

**nine**

*5,000 words. two girls at the end of the world.*

I.

It's a fairly round word, 'pregnant'. It has no corners but the edges of it sting, the sort that burns upon contact, too hot that you don't actually feel it hurt until your skin's way beyond scalded. That is how it hits me then. If it were a color, I'd say it's a flash of red; if it were a sound, I'd say it's the sound of a door shut unexpectedly loud.

"I'm pregnant." Maggie goes straight to the point and there's no quiver in her voice. I know better than to ask, "How?" When we were younger, it always began with, "When a man and a woman love each other."

I think about how two girls still don't make a baby; about how the question this time is not so much a "how" as it is actually a "who". These are a few of the shortest words I know (along with "why", of course) and yet they crowd my chest so painfully, edges of letters poking harshly inside, everywhere.

We've been together seven years. I say nothing for a long while; that night, I just sit there, quiet and still, palm of my hand curved upon her belly, just breathing.

## II.

In the nights after, I stay up and almost never sleep, cradling my head with my elbows propped upon the dining table. Outside, the steady drone of tricycles that used to lull me to sleep keep me awake instead. Those nights, I turn all the lights in the house on – in the living room, in the dining room, even the ones in the kitchen. Times like these it's no use being in the dark; it's unhealthy, the thoughts that build up in our heads when there's no light.

In the bedroom, she sleeps soundly, like all pregnant women must.

On the table, I begin asking the harder questions – was it when I was on a weekend away with my sisters? Or some night I had to stay in the office and work late? Had she used some kind of excuse to hide it, right under my fairly complacent eyes, at some point?

Distrust does ugly things to relationships; it's when it breaks that everything else goes under, and perhaps in our case they should have done so immediately, only they don't. Still I go to bed, head aching unbearably as I crawl into the space that used to be mine, right beside her sleeping figure, carefully arranging myself so that we do not touch.

It's the hardest part, not touching her; the space is small, but I'm still too tired to make another bed entirely and so I just sleep, limbs stiff and unmoving. In my dreams, she strokes my hair, her fingers ticklish upon my scalp. She's smiling at me, her other hand smoothing the fabric upon the swell on her belly, and really, even in dreams things don't hurt as much as they should.

### III.

“You should have broken up,” says my best friend Mary, on the night I tell her. This is three months later, and it’s getting unbearable, keeping up the lie.

I sigh, pulling at my hair. “I love her.” I look away upon catching the look on her face; she has on a mix of helplessness, pity and annoyance. “What do you expect me to do, throw away all of seven years?”

“She did cheat on you, didn’t she?” Her tone is kind but still it hurt, nevertheless.

I pause at that; we haven’t even discussed any of it, truth be told, and nothing else has been said on the matter, apart from the declaration of the fact. I’ve since stopped talking inside the house – just plain stopped, going about life under the same roof wordlessly, doing the dishes and the laundry and picking up dinner for two on the way home from work. It’s always been for two for the past five years and truly, certain habits die hard.

By then I have already made myself a new bed, and it’s comfortable enough, inherent qualities of sofas notwithstanding. In front of me, my best friend nudges my hand on the table, prompting an answer.

“Didn’t she?” Mary asks again.

I shake my head, suddenly unsure. *Did she?* “I don’t know,” I say instead.

“What do you mean, you don’t *know*?” The pity’s gone from Mary’s eyes now, replaced by a sort of baffled anger. “She’s *pregnant*. Unless this is the Second Coming, I don’t think there’s any room for this benefit of the doubt.”

*The Second Coming*. I let out a small laugh; I’m not even Catholic, and neither is Maggie. We used to say it’s too oppressive. “Well,” I just say, shrugging slightly, sipping from my forgotten bottle of beer. “If this *is* the second coming, at least I’m on the right side.”

I can’t tell which comes first – the warmth of Mary’s hand covering mine, or the shaky sobs that break out of my chest.

#### IV.

On the way to the doctor one Saturday morning, something short of a miracle happens: Maggie and I start talking again, while waiting for a cab under a shed.

“If you were to ask me how this happened,” is how she begins, looking out onto the road. I turn my head at her voice; I haven’t even realized how badly I’ve missed it until that moment, and I curl my hand into a fist tightly to keep myself from touching her. “I’d say I wouldn’t know.”

I swallow before saying, “It doesn’t matter.” And then, the dread of the thought hitting me finally, I ask, “Did he hurt you?” trying my best to keep the alarm out of my voice.

