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The Whole World to Please

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The Whole World to Please
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Personal/Reflective Prose

The Whole World to Please

The clinic was pristine. I don't think I'd ever been able to say that about a doctor's office before. Even back home, my regular doctor's office was cozy. An effort to keep everyone comfortable in the medical environment. It was harder to think of blood and germs while you were sitting in an arm chair with soft classical music in the background.

This room was definitely not my regular doctor's office. The chairs were plastic and crinkly, every shift made a noise that seemed to echo in the white space. Surprisingly, there were quite a few people. I hadn't expected this many women in one place. Of course, they make it sound like women avoid it at all costs. I guess that wasn't the reality. Places like this did much more than what I was here for, but no one ever seemed to talk about that either.

My eyes were being opened real wide today.

Despite the bright glare making my eyes ache, the white helped. It was like the lack of color gave us our own little cocoon of silence and thought. We didn't have to speak to each other and nobody noticed if we cried. No one had to interact. We were allowed that little bit of privacy. What we were waiting for was hardly private, after all.

The front doors swooshed opened and a swell of sound burst into the room like a bubble. A teenage girl, looking no older than 15 slinked in, her mother with her arm protectively wrapped around quivering shoulders. They took a quick glance around the room and then headed to the reception desk.

The mass of shouts and verbal bashing from the hecklers outside vanished as the door swept closed without a whisper of sound. We were once again enveloped in our cocoons.

I closed my eyes and I prayed to whoever would listen.

Being blind made the cocoons a little thinner and I was suddenly very aware that the other 7-10 women in the room were in just as bad shape as I was. We differed in age, race, class--telling by the clothing choices, and most likely religious backgrounds. I had seen one woman repeatedly kiss a golden cross necklace around her neck that glittered with tear tracks. Almost everyone sniffled. The only ones that didn't, didn't seem to be very aware of where they were. If they were anything like I had been my first visit, they had pushed their consciousness to a far away place where nothing could hurt them.

Especially themselves.

"Madigan?" No first names here. Of course, I'd lied on my application anyway. I'd given my grandmother's maiden name. Luckily, the old bat hadn't liked me very much to begin with. Otherwise, I'd be worried about her catholic ectoplasm haunting me forever.

I stood with an energy I hadn't known I had and walked as briskly as I could to the door. The only thing that kept me from running was the slight bump in my belly.

It hadn't been noticeable until just the other week.

I'd refused to acknowledge it before then. But one night, while lying in bed, unable to sleep as per usual, I'd felt it. Like a twinge. A sharp jolt that had woken me up and made me

realize.

I'd pulled up my nightshirt and stared at my stomach. It didn't seem to change much until I sucked in all the breath I could. Normally, this would have resulted in the bones of my hips jutting out like knife handles. Instead, there was a bump.

The bump. It.

I could see it. It was real. There was no more of believing that it had all been my imagination.

The day after, I'd called my regular doctor's office and asked about clinics.

The weekend following that, I showed up at Pristine-ville.

They have to make sure you're pregnant first. I don't know how many women braved the front doors and the masses outside just for kicks, but I reluctantly peed in a cup. I also handed them the three home-pregnancy tests I'd taken just a few weeks before.

And carried around in my purse since then.

I don't think the nurse was even disgusted. If that says anything about this place.

Once my positive test results flowed in, there was the ultrasound. Then the talking. Counselors and options and I was even asked if I wanted a religious authority figure to talk to.

I wondered how they'd gotten any of those freaks to come in here to talk about it. I can only imagine what a priest or rabbi walking through the doors would do to the crowd outside. I could already see the smiting in my head.

I politely declined...Or rather, I shouted "Aw, hell no!" And waved my arms frantically in front of me.

The counselor had asked how I got pregnant.

