

(fiction)

Dissolving Lori

Tanya Seale

Nick calls me at six o'clock. It's Monday evening. "Can you come stay with the baby? Lori's falling apart. Hurry." Before I can ask any questions, he hangs up. "Lola" by The Kinks starts playing on the radio, and I'd like to pull in at the Speedy Stop for a fountain Cherry Coke, but Nick is not answering my texts: *whats going on? everything ok? what do you mean falling apart?*

I arrive in their cul-de-sac in the suburbs twenty-three minutes later. I am bare-foot and braless, my hair in paint-stained pigtails. Nick greets me at the door. There is a weird, frenetic energy that transcends the space in which we stand. I want to hug him. Smell his neck. Tell him it will be okay. But I don't know what *it* is.

He pushes open the screen door, but before I can even step over the threshold, he's already turned, heading toward the kitchen.

"Nick? What the—?" A gummy, warm stench of soiled diapers hangs in the air, and their dog, Buster, a beardie with hair that flops in front of his eyes, is doing this wheezing, whining thing.

"I don't know," he says, and I am taken aback. Nick knows everything.

A pile of laundry, previously folded on the couch, is now strewn on the floor. The dog runs in circles, bounding around the coffee table, and onto the couch. More clothes fall to the floor. I get the feeling Buster's been doing this all afternoon. In the kitchen, Nick's wife Lori is moaning.

Buster whines. Nick places his right fist over his heart and says sternly, "Sit." Buster does not sit. The smell of diaper shit hovers.

"Nick. What is going on here?" Blue plastic bags line the countertops, groceries waiting to be unloaded. Lori, looking like a rabid raccoon I once saw, is balling her body tightly, on the floor, in the corner by the pantry, her eyes red, her lips wet, snot hanging in thick, long drips from her nose. She shakes and snarls when she sees me until Nick stoops down in front of her. He goes to grab her but she thrashes and kicks, knees and elbows knocking into cabinet doors. She bites him on the forearm twice, drawing blood the second time. He finally manages to restrain her. He places

his hands on either side of her jaw and then presses his lips to her forehead. He spoons her into his arms. I am planted firmly in the doorway between their kitchen and living room, digging my toes into luxurious mushroom-colored carpet. I don't know where to look or what to say. Lori fights and swipes. Her hair is long, tangled. Nick likes long hair. Lori's arms are scratched, red and raw.

"Does someone want to tell me—?" Nick holds Lori firmly. She punches and swings. "My God," I say. She finally gives up and then gently collapses around him, letting out a little yelp. She looks like a large child with arms and legs and hands that are too big, and none of those parts having anywhere to go that makes any sense.

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I first slept with Nick in college. We met at a birthday party for a mutual friend and ended the night by hooking up. I wasn't even going to go to the party because Jack and I were fighting and I was feeling sad and pathetic and sorry for myself. My roommate, Kamber, said I had to at least make an appearance. Nick had arrived at the party with some other girl, but lost her somehow. We shot tequila. He liked my skirt. We shot tequila. I liked his voice. We shot tequila. I touched his tattoos and wondered if there was any money in tattoo artistry. He said let's get out of here. I'll sleep with you, I said. But don't assume you owe me after. Whatever, he said. I don't even like you that much.

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"Tasha's milk is in the fridge," he tells me now. He's wearing Dockers and a button-down Oxford shirt. His hair is too short and his teeth are too white. "I don't know when we'll be back," he says. I stand there, dumbfounded, wondering, when. Where. When. What. And how. On earth. I trip over a leaking sippee cup and then follow Nick and Lori around to the door that connects the kitchen to the garage. He places the lump of Lori inside his hybrid Lexus, buckles her seatbelt, and shuts her up inside.

"Thanks," he says to me. His eyes are wet.

He settles himself into the driver's seat, raises the garage door, says something tender to her. He loves her. Who doesn't love her? She stares straight ahead. He starts the ignition and backs out of the driveway and into the street. The garage door goes down and I am left standing there, Buster nudging my thigh, circling my feet.