There is something strange altogether with the look she gives me; her eyes are painfully soft, and the peace there is entirely unsettling. “It’s not what you think,” she just says, and with a small gesture she touches me, a mere thumb brushing against my wrist.

*Not what I think.* I nod dumbly, like I understood any of it. “Will you ever tell me someday?” I ask, pushing the wrist she touched into a pocket. “The truth, I meant.”

She shrugs. “Once I figure it out, maybe.” She turns away from me at that; after a while, we finally manage to hail a cab, her arm outstretched in the sun. With one hand I open the door; with the other, I hold hers.

Throughout the half-hour ride, she doesn’t let go, and I let myself be comforted by that.

V.

On the fifth month, we find out it's a girl.

Sitting there watching the monitor, I hold her hand as we listen to the doctor, breathing out shakily just as Maggie lets out her soft, "Oh."

We've talked about kids a few times, though never seriously; whenever we came around to discussing it, we often pointed to a Sunday morning in the supermarket, when we both looked on in horror as a toddler threw a tantrum by the dairy section, pulling milk cartons from the freezer to the floor. Someone's always sure to say, "I hate kids," before breaking out into laughter.

Besides, we never agreed on who would carry it.

But then here it is, now – a *girl*. I was born last in a brood of three, and both my sisters are single women, still hard at work, still focused on their career ladders. Our parents had long given up their dreams of having grandchildren, especially after I announced, halfway through college, that I was into girls.

*Funny that*, I just think, on the way back home in the cab, Maggie's hand in mine. *Look who's having a baby now, huh.*

There must have been a smile on my face, one that prompts Maggie to ask, "What's so funny?"

When I turn toward her, she is looking at me, smiling like we have this ongoing private joke between us; it's been a while since I last saw her smile at the very least, and I can't even remember when I last saw her looking like that. I shake my head, my own smile bubbling slowly into a soft laugh; in my chest something warm has started spreading. "Nothing," I say. "I just remembered how my parents wanted a grandchild so desperately."

"Ah," says Maggie, gripping my hand tighter. "I can't remember if they got angry when we got together, thinking it meant they'd never get a grandchild from you. Did they?"

"Not really," I shrug. It's true; my parents weren't entirely homophobic, but I can't say there haven't been any attempts to change my mind. "But they're always saying something about grandkids when I'm around."

“And look at what we have now.” She gestures to her belly, rounder than I’ve ever seen – or perhaps, it’s just that I never really looked so closely before. She runs her hand over it, careful like she were stroking a porcelain surface. “Amazing isn’t it?”

I look up in time to catch her eye. “Whatever would we do with it?” I ask softly. “I have no idea how to do this.”

She smiles at me, tugging at my hand and placing it right above hers, the one that’s curved around her belly at its roundest. Maggie’s always smiling lately; like she’s made a certain peace with this, and really, it baffles me, how she seems to be so serene, these days. The Maggie I knew would have been angry. The Maggie I knew would have wanted this done some other way, some other time.

Instead, she just says, “Trust me, we’ll know,” stroking the back of my hand, tracing the ridges of my knuckles slowly with the pad of her thumb. “It’s going to be okay.”

I believe her then, like I always have.

## VI.

By the sixth month, it stops being about the mystery behind the thing, and more about the fact that it is about to happen anyway; in three months, to be precise. By then I'd been trying to ease myself back into the bed we once shared, having been woken up in the middle of the night all too often by curiously strong lights coming in from the window in the living room.

And then there's that thing about Maggie sleepwalking.

That first night I catch her is the last night I spend on the sofa. I see her looking out the living room window silently, the house dark, save for the light from the street. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes I call out to her softly. "Maggie."

When she doesn't turn around, I get up and walk over. I find her with her eyes closed and her breathing steady; it's as if she had fallen asleep standing up.

I nudge her gently. "Wake up, Mag," I say, kissing her on the cheek; I haven't done that in a good while, and it is what wakes her in the end. There is a brief moment of confusion, right when she opens her eyes, but then she says nothing as she pulls me back toward the bedroom.

I spend all the other nights watching over her, making sure she nods off before I do.

On a night I slip and fall asleep first, I wake with a bit of a jolt to the sight of a half-empty bed and an open door. As I step into the living room, I see Maggie standing by the window again, looking out like the last time.

She's awake, so I ask her what is wrong. She gestures to her phone in her hand. "Just taking a call," she says, not turning her head.

"In the middle of the night?" I ask. "From who?" Her hands are braced against the sill, and in this light, I can see her silhouette breathing. She says nothing. "It's the father, isn't it?"