I think I scared him a little bit. Telling him about my boyfriend, now ex-boyfriend, who I hadn't really loved, who I hadn't really known, who I'd purely used because I had only had sex once before and I wanted to try it again and he was cute. I remember telling this complete stranger how Eric had never really shaved, his jaw always slightly husky and bristly. He had eyes that reminded me of snow showers, that bleak grey that is always filled with silence. I told him about the night that we were together for 3 hours and how it'd been wonderful at first, but then I'd just wanted a shower and some food, but Eric had wanted to keep going. I told him about how the sheets had tangled into my legs and twisted my ankle and a weird angle.

Eric had had to stop and untangle before we progressed.

He asked why I wanted to do this.

I told him about the Halloween that I'd figured it out. My 'sexy witch' costume pushing up my breasts to achieve the epitome of cleavage, the sheer tights digging into the edge of my thighs and the pins holding my hat in place sticking against my skull. I told him exactly how much hairspray I had used to achieve that state of perfection. I even told him how much pizza I'd eaten and how quickly it took for me to want to vomit it all up.

I told him about the guy that had showed up in a baby costume, going to all the girls and calling them 'Mama.' I told him how that boy, a boy I'd only seen once or twice while walking

from grad school classes to work to my apartment, a boy I'd thought was cute until he'd whistled once when I wore my favorite maroon mini skirt, had come up to me and said:

"Mama."

It registered a second later and I started hysterically laughing, like the nut inside of me was finally let loose.

I think I scared that boy. Probably his buddies too, watching him with beers in their hands and laughter on their lips. But I told them I was practicing, my 'sexy witch' costume as an explanation.

I told this male, middle-aged counselor who was probably bored at this point or seriously worried about my mental health, about how I ran to the bathroom after that and stared at the corset around my belly. I told him how I shed every piece of clothing I had, tearing off the cheap tights that I'd bought at Goodwill to look at the body that only a few weeks ago had been perfectly fine.

Of course, it had still looked fine. Or as my friend Tyana would say "*Fiiiiine.*" With a flick of her bejeweled wrists and a snap of expert jazz fingers.

I hadn't believed it at first. I hadn't believed that the usual downpour of blood that I got every month wasn't there because of some other explanation than 'stress'.

My life was about stress and that had never stopped Mother Nature before.

When I finally got a pregnancy test from the girl down the hall in my apartment building who was only a year or two younger than me at 25 and was absolutely paranoid about things like pregnancy in college--her face of pity and superior strength still haunted me at night--I did the peeing and things and then I sat and stared.

There was a little blue line there. One that hadn't been there before...

Beauty and the Beast suddenly popped into my head. Like all I could imagine was that my uterus, which had never misbehaved, had suddenly decided that my dreams as a six-year-old had to come true now.

I told the counselor how I'd shoved the test into my purse so no one would see it and ignored it for another 2 weeks. After work the next day I went to the pharmacy and bought two more tests, each a different brand than the first. I wasn't taking chances. Both had had the same result. I told him how I'd shoved those into my purse with the first.

Then I recounted my journey to Pristine-ville and then him.

I said all of this and then stared at a spot on the wall for 15 minutes as he explained my 'options' to me. I was sure that after my marathon-rant he'd diagnose me with something before I left. Bipolar disorder, because of the way the word-vomit had stopped as quickly as it'd started. Or depression. Or hysteria, I don't know. Something. For all I knew, he'd diagnose me as some promiscuous woman who should have known better.

He didn't.

He didn't even prescribe anything meaningful. He just patted me on the shoulder, told me to go home and rest and sleep on the decision. Then let me go.

I couldn't believe he'd let me back onto the streets. I was a madwoman. On my way home, every sign of a baby made me want to fly into a rage and rip apart everything. Even the baby clothes that I usually "Awww'd" over were threats to be destroyed. Every baby that coo'd or dozed peacefully in the car or made little excited giggles, even the crying ones made me want to break down and spill my guts to the mother or father or babysitter. I wanted someone else to tell me what to do.

I could always call my mother. It was an option. She listened to me rant about almost anything these days. I knew she'd listen to this too. But she'd want me to keep It. She'd want me to raise It with her and her husband, like a charity case. She wanted grandchildren. She'd begged and pleaded about it every chance she got since she realized she wasn't getting them any other way. It didn't help that I was her youngest and she was going on 60.

