

Ways To Show Affection

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The cold morning wind clings to my skin

like a tangled bedsheet, following me in the door from Lafayette Street and through the metal detector. The heat isn't working in the clinic waiting room. A bronze bust of Margaret Sanger, patron saint of birth control, scrutinizes me from a plaster podium, and a slide show, *Ways to Show Affection without Intercourse*, is projected half on a pull-down screen and half on the cottage-cheese ceiling. There are no empty seats, so I stand among the teenagers, who are still wearing their oversized coats and avoiding eye contact, while a security officer with a shaved head presides over us with a list of names: *Tiphannie, Lindsay, Keisha. You young ladies can go on back now. No, you can't take anyone with you.* The third way to show affection without intercourse is cuddling, but the man I'm with isn't holding my hand. I'm out of place because of my pale skin and my jewelry; he's out of place because of his gray hair.

A little girl with pink plastic barrettes in her lamblike curls squirms impatiently in the lap of her dozing, tattooed guardian. The girl looks me right in the eye, as small children do, and her gaze jumps my heart like a defibrillator. I look away quickly, but her image stays with me, and I am not here in the clinic but leaping from a rubber swing, splashing in a backyard wading pool with a plastic slide, prancing in a daffodil sundress on a wraparound porch with long pine railings. When I was this girl's age, I'd get up at dawn to make parades of tiny objects down the wooden rails: plastic circus animals, alphabet blocks, newly minted pennies, brittle cicada skins plucked off the bark of pecan trees, granite rocks with quartz jewels embedded in them. In my family the women all collect small things, and we like to put them in lines. At my grandmother's house, high on a shelf that held hawk feathers and arrowheads and foreign coins, there stood a glass mother elephant and four baby elephants all in a row, each one's trunk tucked through the curled tail of the next. Sunlight from my grandmother's window reflected off their glass ears, and I took them home with me, one by one, tucked in my palm, careful not to squeeze too hard and break them. The elephants were my grandmother's gifts to me at the end of my visits, my reward for being a good girl.

There are no presents for the little squirming girl, nor for me, here in the first waiting room of the clinic. The windows, small grated diamonds near the ceiling, look out onto a sidewalk pockmarked by blackened chewing-gum buttons ejected from the mouths of smirking adolescents. I try to imagine carefree, bubble-blowing girls in miniskirts, but the only encouraging item in this cold basement holding cell is a ruffle-edged *New Yorker* magazine from last May. Blue xeroxed pamphlets, carelessly folded, lie scattered on the stained industrial carpet and particleboard tables: *My partner / family member / friend is here for an abortion today*, they read. *What should I expect?*

I guess they're allowed to write *abortion* in print. On the phone they say *termination*, and in person they say *procedure*. Paul, whose hand I'm not holding, eyes a pamphlet but doesn't pick it up. Maybe he'll wait until I'm called away. Then maybe

he'll read it over and over, until he's memorized what not to say afterward and knows exactly how much bleeding is too much. I could have told him all that myself, in minute detail. I know exactly what to expect.

I don't know whether to say, "I'm sorry," or, "That's wonderful" was Paul's first, whispered, response when I told him I was pregnant. Then *What do you want to do?* Then a gentle *I guess I should come up, huh?* Later he'd say that the *wonderful* part was just because he'd felt sure I'd want it, no matter what.

I just never in a million years thought this would be happening to me, Paul said — as if it were happening to *him*. I sat quivering in Queens, with my plastic cellphone in one hand and the plastic pregnancy test — showing two lines — in the other. I imagined him fiddling with his phone cord, perched on the edge of the navy-sheeted mattress on the floor of his dim Washington, D.C., studio apartment, beside the flimsy folding table that held his alarm clock, a photograph of his mother, and his wedding ring at the bottom of a white paper cup. (I'd known he was divorced from the beginning, but it had taken me weeks to notice the ring. I'd slip it on and off my finger while he shaved.) As it became clear that I was uncertain and willing to consider all the factors, Paul revised his initial line: while he couldn't say no if I wanted to go through with the pregnancy, he wouldn't *lobby* for it either. He didn't want me to do anything I didn't want to do. I would hear no more mention of *wonderful*, not until I e-mailed a girlfriend who made assumptions, wanted to throw a shower, told me she had hand-me-down onesies and tiny socks and a million books for me to read. By the end of her sweet, excited letter, I couldn't stop sobbing.

How the fuck did this happen, anyway? Paul asked, and I explained to this man nearly twice my age — to this gray-ing, ankle-aching, shoe-tree-using man — all the reasons why withdrawal isn't enough. But by *this*, he meant a lot more than conception.

He said he was still all tangled up in his failed marriage. And I told him, *I don't want to talk about Alice right now.* And he said, *I know, but—* And I said, *You don't.* And he said, *It's not about her. It's about us.* And I said, *Please stop.* And he did.

When he came up, he said, *No matter what, I'm glad it's you* — glad I was the one carrying his child. I wouldn't let him hold my hand. I wouldn't let him touch me at all.

