



PERFECT BED

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Not again, I think, Not this soon. I don't say anything, but I don't need to. She's already picked up on something, a sigh or twitch, something barely perceptible.

"Gary, I don't think you understand," Taylor says, like I can't know what she's going through. It's as if she thinks I have never had to pee before. This is the last trip we'll be able to make to the beach house this summer, and so far, she has to stop at every single gas station we have passed. She doesn't even look pregnant yet, and already she's feeling it. She talks about the constant, dull pain in her back, the fatigue, the nausea. Already, her breasts are changing. She complains of their tenderness, and her areolas have turned from their old tender pink to tan.

We've gone twenty minutes without seeing anyone or anything, save the few pairs of glowing eyes we catch a glimpse of before we pass and leave them in the dark. We're coming up on this backwoods gas station, a real shit hole, the kind of place you wouldn't want to stop if you were about to rupture a kidney. I slow down a bit. There's just two gas pumps and a couple of pit bulls

chained in the grass a few feet from the door. They don't even bother to raise their heads, just looking around with their small, dark eyes.

“You don't really want to stop here, do you?” She acts like she doesn't hear me. I tell her, “We're going to be at the house soon.” She looks me in the eye because this is a dare to her. She was the only girl out of four children and has always prided herself in being tougher than other women. When she was younger she'd go out of her way to prove it; she'd search out small motors to fix and snakes to catch. She can sit on the nastiest toilet in five counties without pause, and she's going to show me.

I park the car, and she walks up to the store, hands in her pockets. The only lightpost casts a dull yellow onto her skin and makes her shadow tall and stark as she strides away.

There was a time when I could not picture her naked. Before we started seeing each other, I would try to think of the way she might look, but something about her body resisted being imagined. I sometimes came close, but still all I could see was her strong face and the bevel of her jaw. It's funny how sex helped me see her clearly. Now, I can make her out as she is. The dim light from another room shows me the gentle dip in her collarbone, the cinch of her waist, and her own hands pulling me closer into her hips.

When she finally comes out, she's got an issue of *Parenting* magazine in her hands, not the copy of *Weekly World News* she used to read out loud on

the way with headlines like “World’s Fattest Couple steals World’s Fattest Cat,” or “Man in the Moon is Peeping Tom.”

She doesn’t worry about the money. She doesn’t worry about my family’s history of heart disease, or how delicate and small her hips are. She has started taking vitamins and throwing baby names around, but she was careless enough to get the first pregnancy test from the Dollar Store. Who knew the Dollar Store had their own brand of pregnancy test? I went out and bought her an E.P.T., because somehow I just don’t like the idea of a pregnancy test costing less than a buck. She’s been carrying it around in her purse for a week. She is too calm.

She hops back into the car and flips the sun visor down to use the small light on it. I see her smiling out of the corner of my eye. Recently, I’ve been wondering if she really even put the diaphragm in. I guess there weren’t any real promises: we never made any spoken agreements. But they were implicit. That’s what I thought she was doing when she went to the bathroom those times, putting the diaphragm in. Every time I imagined her holding the silver disk of the thing up to the light. But not that time. Maybe she just looked at herself in the mirror, knowing that would be it.

As we drive away from the station, I watch her thumb through the glossy baby photos. They’re staring up into her face, and she’s staring down at theirs.

Both of them are frozen, her face in a look of unashamed adoration. I ask her, “How do you think the kid’s gonna feel about being an accident?”

She pauses a moment to see if I’ll correct myself. I don’t.

“An accident?” she says, “Like a car accident? Or a machinery accident?”

“No, not like that—”

“Accident, like when someone falls asleep at the wheel or loses their hand in a combine?” she says, and by this time her lips are tight together and the magazine’s lying in the floorboard.

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

She turns away to the stretch of countryside. From the side, I can see her jaw clenching and unclenching, the side of her eye darting back and forth. Finally, she whips back around. “Well, what were you?” she asks.

“What?”

“What were you? Were you a plan, or were you an accident?”

I’ve never really thought about it before. “They were married four years before they had me,” I say.

“I didn’t ask if you were legitimate, I asked you if you were an accident.”

“No, I wasn’t an accident.” I’m not really sure of this though.

“That’s where you and I differ,” she said, and picks the magazine up again, folding over the cover of a fat baby’s face. She lays her head on the window and falls asleep to the sound of the motor.

Even when we started going out two years ago, she was always watching kids and pointing out something cute, like the drool running down their faces or picking food up off the ground and eating it. I always knew she was a maternal girl from the times I’d wake up and she’d be stroking the side of my face, the way she was always asking how I’m doing, how she knows someone’s feeling rotten. It’s like depression radar. But I didn’t think she was that eager to have kids.

She fidgets when the tires crunch on acorns in the driveway. I’m about to get out and start unpacking when she stretches in the car seat and turns around. There’s a little red spot near her temple where she was leaning on the glass.

The beach house is still the same place Taylor ran barefoot in the summer twenty years ago, but with more leaves. She grew up here, and her parents also spent their last years, but since they passed away, she and her brothers and their families have only used the house for vacations. For months at a time in the winter, it is completely empty.

I turn on the lights to the house and carry the bags past some faded pictures of Taylor as a half-naked child digging in the sand. There are little

pieces of her and her brothers' child artwork hanging on the walls. I see those pictures, and I can't help feeling that there are things I will never know about her.

While she goes to the bathroom again, I take the sheets out of the closet. I start to pull the case over one of the pillows. I've always had trouble making beds. The sheets always slip from my hands, the opposite corners always come undone, and I can never get all the wrinkles out. I'm trying to stuff the second pillow when Taylor walks into the room. She smiles and shakes her head. "Here," she says, taking the pillow from me and sliding it into the case in with a few quick motions. We go through our routine for making our bed. We grab the fitted sheet and each take a side of the bed, pulling it around the corners. She flattens out the wrinkles with both arms in a wide, sweeping motion. I don't know how she does it. It's perfect. We unfold the top sheet together and put it over the bed. Each holding a side of the sheet, we throw it into the air. For a moment, we're both holding the sheet over our heads. It's ballooning above us, and I see her smiling on the other side in the milky light.

We fall onto the bed. We sit there for a moment, and then she looks over at me. "Let's look for ghost crabs," she says.

We walk out to the beach, the lighthouse spinning around. We herd the ghost crabs with a flashlight and watch them scuttle away from the beams. "They're almost see-through," she says as they each dart into their own little

holes. They remind me of what must be inside of her, the jelly and tissue floating in a pink ocean, like the pictures you see in your high school biology book. Those pictures creep me out, to tell you the truth.

“God,” she says and holds her head up, her nose shadowing one side of her face from the moonlight.

“What is it?”

“I have to piss again,” she says and looks around, like a toilet might have just been summoned by her voice. She looks out to the sea and starts ripping off her clothes.

“What the hell are you doing?” I said, but by this time she was throwing her shirt to the ground.

“I can’t wait any longer,” she said, hopping on one leg in a circle trying to take off her jeans. She scratches at her back trying to pull her bra over her head. The clothes make a trail out to the ocean. She runs out into the water, splashing her thighs and falling into the waves. I walk closer and see how the small of her back cups the light below the valley of her spine, her shoulder blades spread like white plates. I’m at the edge of the water now, my feet sinking deeper with each wave. Once the water is up to her neck, she sighs and looks at the moon. Then she stands up, rubs her neck and starts to wade back to me.