I did want children.

I had dreamed of children to play with and do Girl Scouts and Boy scouts and school projects. I even had dreamed of the fights we'd have over dating, eating healthy, cleaning rooms, cars, and college.

What I hadn't dreamed of was doing it alone.

I didn't want to do it alone. My mother had done it alone.

Of course, I knew I could call Eric. He would probably be happy to hear from me. When I'd broken it off, he'd asked me to keep his number. Just in case. When I thought about it now, I hated him. I knew he had no way of knowing anything about the thing inside of me now, but I loathed him for even bringing it up. He'd cursed me. Cursed us.

We'd used a condom. I was on birth control. I always took precautions. I always took measures. I had never wanted to end up in a situation like this. Yet, here I was. I must have just been that lucky 1% of the 1% where the precautions didn't work.

I couldn't call Eric. I'd probably hit him the minute I saw his face.

That's why, when I scheduled my second and final appointment, I was alone.

I hadn't wanted to drag anyone through this with me. Everyone I imagined bringing with me looked like the mother of that 15 year-old. Resigned to the fact that they were about to witness something painful. I could only imagine what that teenager was going to tell her future family. What her mother was going to say if/when that poor girl decided to get married or have children.

I didn't want to put anyone in that situation.

I followed the nurse back through the halls that had probably been decorated by the same guy that did high schools. The floor was a sickly orange color that reminded me of old tomato soup and the doors looked like hand-me-downs from mental institutions. A few doors opened to offices with out-of-date computers and desks littered with papers while others were open to exam rooms. Only two or three of them were filled, the doors closed with signs keeping us out.

A few doors down from the entrance, the nurse led me inside and gave me a gown and several pills. In my first visit, they'd explained the procedure in non-gory detail so I was

prepared. I didn't remember much of it now except that the pills I'd been given now were pain pills. Vicodin and Ibuprofen and the like. I swallowed them down quickly. It took all of three seconds to get undressed, slipping the gown over my body and taking deep breaths to control the sudden lack of strength in my legs. If I fainted, they wouldn't perform the procedure. I had to keep standing.

It wasn't until the doctor came in that I realized something rather important.

I hadn't taken my underwear off. Only semi-important.

Blushing and getting more lightheaded by the moment, I slipped off the polka-dot underwear I'd gotten on sale about a year ago near thanksgiving, throwing it atop the pile of my other neatly stacked clothes. In seconds, my ass was sitting on crinkled paper and my feet were in stirrups, baring me wide open to the world. For a second, I was blinded by the fluorescent lights above me, and I could swear I heard the malicious crowd outside. I could feel their eyes staring at me. The grotesque and horrifying images they'd waved in my face, 'malformed fetus' and ruptured uterus', were suddenly there again.

I could hear the woman that had followed me through the crowd, her breath hot on the back of my neck and ears *"You'll regret this, whore."*

I saw Eric's eyes. For a brief second I saw his eyes full of mirth, what had caught my attention in the first place. Eric's smile was something to see. Full of ego, but still warm. I saw his eyes and I wanted to tell him. I wanted to call him on my cell right now and tell him where I was and what I was doing and how, if he wanted, I could keep it or send it away or there could always be another option. But I realized with a jolt, that there was a reason I hadn't told him on our last date in the restaurant on Charles Ave. There was a reason I hadn't wanted a child with this boy who I'd never really liked outside of the bedroom.

The light flashed and just like that my hallucinations were gone and I was alone with the doctor again. She shook my clammy hand and introduced herself. I still only remember the beginning of her name, Dr. Sh...? Shomaker? Shamaza? I had no idea. Seconds later, I could hear her humming show tunes under her breath as she fidgeted with machinery. I briefly recognized the song "You can't stop the beat" from Hairspray as my heartbeat slowed down to a normal speed.

I wished, at that moment, that I'd given in and called Eric. I wanted a hand to hold. But I had refused to tell anyone I was pregnant, let alone that I was doing this. Despite my numerous backtracks, I had my reasons for not wanting anyone to know.

