

BROOKE STREECH

## Pitchpoling

Clara pushes herself up from the chair, shaking the bees from her head. The Diner is only a five-minute walk, seems insurmountable. She calls Nicolette for a ride.

“You okay?” she asks when Clara slouches into the front seat.

“Think so, just a little, I dunno, off.” They drive, Clara texting the entire way.

“Is he coming to visit again?”

“Hmmm? Oh yeah, next week.”

She turns off the phone and jams it in her purse, sad to lock him up for the entire shift.

The Diner - it's actually named that, in large red letters that can be seen from the freeway - is always busy. The girls wear pink dresses with white collars and aprons that tie into bows. Nicolette's looks like a hot-waitress-Halloween costume (she'd had it hemmed), Clara's more like a sack. Nicolette was always trying to get her to buy one a size smaller, put on a push-up bra, wear cuter shoes. “Cute shoes hurt my feet,” is all she would say.

She makes it halfway through the shift, but the buzzing in her head won't stop. She sits on a stool near the kitchen. Nicolette breezes past. “You look awful. Want me to get table seven for you? They just sat down.”

“Thanks, just their drinks, I'll be out in a sec. I'm just a little dizzy.”

“Maybe you're pregnant.” Nicolette rummages around in her skirt pocket for her lipgloss. Normally this would have been Clara's line, as they waited patiently for Nicolette's period each month, quietly marking the days. Nicolette looks up from her compact, eyebrows raised over sparkly shadow. “OH.”

Clara can't stand, dread is on her like an asthma attack. “Bring me a calendar, would you? And get table seven.”

She met Tony at a bar in January. Nicolette dragged her out with some other girls one night after work, rejecting her original plan to go home and watch Lawrence Welk alone in the dark. They went to a place downtown with a DJ, Nicolette in a silver dress and high strappy sandals, Clara tethered like a balloon next to her, tan skirt billowing around her knees. She sat at the bar and let the vodka ease into her body while Nicolette shimmied off to dance. Clara didn't even notice him until he was right on top of her.

“I guessed. Screwdriver, right?” he handed her the glass and it almost slipped from her hand.

“Thanks, yeah,” she tried to catch Nicolette's eye, but she was busy gyrating in the crowd on the other side of the room.

“I saw you tapping your foot, why don't you dance?”

“Oh, I'm not very good at it.” The thought of trying to pull off what Nicolette and the other girls were doing was enough to make Clara want to eat spiders. She knew the redness is creeping up her neck then, making her pasty skin more mottled. She put her hand up to her chest.

“Take another drink and come dance with me.” He looked directly into her eyes. She could not say no. She wished herself into the wall. It didn't work. She took a drink, almost draining the glass. He held out his hand and lifted her from the stool. “I'm Tony,” he said. Does he have an accent? Hard to tell over the music, but his tan skin and dark hair made her think of someone who came from somewhere else.

His hands did not leave her body. The music slowed in her head and she moved around him as if in deep pool of water. She felt free of her body and grounded at the same time. An older song came on, one she knew from her mom singing in the kitchen, and she danced like a little girl. They laughed, he pulled her closer, pushed her away. He was tall enough to spin her around, but she could still rest her head right under his chin. Out of breath and a little damp, he put his hand under her hair and held her. He let her go and gave her the same look as before, the one that made it impossible to say no.

“You have beautiful hair,” he whispered to her, his fingers gathering one blond section after another, letting them slip down her back. Given all the vodka, her head felt strangely clear as she walked with him to the hotel across the street. Nicolette was a memory.

She woke naked sometime before dawn and blinked around the dark room. A half-full Bud Light on the nightstand turned her stomach. She needed a drink of water but didn't want to wander around the room without clothes. The sheet was tucked too tight to use it as a toga. Trapped. She made a run for the bathroom, hoping to find a towel. A robe on the back of the door - perfect. She avoided the mirror and ran the tap, made a micro pot of coffee and splashed water on her face. Some Advil in her purse ushered her on the way to feeling a bit normal, despite the lack of sleep.

She sat in a chair next to the bed, feet tucked in, holding the mug with both hands. The sheet was barely covering him and she admired his back. He had a tattoo between his shoulder blades, she longed to run her fingers along it. His hair too - slightly long in the back, black, wavy. Nicolette isn't going to believe any of this, she thought.

The light was coming up in the room now, she could see her clothes - skirt on the floor in a heap, tank top next to the television. Her shoes were a mystery. Should she dress quickly and leave? She was starving, and Nicolette would probably be dying to get the story. Was that bad etiquette to go? Or expected? She did not know.

He started moving, she set her cup down too hard on the nightstand. The sheets slid back, he coughed and opened his eyes. “Hey beautiful.”

“Coffee?”

“In a sec.” He got up and walked to the bathroom. She could not tear her eyes from his body. She had been with men before, of course. She had a boyfriend just last year. But he had never walked around like this - usually after sex he reached for his clothes and dressed as fast as he had undressed.

Tony came back and pulled her to the bed. He held her face in his hands, kissed her on the mouth. “Good morning.”

“Hi” was about all she could muster with his mouth all over her.

“So tell me, how was it?” Nicolette buttered a piece of bread in the booth across from her, eyes wide.

“No, my god, I'm not going to tell you!”

“Oh please, Clara, I tell you everything.” This was true, and part of the reason she had any idea of what to do last night. Nicolette was nothing if not detailed about her encounters. So she told her, from the making out in the elevator, opening a beer, taking off his shirt. Her phone beeped.

“Hang on.” It was a text from him. Miss you already. She smiled.

“Is it him? Texting you?” Clara showed her the phone. She rolled her eyes.