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Nick used to rent an efficiency apartment in the city. He owned exactly five pieces of furniture—a slow-leaking air mattress, a particleboard desk, a red swivel chair patched with silver duct tape, a mauve pleather couch, and a rickety wicker patio table. It all came from Goodwill. He told me he moved the desk chair to the wicker table for meals, but that it wasn't a big deal because he rarely ate. He was a minimalist in every way, he once said. And then he removed my clothes.

Nick knew everything. He was an unpretentious intellectual, a reader of difficult literature, science, politics. He was a philosopher, a pot smoker. He wore black hoodies and green flip-flops. I liked his style.

We had sex on all five pieces of furniture. Also, his two kitchen counters, the bathroom sink, the pantry shelves, the balcony, the floor. I liked the way he pressed me hard against the front door. I liked the way he lifted me off the bed and flipped me like an omelet. I liked the way he ran his finger slowly from my forehead, down my nose, over my lips, under my chin, to my neck, down my chest, and then, finally, to rest over my heart. I slept with him forty-six times after I told him I couldn't sleep with him anymore just because he did that finger thing.

He adored me and it made me uncomfortable, so I told him I couldn't see him anymore, that I thought I was becoming too attached. Usually attachment makes a man uneasy. He said don't be silly; I like you. I said don't be silly; I am not that likable. He said you're right; I'm being silly. I don't like you. And he did the finger from the head to the heart thing. I said don't be silly; we're just fuck buddies and we both know it. You don't like me that much. He said I know you're not like those girls. His phone buzzed from the floor. I said, see? I could be any girl. He said you're projecting. What you mean is that I could be any guy.

Nick asked me out a few times in the following months, but Jack and I were on again. When we were off again, I asked Nick out a few times. He had other plans.

Six months went by before I saw him in the quad with some brunette girl. I started calling him again. You break up with Jack yet? he said. What's it to you? I said. It's nothing, he said. I don't like you that much anyway, remember? I got jealous. He didn't understand. Break up with your boyfriend then, he said. Let's go on a real date. No, I said. I've been with him too long. You can't just...You can't just break up with someone everyone thinks you should marry. Fine, he said. Friends?

Always, I said.

Nick held me for six hours when Jack told me he had fallen in love with Kamber Peterson. He didn't say a word, even though Nick knew everything. He just listened. That was the night before Nick and Lori's rehearsal dinner.

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Nick and Lori have a big-ass electric grill and a top-of-the-line Dyson. They have a three-thousand-dollar couch and a TV as big as two of my art cabinets put together. They have a pressure-treated swing set. I wonder if they've ever done it in the tree house.

call me when you can. tell me what's going on. I stand there watching my phone for thirty seconds. *like soon.* I check to make sure my ringer's on. *are you taking her to st.marys?* Buster nudges my leg. I push him away. He whines. "Dog, you are seriously going to have to stop that," I say. He cocks his head. *any special instructions?* I check Nick's Facebook status. *is she ok?* I check Lori's. *your house smells like shit.* I delete that one before I send it. *call me asap.*

I decide I'm probably about to overwhelm him emotionally, something he says I do, which I don't mean to do, so I just check again to make sure my ringer's on. I scan the bags on the counter for frozen items—I'll deal with the groceries first—but from upstairs, fourteen-month-old Tasha begins to make noises. Buster barks. "You're going outside, dog," I tell him, "Along with whatever it is that is making this place smell like shit." As soon as I say the word *outside*, Buster makes a beeline for the patio door off the living room. I spot the too-full Diaper Genie, which I push out onto the back porch. "Nasty," I tell him. Buster wags at me and then springs down the stairs of the deck and growls happily, running in loops on the muddy lawn.

