

What to Expect

Anticipation is the snowball right after it's left your mitten and right before it wallops her square in the face. Or misses completely.

The plastic retro wall clock in the waiting room makes too much noise, tick tick tick, but it's not as loud as mine. Seated behind the counter, 'Lucille' repeatedly taps the French polish nail of her index finger on the delete key of her terminal and does not look up.

"Birthday."

"It actually is!" I say, enormously pleased with myself. I grin, and then stretch the grin wider and higher as 'Lucille' neither reacts nor diverts her gaze from her screen. "I bought myself these!" I point, indicating my new earrings, pendulous koala bears, groggy from eucalyptus and chlamydia, then I bob my head back and forth to make them jiggle.

More tapping.

"I'm going to be a Mom!" I blurt out. "First time!"

Delete delete delete . . . "I mean — I've decided! Fingers crossed." I examine the hangnail on my pinky.

"Birthday," repeats 'Lucille' (or it could be 'Lucifer', the end of her nametag is smudged with jam), neither grin nor confession nor ornamental marsupials staying her from the dawdling completion of her data entry task. It doesn't bother me. It shouldn't bother me. It wouldn't bother me, but today is supposed to be special (also I must pee). Birthdays were always a big deal for Trudy and I — double trouble — and scheduling my appointment for today was my Big Present to myself. First off they're going to pop out Tiny Tim, who's my Liletta and looks like a squid (you can't spell 'squid' without IUD . . .), and who I plan to display in a jar of rubbing alcohol on the mantelpiece alongside my baby teeth and Granma Bell's taxidermy sandhill crane she got as a wedding present. Then I'm having a preconception checkup because tech-

nically at forty-one, fingers crossed, it will be a geriatric pregnancy and they need to check all those antique cranks and plugs down there are shafting and sparking like they're supposed to. When you want a day to be special but no one winks back. Come on people, play with me!

"Koala bears!" I point again. Jiggle.

"Miz Bell," she says it severely, one word, really 'misspell', she looks up, then further up because I'm really tall, "I need you to confirm your date of —"

"February four," I snap, sputtering pique and vocal fry, then I catch myself and smile into 'Lucille's frowning nostrils. February four is Aquarius, the waterpot. We're lofty and altruistic and susceptible to frequent mood swings which is such a load of horseshit. Astrology is true — I mean, there really are constellations floating around up there — but I don't buy it. If it made any sense I'd be a Gemini. Stars are predictable, life isn't. We waterpots are bad with money — that bit's true. I look around the room to communicate my indifference to 'Lucille' — the indoor ferns, the *Sunnyslope Maternal Child Health Clinic* sign with the logo like a fried egg, and my gaze settles on new Mom swaddling testy bub. Actually she's looking up at me; when we make eye contact she smiles.

"Happy birthday!" she says.

I bounce over and plop into the adjacent chair, and then rearrange myself because I can never get comfortable, then proceed to coo over bub who is a mewling scoop of teaberry toffee wedged in a crocheted waffle cone. With a free hand Mom offers me a cookie tin from her lap then replaces said tin in her lap and takes one herself.

"I hate gingerbread," I say, take another bite, "I love gingerbread. I don't like gingerbread." Mom bounces bub on her shoulder until she brings up wind and is popped back in the stroller.

"Another?" she says but I'm always a little nauseous.

Mom is named Amber. "Judy," I say. She has a round little nose, and angry acne scars she's tried to cover with too much foundation. She's my neighbor!

She's literally down the street in Edgewater! And she's a twin! "Same as me!" I say, "... we could be twins!", but she doesn't realize I'm making a joke. She's moving to Wheaton — a vision of brunches, mani/pedis, pottery classes and other momdates evaporates under the frown of geography. I tell her I'm going to be a Mom too, "fingers crossed." Amber smiles, more polite than chummy and adjusts a latch on her stroller.

Her labor was twenty-six hours, bub had cord wrapped round her neck so Amber was on the fetal heart monitor to check for decelerations and was confined to bed until the Doctor arrived and said why didn't they just use the portable monitor, except by that point she was eight centimeters and it was too late. I want to ask her about doulas but there's a scream from behind me: "Amber!!"

"Katie!!" screams Amber. "Katie!!" I scream thinking I'm funny; Katie stops short, unsure what's going on, but Amber cuts in, conversation-hopping like a kangaroo: "Thank god you're here, I am literally dying of boredom."

Katie alights in her Lululemons, accessorized by a Starbucks Venti travel mug and thigh gap (courtesy of Spanx?), parks her fancy stroller athwart Amber's, and the two of them launch into a fierce duet, flexing their momhoods like VIP passes to Coachella while I crane stratospherically over their nattering heads like a superfluous giraffe. Alpha Mom Katie's really spiritual. She's into Jivamukti Yoga and her spirit animal is a bobcat. "Oh my god," she says, "don't talk to me about Celia, with her uggs and her faux fur bucket hats and her freaky-tiki earrings ..."