She turns to face me, shaking her head. "You don't understand."

"I wish I did though," I just say. In any case, it is far too late to argue, but then what else is there to do about the questions? "Surely, there's a father out there, yeah? Maybe I know him?"

"It's not like that."

“Oh come on,” I sigh. I am inexplicably tired; I haven’t been sleeping well at all, as it seemed like the lights have followed me to the bedroom, and there have been nights that feel like I am being deliberately woken by the damned street lamps. “What, is it *in vitro* then? Or are you invoking the immaculate conception clause, too?”

Maggie draws in a sharp breath at that, and in the dark I sense her expression shift. “Don’t be this way,” she just says, though it comes out more as a hiss. “You don’t know what you’re saying.” With that she pushes herself off the window and tries to amble past me, presumably to head back to the bedroom.

Only she doesn’t make it too far; with a sharp cry and a choked breath she braces herself against the arm of the sofa, her other hand clutching her stomach.

In my head, I remember the word, *Six*. “Maggie!” I reach out, trying to steady her, eyes straining in the dark for any sign of blood. I stretch over to snatch the phone off the table by the window. “We need to get you to a hospital,” I say, fingertips shaky over the keypad, trying to keep it together. *Is it 117 or 138 if I need an ambulance?* I ask myself, shutting my eyes for a moment.

Her hand is cold and sweaty as it wraps around mine; I haven’t even realized I am shaking so bad until she grips it and stops me. “It’s okay, look at me,” she says, as if I were the one in some form of premature labor; when I open my eyes, there she is, trying to smile through a wince. “Joey, I need a favor.”

“No, we need an ambulance,” I insist, trying to pull the phone from her grasp. For such a weakened woman, her grip is unbelievably firm.

“No, no hospital,” she says, her breathing heavy. “No hospital. I need to sit.” And then, “I need to pray.”

*Pray?* I shake my head, still tugging at her. “Maggie, we don’t have time.”

“We have *time*.” Trembling she slides onto the sofa, breathing in deep with her eyes closed. I watch, half-baffled, half-terrified. *When did this start happening?* I ask myself, and it hits me just then, how much there is that I don’t know.

Her lips move, quick and fervent; she's muttering prayers I thought we'd already long forgotten, swept under proverbial rugs along with memories of failed love affairs in plaid skirts and strict nuns. I sigh and just then, she reaches out, still with her eyes shut, wrapping my hands warmly in hers as she goes on and on.

When she opens her eyes, it is already close to daybreak; from somewhere far away we hear a rooster crow. "It's morning," I just say. "How are you feeling?"

The first word she replies with is, "Safe." She is smiling and I don't understand what she means, or at least, not outright; it is only when she adds, "I'm feeling much, much better," that I am able to breathe out, finally.

In reply, I just say, "Good." Coming out of prayer, Maggie looks so refreshed, and inside I feel a curious peace wrap around my heart like a blanket.

## VII.

The seventh month is not really any better; Maggie has grown weaker, and I am always up at night fetching water. I never thought pregnant women can be this thirsty all the time. She is also often sick and in bed – her frame just isn't made for such a heavy pregnancy, and she's always complaining about the horrible pain in her back.

Halfway through, she gets sacked from her job at the book store for being “pregnant out of wedlock.”

“Is that even legal?” I ask. “Tell them the 18<sup>th</sup> century wants its logic back.” We are in bed when she tells me; not that it is altogether a surprise – it was a Christian book store, for one, and they didn't even know Maggie was *lesbian*, to begin with. That she got this far is a feat in itself.

She laughs as she shakes her head. “I'll get a new one in time,” she just says, waving her hand around confidently, as if to disregard the whole thing. “We'll be all right.”

I smile. “I don't know how you do this,” I say, shifting to turn the television on. We'd left it on the news the last time, and right then they are showing images of dead fishes by the shore, the voice-over saying something about how it is about to be the hottest summer to date – not that they didn't say that last year, and last year was nearly *molten*, to be honest.

Off Maggie's quite worried, “Oh,” I shut the TV again. “Not the perfect world to be bringing new kids into, huh,” I just say, moving to rub her arms, thinking she needs the comfort of the gesture.

“The decision isn't in our hands, Joey,” she replies, burrowing her face into my neck. It is all too warm for cuddling, but I don't have the heart to push her away. I want to tell her that *that* is a lie, that certain decisions *are* in our hands, but then I remember how I simply don't know enough for anything in my head to be true anyway, so I just let it slip.

