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Flickering

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Flickering

Her hands trace figure eights on her lower stomach, and at three and a half months pregnant, she fantasizes about a baby with small, tightening fists. On a lazy Sunday morning, Adam is still asleep beside her, and Olivia places her palm to her skin, as though she can feel the baby's heart beating, a reassurance and a promise: *I am here, I am here, I am here.*

In her bones she knows she'll be the mother of girls: she pictures a child with long, wavy hair that mirrors her own, and dark, confident eyes that could fell her at the knees.

She can envision a life where it's just the two of them: the baby at her hip, chubby and mewling, hands curious and knotting themselves in her hair.

In little more than three months, she has found a love that she has not felt for anything or anyone before—an instinctual, heady kind of love, immense and consuming.

Beside her, Adam shifts, and she watches him for a moment. She wonders if the baby will have his eyes, lighter than her own, or his tall, skinny frame. She loves Adam as the person who has given her this small being that grows within her, who will raise this new life with her.

He grumbles, "I can feel you staring at me," before opening his eyes and resting a hand on her belly. "I should shave," he sighs, pulling her closer to him and burying his prickly beard into her neck. She laughs and moves to push him away, but he holds onto her and nuzzles his chin against her skin.

She shoves him. "We should get out of bed before it's time to go to bed again."

He turns his forehead into the pillow. "Soon we'll have a screaming kid and you'll regret saying that."

She smiles. “What do you mean, soon? I already have you.” He laces his arms around her waist, but she moves to unbuckle them, and asks, “Why don’t you ask me to marry you?”

He speaks into her upper back, “Good question. Will you marry me?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “Are you crazy? Of course not.”

This is a running joke; they are the children of divorce. They believe they have discovered a formula for love that their parents couldn’t master, as if not being married would make losing one another simple.

Baloo, their English Bulldog, jumps with a thud onto the bed, and Olivia twirls her finger in his fur. He’d been a gift from Adam, a year after her graduation. She’d found her first job as a veterinary technician, shortly after they moved in together in a small city apartment. Adam had lifted the puppy up to her and said, “He’s all yours, Doctor.”

Now, she rests her head on Adam’s shoulder and Adam pats her knee. “Okay,” he says, “time for breakfast.”

Adam takes off work for her ultrasound that week, grips her hand as they wait. The technician offers small talk as she applies gel to Olivia’s stomach, and Olivia attempts to absorb it, but giddiness rises in her lungs, distracts her.

“And right there,” the technician finally says, with one pinky pointed at the screen, “is the baby’s heart beat.”

There’s a pulsing, gray and white, and somewhere amongst these things, Olivia can see this small organ pumping, small but persistent. It flickers like wings flapping, and she wonders how such a tiny thing could have such force. She nods and feels herself swelling.

“Do you want to hear it?” the technician asks Olivia, and she looks to Adam and nods. The sound closes in on them like a stampede, like a drum beating underwater.

“She’s so strong,” Adam says to her, and she wants to save his words, squeeze them into her palm and carry them with her—a gift. Against the baby’s heartbeat, she steadies her own. When she leaves with Adam, she will think only of that powerful beating.

Later that week, Olivia stretches across a tearing leather couch in their small living room, her feet in Adam’s lap. Her fingers circumnavigate the globe of her stomach.

Adam’s fingertips brush against her calves as he stares at the television screen across from them. “You know, when I was young and I’d get a paper cut or whatever, I’d show my dad my finger and he’d go, “This looks pretty serious, Adam. I think we’re gonna have to take off your whole hand.””

She smiles at him, places one arm lazily behind her head, lets the other drift from the couch to rest on Baloo’s head.

He continues, "I hope I'm like that with our kid. You know, like I'll know how to make him laugh."

"The earlier we can traumatize our kid, the better," she jokes.

He shakes his head. "That's what I mean. Like he knew what would upset me and what would make me laugh. I wanna be able to do that."

She admires the seriousness in his eyes, his intent, and smiles. "I think you will."

He nods quietly, his face calm, and when he turns to the television screen she watches his face, picturing him with a crying toddler at his hip, a smile on his face.

She comes home late from work one night when she is five months pregnant, scrubs dirtied. When she places her keys on the table, she finds Adam boiling water on the stove.

"How was work?" he asks, turning to her.

She considers him for a moment before answering. His eyes point downward, so that they're at a slight angle, sloped like they might melt from his face. His eyes have always made him seem sad, even when he's smiling, and when they started dating a few years earlier she would tease him about this feature.

They'd met at a bar the night of her college graduation. She had drunkenly laughed, "Your face looks so sad," while pointing to her own face, now contorted in a sorrowful expression, "like this."