“What?” Clara said, “Is that bad?”

“No. He's just gonna get all clingy on you now.”

“He doesn't live here, that would be impossible. Plus, maybe I like clingy.”

“Ok, so you got his shirt off...”

“Oh the tattoo! Yes, he took his shirt off to show me his tattoo. It was a tree, sort-of, and a snake twisting up the trunk. You could see the tongue of the snake. I couldn’t stop touching it.”

“So then you did it?”

“No, not really. He told me about the tattoo, we talked a lot, shared a beer.”

“Weird.”

“Is it?”

“Kinda. Then what.”

“Well, then we did it. Twice actually. Then we talked until we fell asleep.”

“Talked? About what?”

“I don’t know. His job? He lives in LA. He goes to the beach a lot, he’s really tan. He learned how to surf last year. He sells medical equipment. He’s out here every few weeks....”

“You’re smitten. Clara. This is dangerous.”

“No. No, it’s fine. He doesn’t live here.” The phone beeped again.

“Be careful, please.”

Clara couldn’t stop smiling. “I will, I will.”

After their shift, Nicolette drives over to the dollar store and buys ten pregnancy tests while Clara waits in the car. She sits on the couch that reminds everyone of a teddy bear, reads through a magazine article about dying Easter Eggs with tea and flowers. Once Clara realized she had missed not one but two periods, they were both pretty certain what the little sticks would say. She comes out and sets it on the coffee table. They wait, perched over the lines like they are reading Tarot Cards.

“I guess you’d better make an appointment.”

“Yep.” Clara’s eyes spill over.

She hoists herself up on the narrow table and waits. The nurse told her to strip from the waist down and wait for the doctor. Clara eyes her underwear balled up on the floor. Should I get up and put them in my purse? It’s too late. The door opens. “Good morning Clara, I’m Dr. Johanson.” Her black slacks whisper when she walks. “We’re going to do a quick ultrasound and see how far along you are.”

“So you’re sure I’m pregnant then?” Clara’s voice sounds high in her own ears.

“The urine test was positive, so I’m pretty confident. Let’s have a look.” She pulls a wand out of the cart and turns on the computer. It glows green. She lightly presses the inside of Clara’s knee. “You’re going to have to relax a little here.”

“I thought...don’t you do this from the outside?”

“Not this early, no. Just relax, it will be fine.” She inserts the wand and Clara draws in her breath. She tries to see but can’t maneuver. Dr. Johanson turns the screen, a fuzzy image floats on a black background.

“Looks great. See? Here’s the head right here.” She clicks the screen with a mouse, drawing a line. “That flashing? That’s the heartbeat. The baby is just over two inches long. I would say you’re 12 weeks at this point.”

“It’s a baby then?”

“Of course it’s a baby. It has a lot of growing to do, but see here? It has fingers and toes, and most of the internal organs have developed. I’m putting your due date as October 16th. Congratulations.”

Clara tries to sit up, pressing her elbows beneath her. The table is tiny, she feels like a fish flopping around in her grandpa’s old metal boat.

“I can’t have a baby. It doesn’t even have a dad.”

“All babies have dads, Clara, some are just better than others.” She snaps off the gloves and turns the computer away. A sheet of photos spits out the bottom and she hands them over.

At night she can feel the baby moving around inside her, like a fish bumping the sides of a tank. She dreams of giving birth, but the baby looks like an alien. Or worse, it’s limbs are tangled or missing, its eyes scratched out.

Tony comes back to town again, they go to dinner at their new favorite place. She and Nicolette can’t decide if he needs to know about the baby. “He’s not really your boyfriend or anything,” Nicolette points out. Clara rummages through her closet, trying to find something that makes her look as beautiful as Tony makes her feel. He picks her up in a white rental car that smells like dirty kids. He pulls her into the booth next to him so he can keep his hand on her leg. She fidgets, notices his hair looks a little thin. He picks up a fork, twirls it in his fingers, taps his foot. She gets up and moves to the other side.

“What’s wrong, baby?” he holds both her hands.

“I’m pregnant Tony.” He lets go.

“I thought. Aren’t you on the pill?”

“No, I never said. No, I’m not. I’m sorry.”

He sits for a minute looking down. She wants to leave but doesn’t. “I can’t have a baby with you Clara. I’m...I just can’t.”

“I know, I know. I’m saving up to get rid of it. Don’t worry. I shouldn’t have told you.”

“Shit Clara, I’m glad you did. But, damn.” He won’t look at her.

It is hot, and bright. Nicolette picks her up in her mom’s mint green Chevy and drives her to the clinic. She sits in the passenger seat staring out the window, fingering the wad of cash in her lap. Her freedom a few short hours a way. No more tiny being living inside her. No more worry. Maybe she will go on a diet, join a gym, get a real job in an office, wear pantyhose to work.

“Good luck in there.” Nicolette hugs her, kisses the top of her head. She turns without speaking. They give her a gown that fits. The table is wider, more comfortable. She climbs up and settles in, staring at the ceiling and trying to breathe. The nurse lifts her gown and smears clear jelly on her belly. She turns the monitor away. A new doctor comes in, squinting at the screen, makes a mark on his clipboard.

“Someone will be here in a minute to give you something to relax.” Her voice sounds apologetic. A man comes in with a needle, wipes her arm with a cool cloth. She feels a prick and her arm gets cold.

“Start counting backward from 50, this will make you a little sleepy.”

“Wait,” she says.

“Shhhhh,” he puts his hand across her forehead. “You’re okay. Just count.”

No. Wait. She thinks. Wait. She tries to speak again, her tongue is heavy in her mouth, her lips won’t move. She is pinned to the table with tiny strings.