

It had been an exceptionally warm February in Los Angeles, but for the last four hours, rain had been drumming on the windows of Rachel’s classroom, leaving her no choice but to keep her kindergarten students inside for both recess and lunch. The caged-in five-year-olds were bouncing off the walls like tennis balls from a high-speed launcher someone forgot to turn off.

Rachel worked in an upscale private school, the kind of place where kids would bring sushi for lunch instead of a turkey sandwich. She loved her students, except when they forgot to take their lunchbox home on Fridays.

*Only two more pick-ups to go before all the kids are gone and my weekend begins*, Rachel thought as she erased the chalkboard and put books back on the bookshelf. She was in a hurry to get home today, knowing what was waiting for her there.

Thirty minutes after the last child was gone, Rachel sat cross- legged on her bathroom floor, holding a small box in her hand. A box with pink and blue and pluses and minuses on it. A box containing something that would decide if she was having a good day or another bad one.

She ripped the cardboard from the middle and pried the stick out. Rachel hated peeing on that thing. Would the stream hit it exactly right? Would she accidentally drop it in the toilet and have to start over? Every month, that hateful little stick monster would betray her and Brett. Months ago, she stopped feeling a rush of butterflies when her period was late. Like a cruel joke, she’d run out to buy a test, only to get her period the next day. And it didn’t help that her cycle was irregular. Some months it was twenty-nine days, some months thirty-two, and some months thirty-six.

Why couldn’t she be twenty-eight days like the rest of her friends? The friends who had children already. At this rate, they would have an empty nest before her womb was full.

She pulled down her black pants and her shocking pink panties and sat on the toilet. She held the stick between her legs and felt a rush of warmth. She waited until she was sure nothing else would come out; never knowing if the last drop would be the drop that would tell the stick she was pregnant.

Rachel pulled her clothes back on and put the test on the counter and set a timer for three minutes. She turned her back. She wondered if a watched stick would come up pregnant. She wanted to be pregnant so badly, it was all she could think about for what seemed like forever. She couldn’t wait to watch Brett hold his child; she knew that even when they were dating, he’d be a wonderful father. The two of them finally creating the family they’ve been dreaming about. Please let this test come out positive!

Rachel stopped herself from turning around while the stick was hatching results. She used to use these three minutes to pray to God to help her get pregnant, but she stopped when it didn’t work. As a kid, her prayers for a Barbie Dreamhouse (or later, for Steven Parker to ask her out) never materialized either. She decided to try prayer again because now she wondered if God thought she stopped believing. Rachel began speaking Hebrew, or at least the little bit she remembered from her Bat Mitzvah. She stopped mid-sentence.

*What if I’m mispronouncing the words and God doesn’t understand me?* she thought. What if I’ve been praying for no baby instead of a baby? Rachel didn’t want to make things worse, although she wasn’t sure that was possible.

The timer dinged and Rachel caught her breath. She slowly turned, but instead of walking over to the counter, she stayed where she was and squinted. She couldn’t see if the test had two lines. Her legs trembled and wouldn’t move. It was as if her heels had grown roots that went through the floor.

*This is ridiculous*, she thought as she picked her feet up and with both eyes wide open walked over to the stick. The test had only one prominent line. Rachel crumpled to the floor, the tears that came were as fresh as the ones that flowed each month before. In the last few years, Rachel had suffered three miscarriages. At least before each pregnancy ended, she had a couple weeks of hope and happiness. When did thirty become too late to start a family? Was she wrong to want to spend a few years alone with Brett as a couple? *Did I do things in my youth that I’m paying for now?* How was she to have known it would be this hard to get pregnant? Especially since her mother had told her she’d gotten pregnant with Rachel without even trying.

Rachel had always wanted at least two children, so her kid would have a sibling, so they’d never be as lonely as she was. She was close to her parents, but she wished she had a sister to confide in. A sister who would’ve kept her company when her parents went out of town. A sister who would’ve snuck her dessert when she didn’t finish her cauliflower. A sister who would cry with her when she miscarried another baby. Rachel couldn’t control the negative thoughts. She blamed herself for not being able to have a baby and wondered if Brett might blame her also if he knew everything.

That feeling of failure had followed her everywhere, even to work. Now she was so lost in her grief that she wasn’t the same dynamic, cheerful teacher her previous students had. It didn’t help that some of the parents were always on her, complaining about something: “Why isn’t my son reading yet?” “Why can’t you help my daughter make friends?” Couldn’t they just be happy they have kids? *I would give anything to have one, even if they were dim-witted and ate their own hair*, Rachel thought. Those parents don’t have to live in my shoes with disappointment and sadness every month. They get to bask in those little arms wrapping around them. One mother even asked if Rachel wanted to babysit on the weekends. When Rachel declined, the woman was stunned. Rachel loved her students, but it would’ve hurt even more to see them in their cozy homes, playing with the toys she wished she could get her own child, or seeing them smile when they ate their favorite dessert.

