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Traffic

Yet another exam had ended. Laura's paper modesty sheet hung loosely over her lap. She pulled her feet from the stirrups and sat up. Tried to keep her attitude in check.

"I know it's been a long road," said the nurse, Judy, who then left Laura to dress.

The road was, in fact, seventy-eight miles long. There were only three clinics in the state that did what Judy and her colleagues had undertaken—to override God's will. To take God's decision that Laura and Niles remain childless and respond with a smile, "Thank you, God, that's an interesting idea ... we really value your opinion," and then ignore Him and do what they wanted to do, which was called *in vitro fertilization*. In vitro fertilization had not been present at the time that Adam had named the animals.

Attempting to override one of God's decisions was not a simple matter. First, there was Laura's stepfather. Secondly, there was the \$15,000 that they didn't have. Thirdly, Laura gave herself a shot in her stomach every evening before dinner. "Think of the diabetics," she coached herself; diabetics had to do this their whole lives. After two weeks, the normally smooth and pristine area between Laura's belly button and her pubic hair had become bruised and pinpricked. She had stored under the bathroom sink a bright red, plastic Hazardous Waste container, into which, one by painful one, the spent needles were dropped.

Laura and Niles used to live in the city in which the clinic was located. Four years earlier, they'd decided to move to the country, where they could have an entire acre of land instead of a city plot. They could grow their own food. Laura could continue her work as a graphic designer; Niles got a job at the high school. Full of grasshoppers and cornfields, the country would be a less polluted and better place to raise their children.

Seventy-eight miles, from door to door, took Laura or Niles about ninety minutes with traffic. They sometimes drove to the clinic together, but mostly Laura went alone; if Niles accompanied her, he needed a substitute teacher for half the day. Usually, Laura listened to the radio. Lately, she'd been yelling at the other people on the road.

This morning, there had been some textbook cases. As she had merged onto the interstate freeway from her quiet, two-lane county highway, she encountered a large sedan that was driven by a middle-aged man in the left-hand lane (*Otherwise known as the passing lane*, Laura grumbled). It did not matter if she was directly behind him, flashing her headlights, while the right-hand lane remained unoccupied. He would not budge; eventually she had to roar past him on the right. She'd resisted the urge to expose her middle finger as she passed, but did glare. He'd stared straight ahead.

"Idiot," muttered Laura. She accelerated to nine-over-the-speed limit and set the cruise control, and then settled in for the duration. The scenery was majestic; the highway wound through an enormous river valley that had been carved by glacial floodwaters fifty-gazillion years ago (*Niles would know how many*). Osprey and eagles circled overhead; barges moved along the now-dammed waters. Clouds caught their hems on hilltops, or hung in deep valleys that were lined with evergreens.

"Oh, for god's sake," said Laura. It was the old man again. Niles referred to such drivers as "gasser-breakers:" while Laura or Niles maintained a constant pace, a gasser-breaker accelerated, then slowed, then accelerated, then slowed, the result of which was that the two cars passed each other again and again. Over seventy miles, this could happen a half-dozen times. The old man was creeping up on her on the left-hand

side (*of course*).

“Hey, asshole!” Laura called into her closed window. “Learn to drive!” As he passed, the man stared straight ahead. After a few minutes, he disappeared around a curve. Laura wagered with herself when she’d see him again. Five miles? Ten?

She tried not to get upset about it; everyone, including Niles, reminded her that stress might have an adverse affect on her womb. The doctor had recommended she quit her job. Her sister, Lydia, had wanted her to drive in to the city at five in the morning so she could attend Lydia’s yoga class. “You will feel so peaceful and empowered,” Lydia, who had two children, promised.

People wanted to be supportive. They said they *just knew* it would work. “I have a good feeling about this,” they said.

During the time period that Niles or Laura had ravaged her stomach, Laura had also been required to drive to the clinic every other day for a “blood draw.” They were “watching her levels.” Translation: both her arms were bruised and prick-marked as well, forcing her to wear long sleeves lest she attract inquisitive or disapproving stares from grocery-store clerks. She had also become entirely accustomed to exposing herself to the doctor for an ultrasound, one that went *up there*, with which he monitored the size of her ovarian follicles. He’d never seemed happy with them while he was looking at them, which would fill Laura with terror; then he would stand, pat her knee and say everything looked fine.

