

FOR SALE: BABY SHOES, NEVER WORN¹

I never expected to see the baby anyway.

My wife, gorgeous, leans over the toilet, cradling it like the child that never would be.

“The baby shoes,” she murmured, crying, vomiting, hugging the toilet like a ticket to ride and desperately reading and re-reading the stick in her hand.

Who knew that a little symbol could mean so much. That little plus sign guided us throughout our life together: We met at the hospital where she worked as a nurse, she first told me she was pregnant in my tiny, crowded seventh grade classroom where I teach math, we got married in the Baptist church underneath the plus sign that held Jesus up by his flowing, bloody hands and now she held the stick out to me with her own bloody hands, but no plus sign this time.

Sometimes absence is worth as much as presence.

I threw away the stick, grabbed the shoes with the tag still on them from the nursery, and placed them into a box in our garage that read in my wife’s unmistakable, illegible handwriting: For Sale.

Going back to the bathroom, my wife looks up at me with swollen eyes hidden under curls that have stuck to her cheeks with her tears.

I part the hair from her cheeks, “Valerie...” And she falls apart in my hands.

The first time I met my wife, I would never have been able to envision her in such a vulnerable position. After one of my students sneezed directly in my face while having a conference, I went to the doctor sick as a dog with the flu. She took my arm in her hand to take my blood pressure and I became enraptured by her beauty. Clean cut, with the exception of her wild curls and bulging blue (almost silver) eyes, she was the epitome of an independent woman who knew what she was doing. As she pursed her lips in a way that only emphasized her professionalism, I couldn’t help but try to think of a way to make her part those lips, to put my own on them.

Lost in these thoughts, I foolishly but helplessly blurted, “God damn, you’re beautiful.”

Startled, but smiling, Val looked at me and said, “Actually, I’m Valerie. Please let me take your blood pressure instead of hitting on me.” And as the machine squeezed my arm so tight and her fingers grazed my arm ever so slightly, I felt my breath constricting and my heart racing and I knew I could never live without those fingers, or those eyes, or that hair, or this woman.

It’s not that I didn’t want a baby, but a baby just never seemed as important as Val.

She always wanted a baby. It was a part of her dream, even though she always

¹ Ernest Hemmingway

so independent. On our first date, she told me that she already knew who her child was.

“It’s a girl. Blond hair, blue eyes, a slight gap, never dirty. Her name is Rooney and I have always known her. She breathes life into me even...” and she trailed off.

Taking her hand, I said, “I think she sounds wonderful,” but even I could hear the artificiality in my tone. She took a sip of wine and smiled at me in a way that said I’m letting this go for now. And I let her because I really didn’t want to talk about it.

I don’t know why the Baby is the only thing that separates her and me. We are always so happy, but whenever the Baby comes up this stifling gap comes between us and I get so angry about it. We have a nice enough life; I don’t know how a baby would add anything more to it. We live in Lansing, Michigan which means we get to enjoy each holiday to its fullest even if it is a pain in the ass to shovel the snow each winter and waste money cooling the house each summer. But even that has its joys. I always look forward to the winters with Val because of our snow shoveling ritual. We shovel as fast as we can, race to the end of the driveway, and collapse in the snow and stay there until we can’t take the cold anymore, which makes hot chocolate taste that much warmer and that much sweeter.

Now, I make her a cup of hot chocolate even though it’s in the dead of August and we don’t even have the air on, but Val is cold today and hot chocolate is her favorite drink. It used to be café mochas but when she (correction: we, I guess) started trying to get pregnant she cut caffeine from her diet.

When her hot cocoa is done, I walk back into the bathroom and hear her murmuring “Rooney” over and over again. Seeing her like this, I thank God that I have two more weeks until the school year starts. I guess that’s one of the perks of teaching, summers off, even though the rest of the year wears you down so hard that a summer is a necessity.

“Val,” I say, setting the cup down on the counter. “We have to move forward. We can’t do this anymore. We’ve tried.”

“Nick, I need this. I need Rooney. What don’t you understand?”