* * *

Nick and I took an advanced psychology class together our junior year. Not because we planned to take it together, but because, despite my feigned revulsion for him, I'd spent a lot of time reading about lateralization of the brain the previous summer. He'd foolishly accused me of being too romantic, of thinking primarily and continuously with an *artist's brain* and being incapable of logically and realistically coming to rational conclusions about history, politics, biology, and humanity in a manner that would sufficiently impress a left-brain thinker such as himself in any kind of intellectually respectable way. When I heard Nick was taking the class, I decided I was going to make him rethink that little *You-know-what-it-is?-You-think -with-your-heart* barb. What I didn't know at the time was that he had been flattering, flirting, teasing me.

My parents liked Jack, and I was looking for reasons to hate Nick, so I found them.

We spent the whole semester competing for the professor's approval. Nick took great pleasure in this, and I loathed him more each week for it. We avoided one an-

other fiercely, only once making eye contact during that class. He'd seen one of my exams—A plus—and I'd seen his—B minus. I purposely wore thigh-highs, short skirts, and tall boots to class. He read far and wide outside the assigned text and brought stimulating questions to class. He did every extra credit assignment. He knew everything. I started wearing a gold-plated cubic zirconium on my left hand that I bought at Claire's. He pretended not to notice. Our relationship had become a weird, twisted amalgam of emotional chaos. I was with Jack. And Nick had a handful of fuck buddies in that class alone. One of them was Jenny Lindsey. He had no idea I was sleeping with her too. His words I like you I like you I like you had meant nothing to me. But his words "primarily with your heart" stung like a violent gust of fuck-you-you're-stupid wind. So I picked fights until he said, You know what? Fine. You're right. I *don't* like you.

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"Baby!" I say cheerfully. Tasha is bleary-eyed, standing up, smiling at me from her crib. It is the best crib money can buy—a cherry-wood sleigh bed with an enormous matching armoire. The doors are flung open; piles of boutique baby clothing messily spill out. There is a pink motorized Jeep in the corner. I've no doubt it cost as much as I spent on my busted up, broken-down '92 Escort. Tasha has the best of everything.

"Whatcha doin', cutie?" I say. She claps her fat hands on the railing. She makes a burbling baby sound. She is excited to see me. Each time I've come into her room—three times since the incident between Lori and me—I pause for a few minutes and admire my work. I logged about ninety hours on this mural. It's the best one I've ever created.

There's a huge plastic activity gym in front of the fairy door I painted above the baseboard, so I grunt, roll my eyes, and then move the thing into the middle of the room. I also move a pushpin that supports a ridiculously full ribbon of hair accessories. They've stuck it right into the eyeball of my princess.

"Who did this?" I ask Tasha. "Did your mama do that?" She braces her chubby little hands on the side rails and begins jumping.

"Mama mama," she chants. I wonder if Nick and Lori have ever fucked in here.

* * *

Good sheets, I told him once. A person can be a minimalist in every other way. But good sheets are a necessity. He invited me over the next weekend to help him fix a Valentine's Day dinner and to approve his 900-thread-count sheets.

"I have never spent so much money on . . . on material in my life. It's silly," he said. I couldn't tell if I was supposed to tell him he was right or disagree, so I just said, "Fabric. It's called fabric."

"She's not into frivolity like you are, Zoe. She won't even notice the sheets," he said.

"Lori's studying to be a lawyer," I said. "She notices everything."

He said, "God, her lips are great. Have you seen her lips?"

I said, "Look, Nick. If she doesn't notice the nice sheets, you can't propose. You just can't."

* * *

Tasha has 900-thread-count crib sheets.

I remove the push-pinned hair thing from the mural and set it on the edge of the changing table. I rub over the hole in the princess's eye, but it's still there. God damn her. I will have to fix it before I leave.

Tasha grows impatient and begins to cry. I lift her out of her bed but she squirms out of my arms. She toddles straight to the huge plastic toy and bangs on the colorful buttons. It sings and honks and says I love you in French and Spanish. Tasha lifts one foot off the floor and then the other, moving to the sounds. She looks like a smaller, thinner-haired version of Nick. I love the way her mouth is always wet.

