

Bloom

BY HALI THOMPSON

She stood there in the doorway when I told her I was leaving. I was out on the porch. She told me that she hoped I would be disappointed. I remember because she said it all wide-mouthed, gap-toothed, ringing in my ears, furrow in her brow and wrinkles in her forehead. Tired lines around her eyes as if she had been there before. "I hope you will be disappointed" swirling in the bright summer sky, catching the words in the light breeze, and settling itself angrily in the too-pink flowers wrapped around the columns on the porch, holding up the structure.

I wasn't quite sure what to say. I'm not sure I said anything at all. Never had I suspected that she would hope I'd find myself disappointed with a life that she brought me into, that she was there from the moment I first took a breath. I would never have predicted it when I paged through books full of photos, her holding my hand or me in her arms. Her behind a lens, while I took my first steps and built sandcastles and ate cake and went to high school.

Her "I hope you will be disappointed" riddled me as I left with the man that I love, while she stood in the doorway and watched his beat-up car carry me out of the driveway and across state lines. And it haunted me when I would fall asleep on my side of our bed, him on his. Would make me question his love while bacon sizzled in a pan and he asked me how I wanted my eggs that morning, as I watched the light from the diamond in my ring sparkle across the tablecloth. Stalked me outside work after receiving a promotion, while I enthused about it with my friends over drinks. Lingered while I was dancing in white and he was dancing in a suit, my head on his shoulder when he told me, "We made it."

Standing here in the doorway with a positive plus on the white stick, my heart flutters with excitement for what may be blooming within me. But "I hope you will be disappointed" brings on the dizzying, impending doom, the pounding in my chest and the rush in my veins. The fear of what is blooming to become barren or to not be there at all. My eyes train themselves on the

floral wallpaper before me while I scramble for my keys, the metal cold on my skin. The fan whooshing with all its might as I make my way out the door and into July's triple digits.

I drive down to Rite Aid, the car air conditioner creating a vacuum that seals me away from the heat outside. The heat painting itself over me as I pile out of the car. Air conditioner meeting me again in all its cool aggression when I walk through the sliding doors. The fluorescent light too bright for some reason. I rub my temples while I adjust to them. There's a woman with a basket heading towards the hair care aisle. She's on the phone—"No, mom. It's on the table by the door." I scan the row of aisles and feel a wave of nausea escalate, but fight it down with some easy breaths.

"Is there anything you need help finding?" It's a short man with a thick mustache. His name tag says "Jeff."

I quietly shake my head. He tells me that if I need anything to feel free to find him. He punctuates this with his name—in case I wasn't aware of his nametag—before following after the woman in the hair care aisle, now deciding between boxes of dye, on the phone with her mom.

I head down the feminine care aisle, scanning all the brands, the different promises each one proclaims on its packaging. I select a few of them, trying to vary my results. I try to envision a pretty positive plus on all of these glorious sticks, like a good grade on a homework assignment in elementary school.

I pay up front. The woman at the register clearly debating whether to appear solemn or excited while she scans them. Probably having scanned them before in front of sad, young eyes with anxious stomachs hoping their cycles are just off. But also having bagged them and passed them over to baby-fever eyes, filled to the brim with newborn hope after just missing a period. I'm not sure what my eyes look like to the woman, whose nametag boasts "Carol." She catches my eyes, trying to interpret them and wanting to ask but not sure. I feel her glance at my hands, landing on my wedding band, and then, "My daughter has been trying for months."

I sort of smile at Carol, feeling slightly uncomfortable at this disclosure. "It's hard. Especially if you get to a certain age." I'm not at that age, though—the one that women's magazines lament. I just wasn't sure what to add to the conversation.

Carol's eyes brighten. "She waited too long. Wanted to move up in her career." She rolls her eyes in a particular way that reflects a sentiment that some possess about women who put careers before babies. I'm too nauseous to give my own contrary assertions. "She's going to try some hormones. But, you know what I told her—I told her that her time's up." She raises her eyebrows in this sort of "I told you so" way and laughs as if she and I are sharing an inside joke. She laughs loudly in a way that's almost visible it's so vibrant.

