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In the Aftermath



The first time I ever bled, I fainted and hit my head against the purple door of the school bathroom stall and I had a goose egg on my forehead for three days. It had happened a little earlier than with most girls, so my mother hadn't yet sat me down to have "that talk." I was nine, and I'd never been so scared in my entire life.

Until eleven days ago when I relived that day, but a hundred times worse. Because this time, when I awoke to that familiar squeeze in the deepest recess of my belly, when I found a spill of Merlot in my light blue bikini cut panties, I wasn't nine years old anymore. I was nine weeks pregnant.



I lay in bed on a Monday morning, and watch my husband Adam as he dresses for work. The man is a work of art. A masterpiece. He has put time and discipline into shaping his sculpted muscles, and he has a tendency to turn heads, even now in his early thirties. I've always loved

watching him move, so strong and assertive and...well, for lack of a less cheesy term, suave.

But today there is something different in his movements, which I've been noticing the past several days. It's more prominent now, as he prepares to go back to his office for the first time since that day that he rushed me to the emergency room, the both of us hoping that it was all a giant nightmare. I watch him pull on a plain blue button-down over his skin-tight undershirt and stiffly loop the buttons through their holes with trembling fingers. He tucks and untucks his shirt into his grey slacks four times before looping and buckling his belt. He ties his tie into a double Windsor knot, his movements slow and robotic, as if he has to think through every step of a knot that a week and a half ago he tied while dancing around the kitchen and fixing our coffee.

I want to reach through my half-sleep to ask him if he is okay, but I can't do it. I don't know why; maybe exhaustion. Maybe I am afraid of the answer, because if the strongest man I know is not okay, then there is no hope for me. It's probably nothing, he hasn't tied his tie in eleven days, that's all. He's fine.

He takes his black dress shoes off the rack hanging on the inside of the closet door to bring them over to the foot of the bed where he sits every weekday morning to tie them. As he turns around, he sees me watching him, and his face softens into a weary smile. His eyes are swollen from restless sleep and he hasn't shaved in at least three days, but still he looks handsome.

"Hannah," he says softly, and then he crawls into bed next to me and curls his arms around my body. "I didn't know you were awake."

I make an incoherent sound, trying not to stiffen under his embrace. I don't know why, but ever since that day I can't relax in his arms. His touch has always been the most comforting thing in the world to me, but somehow now I can't keep my spine from tensing and my lungs from constricting. I know he's noticed the difference but he hasn't said anything about it.

"Should I stay?" Adam asks. "I don't have to go to work. I can take more time."

He said this to me at least fourteen times yesterday.

I shake my head, my short dark hair catching in the stubble on his chin.

"You sure?" His voice cracks mid-whisper.

"I'm sure. You should go. The doctor said it'd be better if we got back to our normal routine."

The doctor didn't say that, actually. He said that we should take

all the time we needed to rest and grieve. Adam knows this as well as I do—he was with me the whole time. But he doesn't press the matter, and I am relieved.

I am not sure of the moment that he leaves for work. I had dozed off again in his arms, and I don't know how long he stayed with me before he slipped off the bed, pulled on his shoes, and backed his green truck out of the driveway.

In my dreams I keep reliving that horrible moment. Eleven days ago. On a Thursday. I had planned on having lunch with Adam's mother. We were going to spend the afternoon picking out paint colors and bedspreads and I knew I would end up faking enthusiasm over her every outdated and tacky suggestion, then picking everything out with Adam another day. Thank God he didn't get his taste from her.

But all those silly plans were canceled when I woke up to stabbing pain and torrential bleeding. Funny how something that happens every month under normal circumstances can suddenly become your worst nightmare.

I screamed, and Adam was in the bathroom seconds later, holding me as I vomited, trying to get me cleaned up and clothed, carrying me out to the truck and driving me to the emergency room. Poor guy didn't know what to do. He just kept touching my knee and squeezing my hand and saying, "I gotcha," because there was nothing else to say.

We've said very few words since then. It's like we're on opposite sides of a glass door. We can see each other, we can place our palms perfectly aligned against the glass, but no matter how close we get we can't seem to really touch.

I spent the next eight-and-a-half days after that in bed and the torrents continued, the tempest ravaging the life inside of me. It was too early to know the gender, but Adam and I had both had this gut feeling that we were having a she. We called her Charlotte—*Charlie*. And it would be an easy switch to Charles if we turned out to be wrong. All that time I lay there wondering, what do most people do with the name they've chosen? Do they recycle it for the next baby, pretend the first one never happened? It seemed so insensitive, like the baby who died didn't count, she was just a practice run. If we'd lost an eight year old, we wouldn't

give any other child the same name; it would seem like we were trying to replace the irreplaceable.

Which, of course, led me back to the question of getting pregnant again. That seemed impossible. It seemed like I would never stop bleeding. And even if I did, would another baby be safe inside me? I wasn't safe for baby Charlie. Maybe I drank too much coffee, maybe I took too many walks, maybe I didn't do enough yoga or eat enough protein. Maybe she didn't hear my voice enough, maybe I was too grouchy with Adam, maybe I was somehow unfit to carry life. Maybe I ran too fast to the bathroom every time morning sickness set in, maybe I didn't pray enough or maybe I used soaps with too many parabens in them.

And worst of all. Maybe it would happen again.



