over to the pair.

Tory smiled and nodded. She tapped Mary on the shoulder and leaned over to her.

“What do you want?” Mary could do nothing but shake her head. They had every sort of flavor you could think of. Chocolate, licorice, milk, wine and liquor flavors. Mary could not imagine why someone would *want* these flavors of soda. She thought she would try something more tame.

“I’ll try the pineapple flavor I guess.”

“Well. I’ll get the chocolate. Is it fake or does it have real chocolate in it?”

The bartender shrugged. “I think so. I don’t know.” She turned to pour the drinks.

Tory turned to Mary and said, “Grab that table outside. I gotta pee.”

The bartender served Mary both drinks. Mary tipped her very well. The bartender gave Mary a questioning look when she fumbled with both drinks and hustled away.

Tory came back to Mary seated at a table just outside the door, sipping on her soda and staring into the swirling chocolate drink. “Wonderful day, right?” Tory exclaimed as she sat down.

“Mmm hmm,” replied Mary through the straw in her mouth, still lost in thought. She forced herself to surface and replied. “This soda is so refreshing!” She set her glass down.

“I bet! This place is so cool!” Tory sat down in her seat and situated herself for an agonizing minute. She adjusted her dress, set down her purse, but not before rummaging around in it and pulling out a small pill bottle. “I’m taking vitamins to help with the...” Tory patted her stomach to explain before spending another thirty seconds digging one of the last couple of vitamins out of the bottle.

Tory popped the vitamin in her mouth and took a huge gulp of the chocolate soda and swallowed. Mary’s heart nearly leapt out of her stomach as Tory took another sip to taste it.

Tory suddenly recoiled in disgust. “What’s in this?” She took another small sip before shaking her head and pushing it away, but the drink, inside the criminally small serving glass, was already half gone.

“Hm. Let me taste.” Mary offered. She took the glass and put it to her lips, taking care to not let a single drop pass them.

Mary set the glass down and she wrinkled her nose. “Well I guess that’s what you get for getting chocolate!”

Tory shook her head. “This isn’t right, I’mma ask the girl to make another one.” Tory stormed her way inside, but not before taking another small sip and shaking her head.

Mary’s heart could hardly contain itself as she watched Tory through the glass complain to the poor barista.

Tory pointed at the glass, the barista pointed at Mary - Tory *emphatically* shook her head - the barista argued some more. Eventually the barista took the chocolate soda and tasted it herself. She nodded and took the glass back from Tory and poured her a red colored soda.

Tory came back through the door, head held high. She proclaimed her victory against the rude, and apparently vindictive barista.

Mary smiled and nodded along. She offered words of support and condemnation when appropriate. Tory could not be more ecstatic about her newfound enemy. They enacted a petty revenge; Tory supplied them with lip gloss, which they coated the inside of the glass with; and some mints from her purse, which they attempted to dissolve in the bottom of the glass. This would make sure the barista would have to run them through the washer more than once, in theory.

The pair giggled the whole way through, exchanging insults directed toward the barmaid. They finished their dastardly work and walked away.

They parted at Tory’s car. Though Tory offered a ride, Mary did not accept. Tory thanked Mary for the get together and insisted they do it again. Mary half-heartedly agreed.

As soon as she turned the corner out of site of Tory, Mary broke, her legs turned to jelly and she leaned against a wall, taking deep breaths.

She stayed against the wall, fighting tears and staring at the sky until her phone rang. It was her husband. They had not spoken in days.

“Hello?” Mary forced herself to straighten up and walked to the pharmacy down the street.

“Mary, you okay? How did the appointment go?” Her husband was worried. He sounded genuine as ever.

“It was fine.” Mary breathed to him. “I met Tory. We had sodas.”

“Tory was there? That's great!” It had been great. “.... Mary listen, I'm sorry about everything. I really am. Did the appointment go well?”

Mary nodded, then gave a raspy, “Yes,” as she realized he could not see her. She fiddled with the empty pill bottle in the bottom of her bag.

“Cool, hey, I'm sorry to ask this but did take my pain meds to be refilled? I can't find them and they were almost gone.”

Even though Tory only drank half of her soda, the Percocet Mary mixed in must have affected her child enough to disqualify her from the competition, right? Mary wouldn't know for sure until next week, but she may have won.

“Yes I did, I think we'll be alright.” Mary said softly. Her frown loosened as she thought of her appointment next week.

In fact, she was smiling.