I nod in a noncommittal way as she piles my items in the bag, passing the plastic across the counter. I tell Carol, "Good luck to your daughter," before I leave and head out into the parking lot. I sit in my idle car for several minutes, trying to gain the courage to drive home, to bless my holy sticks with my hopeful urine and wait for the results.

When I come home, Oliver is busy assembling a table. "Just got home from work a little bit ago," he says. He explains to me that he ordered the piece of furniture a week ago. It arrived at his work because he wanted it to be a sort-of-surprise. He says he remembered that I had been upset about how roughed up ours got from when the movers brought it in. "And I just want everything to be perfect here for you." As if he would never want me to be disappointed.

I tell him how nice it is. It is a nice table. It's the gesture that's the sweetest part and I try to make sure he knows how sweet it is. And he looks beautiful, his head to the side trying to match the directions with the parts of the table. He has a wooden leg in hand, holding it up, while he stares at the sheet intently, his tongue stuck out a bit in concentration. He tells me that he's going to spend some time on this, those eyes of his trying to convince me that he's got it, while he looks through an assortment of screws.

"I was thinking of ordering some takeout," I tell him, not sure I'm quite in the mood to eat anyway, butterflies lining the walls of my stomach. I

leave him with the table after he nods a bit to the takeout, mostly focused on the wooden parts, trying to make them whole.

Then, I'm in the bathroom.

And then, I've used all of the sticks, wondering how I was able to produce enough pee.

And then, I'm waiting.

I pick up my sticks and view them all as if I'm inspecting works of art. Looking at the patterns and making my criticisms, feeling this flutter in my chest that I've only felt a few times before in my life. I keep thinking about Oliver in his car the day I left with him. "I'll always be there, you know that, right?" he asked as he saw my hands trembling, as midday grew to sunset grew to darkness. We had planned to take a road trip across the country, settle down in California, start our lives together. "But, I can take you back and wait for you in California. Until you're ready." He just wanted to be sure it was what I really wanted, that I was ready to start my own life away from my overbearing mother and all that I've ever really known. That I was ready to start a life that I would share with him. He had stopped the car on the side of the road. And I explained to him that I was trembling because my bones have never been so excited and so scared at the same time—excited for the beautiful possibilities and scared for all that to shatter. I wanted this more than anything, I assured him, as he assured me the same before pulling back onto the road. I was ready to taste my own freedom, to understand what the world feels like when you're thousands of feet above or below it, watching the landscapes change as you're passing them by, blending one into another. And I did see it all. And I fell more and more in love with the world and with him as we did it all together. We really did make it.

As I leave the bathroom now, and wander into the living room, I realize how much we have grown while I watch him working on the table, halfway done. But he's still the Oliver I've always known, his eyes scrambling around my face for clues as I approach him. Always trying to kiss my worries away. Looking at me as if I was the most brilliant thing he'd ever seen since we first met. Treating me like the brightest star and loving me in all my phases and I

him, in all his eclipses, even when he dwindles behind his shadows. All I can ever see is his light.

And his eyes have all the warmth in the world as I stand there with one of my sticks. They were all painted with the same pattern, same strokes. He looks at me with this knowing that undoes all the knots in my stomach. I don't even need to explain when he asks, "Really?" over and over- "Really?" dancing around in the lightest of ways, like we did at our wedding party. "We made it" still whispering in my ear.

And later, we sit across from each other at the table he finished piecing together, eating some takeout. "I don't want you to get too excited," I tell him suddenly. "I don't want you to get disappointed."

"There won't be anything to be disappointed in," he assures me between bites of spaghetti, marinara dripping from his fork to his plate. He smiles at me the way he always has and asks me what we need to do.

As summer changes to fall and fall to winter, I feel the first kicks. I ring up a number I have sparsely felt my fingers reach for. Racking up anxiety while I listen to the dial tone. We say our hellos before I get to the point: "I'm having a baby, Mom." She draws out a sigh. "Well, that's something," she says before she tells me she needs to prune back the flowers. So I let her go. And as I hang up, I hold the phone there by my ear, listening to the silence on the other end for a few minutes, and find myself troubled with the way her words have lingered all this time. But even as I place a hand on my belly, I catch my mind stumbling over the words again, "I hope you will be disappointed" lurking in the corridor of all that is to bloom.