(When I wake the following morning, Maggie's arm is draped heavily across my torso and her breath is hot against my neck. I am sweating profusely yet I don't want to move.)

## VIII.

One night, a week or so into the eighth month, I run into Mary in the department store, while sifting absently through baby clothes.

“I guess you’re still together then?” says Mary from the other side of a rack of tiny dresses. I can tell how she is trying hard to not sound so disappointed, but I hear it anyhow.

“What gave it away?” I ask back, trying to get my own disappointment out of my voice. It’s been the loneliest few months, and I’ve made my peace with the fact that it’s just what unpopular decisions do – isolate people.

Mary sighs. “Joey.”

“She’s due next month, you know?”

“Do you know who the father is yet?”

I pause, hands stilling upon two identical pink lacy skirts; at least, I just think, I know now where to go, should the kid be so inclined. “She needs time,” I reply without looking, willing my hands to move again, focusing on the movement of hangers.

Mary gets quiet for a bit, and it’s almost like she’s already left. After a while, she says, “We’re worried about you, Joey.” And then, “Do you even know what you’re getting into?”

I sigh, looking up finally, meeting her eyes for the first time and bracing myself for the possibly unbearable mix of pity and judgment there. They *were* my friends, yes, but I understand now how there are limits to even that. “Yeah,” I say. “Yeah I do.” I am lying through my teeth, I know as much. “We’re going to be fine.”

Pushing herself away from the rack, Mary says as we part, “She’s lucky to have you.”

I shrug. “We never know, it *could* be the Second Coming,” I say, managing a smile now, and Mary laughs out loud. “Better be on the right side, hmm?”

“You’re a crazy girl,” Mary just says, still laughing as she walks away.

## IX.

Month number nine. Under usual circumstances, the weather should have already managed to turn itself around by now, and in lieu of the heat of the past few weeks, there should already be rain. Around this time a year ago, it rained every day that there never was a moment that the pavement was dry; at some point it poured so hard, a month's worth of rain in the span of six hours, and by nightfall half the city was already under water.

It's different this year though, and it's still too hot at night that Maggie finds it hard to sleep, even with all the windows open and the curtains drawn. Most nights I find myself looking out, whistling for wind, and even under the faint street lights I can see that the grass on the lawn is still that worrisome shade of brown.

When the day comes, it hits me distinctively early; somewhere inside I just *know*, and I pack Maggie's things just as I get up that morning, way before she wakes and true enough, when she does, she looks at me and says as much.

"It is time."

The calm is strange; I expected this to be more frantic, for the mood to be entirely more panicky. Instead, we eat our breakfast in silence, as if we are not in the face of something truly life-changing; as Maggie's bag sits heavily on the table in the living room.

Outside, it is sweltering and one can almost hear the heat hiss. "We have to go," I tell her, gathering the dishes and taking them to the sink. Peeking through the kitchen window, I am surprised to find the trees swaying; everything else is quiet.

On the table, Maggie is fiddling with her cell phone. "Signal's weak," she tells me, frowning as she pockets it. These days, the lack of rain has also come to mean chronic power outages and fucked up telco towers. With one hand under her belly and the other reaching out for balance, she adds, "You're right, we should head out," as she walks toward the door.

I grab the biggest umbrella from our stash and head out to check the street – dusty and already feeling like a fever. I look up, squinting at the sun; it isn't even noon yet.

She is wiping furiously at her forehead when I get back in. "It's scorching," I say, slinging her bag onto one shoulder and reaching out to her with the other. "Let's go."

Her hand is unbelievably cold. I look at her, waiting for her to tell me we're going to be all right (like she always has), but she says nothing; her quiet lips thin and pale.

\*

It takes a while to get a cab; the street is strangely empty for such a morning, and at some point I almost give up searching for transport, thinking I'd just read up on home-assisted deliveries instead, only to be pushed back into the street when the power in the compound goes out.

After a good while spent sitting on the curb, I finally come across a rusty old Kia. I wave at it frantically, and I feel my skin stretch, the surprise movement painful under the sun. As it creaks to a halt in front of our compound, I go back to assist Maggie past the threshold, trying my best to grip her securely with my sweaty palms.

"To the hospital," I say, tapping our driver on the shoulder. He is a kind-looking old man, perhaps a father himself; perhaps this is what drew him to pity us, in the first place. "We're having a baby."

"The two of you?" he asks, raising his brows at me on the rear view mirror. The words still feel wrong on my lips; when I feel Maggie tightening her hand around mine, the next word that hits me is *contractions*.