She picked her phone up of the floor and sent a one-word text. Nope. Even though Brett tried to hide it, Rachel hated seeing the disappointment on his face when he came home. They had been going through the same routine for so long, they were both a little numb. Even the hug he gave her every month now felt robotic. The next text she sent was to her mother. Seconds after the text was sent, her phone rang. Her mother wanted to comfort her, but she couldn’t talk to anyone at that moment.

Rachel left the bathroom and walked by the only empty room of the house. Now she wondered if she’d painted those walls and bought a crib, would there already be a baby quietly sleeping in it? These were the thoughts that crashed through her head like a cannonball every minute of every day, especially at night when she couldn’t sleep.

Rachel went into the kitchen for a glass of water, but after taking a sip she knew she needed something stronger. It wasn’t like she was pregnant. She climbed on a stepstool, reached into an upper cabinet, and grabbed Brett’s bottle of Johnnie Walker. She #lled a glass halfway, gazed at the orangish liquid, then put her nose in and took a whiff. *How could Brett drink this stuff?* she wondered. Well, I’m about to find out. She stuck her tongue in the glass and felt a slight burning sensation, then a weird warmth coated her throat. She couldn’t decide if she liked it or not, but she was willing to have more to figure it out. Rachel took one more sip, then put the bottle back on the counter, and rubbed her aching eyes. She knew they were red from crying, which had become their normal state most of the time. She smoothed her hands over her hair which needed to be cut badly. Her wavy amber mane had gotten so full, she looked like a shrub with eyes. And her skin, with its normal peach undertones, was often blotchy and washed out. Even her gray sweatshirt was drab, in fact, everything about her felt drab.

Brett announced himself with the jangling of keys in the door and the stomping of boots on their front doormat. He did that every time he came home, trying to get the dirt and mud from the construction site o! before entering their clean house. She wasn’t surprised he would find a reason to come home early.

“Hey,” he said gingerly.

“Hey.” She tried to smile but felt her lips curling down and her teeth not able to make an appearance; she couldn’t even convince her face to pretend she was okay.

“I would say I’ll try to cheer you up, but I think that’s what Johnny Walker is for.”

Rachel couldn’t help but let out a small laugh, and then she whacked him gently on the butt.

“I don’t know how you drink this stuff,” she said, swallowing hard.

He took the glass from her. “Like this.”

He took a gulp, then put the glass down and took her in his arms. She stood on her toes and put her head on his chest. After a moment, he lifted her face to his and kissed her lightly on the lips. She looked into his eyes. No matter how sad Rachel was, looking at him still took her breath away. His face, a golden brown from working outside every day, was decorated with a spattering of freckles like a Jackson Pollock painting. Rachel noticed a few new frown lines that had emerged between his eyebrows. She wondered if she were the cause of them.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said. She’d stopped believing him a while back. Two years ago when Rachel first didn’t get pregnant, Brett would come home with a dozen roses to cheer her up. She knew he was trying so hard, even though he was disappointed also, he wanted to do anything to make her happier.

“We can adopt if things don’t work out,” he would say, hoping it would comfort her, but the thought of not ever getting to be pregnant made Rachel twitch with anxiety.

“What do you want to do for dinner?” he asked. Rachel shrugged; she couldn’t make any decisions about food at that moment. He kissed her and then ordered from her favorite Italian place down the street.

Brett dropped his jacket over the back of a kitchen chair. His navy and white plaid shirt looked just as clean as it did in the morning when he put it on. Those were the perks of being the boss.

When the food arrived, Brett placed Styrofoam containers of Caesar salad, mushroom risotto, and linguine Bolognese on the table. Rachel grabbed plates, napkins, and silverware. Brett dished out a little of everything on each of their plates.

While Rachel ate a small spoonful of mushroom risotto, Brett took a big bite of linguine. “How was your day?” she asked, trying to swallow the creamy, cheesy substance but the lump in her throat made it difficult.

“Good, I booked a big job in Malibu for next month.” Brett had been a general contractor for ten years.

Rachel was happy for him, even if her voice didn’t express that. Brett grabbed a beer, while Rachel tried to stab one of the croutons in the Caesar salad, but she kept missing. She gave up and picked it up with her fingers.

“How was your day?” he asked, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “You mean besides finding out that my body still hates me?”

“Yes, besides that,” he said facetiously. One of the things Rachel appreciated about him was the way he used humor to try to make her feel better, even when it didn’t work.

“I think you should leave me and find someone who can give you a baby. What about Martha from the dry cleaner?” Rachel said, mostly jokingly.

“She’s in her sixties.”

“She likes you. I’ve seen her sneaking you coupons.”

Brett looked into her eyes. “You will never get rid of me; I love you too much,” he said with sincerity. “Besides, if things didn’t work out with Martha, I’d have to find another dry cleaner.”

“Ha, ha.”

Brett took her hand. “I know we’ll have the family we both want. We’re going through a tough time, but I’m not going anywhere.” She forced the corners of her mouth up into a half- smile.