He smiled but didn't respond, and she shook her head in frustration, "Oh, man, I'm sorry. That was like really rude of me. I'm really drunk, I'm sorry. Do you go here? I mean, the school. Did you just graduate?" she focused on him, eyes wide.

He stared down at his feet. "Uh, yeah, I majored in produce science. "

She laughed and turned her head. "Sounds intense."

He shook his head. "No, I, uh, I dropped out? My sophomore year," he grimaced. "I work at a grocery store. I'm a manager, so you could say I'm going places." She nodded, serious, and he stammered, "I don't even know why I'm here. Mark, my friend, made me come out and I don't even drink. I'm rambling, I'm sorry."

She watched him, smiled at his blushing. She knew she made him nervous, and liked the softness of his voice, the calmness of his features.

Now, she laces her finger through the key chain loop and spins it around, "Someone brought in this stray from the side of the highway," she sighs, head shaking. "She must've just had puppies and was all torn up and lactating...I've never seen a dog look so sad."

Adam twists his lips to one side of his face. “Well, we should keep her then. Baloo could use a girlfriend.”

“Oh, no. The last thing she would want or need is a boyfriend. Especially one as dopey as Baloo,” she says, clapping her hands. “Isn’t that right, Baloo? C’mere.” Leaning over the dog and scratching him behind the ear, she watches as Adam empties a box of dry pasta in the pot, and says, “Oh! Look what I bought, I gotta show you.”

She brandishes two small white mittens from her bag and walks over to the stove. “So, how cute are these? She’ll be here February-ish, and I keep picturing her hands in the cold...” She kneads the mittens in her palm.

He looks at them and smiles at her. “Very nice. And gender neutral! I see you’ve accepted it may not be a girl.”

She sticks out her tongue. “No, I just liked the color.” She taps at her temple with an index finger. “She’s a girl. A woman just knows these things.”

He raises his eyebrows and turns to the pot. “Whatever you say.”

She balls the mittens into her scrubs pocket and looks to the dog, who stares up at her. “Who do you think is right, Baloo?” When the dog wiggles his body under her gaze, she nods. “Yeah, I thought so.”

Adam shakes his head at Baloo and says, “Okay, she can be a girl. But promise you won’t find out without me next week?”

When Adam first told her he couldn’t get off work for her next ultrasound appointment, she had bristled against him. But after a week of his apologies she’d grown excited to be alone with the baby, to see her heart, hear it. “I promise.”

The next Monday, the ultrasound technician, a younger woman with light brown eyes and platinum blonde hair, applies cool gel to her stomach and asks in a high pitched voice, “Are we trying to learn baby’s gender today?”

Olivia dislikes how this woman speaks in a singsong tone, as if addressing a toddler. “Yes. I mean, I think I already know. But Adam, uh, my partner, he wants you to write if she’s a boy or girl on a piece of paper, so we can find out together later.”

She wonders if she’s said too much, as the technician seems to have stopped paying attention to her, and she waits for a response that doesn’t come.

The technician glides the probe around her belly in wider and wider circles, pursing her lips and squinting her eyes at the screen.

Olivia, watching the stiffening face of the woman next to her, half jokes, “Well, she’s gotta be in there somewhere, right?”

The technician offers her a small smile but avoids her eyes. “Can you excuse me for just one second?” She leaves Olivia alone in the room with her

heart racing, confused. Somehow the air in the room feels tighter, and she waits for this bubble of time to burst and the technician to show her that flicker of life again, that small beating.

The doctor enters the room with her fine hair pinned tightly back, brown eyes blank. Olivia searches her face for some warning of what's happening, some smile that will loosen the air in the room and make it easier to breathe. The doctor travels the same winding loops that have already been traced on her stomach, and shakes her head at the monitor screen so slightly Olivia wonders if she imagined it. Exchanging a look with the technician behind her, the doctor sighs and her eyes meet Olivia's.

"We're not detecting a fetal heart rate."

Olivia's head has condensed inward and through the ringing in her ears the doctor's words enter messy, disordered. In the spinning room everything slows—she locks her eyes onto the doctor's face. She can't understand the swelling in her chest, this sense of foreboding. Olivia shakes her head. "I don't—"

The doctor speaks calmly, with the finality of someone who is used to delivering bad news. "There's no heartbeat," she says, pausing, head shaking. "I'm sorry."

Olivia doesn't breathe for a minute, and she thinks that the doctor is discussing her own heart, paused in its churning. Some part of her knows they're discussing the baby, and she wants to tell them that this doesn't make sense, because she had seen it and heard it beating herself, only a few weeks earlier.