I tidy up Tasha's room a bit while she acclimates herself to being fully awake and fully mobile. She fusses and begins calling, "Mama mama," so I scoop her up onto my hip and say, "Mama's not here. She'll be back. You get to play with Zoeeeeeeee!" I say it just like that.

"Mama," she repeats, and claps her chubby hand on my chest.

"Yes, but I can teach you how to sculpt an Eiffel Tower out of mashed potatoes." She smiles like she knows what this means. "You hungry? Do you eat regular food yet? Hm. Let's go see what we can find." I like the way Tasha feels on my hip. If I let go right now, she wouldn't even slip because she clings to me so tightly. She drools onto my shoulder and I kiss her crusty pink cheek. "Come on. Let's go see what we can find."

Amidst the convenience foods that should have been frozen hours ago, I find a bag of edamame. It is mostly defrosted, so I pour the contents into a small bowl and microwave it. There are four days worth of food-encrusted dishes in the sink, the remains of what looks like lasagna, a pot of decaying seafood gumbo, and something completely unidentifiable. I open the panty looking for salt, but a bag of flour falls out.

“Goddamnit!” I yell. Tasha starts to wail from her highchair. “Oh not you, baby. Not you, sweet girl,” I tell her.

I scoop the flour up, by the handful, when it occurs to me that tossing it in the wet sink is only going to create a bigger mess. Tasha does not understand “one second” and is now shrieking. There is only half a baby bottle left, and the fridge smells like a wedge of old fontina crawled up in there and died. I hope the stench is not coming from the milk, and I set it on her tray. She is pleased with this, and begins suckling at it while I search for a broom. “There you go cutie,” I tell her.

Buster’s nails scrape at the back door. When I get most of the flour off the tile floor, I text Nick again. *you need to call me asap*. I haul the Dyson out of the closet and begin sucking up the rest of the flour. This sends Tasha into a fit that neither salted edamame nor the dog toy can fix.

“Sorry, sorry,” I say. She wails. “Oh stop it. Now how was I supposed to know?” I lift her out of her high chair and try to mold her to my hip, but she is pissed off now, and so am I when her diaper leaks onto my shirt. “For fuck’s sake,” I say, hoping this trilingual-in-training hasn’t yet learned how to *répétez s’il vous plait*.

I carry her into the living room and lay her on the couch where she squirms and fights. “You need to stop *that* right now, little lady,” I say to her. “I’m trying to help you.” She kicks and wriggles. I have to use my leg to restrain her legs. Shit smears onto her thigh and then onto the couch. “Come on now. Tasha! It was just a vacuum cleaner.”

“Mama” she cries. She flails around. I move her to the floor, where she picks up and hurls one of Lori’s nursing bras across the room. I realize in this moment of pissed offedness that she has drunk all the milk. That these are indeed nursing bras. And that I am possibly trapped here without lactating breasts or a car seat. The dog is barking at the door. There are messy piles of disorganized dysfunction all over this fucking house. And it still smells like shit even though I threw the stinking Diaper Genie on the porch with the still-barking dog. And someone pinned a hole in the princess’s eye and I am *definitely* stuck here without a car seat so I can’t even get to ArtMart to secure the materials I need to properly fix her.

* * *

Lori spent her career working as an attorney. She is perfectly incapable of thinking with her right hemisphere. She is all about logic and reasoning and doing things the sensible, rational, and annoyingly pragmatic way. She is smart, sassy, and can dice powerful politicians and self-made millionaires into tiny pieces of shark bait. When

Nick told me they wanted to decorate the baby's room and Lori wanted to pay me four thousand dollars to do it, I said, "Of course. Sure. Seriously? Wow. Okay."

Lori took time off work so that she could be home to supervise while I was here painting. She likes to be in control, Nick says. I told her it wasn't necessary to micro-manage my creative process, but she said she just wanted it to be perfect and besides, being there gave her a good excuse to start easing into this whole stay-at-home-mom-my thing. What she didn't yet say was that she felt that because she was now undeniably pregnant, those powerful politicians and self-made millionaires weren't taking her seriously anymore.