“Rooney doesn’t exist, Val,” I tell her as gently as I can. “We had a child, yes. We knew she was in your womb, yes. But she was never born and we have to let it go.” She starts crying again and pukes again in the toilet. I feel bad now.

“Let’s go to our room. I made you hot chocolate.” I lead her to the bedroom; lay her down and I lay down with her. I think about the baby shoes in the For Sale box, which serves as a reminder of her most important dream that she lost.

Val is my first dream, teaching is my second. I feel selfish in a way, because my dreams in our life have been fulfilled while she put her secondary dream (nursing) on hold to pursue her first dream of having a baby and look how that turned out. We both deal with mathematics in our jobs, working through equations to reach our humble humanitarian dream. I teach thirteen year olds how to solve equations in the hope that they will lead a good (sometimes better) life. Val uses equations to mix medicines and take temperatures in the hope that those who come to her sick will

leave better. You'd think with our knowledge of math and science that we'd be able to figure out this equation of our marriage. But the Baby seems to be the unsolvable problem; the prime number that never seems to fucking end and that Valerie can't seem to stop attempting to figure out.

Around a year and a half ago, we were making love and she seemed almost desperate in the way that she held me to her. I didn't care but it seemed odd. I think what was odd about it was that she got those pursed lips like when I first met her. The lips that show that she is in a moment, that she knows what she's doing. Instead of being lost in our entangled bodies, she was thinking hard about something and doing something beyond being with me. When she started to shake before I did, she smiled in a knowing way and she grabbed my back tight, hurrying me along. That was the first time we finished together but as the last waves rolled away she pushed me off, held her legs tight together, and turned on her phone. I saw a menstruation app light up on her phone with a message that said: "You are currently ovulating. This is the prime time for pregnancy, so start trying or get protected. Your period is projected to start in 2-3 weeks." I immediately felt sick and opened the nightstand drawer where she kept her birth control. It hadn't been taken in almost four months.

That's when I knew that part of our marriage functioned as a way for her to solve the equation of infertility in order to finally meet Rooney. Not that I blamed her necessarily. I have always gone to great lengths to keep my dream of being a great teacher and great husband working in tandem throughout our marriage, but it was the sneakiness with which she went about it. She knew that I needed to be a part of the decision to have a baby with her and she did it anyway. But then again, I wasn't sure that I wanted to have the Baby anyway. I just knew I wanted Val, our house, my job, her job, and our life together and I knew that the Baby would only complicate things.

As Val falls asleep, I go back out to the garage to look at the baby shoes. They're pink and that super soft material that seems to be reserved solely for babies. I rub them against my cheek and then hold them to my heart, trying to feel the love for the Baby that Val does. But I only feel hollowness. To test the theory, I take off my wedding ring and hold it to my heart and feel a swell of emotion as I think about Valerie. Holding these two items in my hand, I begin to cry because I cannot figure out how these things can be added together in a way that makes sense to me. But this makes me love Val more. She somehow has enough love in her heart for the Baby, for her job, and somehow for me. What is even more baffling is that the baby does not even exist, at least not anymore. It is this natural, selfless, loving disposition that holds me to her. Some may say she is a perfectionist to a fault, but to me she holds no faults. She is my Val, and that is all I need in life.

I was the one that bought those shoes for her. It was after a huge fight regarding the Baby in which I dismissed the idea of us having a baby "right now" even though my heart said "not ever."

"How can you be so selfish?" Val had spat at me, her voice shrill and filling our

bedroom. “You know how much I love Rooney. I love you too, but you’re disregard for what I want makes me think otherwise.”

“Well, Valerie, if Sweeney or whatever the name is all that matters to you, then maybe I don’t fucking love you,” cruel and calculated. If this, then that.

Incredulous, she dropped her crossed arms.

“Fuck you.” Seeing the disbelief, the near hatred, I saw in her eyes I knew I had to fix it. The next day I bought a pair of shoes. They were only seven dollars at the nearest Wal-Mart, and though I didn’t exactly change my mind about the Baby I at least wanted Val back.

Once I handed her the shoes, she cried but this time with happiness.