Walking around those last weeks, pregnant when that was the last thing I wanted, I think was something I was always going to remember. It was like the sword of Damocles had been hanging over my head the whole time. Every person that looked at me funny had to know. I'd never been more paranoid in my life.

I looked forward to going back to the way it had been. Rationally, I knew this would never happen. I'd always know. Maybe, someday I'd tell someone. Maybe, someday, I'd tell Eric. Maybe when I got back to normal, I'd call him like he wanted me to. Maybe we'd even try

to date, instead of just together. Although, I knew, it'd be a while before I could sleep with him. With anyone, I think.

I didn't ever look away from the ceiling. I'd found another spot to interest me. The doctor didn't ask any questions, continuing to hum off-key while she worked.

It was the second part of the procedure. A 15-20 minute surgical procedure that was supposed to be quick and effortless. I didn't dare look away from the ceiling in case I saw the utensils that were about to be shoved into my body.

It was my body and it was my choice. I still didn't like it.

I only felt a slight pull when the doctor started dilation. After that, I barely felt as the tube was inserted. It wasn't until the hum of the sucking overpowered the doctor's oh-so-melodic voice that I had to squeeze my eyes shut, my fingers gripping the edge of the chair in order to restrain myself from looking. I did not want to see. I. Did. Not.

I don't remember a whole lot once the machine was turned off.

I was allowed to take my feet from the stirrups and given a blanket, a cookie, and a small cup of juice. It reminded me of my babysitting days. Not something I had wanted to be reminded about. For a couple of minutes, I was fine. Then the cramping started.

It wasn't nearly as bad as my beginning periods, before birth control. Those menstrual cramps had often given me nausea that had been close to flu-like. These were like teasers. They came, cramped, and went in quick succession. It was my uterus going back to its normal size. Without It inside, there was no reason to have a bump. I was bump-less. For a few blessed moments, I was allowed to absorb that on my own, no show tunes, no bible verses, just me and my thoughts in a sterilized room with florescent lights.

I called a cab. I could have called my roommate. Or my best friend. I could have even called Eric to come and get me, but I didn't want anyone to know where I was. A nurse was nice enough to walk me out the backdoor, so I didn't have to face the hecklers again. By the cabbie's face, I knew that this was not an unknown practice. He almost looked like he pitied me.

I wanted to slap him too. But I couldn't find the energy. I was still and silent. It was like the whole world had shut down to give me a minute. Or an hour. It was some time that I desperately needed. Since I was little, I'd been that way. I'd rushed from thing to thing, class to class, jamming everything in one day with breaks no more than 30 minutes apart so that I never had a chance to breath. But now, now I needed to breath. More than anything, I needed a minute of silence and stillness.

But it was over.

I was no longer pregnant.

I'd only been so for a few months. 12 weeks, to be exact. But it felt like a year. Those first three days after I'd realized, after that little blue line had appeared, had felt like a month in itself.

That night, I slept soundly for the first time in 12 weeks. I dreamed of being a mother. I dreamed of the child I would never know. Their face was like an empty canvas. For a moment, I

woke up crying. I felt selfish for not wanting to be a mother.

I wasn't underage. I could have made it work. I had a support system. Why had I decided to do this? But why did I have to justify it?

So what? I wasn't underage. But I wasn't ready to be a mother either. I could have made it work, I had a support system. But I didn't want to drain their resources or my own just to make sure that my accidental pregnancy could be supported until it was 18 years old and I was 43.

I felt selfish for a few seconds. I hadn't wanted a baby that may have wanted me. But one day, I would be a mother. And if I would tell them, eventually, of the child that I never had, so that one day I could have them.

It was that moment that sound came back into the world. I listened to the echoes of the crowd outside the clinic in the form of late-night parties and police cars and felt relief.

Perhaps I was selfish. Perhaps, one day, I would regret not having the child with eyes like snow storms. But for now, I was not pregnant. I was alone. I could sleep.

Sometimes, the world we need to please is within ourselves.