I didn't like her watching me work, because she asked too many questions and expected too many answers. She didn't understand that art, for me, isn't about my answers; it's about her questions. I also began to suspect that she had no idea Nick and I had ever been lovers. That we had been again four months after they married. That we almost were six months ago. And that we were again three weeks ago. When I asked Nick about it, he said it had never come up. And that Lori assumed I wasn't his type. And that it wasn't worth a mention because he didn't like me that much anyway. He put his finger on my forehead and drew it down, down, down to my chest. I wanted to feel angry and ashamed, but I had come to love having this delicious secret.

The mural took three weeks to complete. Lori watched me every day. She fed me lunch, and frequently told me she wished she could paint like that. She was gorgeous then. Her hair was thick and healthy; her skin glowed with verve. I loved the way her eyes took in each new element of my mural after she'd been out of the room for a while.

"When I was a girl, I used to say I'd hide myself from the world the second I got pregnant," I told her out of the blue one day, "because everyone would know what I'd been doing."

She laughed. "That's funny."

"It seems ridiculous now," I said. "Because you're so—"

"Fat?" she said, caressing her belly and then flopping into the nursery's glider chair.

"God, no," I said. "Not at all. Nothing like that at all." I wanted to touch her belly. Not on top of the shirt, but underneath it. I wanted to undress her slowly and slather paint on that perfectly round canvas. I wanted to strike her stomach with reds and blues and oranges—a hellish ton of orange—the resplendent kind of orange that glows and fades into blazing yellow at the edges. I wanted to paint a pale blue heart on her forehead and a flaming red brain on her breast. I wanted her to feel as beautiful as she was right now in this moment and I wondered why Nick hadn't told her and why she

was staring at me staring at her and why couldn't she see that underneath the suits she wore and the ten-dollar words she flung about and the power she wielded and the money she earned and the freakishly shiny black car she drove that she was a mermaid or a goddess or a fairy princess.

"Zoe. Why are you looking at me like that?" she said.

"It's probably crazy," I said. "But would you ever consider letting me..." I knew, the way she had been leaning in, admiring the precision in my fingers and the swirls on my palette and the brilliance I'd applied to the princess's eyes that day that I could make her say yes. "I mean, it's just that you're . . . look at you. You're stunning right now. The way your belly and your breasts look in that top, and the way your..."

She drew back, alarmed. Her lips parted slightly, her cheeks suddenly flush. I couldn't help it, though. I wanted to see her naked, her nipples erect in the air conditioning, her belly curved and ripe. I had to make her say yes.

"Would you let me paint your . . . you?" I scooted close enough to touch her, but she crossed her arms over her belly protectively.

"Oh, trust me. Nobody wants to see th—"

"I do," I interrupted. "I do so much. I mean, not you specifically, but it's just that... you really just have no idea how attractive you are right now." She winced self-consciously, so I turned around and resumed painting the orange flecks in the princess's eyes. "I'm sorry," I said. "Forget it."

The moment passed. "Did you see that?" she said a few minutes later. "Did you see my shirt move when she moved?"

"No. I was. The eyes," I answered. "Will she do it again, though? Because I'd really like to."

Lori sat in the glider, her belly protruding, her legs parted, watching me work on the eyes. "Oh!" she said. "She's doing it again."

I set my palette on top of the stepladder and went to her, kneeling on the floor in front of her. She studied me for a moment and then tentatively lifted her shirt above her round middle. She pulled her pants down low to expose her bare belly to me. She placed my hand on her hardened tummy and placed hers on top of mine, to direct it. She said, "Just wait. She'll do it again."

She guided my hand several times, and I felt Tasha flutter and bob inside. We watched twice as the distorted contour of a tiny limb—a hand or elbow or heel, perhaps—moved across the globe that was Lori's belly. "This is easily the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," I told her. I spoke near the other side of her belly and Tasha moved toward my voice.

