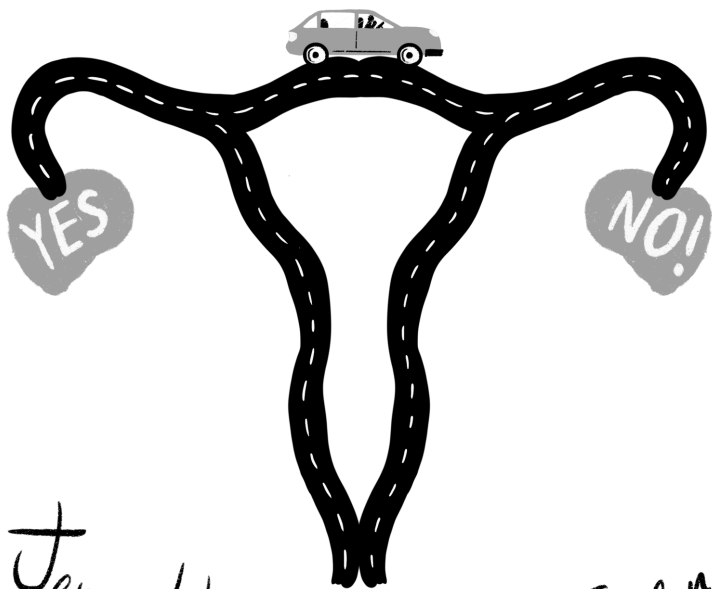


UNPREGNANT



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For our children

MILE 0



Sitting on the icy-cold toilet seat in the third stall of the girls' bathroom, I desperately squeezed my thighs together and concentrated on not peeing.

'Ronnie, you done in there? We gotta book it if we're gonna make it to first period,' Emily asked. No, I wasn't almost done. And a late slip was the least of my concerns.

'Uh, go ahead. I've got . . . girl issues.' Just not the monthly kind.

I prayed Emily would leave quickly. That second glass of orange and guava juice this morning had definitely been a mistake. Curse its pulpy goodness. Finally, she opened the door. The bathroom echoed with pounding footsteps as everyone hurried to class, then . . . silence. I remained frozen, straining to hear the slightest sound of a student, or worse, a teacher, approaching. But there was only the occasional drip from a tap. Everyone was in homeroom. I let out a sigh of relief. And almost peed.

It was time to find out if my nightmare was over or only just beginning. I slowly unzipped the front pouch of my backpack and winced as the sound reverberated off the tiled walls. Even though I was alone, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone would know what I was about to do. I reached deep into my backpack, felt around the pens and broken pencils scattered at the bottom, and found what I'd hidden there. I sat back down and studied the object in my hand. It felt heavier than I remembered.

I'd read the instructions last night. Then again when I woke up. And once more after breakfast. I was nothing if not a good student. But now that the moment had come, my throat constricted with panic. What if I missed the stick? What if I did it wrong? I only had one of these and I couldn't mess it up. I took a deep breath. I had a freakin' 4.56 GPA, a membership in the National Honor Society, and was going to Brown University in the fall. I could damn well pee on a stick.

I ripped open the thick foil and pulled out the pregnancy test. The little plastic window stared back at me, blank, waiting to tell my fate. Trying not to think of what I was about to do, I stuck the thing between my legs and peed.

For a moment I was lost in the bliss of a rapidly emptying bladder, then a stab of panic struck. I'd forgotten a step. The instructions had said to pee a little first and *then* stick the test down there. Would not doing that invalidate

the results? I looked down to see if the test was working. The fibrous wick was soaked, and the little plastic window was turning a light grey. Was it supposed to do that? Or did that mean I'd broken it? Should I stop peeing?

Then, in the window, a thin pink line began to appear. My stomach dropped, until I remembered the little pamphlet had called it a control line. Two lines needed to appear to indicate pregnancy. I hoped the line meant the test was working right. Especially since I was out of pee. Careful to keep the test as flat as possible – as per the instructions – I pulled it from between my legs. Three minutes. I could read the results in three minutes. They were going to be the longest three minutes of my life.

I looked anywhere but at the little window. I wasn't the type to fix my make-up obsessively or smoke illicit substances, so the girls' bathroom wasn't exactly a place I'd spent a lot of time in over the last four years. Forty-five seconds of staring at the stall walls told me I hadn't missed much. The only thing to distract me was one mildly amusing caricature of our principal and several dire warnings about the diseased genitals of the football team – no surprise there. I dared a peek at the test. Still one line.