Her lungs refuse to inflate but somehow her voice whispers, "It was just there."

The doctor nods, smiles sadly. "I know. Sometimes these things happen, and we don't know why."

She thinks the doctor is speaking to her, but distantly, far away in a place she used to be. Loss charges through her body, and she trembles as she tries to hide her face. Her stomach is hollowing. She feels herself halving.

The doctor is telling her that she will have to come back and they will induce labor, and she wants to tell them they can't, that it's too early, that at twenty weeks the baby wouldn't survive. She wants to tell them they've made a mistake, that she feels the life within her, and that she has never felt so sure of anything in her life. *She's still here*, she wants to say, *I saw her heart myself*.

She loses what the doctor says to her, the sorrow in the eyes of the technician. Everything feels slower, sticky, and when she enters the waiting room again, she wonders if the other women can smell the loss on her. For a moment she thinks she can see them pulling away from her, retracting—whales moving out to sea before the storm hits.

Her hands shake as she calls Adam's number, and when she hears his voice on the line, her throat ignites. "Please come get me. I need you to come get me."

He tends to her like a baby bird pushed from its nest too soon. When they leave the doctor's office, he guides her to their car, leads her to the passenger seat, buckles her in. They drive in silence and she presses her cheek to the cool window, lightly knocking her temple on the glass again and again. He rests his hand on her thigh, but she starts and pulls away.

Once Adam parks the car in the street outside their apartment, he reaches for her hands. "Olivia."

Her face collapses, and she turns to him finally, folding in on herself, pulling her knees closer. The crying chops up her words, makes it hard for her to breathe or speak. "I feel like I did this," she heaves, patting at her chest with her open hand. "I feel like this is my fault."

"You know that's not true," he says, closing her hands within his.

"I don't want to do this. I can't do this." Her face reddens, blisters. "I shouldn't have to do this."

He leaves the car, opens the passenger side door, helps her out of her seat. He leads her across the street, up the stairs, into their apartment, into their bedroom. He braces her body against his as she cries. He pulls her to him when she struggles to breathe. He waits until the shaking stops, until she's fallen asleep in the empty belly of their silence.

At work a few days later, Olivia runs her hands along her stomach as she stands next to Caroline, her closest friend, a veterinarian at the hospital who was hired at the same time. She laces her fingers through the cage of a sedated cat, and when Caroline speaks, she starts.

Caroline, a heavier woman with thick red curls of hair, often confides in Olivia about her husband and her brood of children. She was the first person Olivia told about the pregnancy, only a couple weeks after she had found out. Olivia wants to tell her about the baby, about carrying two stilled hearts within her body, but when Caroline asks if she's okay, the words stick to the sides of her throat. She nods. "I'm fine, I'm fine."

The next week, she dresses herself, stares in the mirror early on a Monday morning. She notices the creases around her mouth, feels removed from her body, her suddenly aged face, fuller from the pregnancy. Her hair, fine and dark, falls down her back in waves, and her eyes wander unfocused. She tells

herself, “I’m going to have my baby today.” She places her hand to her womb, closes her eyes, and pictures the baby kicking.

Adam drives her to the hospital in a now familiar silence, hand to her knee, smiling weakly. He turns on the radio, but she reaches over and gently turns it back off.

At the hospital, they give her a pill to help induce labor, wash out her insides. Contractions rip through her abdomen, steadily rise in intensity until she thinks she will break open, and then die down again.

She cries during the first hour and Adam holds her hand through the current. As time passes, she closes her eyes and waits for when the pain grips her so tightly that she thinks her heart stops.

The doctor, the same woman with the tight ponytail, encourages her through the pain. Dr. Karen, Olivia thinks to herself, remembering the woman’s name now. Karen Tutunik.

The doctor checks in on her between hours, but at the very end, she waits with her. When the pain has receded for the last time, Dr. Karen asks, “Do you want to meet him?”

Olivia stares at her blankly for a moment. The doctor seems to sense her confusion and confirms with a small smile. “It’s a boy.”

Olivia turns to Adam with wide eyes, sure that the doctor has misspoken, but she nods.

And then, suddenly, there he is: tiny, still, the skin of his belly translucent, his insides dark. They wrap his body in a small cloth, and he’s so small Olivia can fit him in the palms of her hands. “Hi, baby,” Olivia says to him, Adam leaning over her.

The doctor tells them to let her know when she should come back for him, and as she walks from the room, adds softly, “You should name him.”