"I know, but it's also uncanny," she said. "Don't you think?" Her skin was hot and hard, taut and tight. I wanted to press my mouth to her stomach, to feel the strangeness of her on my lips. I knew Nick must have done the same, that he probably hummed and whispered onto the space between his mouth and her womb, and then kissed it over and over again.

"I could paint your hips like scales, give you shells on the top. And I would paint a little, tiny mermaid in utero right there," I said. I pointed to the firmest spot where Tasha was still moving, Lori's belly stretching and forming around her. "Her head would be here." I splayed my fingers out, touching as much of her skin as I could with one hand. "And her fin would be curled up here, the same color scales as yours. It would be cobalt and sapphire and all the shades of love," I said.

We sat like this, waiting. Lori, contemplating the idea, waiting for the baby to move in the silence. Me, waiting for Lori to take that movement as a sign, waiting for her to look at me with soft eyes and say yes. The baby, waiting for us to resume conversation, so it could glide nearer to my voice.

"What would her face look like?" Lori said, finally.

"Like perfection," I said.

And then Lori, having taken a little kick from the inside, dissolved into a yes.

I spent the next two hours painting Lori. I liked the way her skin prickled when I told her to lay back in the glider and relax as I applied the primer. I liked the way made her catch her breath each time my brush—whether wet and thick and slick with the richest pigmented body paint or soft and wispy with gem powder—tickled her unclothed breasts. I layered and shaded and smoothed and glittered and trailed my fingers along her voluptuous curving slopes. I very much liked that she didn't know if she liked this or not. As I began the finish work—the application of the metallic sparkle to the seashells I painted atop her breasts, she sat up abruptly. Before she even completely situated herself—somehow fuller and more beautiful now—on the edge of the glider, she leaned in and then, gently and slowly put her lips on mine. Unsteady, she placed her hands behind my head and pulled my face closer to hers. Her tongue was sinuous, and I liked it, so I kissed her back. Because I wanted to. Because she was a mermaid. And because it didn't matter; I didn't like her that much anyway. I knew when she did it that I would not be finishing the princess's eyes that day.

"Oh my God, Zoe," Lori said suddenly. She pushed me away. "That didn't just happen. You can't tell Nick that happened." Lori propelled herself clumsily from the glider and scrambled to grab a stack of folded cloth diapers from the top of the baby's armoire. Hastily she began smearing the mermaid-in-utero off her belly.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "I—the—we should get pictures—" She stopped and looked, hard, at me. She started again, this time wiping more awkwardly, with wild, broad sweeps. "Lori! You're ruining the—Stop it!"

"I just kissed you, Zoe," she shouted at me, shaking.

"I know," I said, calmly. I didn't know what to say next, though.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I don't know where that came from. That was. I don't know what that was." She rubbed at the paint, smearing my work on the baby beyond recognition. She was harsh and frantic, panic firing from her eyes. "I mean, I'm sure you've been with a *million* women, but I. I don't—"

"Lori. It's okay," I said. She started to cry. "Look. I did some body painting at the community center a few years ago, and the same thing happened," I lied. "It is a sensual, intimate experience, body painting. It often confuses the brain's ability to rationalize." I wanted to sound like I knew what I was talking about. I wanted to scoop out her brain and dissolve it with paint thinner inside a heart shaped dish and then place it, freshly gelled, into her head again. "It's just art, Lori," I said. "Don't worry. It didn't happen." She watched me say it and I watched her try, hard, to process it.

"So you won't tell Nick?" she said. She stood there, appearing to be pleading with me inside her head, horrified in her own impulsiveness, confounded and shaken and scared for something her heart made her do. She wrung her hands and averted her eyes. I wanted to kiss her lips again, for real this time, to see why Nick loved them so much. I needed to savor her and see what she tasted like. I touched a blue star I'd painted on her forehead and instinctively, mechanically, and without any consultation whatsoever from the place inside me that was lucid or rational or sane, I trailed my finger along her nose and lips and chin, along her esophagus, onto her chest, and then cupped my hand over her heart. Her breasts were full and ripe and round, and although she was covered in primer and paint and powder and shame, I wanted to taste them too.