Hope exploded in my chest. Maybe I was just late. Maybe this was me panicking over nothing. Like when I thought I'd bombed the second essay on my Advanced Placement English test. Even though I hadn't fully elucidated the

thematic similarities between Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, I'd still scored a five.

I had been under a lot of stress with college admissions and prom and finals. Not to mention being in the running for valedictorian. I was probably just late. I blinked. Was that the faintest whisper of a second line appearing? Leaning towards the stall door, I tried to angle a little more light on to the window. If I could just—

The door to the bathroom slammed open.

I jumped. In slow motion, I saw the test bounce from my hands, brushing past the tips of my fingers. Lunging forward, I made a desperate grab for it, but found only air. Tipping end over end, it fell to the floor, landed on the tile with an impossible-not-to-hear crack, skittered under the stall door and spun to a stop right in the dead centre of the bathroom floor.

OK, this was not the time to panic. I needed to keep it together. Maybe they wouldn't see it. Maybe they were blind. And deaf. Maybe there would be a massive earthquake and the school would collapse and we'd all die. Missouri had to have a fault line somewhere.

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp. From under the stall door, I saw a pair of scuffed black combat boots walk over to where the test lay, perfectly highlighted by a beam of sunlight. A hand reached down, chipped green nail polish on bitten-down fingernails.

‘Whoa.’

Who was it? Who now held my pee-covered future in their hand? I peered through the crack in the stall door. Oversized black T-shirt. Ripped skinny jeans a size too small. Faded turquoise hair with black roots that looked like it hadn’t seen a brush in days.

No. The high school gods couldn’t be that cruel. Bailey Butler. Jefferson High’s very own black hole of anger and darkness. If you said hello in the halls, she’d flip you off. Not to mention what she’d do if you tried to sit with her at lunch. She had a whole table to herself in the cafeteria because she literally barked at people when they tried to sit down. Rumour had it that when the quarterback of the football team had said something to piss her off, she’d bought a pocketknife and engraved his name on it. She was sullen. She was cynical. She was deeply unpleasant to be around. She also used to be my best friend.

Bailey lifted the test to her nose and sniffed. ‘Still fresh.’ She scanned the bathroom, her gaze stopping when she saw my white Adidas Superstars. ‘Oh, this is going to be fun.’

Would she still know my voice? It’d been almost four years since we last spoke. Just to be safe, I pitched it low and gravelly. ‘Uh, if you could just slide that back under here, that’d be great.’ I stuck my hand out beneath the door and hoped she was feeling merciful.

Bailey snorted. ‘Nice try. But I’m pretty sure Batman can’t get pregnant.’ Through the gap in the door, I saw her begin to pace back and forth, hands behind her back, the corners of her mouth curling upwards. Great. I knew that smile. It was the one I imagined Catholic priests wore when they carried out the Spanish Inquisition.

‘Chloe McCourt?’ Bailey ventured. I sat on the toilet in stony silence. No way was I playing this game. I’d just wait her out. Bailey narrowed her eyes. ‘No. Calvin broke up with her. No way she landed another dude already after she burnt his football uniform in the quad; I don’t care how big her titties are. Hmmm. This is a tricky one. Ella Tran? She’s dumb enough to confuse her mints with her birth control.’

‘Give it back.’ I tried to make my lowered voice sound forceful, but it just came out desperate.

Bailey squinted, examining my shoes. ‘Well, there’s always long-time subscriber to the Penis of the Month Club, Olivia Blume . . .’

‘No!’ I burst out, offended.

‘Oooh. Judgy. A clue. Who thinks they’re better than everyone else?’ Bailey tapped her chin. ‘Faith Bidwell?’ Bailey wasn’t going to give up. I had to end it before someone else came in.

‘Darn it. Don’t tell anyone. Can you hand it back now?’ I waited with my hand extended. I wasn’t sure she bought

my B-plus performance, but Bailey walked towards the stall. Maybe she was getting bored of the game. I felt a flutter of hope. But then instead of bending down to hand me the test, she leapt up and grabbed the top of the stall door.

‘Holy donkey balls!’

I yelped. Bailey was hanging over the top and grinning down at me.