Music: from somewhere the first few bars of Ravel's 'Bolero'. There's a meow from Katie's stroller. I reach out and tap Katie on the shoulder but she doesn't react. I wonder should I tap again and then I'm just frozen for a stupid moment with my index finger cocked like ET. Celia's food drive. The asanas let you build a connection to the Earth and all living things. Quit biting your nails, Judy.

"Run your own race, set your own pace," says Amber, earning an eyeroll from

Katie. Celia's miscarriage. On the wall there's faded MCH posters with reduced color palettes and figures with blank expressions from the airplane safety card school of visual communication, in the event of a water landing brace yourself, pull down on the umbilical cord, and wait for your boobs to inflate.

Katie's bub blinks, slowly turns her head, blinks again, her eyelash a trembling butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. She's a peach, I could eat her up. Bolero again, flute and snare drum. Mindfulness meditation is this whole thing, relate to yourself and others with kindness and compassion blah blah blah.

"It's all about being present in the moment," says Katie, admiring an eye booger balanced on the tip of her middle finger. On the side table there's a Connect Four box. I take the box, glance briefly at Katie and then put it back.

"...so get this," says Amber, "she runs off to Thailand — with 'Rupert'!"

" "Rupert", " says Katie.

" "Rupert", " says Amber and they both collapse in hysterics.

An alluvial fan of laminated *People* magazines conceals a yellowing pamphlet sans cover. Bolero. Tick tick tick. I crack open the pamphlet, center myself and stay present in the moment while keeping at the back of my mind the image of a moss-covered hillock in a psychic effort to manifest a lush endometrium and begin to read. (I definitely have to pee. Or do I?)

'...although no more than a cluster of cells at this point, nevertheless some women might begin to experience a range of symptoms including nausea, fluid retention, and the tendency to bruise easily ...'

This makes me think of fruit, and I have a vision of a hundred convex bellies, a field of watermelons under a sturgeon moon, quivering in pink delight. Katie's bub is fixated on me. Or am I beyond her focal length? I lean in, there's the smell of vanilla and lavender and fresh baked bread. Bub blinks, intelligently. Does she think I'm a Mom?

"So histrionic," says Amber, "I mean: she was only ten weeks along!"

"Celia's alright," says Katie, a little aggressively. "She's resilient, she bounces

back.” She pauses, “Celia knows how to seize joy where you can find it.” Amber turns bright red, a smile rigid on her face like it was nailed there by Martin Luther.

Bolero. It’s a cellphone, obviously. What do Moms look like? Moms are round and soft and overtired, and I’m tall and spiky and hyperactive. They need more toys in here.

“Peekaboo!” I say. Bub giggles.

I wriggle to get comfortable. Not a spirit animal, it’s her guru, he went to Texas State and bobcats are the mascot. Go ahead, ignore me — I’ll make my own playmate. Maybe if I sit on my hands I’ll stop. Katie has a livestrong bracelet, haven’t seen those in forever.

“...Kundalini is a coiled snake at the base of the spine,” says Katie, “but it’s all such a load of horseshit ...”

Cancer maybe? Or Capricorn? They’re both incompatible with Aquarius. Bolero.

“Answer the damn phone ‘Lucille’,” says Katie.

A sigh from bub. “Want to hear a secret?” I whisper, and lean in even closer and give her a conspiratorial wink, and then suddenly blow a raspberry. Bub erupts into laughter, and then there’s a hand on my shoulder and Amber is yanking, is actually yanking me back so hard I fall out of my seat.

“Dude,” I say, “what the actual fuck?”

Bub is screaming now. Katie snatches her up and seizes her tight to her chest and the screams become a continuous wail.

“Oh my God,” gasps Amber, “Oh my God ...” she pauses and has an expression on her face like she’s about to laugh but then it contorts in a rictus, “Get away, you creep!”

“I didn’t,” I say, “what do you even think?” I glance at Katie, who is turned away and bouncing bub, sobs synchronizing with bounces ow–wow–wow–wow. “You think I want her baby?” Something inside me comes unglued.

“Shh shh,” whispers Katie, “oh baby my baby . . .”

“Leave us alone,” cries Amber, almost shouting, “you’re making it worse!”

“What then? You think I’m going to eat her?!”

Another howl. ‘Lucille’ is staring now. Flushed, I stand up and move to an empty chair against another wall.

“Munch, munch,” I say.

I snort, then my eyes well up for an instant at the shame and the unfairness of it, and then I’m sick to my stomach. My left hip is bruised like a pregnant watermelon.