They speak to the baby in the hospital room for a few hours. They name him Luca. Olivia lightly touches her finger to the baby’s hands, his toes. She blinks for a moment and thinks she sees him breathing, but the baby is so still, so small, Olivia knows this can’t be true. She remembers listening to his heart beating only a few weeks earlier, and tries to picture this sound within his chest. She closes her eyes and imagines her life with her baby, her son.

When they leave the hospital, they leave with a small box. They leave with pictures of him, his small footprints in ink on paper. When they leave, they leave without their son.

That night, Olivia places her hand to her empty womb, aching for her son like a phantom limb. She will have to tell people that she lost the baby, and she considers the insufficiency of the word *lost*—as if her son is hiding, waiting to be found; as if he slipped away when Olivia’s back was turned. The

word doesn't convey the feeling that she's been broken open and picked clean, her insides raw and bare.

She thinks the word implies blame—and in this way it may be fitting, because doesn't she feel like she failed somehow? Doesn't she feel guilt?

She holds Luca's white mittens, tries to slip them over her fingers. Her thumb runs along the smooth stitching on the inside. She imagines kissing the mittens, the warmth of the baby's fists rising through the stitches, and longs for the pressure of his hands within hers.

When Adam touches her, she recoils, lost, thinking of the baby between them.

"Why are you shutting me out?" he asks after a month of her pulling away from him, inching to the edge of the bed.

She wants to tell him that she's sorry, that she doesn't want to feel like this, that she doesn't know where she stopped and this part of her life began. She wants to tell him that she thinks of Luca's small, curled hands at night long after he has fallen asleep, that she wonders what his voice would sound like. She wants to tell him that she can imagine his hands within the mittens. She hopes that he wasn't cold, even for a second.

She wants to tell him that she has never felt a love so strong as when she held that baby in her arms and imagined him in a high chair, laughing, eating Cheerios. That when she is alone, she pictures Luca at her hip, his baby belly round and fat.

Her grief is dense, settling to the distal areas of her body like acid, eating through her skin. She wonders if she is allowed to call herself a mother to a child she will never know.

Now, she thinks of work, of the stray dog, scarred and growling at anyone who goes near her. She wonders if the dog searched for her pups, wonders if she still feels just as hollow, just as rotted out.

Her own words swell but her mouth doesn't open and she shakes her head at him and turns away.

One month later, Adam reaches for her when they are in bed together. Initially, sleeping with him had helped her fall in love with him—he is patient, yielding with her body. He kisses her, and she kisses him back for a moment, but sours at his body on hers and quietly pushes him off of her.

He sits at the edge of the bed, head in his hands. "You know, I lost a baby, too."

She curls away from him, places a pillow to her stomach. "You weren't there."

He stares at his feet for a moment and shakes his head. "I wasn't there for what?"

Olivia drags her hand down her scalp, feels her throat tightening. "You weren't there when they told me. I was alone."

His eyes focus on hers. "About the baby? You're gonna punish me for the rest of my life because I missed the appointment? What do you want me to do?"

She hears his voice rising and turns from him, placing a hand to her chest, wanting to slow her racing heart, resting her other hand against her eyes. She tries to speak, but her throat won't open, and she shakes her head and whispers, "I don't want to feel like this."

Adam leaves the bed to kneel before her and says quietly, "I don't want to feel like this either. I've lost him and now I'm losing you."

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He holds her against him and she feels herself being absorbed into his warmth and steadiness.

At work a week later, Olivia laces her arm around the neck of a German shepherd, holding her steady as Caroline places a stethoscope to the dog's chest. "Okay, she's all good," Caroline says, and when Olivia doesn't look at her right away she places a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Olivia nods, smiling. "Yeah, just thinking."

Two months ago, when Olivia finally told Caroline about the baby, the words had forced themselves from her mouth, sour and angry. When Olivia told her of the loss, they'd sat with their knees touching, Olivia's face bowed while Caroline's hands reached to steady her.

Now, Caroline tells her, "You know, when I was younger my grandpa would always say, 'you can't dry in the same place you swam.' You should get out. Go on a trip with Adam or something."

Olivia laughs. "I'm definitely tired of swimming."

Caroline's mouth straightens. "I'm serious, Olivia. Even if it's just for a day."

Olivia nods. "Okay, okay."

When Olivia comes home to Adam, who has already made her dinner, she says, "We should go somewhere. Anywhere in the world."

He smiles, and with a fullness in his voice, he says, "Okay. I'm ready."

When he turns to the stove, she admires the furrow in his brow, watches him, her companion in grief. She still feels the water in her lungs, but she nods at him, smiles, and helps him set the table.