"Well, it's her, not me," I answer, trying to smile. The engine sputters to life; it's a worrisome sound, to say the least. "Are you sure your cab's all right?"

"It better be," he says, shifting the gear. Underneath us I can feel the engine trembling. I close my eyes for a moment, trying to pray, my other hand growing numb inside Maggie's grip.

As we reach the corner leading to the main road, the Kia creaking over the dusty road, Maggie turns to me and asks, "If I asked you to believe the next thing I say, would you?" Her voice is shaky and raspy; her hand still cold around mine, my fingertips turning white inside it.

That look upon her face is unlike anything I've ever seen all these months. Her shoulders are shaking despite the heat and I put an arm around her to still them. "Hang on," I say, rubbing absently, for the lack of anything more comforting. "We're almost there."

"Joey, if I asked you--"

I look away and turn to my window; the streets are empty save for a stray car or two. The vehicle shakes lightly as the wind picks up, and I find myself holding on to Maggie tighter. "I'll believe anything," I just say, distracted.

The engine starts wheezing by the time we get to the gasoline station by the curb. "It's too hot," the cab driver says in a worried tone. In one brisk move, he maneuvers the car to the emergency bay at the shoulder of the road, wiping his brow before opening the door.

"Boss," I try calling out.

"We're overheating," he just says.

Beside me, Maggie's grip is a steady pulse. "Joey."

"It's going to be okay." I am lying, but I try not to look at her, so as not to give it away.

"Joey, I need you to understand something."

With my other hand I am wrenching my window down, desperate for air. When I breathe in, what comes to me is warm and heavy and it does nothing to ventilate the small space we're in. I stick my head out, looking further out down the road – there's nothing else there, apart from the silence of asphalt and concrete.

Beside me, Maggie keeps on tugging, her voice calling my name, growing softer and softer. "You must understand," she whispers. "It's bigger than you and me."

When I look back at her, she's already closed her eyes; she looks deathly pale and it triggers all the alarm bells in my head. "Boss," I call out again, pounding upon the side of the taxi with an open palm. "We have to get to a hospital."

He emerges from behind the hood wearing a genuinely worried look on his face that almost reads, "I'll try."

*Shit*, I think, gritting my teeth. It is then that Maggie starts talking about the voices in her head. “They tell me I am ending the world,” she says, in between deep breaths. “They tell me when it comes for me there will be no star, no kings, nothing.”

My mind fills with longing for a hospital and for medical intervention, for anesthesia, for a steady bed covered in clean sheets. “What are you talking about?” I ask, instead of trying to wrap my head around what she’d just said. She keeps on breathing, keeps on tightening and loosening her grip at worrisome intervals. When she opens her eyes, she finds mine and holds them; they’re so bright that I have to squint.

“No star, no kings – nothing,” she repeats. “There will be *nothing*.”

Under my hands her skin is cold, and as I look away from her eyes to the warm gushing of *something* upon my palms, something in my head seems to right itself just then.

*No star, no kings – nothing.*

At that moment, the ground starts shaking – lightly at first, before slowly building up to a full tremble. I hang onto her tighter, and my eyes scan the space for a sign. Something underneath me shifts, and not long after I catch the sight of the rosary dangling from the rear view mirror swaying, a pendulum counting down.

“*Punyeta*,” the driver says, holding onto the edge of the driver’s side window. “The world is ending and we’re in the middle of nowhere.” The notion that we’re in the midst of something far more powerful, something we could not control – it’s more frightening than ever.

“Boss, we’re having a baby,” I tell him, wiping at my face with the back of a hand. He just looks back at me helplessly, the ground still rumbling underneath.

When Maggie starts screaming, it begins like a low hum before breaking out into one long heart-rending wail. I have no idea what to do so I freeze, every inch of me stilling.

When it’s done, the words in my throat are dead, and the cab fills with the sound of a small new cry.

“Is she there?” asks Maggie, smiling weakly at me over her knees.

Looking down at what I have in my hands, I pause for a moment, uncertain. Outside the trembling has stopped, and gradually, it has begun raining.

“Yeah,” I nod, breathless as I hold onto this fragile movement right over my fingers. I shift my eyes over to the rosary hanging upon the mirror, waiting for calm.

“It’s raining,” the driver says, closing the hood and hurrying back in. “It’s the end of the world.”

*The end*, I repeat in my head. I look at Maggie, her eyes clear in the aftermath. “I think we’re going to be okay,” I smile.

My hands are warm, feeling every bit like a good beginning. #