

Boy and Girl

A boy sits by himself at the back of a Burger King. He's huddled over a small wooden table, the chair across empty and askew. The boy taps his foot impatiently and eyes the bathroom. The girl has only been in there a few minutes, but the boy knows it has been too long. He starts to think about the future; he thinks about what it would mean to move in with her. He thinks he can drop out of school if he needs to. His parents will be furious. They will go off the handle, yell, scream, and lecture when they find out what has happened, but he will drop everything to help her, if that's what it takes. That's what responsible people do. He used to work at a pharmacy back home, where he held a small position—nothing glamorous—but he knows he can talk to his old boss and get the position back. It is a job, which means money, and that is what the two of them will need. He wants to see all the pieces come together.

The boy glances around the room. The walls are half-wallpapered and peeling in spots. The paint is chipped at the corners. The whole place smells like grease, and he can hear food sizzling in the burners around the corner. It's dead in here. Nobody comes in or out and the workers are quietly talking amongst themselves.

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He hears a noise. He comes to a jarring halt; his foot sits on the tips of his toes. He thinks he hears crying, some kind of sniffing from the women's room. He can feel it, too. The hot tears, the grainy stall. He imagines the girl inside as she braces herself against the rim of the toilet, feeling something inside her. Vomit, maybe, or something else.

A new sound overtakes the imaginary one. He can hear a piano through the speakers. He smiles because he knows the song. He feels like an asshole for grinning like this, especially at this time, but he still smiles because he doesn't understand why classical music would be playing in a place like this. His hands drum along with the keys.



"These say three minutes," the boy says.

"I think they all say three minutes," the girl says.

The boy grabs a blue box off the shelf and eyes the directions with confusion.

"Three minutes just doesn't seem like a whole lot of time," he says. "That's, you know . . . it just seems so quick for this."

"I think that's the general idea," she raises her voice. "Quickness. You want to know fast, you want to know *right now*, don't you?" She stares at him. "Don't you?"

"Of course I do, that's not what I'm saying."

"Then what are you saying?"

"I don't know. It was a stupid comment. I'm sorry."

"I've never had to do this before," she says quietly. She keeps looking at the boxes; her eyes flutter over the labels and she mouths them to herself as if she were at a library trying to pick out the perfect book.

She is quiet. She is calm. She is handling this reasonably well. He is terrified, sick to his stomach with anxiety, and he realizes that it is this absence of palpable fear from her that worries him most. He doesn't know what should be happening,

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whether they should yell and fight in the aisle of this stupid drugstore. Should they hold each other and cry or give up? Should they just go back to their dorm rooms to sit and wait, and pretend like everything is okay? Should they just pretend that there is nothing to be afraid of and that mistakes are just things that happen to other people? He doesn't know what to do so he just looks the other way. He sees another girl wandering at the end of the aisle, her mind seemingly set on whatever she's looking for. She's cute, and the boy remembers how oblivious he was yesterday and how great ignorance could be.

The girl pulls a box from the shelf, glances at the side, and slides it back. She taps her finger against her lip and looks at the boy for a moment before reaching and grabbing another box from a different section, each one a different brand.

"We'll try a couple," she says. "There are two in each box. Four chances. Four shots."

"Okay," he says.

"And then we'll know for sure."

"Okay."

"Are you scared?"

"Yes, of course."

"Me too."

"Will you be okay by yourself?"

"There's not much you can do. It's a one-girl job."

"I could be there."

"You can't."

"I could do something."

"Like what?"

"I could hold it. You could just pee on it while I hold it. It'll be a great bonding moment."

She laughs. It is the first smile he has seen all day.

"Maybe we can save that milestone for a different day," she says.

Should they be laughing? Should either one of them feel something happy and good, even for an instant? He panics. He

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feels shame fall on him, heavy and loud. This is serious. Why isn't he taking this seriously? He looks to her for some kind of confirmation but he doesn't know what she's thinking behind those cool, blue eyes. All he can see is the buckshot of dark blue and purple that stipple and surround the black of her pupils. These eyes were the first thing he remembers noticing about her three months ago, and they have frozen him once again in this inconvenient moment.

"I'm here," he says.

"I know," she says.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Okay."

He takes the boxes from her and pays for them as if they were a gift; he thinks about making a joke about this, saying, *Hey, Honey, happy birthday*, but he doesn't. He can tell she is afraid now, shaky even, as he pays. He rubs her back and thinks about the emptiness of this gesture in such a situation. The thought alone makes him look at his feet and shove his hand back into his pocket like an idiot, like a moron.

When they step outside of the store, he suggests they go home. She stops, pauses.

"We have to do this now," she says.

"Where? Where are we going?"

He looks around. It's a Saturday night and college students are showing up in force for the end of happy hour and the beginning of better nights.

"Where could we possibly go for this?" he asks again.

She throws her hands up, exasperated. Her eyes are watery, and he backs away knowing he has gone too far. She walks to him, grabs the bag from his hands, and walks away. She crosses the street quickly without watching for traffic. She walks straight towards the corner of the intersection and the brightly lit Burger King and steps inside without checking to see that he is following.

He enters a moment after her and watches her move past the empty chairs inside until she makes it to the bathroom. She

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hesitates before pushing open the door, and she turns and she looks for him and when their eyes meet, she nods and breathes and walks inside. The boy sits down by himself in the closest chair he can find. After a moment he sighs and huddles over the small wooden table in front of him, the chair across empty and askew.

The boy taps his foot. He drums his fingers on the table. He plays piano. The minutes go by.

The door to the women's room opens and the girl emerges in one piece. The bag and boxes are gone. She walks over to him, but does not sit. Her eyes are watery and puffy. She is still shaky.

"We're okay," she says.

"Are we?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Are we okay, though?"

"I don't know."

He stands up and they walk outside together. He holds her hand and looks at her face as they walk. She's impassive and she forces a smile when she seems him looking. It is not the smile he knows.

He remembers the piano piece playing inside. He remembers how he played it for her one night when they finished having sex for the first time three months ago, when they snuck into the music building to study one night and wound up doing more. They were in a practice room, a small space with blank walls and a large piano facing the doors. His fingers ran over the keys, her sweat and her scent still on him, all over him. He played with speed until he hit the dead key. It was out of tune. It cracked when his finger hit it. The piano shivered and he stopped playing.

"What is it?" the girl said. She sat at his feet, the room dark and quiet.

A window covered the opposite wall and the first fingers of an early morning began to rise over the hills and trees out