“That’s right Big Bird,” calls Amber, “go tickle Elmo!” She turns to huddle with Katie but Katie shrugs her off and Amber proceeds fiercely to bother her own bub.

Nobody is talking now. Katie’s bub quiets and is repotted in the stroller. A tiny nurse with a oversized clipboard emerges and departs with Amber.

“Hello? Lucille here, were you trying to call me?”

I gradually climb back down to earth. The ferns, I now realize, are plastic and could do with a dusting. Katie welds her attention to Jennifer Hudson on the silent TV. She’s jumpy, she keeps passing her travel mug from left to right hand or back again. The tip of my thumbnail gets snagged in my teeth and in frustration I fold up my arms and legs into some sort of crouching pretzel pose. Katie’s mug leaps from right hand to left and I find I’m recrossing my legs the other way. Soon without even thinking about it I’m playing a game where I’m matching her: left leg over right for mug in the left hand, right leg over left for the right hand. She seems to pick up on it subliminally, anticipating my moves, even glancing about impatiently if I’m a little slow. It starts to feel like she’s the one mirroring me.

“Judith Bell?”

“Yes!?” I say, sitting up and suddenly bringing both feet to the ground with a ‘clump’, at which exact moment the top pops off Katie’s travel mug earning

a loud snort from ‘Lucille’.

“Are you miss Bell?” says the enormous clipboard.

I examine her name tag, which is tricked out with kittens and smiley faces. “I’m a Judith too! We could be twins!” I say, but then I see her name isn’t Judith it’s ‘Jacynth’. I get up to follow, should I ask about the restroom? Katie blinks, turns her head to watch me go.

The consultation room is a waiting room too. A smaller room with a shorter wait. ‘Jacynth’ takes my weight (low) and blood pressure (high) and hands me a paper gown. “Put this on,” she says, “Doctor Cho will be right in.”

I gown up, and amuse myself with the thought of a sequence of tinier and tinier nurses leading me to a succession of smaller and smaller waiting rooms, and just at the moment of convergence Doctor Cho arrives.

Doctor Cho is round and short — even shorter than ‘Jacynth’, her lab coat drapes to the floor like a dress. She produces a disposable speculum from a plastic bag with a “Hey presto,” and titters, radiating nervous laughter like confetti. She adjusts her thick glasses and then goes over the procedure with me.

“...and when I pull on the string, the arms fold up and the IUD emerges from the uterus,” says Doctor Cho, waving the speculum vaguely like she’s casting a spell.

There’s something oddly comforting about this little woman. I lie on the exam table. With a flourish of her wrist Doctor Cho fluffs out a paper quilt and tucks it over my torso. I let out a long breath I’ve been holding all day. There’s no clock in here but my heart is beating tick tick tick. Moss-covered endometrium. I lie my head back and make up constellations in the texture of the soundproof ceiling tiles: the Speculum, the Hypochondriac, the Insurance Specialist. A quick procedure, in and out, smash and grab.

“Ow,” I say.

“Oops, my bad,” says Doctor Cho, “now, you might feel a little pinch . . .”

A minute goes by. Doctor Cho is singing gently to herself. Maybe she's trying to charm him out. Another minute.

"Everything OK?"

"I'm having trouble visualizing the string," says Cho, adjusting her glasses yet again and as she says it I realize I'm tugging at a thread in the stitching of the exam table. "Sometimes the IUD drifts, and it gets embedded in the uterine wall."

Another couple of minutes, "I'm going to use an ultrasound." The transducer is chilly, and I wriggle involuntarily. My mind drifts like a wandering IUD until gradually I become aware that the transducer is hovering over the left side of my groin.

"Um," says Cho, "okay there's something's come up on the scan."

"A fibroid?" I say, but she doesn't reply. My voice gets louder, "Doctor Cho, is it a fibroid?"

She says something, but there's blood pounding in my ears and everything's muffled.

Doctor Cho has a suspicion, that's all. Every time is different, you don't want to jump to conclusions. On our seventh birthday I choked on a handful of grapes. You see this thing that looks a little like a spoke wheel? It was our first birthday after Mom died. Dad threw us an ice-skating party downtown at Daly Plaza and invited the whole class, but it was minus ten and only two other girls showed up. A solid and complex mass. Trudy skated with her friend Mandy while I sulked and scarfed down my snack; they held hands and did a sit spin until Trudy collided splat with a fat man coming the other way. Irregular walls, do you see this serration over here? I laughed and a grape lodged in my windpipe. Mandy's dad grabbed me round the waist and yanked his arm up over my belly button and it shot out like a champagne cork. A cyst would be clear, from the fluid, that's how you'd tell it from a tumor. Five minutes later everyone had forgotten about it but I was afraid to eat for a week. Every breath,

my throat constricting, swelling shut. A hysterectomy can greatly reduce the risk. I'm made of glass and will shatter if I fall or turn my head too fast. Prevent the spread to secondary organs. A cloud in my chest, the sensation of drowning in air . . .