I had never felt so weak and tiny as I did sitting in that bland, boxy hospital room under flickering fluorescent lights, with a paper thin gown loosely covering me fastened only by a few strings tied along my spine. I couldn't bring myself to cry; I couldn't even look at Adam. I had lost my baby and my dignity. I felt like that nine year old again, scared and embarrassed, sitting in the elementary school nurse's office with her secret exposed to everyone.

A nurse I hadn't seen before came in to check my temperature and blood pressure right before I was dismissed, even though three other nurses had already checked them in the time that I had been there.

The nurse had bags under her eyes and rough, dry hands, and the demeanor of someone who had been up all night and didn't want to look at another patient, or even another human being. She tore off the blood pressure cuff with a sharp tearing sound and said, "Alright, you're good to go."

"Wait," I breathed, grabbing her wrist in a moment of desperation which she was clearly not inclined to deal with. "What do I do?"

I was almost begging at this point. I don't know what I expected, or *wanted*, her to say to me. Maybe the same thing I wanted to hear from Adam but was afraid to ask, maybe because I was afraid of the answer, or maybe just afraid he wouldn't understand. I needed to know that it wasn't my fault, that it wouldn't happen again, that I couldn't have done anything differently. That Charlotte didn't feel any pain, that this was somehow better for her.

The nurse sighed and picked up my chart, trying to muster the energy to see to the needs of her final patient before she could presumably

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end her shift. She clicked the button of her pen up and down, and said, calmly but hastily, as if it had been rehearsed a hundred times, “You’ll experience some heavy bleeding and cramping for about a week. You might notice some tissue and clotting. You can use a heating pad and take Tylenol or Motrin for the pain. Drink a lot of water and take it easy.” And then she was gone.

I could hear Adam quietly crying next to me, but still, I couldn’t shed a tear, not as long as anyone was in the room. I just stared into the vacant space where the nurse had been, wishing she was still there, wishing I could grab the neckline of her ugly pink scrubs and scream into her haggard face.

I knew my anger was unfounded. I knew it wasn’t her fault. But there had been more, *so* much more, to my question. I know what to do about a bad period. I’m a grown woman, for God’s sake. I’m not nine years old anymore.

What do I do when my baby just died?



Last night, the night before Adam’s first day back at work, he tried to make love to me. I didn’t know why he even wanted to. I had hardly moved from that bed in ten days. I needed to change the white linen sheets—they smelled like sweat and tears and unwashed hair. But still he crawled on top of me. My flat belly caved in under the stroke of his fingers, my neck curled away from his burrowed chin. Every inch of me retreated, and despite his whispering, “*Hannah...please,*” I pressed my palms against his chest and gently pushed him away.

His soft grey eyes misted over with more concern than hurt and he asked me, “You aren’t still bleeding, are you, baby?” And we both silently winced at his word choice.

I hadn’t bled in two days. But I so badly wanted to tell him yes, so that I would at least have a reason for not letting him touch me. A reason that I could explain, a reason that he wouldn’t question, and that wouldn’t hurt him. But I had to tell him the truth, because a lie would have resulted in a worried husband and an unnecessary trip back to the hospital.

“No,” I whispered, “I’m not.”

I couldn’t say anything else. I couldn’t look in those eyes, the eyes that I had never said no to, until now.

He laid down on his back next to me, facing the ceiling, an invisible line between us.



Around noon on Monday, I finally can't stay in bed anymore. So much rest has made me feel like I've been hit by a train; funny how it works backwards sometimes. I poke around the dark house, I change the soiled bedsheets, I listen to the concerned voicemails left by Adam's mother. She is the only one who knows what happened, and if I'd had it my way, we wouldn't have told anyone at all for at least a few more weeks.

She left at least one message every day.

"Hannah? Honey, how are you doing?"

"I made a casserole for you and Adam, I'll drop it by this afternoon."

"This happens, honey, you've got to just keep going. Please pick up the phone..."

"Do you want me to come clean the house for you?"

I delete every single one of them without listening to any the whole way through.

It irritates me when I realize she's right—my house is a mess. I pick up a laundry basket and slowly gather all of the dirty clothes around the house, still tired and achy. Adam has a habit of leaving socks and t-shirts in random places, so laundry has always been a scavenger hunt. I wash all of the clothes we've worn over the past week and a half, which for me is only sweatpants and tank tops.

I haven't bothered to open the blinds, so the afternoon slips away into dusk without my noticing. I can hear Adam's truck pulling up the driveway as I stack the piles of folded clean laundry into his dresser drawers.

I open his empty sock drawer. There is a rattling sound in the back of the drawer as it slides across the track and I pull it open farther to see what's inside. It isn't like Adam to hide things. I reach in, and what I see in my hand makes me feel like I'm going to vomit.

"Hannah?" I hear him call as he bounds up the stairs two at a time. "I'm home."

He comes and stands in the doorway, his eyes wide with guilt as he sees what is in my hand.

I recognized it right away. It was the pregnancy test I had taken six weeks ago, still reading positive.

"You kept this?" I choke. "Why?"

He swallows, scratching nervously at his beard. "I found it in the trash after...that day."

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I had planned on keeping it, before that Thursday eleven days ago. A weird thing to put in a scrapbook, but I didn't care. But after that day, I couldn't look at it again.

"You dug it out?" I ask, still holding it, but unable to look at it.

He walks towards me slowly, as if the floor between us were a thin sheet of ice. "It's all I have of Charlie. All *we* have."

I try to hold back the tears but they have already begun to spill down my face.

He cradles my cheeks in his palms, stroking away my tears with his rough thumbs. "I lost her too, Hannah."

He puts his arms around me, and this time I don't push him away.