Paul never gave a lot of thought to birth control. Alice couldn't have children. There were cramps when they were still dating. She curled up in pain at his feet in a movie-theater aisle, then again on the floorboard of his car. Her periods left her bedridden for days. After they were married, the doctors told her she had to have surgery. Paul put fatherhood out of his mind. By the time he and I were drinking Belgian beer together at the Pharmacy Bar, he thought it was too late for him, that he'd missed his chance; hell, he might even be shooting blanks. We sat in the dark, smoky interior and looked out a frosty window at the neon music notes and stiletto heels on the streetlight poles, and I said I wanted a baby. It was our first date, and he hadn't yet taught me that Belgian beer has almost

as much alcohol as wine. I said I'd wanted a baby ever since I'd gotten pregnant as a teenager and had to save for three months before I could afford the abortion.

In the third waiting room, on the second floor, I sit next to a light-brown-skinned girl whose head comes to my shoulder if I sit up straight. Her curly ponytail is dyed red, but the hair slicked down to her scalp is chestnut, and her earring, a bent-gold script *Tiphannie*, climbs halfway up her pierced ear. My eye slides down to the medical-history form in her lap. *Year of birth: 1989.* I don't need to do the math; my fourteen-year-old brother was born in 1990. *Number of pregnancies (including today): 3.* She's got fake nails, a tiny orange sunset reflecting on an aqua ocean at the tip of each finger. *Number of live births: 0. Number of miscarriages: 0. Number of abortions: 2.* I'm both horrified and relieved; she's even worse than me, and she's only fifteen. When I was fifteen, I still had a couple of glass elephants left, the ones my little brother hadn't broken. I scribble in 2 for my number of pregnancies and hand in my form before anyone sees.

What I know: Pregnancy makes your skin clear up. Pregnancy makes your nipples throb painfully in the cold, through three layers of clothes. Pregnancy makes you burp and curl up in a fetal position. Pregnancy makes you yearn for small things, safe places, saviors you know won't come.

Over the year we were together, Paul and I spent many hours curled between the navy blue sheets in his one-room apartment on the eighth floor of the Imperial. He played me lonely indie-pop records by artists I'd never heard of, fed me lavender-flavored sorbet with a tiny silver spoon, and told me about Alice, whom he could seldom manage to call his *ex*-wife: When Alice was my age, she tried to cover her breasts when they made love. When Alice was upset, she went to a Mexican bar by herself. When Alice was ready, *she* asked *him* to marry her. When, ten years later, Alice wouldn't let him touch her anymore, she asked him for the divorce. He told me about their vacations in Belgium, their dinner parties, their fights, and his infidelities. He told me she would never forgive him. He described their old apartment in detail, pointed it out to me every time we passed it on the way to the liquor store. One night I sat in his lap on a bench beside the Potomac, and he told me he loved me, but that there would be no more great loves for him.

I told Paul about Jude, the boy I'd fallen in love with at fourteen and had left school to be with at eighteen. Jude, who called me his *bodhisattva*, his *angel*, his *pearl*. Jude, who told me I was everything he'd ever wanted, until it turned out I wasn't. His beloved bodhisattva went off to college and casually enlightened someone else.

I tried to make it better, but all the bad things that happened after that could be traced back to my betrayal. We'd wanted a rooftop garden in Crete, but after my fall from grace, Jude took me instead to the white dunes of Santa Monica, California, where I lost my last glass elephant, the one with the chip in its trunk and no one left to cling to. We hitchhiked down endless interstates, through the desert and the plains and the rain. In St.

Louis, Missouri, my first love punched me in the jaw, and I fell in slow motion in a field of wheat and prickly thistles next to a shopping mall. By then we both knew I was pregnant. Jude ran away, horrified by what he'd done, and I chased him through the fields screaming, *Come back!* When I caught up to him, he was kneeling with his face in his hands. I held him and said I was so sorry for having made him this way. Jude finally left me sitting in a D.C. Metro station, bleeding clots the size of plums, two days after the abortion we'd paid for with money our cardboard sign had said would be for food.

Wrapped in navy blue sheets, Paul and I cried together for these and other things we thought had ruined us. We mourned all that we had lost. We rarely forgave ourselves, but held one another gently, careful not to break what was already cracked. Paul took *fuck me* out of my bedroom vocabulary. He taught me to be in love without the *madly*, to make love without the violence. He ran his hands over my body like a blind man reading Braille, every bone and curve. I said, *You touch me the way I've wanted to touch people all my life.*

Afrowning red-haired woman with a Russian accent and a pin on her chest that says *SONOGRAPHER* digs deep into my pillowy stomach with the ultrasound wand, then exclaims, *I don't see well*, and orders me to take off everything below my waist. She slips a neon blue condom over the ten-inch vaginal ultrasound wand and pushes it inside me, follows arrows on a screen, explores my hollows, snaps photographs of my fetus from different angles, presses too hard, and finally commands, *Get dressed.* As I struggle with my boot, I ask how far along I am. She writes the answer to my question on a form I can't see and says, *The counselor will tell you. Are you ready?* I'm still trying to get my laces through the holes.

(end of excerpt)