"I never tell other people's secrets," I told her. I watched Lori's eyes widen and then—in a flash of a second—I watched her heart break. It always happens so fast and hard, doesn't it? It was the only time I'd seen it happen since I told Nick to marry Lori, and in this moment here, even though I'd never planned a provocation, though I'd never planned to hurt her or hurt Nick or hurt myself again, I realized how much I'd been yearning for it. To this day, I long to reconstruct that brokenness in every piece I create.

Lori's eyes moved back and forth from my left to my right, slowly at first and then more rapidly. Her breathing increased and her eyes filled. She stood there in the

nursery, naked, smudged and smeared and brand new in her deepest, darkest knowledge, but without any important or impressive words, without dicing me into as many chunks as she should have.

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T hungry. milk? I feel bad bothering him. He will likely tell me my endless texts were overwhelming and that I should have been able to deal with one dog and one baby for two hours until he could get back to me, but I already offered Tasha the half-and-half, and I don't know what else to try. I take off my T-shirt and she toddles after me into the laundry room. "You pooped on my shirt!" I tell her, starting the machine. It seems ludicrous to wash just one shirt, but I can't tell what's clean and what's dirty so I toss it in with a cup of OxiClean, a cup of Tide, a cup of Clorox, and a cup of fabric softener. Tasha fusses so I pick her up and carry her into the living room. She pokes at my naked chest with her pudgy fingers so I put her down. She fusses some more. I sort through the sweatpants, nursing bras, granny panties, and colorless laundry—is it too much to ask a new mom to wear something in red or orange or purple?—until I come across a plain grey sweatshirt.

Nick texts me back. *coming now. 20 minutes.*

Tasha cries, "Mama mama mama."

"Just a minute, Tasha," I say to her. "Look at all this crap I have to get done before your dad gets home!"

"Mamama," she cries. The dog knocks the Diaper Genie over onto the deck outside the sliding glass doors, and begins tearing into the shitty diapers. "Mama mama mamamamama," Tasha cries.

"Tasha! I'm not your mama!" I yell, and then I realize it's not she who's confused; I am. And how fast that happens too. The brain just swoops sometimes and a person doesn't even know what's left or right.

I remember reading in the tiny clippings of a collage once, at a gallery exhibit about mothers and children, that baths are effective mood boosters. I remember it because of the way it was worded. Mood boosters. It had occurred to me at the time that baths were effective mood boosters for frustrated artists too. And just human beings in general, no matter who they are or how they think. Tasha's face is crunchy with snot and her mood is definitely in need of boosting, so I carry her to the bathroom. It is remarkable the things you learn at an art exhibit. I do not want Nick to see her unhappy with me.

* * *

I told him we were just friends. I told him I wanted him to be happy. I told him I needed to be happy too. I told him I was going to marry Jack and he should buy the ring that Lori had been pestering him to buy. It was classic Hollywood, standing in the rain, under the flamingo-necked street lamps. He was waiting, staring at me, asking my permission, and hoping I wouldn't give it. So I stood there looking back at him, wanting—but not as hard as he—and I watched his heart break. It was easy. It was a relief, actually. He deserved a woman like Lori who enjoyed thinking about things like politics and science and difficult literature. He needed a woman who could organize and strategize and rationalize his behavior when he got caught fucking women like me. He didn't crumble into my arms or beg me to love him. I expected him to eventually, but he never did, and in the end, that's exactly what made me love him.

"I didn't like you that much anyway," he said. "I know," I said. We were both lying.