“Nick...I don’t know what to say,” she said and wrapped her arms around me. Holding her to me, I felt us becoming closer once again. Yet, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I would lose her to the Baby. But, if having a baby meant I got to keep Val, then so be it. I’d do anything.

Going back to the room, Val still asleep, I lie down next to her and think about those shoes. Soon, I fall asleep with pink silk on my mind.

I wake up to lips on me: frantic, wet, and crazy.

“Valerie, what the hell-” and she shushes me with another kiss, climbing on top of me and pulling off her top.

“This is fucking crazy and you know it. You just had a miscarriage for God’s sake.”

She wilts mildly for one moment, the fact that I just gave her not quite computing with her arousal. Nevertheless, I am captivated by her beauty, her unabashed search for sex even in the face of tragedy, her frantic nails on my back, and the panting of her hot breath on my neck. And, in spite of myself, I let it happen. Even though all of my instincts tell me I shouldn’t do this, this is wrong, I let it happen.

“Nick, which color do you like better for her: a light pink or a deep purple?” I look over to Valerie, her belly swollen with the Baby. With It.

“I don’t know, Valerie. Deep purple I guess.”

She frowns at me, “Light pink it is.” And I roll my eyes, realizing that, in the face of Rooney, I am unable to win.

It’s been like this for the past nine months. Ever since that night when I let myself violate my wife we’ve been in the throes of marital indecision. I use the word “violate” because that’s what it was. She was obviously in an altered state of mind after the miscarriage and I allowed myself to give into her. Now look where we are. Her, pregnant with Rooney, and me unable to come to terms with my new responsi-

bility: Rooney, the thing that will separate us.

Yet, we're both unsure if it is Rooney. It's an unspoken thing in our household, the sex of our baby. She chose to not know the sex as she was too worried that it would turn out to be her worst nightmare: if It is a boy.

"I have to go to work, Val," I say, using the shortened version of her name that I haven't used in months, ever since she became pregnant. I'm trying to distance myself.

"No problem, honey. I'll be here working on Rooney's room." You're fucking nuts, I think.

A half hour later I arrive at the school. Walking into my classroom, I feel comfort. It is a home away from home, away from the madness that is my household. I'm almost panicked that it's May already and the school year is almost over. Thankfully, I've arrived early so I have time to complete some work. I run my fingers over the student papers, all nice and neat in the "Work to Turn In" slot. I take out the pens that I have put into a cup specifically for pens and line them up. I take one out, a red one, to grade student papers. I get lost in it, solving the equations that students got wrong quickly and passing over the ones they got right. It becomes a mantra: yes, right, no, wrong, $x+y=z$ not a, etc. All of a sudden, my phone rings. It's Valerie.

"What's up, Val?" I say, not quite ready for her answer.

Gasping breath, a pause. "Rooney's coming!"

"Okay, I'll be right home."

Standing up, I rush over to the trashcan and throw up. Every anxiety I have had over the past five years with Valerie, over the past nine months with Rooney, each day that I woke up and her swollen belly glared at me like the sun rising on the morning of a storm, each day that I tried to get past it to reach the woman inside this obsession only to be pushed away, all of it came up through my throat and past my teeth into the trash can in the form of thick, vile, nameless shit that represented my whole life with her. Then, I started to cry helpless tears that ran down my cheeks until they took my breath with them until I cried out, my mouth taking form of a crazy smile even though I'm crazy with sorrow.

"Nick...are you okay, honey?" It's Liz, one of the other math teachers at the school. When I look up, I see her staring at me, horrified at my state.

"The baby's coming..." I manage, but barely, and her eyes widen enough so that I can see the reflection of my pathetic self.

"Go! I'll tell the principal, there has to be a substitute floating around here." Taking my hands, "I'll take care of things around here. Go get your baby."

I can't even bring myself to thank her or to explain myself for my state of mind, but I stand up and hug her for a long time which I hope is enough to convey what I need to.

I immediately leave the classroom and start driving. The radio is already on, playing my Thom Yorke CD. The music and the drive have a calming effect on me that allows me to continue even though I'm dreading the moment that I meet

Rooney.