‘Bailey! Get down!’ I frantically waved her away.

‘Am I dreaming? Life cannot be this perfect,’ she crowed.

My cheeks went red as I fumbled with my clothes, trying to yank my underwear and jeans on without exposing myself to Bailey’s laughing eyes.

‘Do you mind?’ I glared up at her.

Amazingly, Bailey slid down without protest. My clothes back on, I banged open the stall door. She was waiting for me.

‘Veronica Clarke, as I live and breathe,’ she drawled. ‘Hold on. I want to remember this moment for ever.’ She reached into her back pocket, pulled out her phone and aimed it at me.

‘Don’t you dare—’

She snapped the picture, then smiled as she studied the result. ‘Just how I’ll always remember you.’ Bailey flipped the phone around to show me the picture. I was half

lunging at the camera, my mouth open in a snarl.

‘Don’t post that!’ I yelled before I could stop myself. Total humiliation via social media was the last thing I needed right now.

Bailey smiled lovingly at the picture before pocketing her phone. ‘Relax. This is too special to share.’

‘Are we done now? You got what you wanted. You embarrassed me. You mocked me. You made my day worse than it already was. Now can you please give the test back?’

Bailey looked at my outstretched hand and cocked an eyebrow. ‘I see you’re still wearing your purity ring. Just keeping up appearances? Or is this some sort of virgin birth thing?’ I snatched my hand back, my cheeks aflame. Trust Bailey not to miss any tiny detail that could be used to torture me. ‘Wow. You really are the full cliché.’

‘I am not a cliché!’ I sputtered.

‘A prom queen, valedictorian, Christian pregnancy is pretty damn cliché.’

‘First, I’m up for valedictorian but Hannah Ballard has a lot more extra-curriculars than me. Even though I took more APs than her and I think that my charity work should be a factor—’

‘Oh God, you are such a nerd—’

‘And I was in prom *court*, not prom queen. So totally not a cliché,’ I finished.

‘You’re right. I stand corrected. My deepest apologies.’

You are full-cliché adjacent.'

'I know it's nearly impossible for you, but could you stop being a bitch for one minute?'

Bailey looked at me, mildly confused. 'No. Why would I do that?'

Something inside me snapped. After a week and a half of worry, stealing a pregnancy test from my older sister, not peeing all morning, now I had to deal with Bailey being Bailey? That expression about seeing red – it's not true. You actually see white. It was like a flash went off. The next thing I knew I was diving towards the hand holding the test. Bailey snatched it out of the way just in time, dancing back a few steps as I stumbled forward.

'Damn, girl. Chill. You're not getting this back until you promise me something.'

'Never gonna happen,' I snarled as I recovered my footing and launched myself at her a second time. She fell back against the sink, laughing at my futile attempts to wrest the test from her grip. Finally, I managed to grab her arm. I was using all my strength to try to get her to drop the test when I felt something cold and sharp against my neck.

'I said chill.'

I froze, then cautiously turned my eyes to look at our reflections in the bathroom mirror. Bailey was holding a black plastic box against my neck. It took a moment to register what the thing was, since up until now I'd only seen

them on cop shows. It was a Taser. She had a flippin' Taser.

'Oh my God. How did you get that into school? You could be expelled! And, like, less than a month before graduation!'

Bailey snorted. 'Of course that would be your first thought when someone pulls a Taser on you.' I released her wrist. Bailey lowered the thing and stepped away from me. 'Now, where were we? Oh yeah, the promise. I'll give you the test back if you can promise one very important thing: that your procreation partner wasn't Kevin Decuziac.'

I held back a groan. She knew Kevin was my boyfriend. The whole school did. He was the star of the soccer team. He played in our church band. Everyone liked him, even my parents. Sure, his grades were only OK, but his goofy sense of humour more than made up for it. And, most importantly, he was totally devoted to me. Only Bailey could have a problem with Kevin.

Seeing my expression, she crinkled her nose in mock horror. 'EEEEEEEEEEWWWWW!'

'I don't know why you're surprised,' I grumbled, defensive.

'I don't know, I guess I keep hoping you'll use that AP brain of yours and break up. Or that he'll die of Ebola or something. Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!' She made a choking sound, as if she were a cat with a hairball. 'I can't believe you let that clingy jock-hole inside you!' She bent over, pretending to

gag some more, and I noticed in her enthusiasm to act out her disgust, she'd placed the Taser on the edge of the sink.