* * *

Nick finds me in the bathroom, hunched over his child, who is splashing and laughing. "Hey honey, I'm home. What'd you do today?" he says sardonically. I rise to meet him at the door. I need to hug him still, but he says, "No! You have to stay right there. Lori says if you move, she'll fall over and drown." I quickly sit back down, tubside, alarmed by his concern. He takes a seat on the toilet lid and puts his head in his hands. "Dada dada," chants Tasha excitedly. I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything. Tasha drools into the bath water.

"I couldn't call her parents," he finally says. "You're the only person I could call." I splash the water a little, driving a toy boat gently into Tasha's belly. This makes her giggle.

"She likes you," he says.

I answer, "Yeah." I know we are both thinking, in this instant, that this could have been me. I hope we are both thinking *thank God it's not*.

"How long has this been . . . you know," I say.

"I don't know. Something seemed to change just before Tasha was born. I don't think she's . . . you know . . . well," he says.

"Can I? Is there anything?" I say. I still want to touch his hair. I want to tell him it will be okay. But I still don't really know what it is. He watches me as I rub my fingers over Tasha's damp hair. Her eyelashes are long and wet. She splashes and then looks surprised and then violated before giggling again.

"She says she doesn't want you here," Nick says abruptly. "She says she doesn't want you around the baby." This takes me by surprise. "But I. I kind of like it," he says.

There are words in every relationship that begin unraveling everything that has ever been stitched together. They often seem innocuous enough, and sometimes we often do not even know they are being spoken until they are out there hanging in the echoing silence, hopelessly unable to be taken back again.

"Yeah. So what the fuck is that, Nick? *Depression*?" I ask him. "Is that what it's going to be? Is that how it's going to be now?" He takes his head out of his hands. "Are we just going to do this behind her back then? For how long? Are we going to keep doing this every time she gets a little sad? Maybe I'll just sneak over and be her stand-in, because I'm available? Because I've always been?" He doesn't know how to respond.

I remove Tasha from the water and pat the drops from her tender skin, gently wrapping her with a luxurious mushroom-colored towel. It matches the sofa, the master bedroom, the wall-to-wall carpet. Everything except the nursery. Tasha burbles something and then leans in to plant her wet mouth on mine. It takes me by surprise. "She's learned to kiss," Nick says, ignoring my exasperation. I set her in his lap on the toilet and Nick says, "Give *Daddy* kiss too." While he is still coaxing Tasha to put her wet mouth on his, I turn to make my way through the hall and down the stairs.

"Where are you going?" Nick calls to me when he realizes I'm not just heading down the hall to fetch a diaper and some jammies. "Zoe!" he calls out again.

I realize my key is still upstairs, on top of Tasha's armoire, so I walk back across the living room, past the patio door where Buster is jumping up and scraping, making a muddy paw painting with each pass, past the laundry pile that is neither terribly clean nor terribly dirty, and up the stairs again.

"Zoe please," Nick says again, as I take the key in hand. He has placed Tasha atop the changing table and is sloppily pulling a diaper across her round middle. He secures it and then lifts her down off the changing table. "Things will get better soon. They will have to." He picks up the hair thing from the edge of the table and thumb-tacks it back into the wall, through a new place in the princess's eye. I watch him do it. Tasha toddles over to me and attaches herself to my leg. When I don't pick her up, she reaches up to me with both arms.

"I need you, Zoe," he says to me. "We both do." I can't tell if he means Lori and I or Tasha and I. "Don't leave."

Tasha gurgles and babbles at my feet. I pick her up and she leans toward her daddy, so I hand her back to Nick. He places her back on the floor in front of the plastic toy. I turn and pause in the nursery's doorway, sighing for dramatic effect. I open my

mouth to say I'm sorry, but then I change my mind. Nick puts his hands on my hips and twirls me around. "Come on," he says.

"Stop it. You know I'll be back," I tell him. "My shirt's in your washing machine." I gesture at the mural. "And anyway, I have to come back to fix her. I have to fix the eyes."

He glances at the wall. He looks at me, confused.

He knows nothing.

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