I struggle with my boots, blinking back hot little tears. Doctor Cho re-enters, I didn't see her go. Is she embarrassed to see me crying? She's hunting for something in the cupboard and I blink faster but suddenly she's offering me a box.

"Take a handful," she says. I look down and see it's a box of tissues, and erupt into boohooos, overcome by her small kindness. I wad up half the box and blow a really good solid honk — it's loud and sustained and musical and I can't help but laugh, which sets Doctor Cho off too, she comes and puts her arm around me and I'm crylaughing "hoo hoo hoo hooooo" like a deflating bagpipes.

"We'll run more tests," she insists. I nod.

"It could be, there's a lot of things," she insists. I nod.

"Don't even think about — you don't want to jump to conclusions. The biopsy takes a week and we'll have a better idea, fingers crossed," I nod and nod again.

Jacynth enters backwards, her clipboard horizontal like a tray on which sits a red velvet cupcake and a single unlit candle; this restarts the waterworks. "Oh honey," says Jacynth then she's lunging towards me for some reason and my legs feel weird and next thing I know Jacynth and Doctor Cho are struggling either side to prop me up, Happy and Doc buttressing a pie-eyed Snow White strung out on one too many poisoned appletinis. Then I'm in a chair and Doctor Cho is pressing a cup of water in my shaking hand but when I gulp it down it has an unbearably sickly taste and I realize it's OJ and spill it all down the front of my blouse.

Doctor Cho pats me down with a wet-wipe. Jacynth finds my scarf. "I like your earrings," she says.

“I need to wash my hands,” I say, “they’re sticky.”

Finally make it to the restroom and turns out I don’t need to pee after all. OK body, enough mixed messages out of you. The quavering trill of warm water is deliciously hot on my cold-freckled hands. I stare for a moment at my face in the mirror, crisscrossed with laugh lines, then I lather up, rub my hands together gently in the stream and rinse away all the spit-up stains and dirty diapers, the croup and cloth wipes, whooping coughs and umbrella strollers, night terrors and teething rings and very hungry caterpillars, failure to latch, failure to thrive, failure to launch, they spiral the pop-up sink stopper and vanish from sight. Happy birthday me.

“Surprise!” I say, and stick out my tongue. I crack myself up.

I take a minute and return to the waiting room. Katie’s there, saying bye to a tall woman. She looks at me and I blush and wipe my eyes. She stares for a moment with an odd, shrewd expression on her face, and then heads to the bathroom. Someone’s toddler is laying out a string of red and yellow Connect Four tiles in a line across the floor. She takes one tile at a time, carries it to the end of the line, places it very purposefully, and then goes back for the next one.

“Judy?”

“Trudy!?” It’s my sister Trudy! I forgot we made plans to meet here. And she’s wearing the koala earrings I bought her as a birthday present. “Ha!” I point. She jiggles.

“We could be twins!” says Trudy, and we laugh.

“Did you try the gingerbread?” says Trudy. “Lucille makes it. They say it helps with morning sickness.”

I look around. “Where’s your kids?”

“Ella’s got brownies till six and Emma’s got Suzuki violin. Oh hello. Okay, bring it in.”

I hug her tight as I can and bury my face in her fuzzy sweater.

“Love you babe,” says Trudy.

“I love you too,” I say, a mouth full of mohair.

It should be enough. It’s not enough. I hug even tighter, curled into a fist of grief.

Trudy ruffles my hair. The mohair tickles.

“Sorry to sneeze on you,” I say.

“This sweater’s seen worse than that.”

I dig my face in.

“You’ve got cheerios under your collar.”

The combination of Trudy’s grace and mohair eventually brings me round and we come unclasped. Trudy looks for a moment into my eyes and I remember my own reflection in the bathroom mirror and suddenly I recognize the odd look Katie gave me.

Doctor Cho enters. “Miss Bell?” she says, looking up at Trudy through her thick glasses. She takes Trudy aside and begins to explain something in a low voice so I get down on my hands and knees and help extend the line of Connect Four tiles until we run out.

“Good game kid,” I say, “don’t ever let the box tell you how to play.” She nods in that serious, deliberate way toddlers do. “High five!”

“Ready to go?” asks Trudy.

At the rear of the clinic racoons have overturned a trashcan into the snow of the parking lot. “Ugh, don’t look,” says Trudy, and I don’t, but skip lightly over the scattered waste, softlanding in a tiny hillock of freshfallen snow.

“Think fast,” says Katie and as I turn a snowball hits me square in the face.

We stare at each other for a second and then burst out laughing.