Laura was approaching a semi-truck. A glance in the rearview mirror revealed a Volkswagen about to pass her, blocking any attempt to switch lanes. She cursed, released the cruise control until the car passed and then resumed it, pulling around the truck. She hated to lose momentum like that. The Volkswagen sped on.

“Drivers wanted,” she muttered.

All the shots and blood draws and up-there ultrasounds had as their purpose the removal of mature eggs. The eggs were sucked out with a device that had a long needle attached to its end; Laura had been mercifully unconscious for this procedure. The eggs were placed in a Petri dish, in a clean-room such as was utilized by the microchip industry, with Niles’s “specimen,” which had been attained by him, alone, in a separate office that was equipped with both video and print pornography, and a couch. This egg-and-sperm mixture had been left to its own devices for a few days and then the “best” two blastocysts—*What happened to the rest of the babies*, her stepfather wanted to know—had been sneaked back into Laura’s womb, a procedure for which she had been conscious but sedated. Niles was required to wait in another room, this time without pornography.

Laura had been swiftly gaining on what she thought to be the gasser-breaker, but which turned out to be a different car entirely. She and it had been about to pass a line of three semi-trucks. Laura prepared to slow her car. To her surprise, the driver yielded his spot in the passing lane, signaling and merging to the right for just enough time to allow Laura to speed past. Laura waved to acknowledge this courtesy. In front of the semi-trucks, the gasser-breaker stared at the road ahead. After a repeated failure to impart Basic Highway Etiquette, Laura passed him on the right.

Once the subcutaneous stomach-injection protocol was complete, Laura and Niles had graduated to nightly intramuscular shots. These were entirely up to Niles, as the shots were administered in Laura’s posterior, with a much longer syringe. This undertaking had required Niles to overcome a lifelong aversion to needles that had previously manifested itself in profuse sweating and lightheadedness. The oil-based progesterone solution sat stubbornly in her buttock for an hour, like a dumpling her mother had made for Sunday dinner.

Nearly all of Laura’s and Niles’s friends had, at this point, at least one child. While they had spent most of their social time during their twenties and early thirties in bars and restaurants, they now found themselves going to their friends’ houses—it was easier for their friends to just put the kids to bed when it

was time, and it saved the expense of a babysitter and rounds of six-dollar drinks. No one seemed to be able to stay up much past midnight anyway.

Laura and Niles enjoyed their friends' kids. Some were more challenging than others, of course. They marveled at how dumb circumstance and their friends' quirks were, it had become clear to them, going to manifest themselves in therapy-necessitating experiences for their children.

"You two would be such great parents," their friends told them. "It's just not fair that there are such rotten people in the world and you can't ..." Laura and Niles tried not to feel resentful.

The gasser-breaker had been gaining on Laura; she'd resisted the urge to go even faster to outpace him. She'd resisted the urge to blast her horn as he passed so that he would at least acknowledge her. She'd resisted the urge to drive off the road and into an evergreen tree.

The final eight miles of the journey took place within city limits. No cruise control; Laura was lucky if she could remain in fifth gear. The road that had so recently accommodated individuals now swarmed with humanity. Laura was behind two pickups that were neck and neck. The pickup on the left realized it was passing its off-ramp and cut in front of the one on the right. Brake-screaming and horn-blasting ensued.

"Jesus!" Laura yelled, swerving to avoid a collision. "It's not our fault you missed the exit!" The driver of the exiting pick-up had rolled down his window and left them with a parting gesture. The nerve.

Dressed, Laura sat in the chair next to the coat rack. Her magazine choices were *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Golf Digest*; instead she stretched her legs and examined the enormous, expensively framed photo collage on the wall, to which the parents of baby after baby had submitted proof of conquest. She believed that this display was intended to inspire, not intimidate or depress, the as-yet-unblessed. Many were twins and triplets. In some cultures, twins were mistrusted—even dashed upon the rocks as a preventive measure. Singletons and multiples in matching onesies stared back at her with wet, soft eyes. *What happens to the rest of the eggs?* demanded her stepfather. *You can't make babies and then just throw them away because you don't need them.*

Someone knocked, and then opened the door cautiously. It was the nurse, Judy. "Congratulations," Judy said. "You're pregnant!"

Laura rose and drew on her coat. She smiled and shook Judy's hand. "It's about fucking time," she said.