I walked over and snatched it while she was busy pretending to vomit all over the floor. It took her several more dry heaves before she noticed the little black box pointed at her. When she did, her eyes widened a fraction and she smiled.

'Well, colour me impressed.'

'Hand it over.' I tried to make my voice sound threatening, like my dad's when he was mad at my brother for playing with one of his autographed baseballs.

'Do it.'

'What?' I lowered the Taser an inch, confused.

Bailey stepped closer, totally unconcerned by the not-lethal-but-still-probably-very-painful weapon pointed at her. 'I've never used it. I want to know what it feels like.'

Suddenly all the anger drained out of me. Bailey was still the same. Still the sort of person who would do something stupid, like let who-knows-how-many volts of electricity course through her just so she could say that she tried it. And it still irritated the crap out of me.

Bailey looked thoughtful. 'I wonder if I'll foam at the mouth.'

'I'm not going to tase you.'

Bailey sighed, disappointed. 'Figured.'

We stood staring at each other, not sure what should

happen next.

‘Come on, Bailey. We’re friends.’ It was the wrong thing to say. A cynical sneer twisted Bailey’s lips.

‘We are?’

‘I mean . . . well . . .’

‘Is it seventh grade again?’ Bailey widened her eyes in feigned surprise. She looked down at her chest. ‘Hmmm. I’ve got a sweet pair of double Ds, so probably not.’ She glared at me. ‘Which means . . . not friends.’

She was never going to give me the test. So I did the only thing I could think of. I took the Taser, dropped it in the sink and put my hand on the tap. A drop of water splashed on to the black plastic.

‘Give me the test or the Taser gets a bath.’ Real alarm flashed across Bailey’s face. I turned the tap a fraction of an inch. Another drop of water plunked on to the Taser. ‘Pretty sure this thing’s not waterproof.’

Bailey took an involuntary step towards me. ‘Don’t. My mom’ll kill me. It’s her favourite after the pink Glock. She’s super into self-protection nowadays.’

I smiled and held out my hand, waiting. With a sigh, Bailey slapped the test into my palm. My knees almost buckled under the wave of relief. Without a second glance at Bailey, I fled to the nearest stall and locked the door.

‘Oh, come on now,’ she called after me, ‘I thought we were besties. Don’t you want to share the moment?’

No. I didn't want to share the moment. I didn't want to be having this moment at all. And now that it was here, I couldn't face looking at that stupid test.

Bailey started singing an old Hannah Montana song. *'You're a true friend, you're here till the end . . .'*

Trying to block her out, I took a deep breath and looked down. Two little pink lines, side by side.

Positive. It was positive.

My body went cold. My vision blurred. Bailey's song became a muffled drone. I saw two fat tears splash on to the plastic stick in my hand.

The singing stopped. I heard a thump and looked up to see Bailey hanging over the stall door again. I couldn't even feel embarrassed at the tears and snot running down my face. It didn't matter. All that mattered were those lines.

'Damn.' There was no elation in her exclamation. She even managed to look a little sorry for me. For some reason that made me cry harder.

When I exited the stall a few minutes later, my face blotchy but the tears gone, I was surprised to see her still waiting for me, perched on the edge of the sink, combat boots swinging.

'Sorry, that sucks.'

I wanted to glare at her, but couldn't even meet her eyes. 'Can you not tell anyone? Please?' I barely managed to whisper the words. Even to me they sounded pitiful and

unconvincing. Who would hold back on this piece of gossip? I knew my reputation. Straight As. Varsity volleyball. Captain of the debate team. Clear skin, nice hair, cute nose. Most Liked *and* Most Likely to Succeed. Which meant that as much as everyone pretended to love me, most of them couldn't wait for me to mess up. I could just picture Hannah Ballard's smug face when she learnt she would be valedictorian. I was pretty sure pregnancy was an automatic disqualification. Which was so unfair. It's not like this would affect my grades and—

'God. Whatever you're thinking right now, just stop. You look like you're about to poop. I'm not gonna tell anyone.' Bailey's voice jerked me out of my panic spiral.

'Why not?' The question slipped out before I could stop myself.

Bailey shrugged. 'Because everyone in this school is an asshole.'