Ten minutes. I'm at the house and Valerie is on the porch, holding her stomach like she's preparing it as an offering to a god, her hospital bag packed and ready. I honk to get Valerie's attention even though she hates when I do that (I can hear her voice in my head now, Can you not honk at me, Nick? Why don't you come to the door and pick me up like a normal husband?). Even now when the best moment of her life is about to happen, she looks up, glares at me, and waddles over to the passenger's seat.

"I'm going to forgive you for your insolence this once just because I don't want her to be born in a world of hate."

"Don't give me your hippie bullshit, Valerie. Let's get this over with."

* * *

I've always hated the smells of hospitals. The clean, alcoholic smell that induces anxiety no matter what you're there for. I remember once going in for stitches after I was too careless with scissors and I almost passed out when the doctor put rubbing alcohol on it, the smell becoming so up close and personal, like the root of evil.

The smell is overpowering now as I watch Valerie push, her vagina stretching like a crying mouth. Seeing the top of the Baby's head coming out, I feel myself getting woozy.

Looking once more at the gaping, gripping, possessive mouth that surrounds the head, I think about all of the moments that I've ever had with Valerie. I think about the first time I ever saw her smile and how it entrapped me within her presence. I remember the first time I ever took her on a date and she laughed so hard that she drooled on the cheesecake and was so embarrassed that she left and I had to call her to convince her how incredibly adorable it actually was. I think about the first time that we ever made love; how that moment was not centered on a baby or a means to an end, but how it was the full embodiment of the interconnectivity between two beings who just feel like they belong to one another. I remember the first time that she felt like she failed a patient and she came home and cried so hard that all I could do was rub her back and tell her cheesy jokes until she couldn't resist a smile (the one that got her was, What is a pirate's favorite letter? Argh! But he likes the sea!). I remember our wedding vows when I told her "No matter what storms change our landscape, the core of me will always naturally revolve around you." And she smiled at me and said, "Spoken like a true scientist" even though I'm a mathematician.

Now, the Baby falls out of her and those moments vanish in one second, and in the next I suddenly let go: of Valerie and my old life. It's a girl.

The doctor places her on Valerie's chest and I stay to the back, watching. Valerie holds her and immediately starts synchronously crying with the Baby. She runs her fingers over the Baby's full head of dark, curly hair and shakes her head in disbelief.

“I don’t want her. It’s not her. It’s not Rooney. Oh my God...” The anguish consumes her face and the whole room is silent. The Baby’s cries continue, as if she knows that she doesn’t belong to the arms that hold her and vice versa. Before I can say anything, a nearby nurse takes the baby, cleans her, wraps her, and places her in my arms as the doctor immediately takes to taking care of Valerie. The Baby stops crying.

I look down at the baby and suddenly everything changes. That lack of emotion I felt when feeling the baby shoes back in the garage rushes at me when I stare at her. Every bit of love I’ve ever felt in my life suddenly quilts into this enormous awakening that I only feel when looking into my baby’s eyes. I walk into the hallway with her and no one stops me because they somehow know I need to be alone with her.

“You are the love of my life, my shining star, my everything. No matter what storms change our landscape, the core of me will always naturally revolve around you because I’m your daddy.”

For some reason, I look up. When I do, I see Liz coming down the hall. She smiles sheepishly at me.

“Well, look at the new daddy. Sorry to come, I just saw how upset you were and needed to check on you and...Anyway, what’s her name?” In an embarrassed gesture, she begins to stroke my daughter’s hair.

“Lisbeth,” I answer almost automatically, as if I knew all along.

She smiles at me and almost blushes. “That’s so beautiful,” she finally answers. Then, “Oh! I bought her a present, I hope you don’t mind.” Taking a pair of tiny pink shoes out of her purse, she gently puts them in my hand to try on Lisbeth later.

And in that moment-all three of us huddled in that hospital hallway through all of the obstacles, wrong answers, and endless miscalculations-I realize that this solution finally allowed life to make sense.

