

Patience Is a Game You Play*By Laura Madeline Wiseman*

I was carrying a human. I was going to be a mother, eventually, assuming I made all the right choices before the date of my human's birth. I'm sitting on a bed with my belly exposed. The flat surface of it hides what's inside as I lay down. I hold in my hand a dagger, the knife that was given to me on a dare. I twirl the tip of the dagger into the skin of my belly. It makes tiny indents, tiny holes. Fat red drops slide down the belly slope to the underwear as if knowing where it should go.

The phone rings and I pick it up, saying nothing. On the off chance it will be for me I listen, but most likely it will be for my brother or for someone else, one of the many bodies who live in this house.

Hey, are you there? It's Davey and I do not answer. Hey, meet me tonight. I'll be at the end of your block at midnight. Lace. He trails off and then hangs up. I will go to meet him, of course, what choice do I have. I have to file soon, report this pregnancy unless I can find a way out of it. I think that maybe I should take the knife and put it inside me, kill it. But does it work that way? Maybe that was made up. Maybe I dreamed it.

I let the blood dry for no one will know what I do or understood if they found out. No one cares when you're just some kid in a large family, living on the outskirts of town in a bad neighborhood in a house that is soon to be repossessed. I don't get a second glance unless it's a glance of contempt. I want to drop out and not from school, not just this place, but from it all. I want to cease to be. I want to disappear. Then there would be no worrying about the, I can't even say it, there would be one less mouth to feed, one less brat to worry about, one less girl. Then I get with human and now I have value, or will, once I report it.

At midnight, I leave my bedroom and walk out the front door. Quietly, though it's not likely anyone would hear. My mom and her boyfriend are asleep in a drunken haze. My brother is on the couch playing video games, but we have a strange secret bond between us. We cover up for each other whenever possible, while hating one another at all other moments.

Davey is there, my knight on a bicycle. He has grandeur dreams of owning a Harley one day, though he has to finish high school first. In a family of several siblings, he is the youngest and the last chance. His brothers all have jobs, but he's playing out his adolescence as long as possible. Fuck work, he says. Fuck the system, he says. Fuck them all, he says. My knight who put this thing inside me has fucked me over.

Hey baby, he says, you took your time.

Listen, I have to tell you something in private. He looks at me like I should spill my guts now, here on the streets, as if the cameras had never been here nor

the microphones. As if I could safely tell him what was inside. No. I say this with a force that I never use with him, I say it so he'll know that I'm serious.

Later, he says. We've got something to do first.

He rides and I walk next to him as we head up the hill and down another one, three blocks over to Nick's house. In Nick's bedroom we smoke because he has learned to disable the security system outside his house. He won't say how he did this, but promises us he will eventually do it to ours too. Davey thinks he is full of shit, but a gutsy mother fucker because he always has some and smokes it in his own house without consideration of imprisonment. We smoke it with him because we won't get arrested for doing something illegal on someone else's property. He will, or more exactly, his parents will.

At Nick's we sit on the couch that is his bed and pass a fat one between us. I get high easily, even though I've done it for a while, and take only a few hits. Davey and Nick share most of it. I start to feel floaty a little, withdrawn from myself, like there are two of me, one that is this body and one that is trapped far inside observing everything. I giggle. Then they giggle at me. Davey tells me to shut the fuck up, then kisses me, blowing smoke into my mouth. We joke for a long time, flip magazines and turn on music, though not too loud. Even though his parents don't mind his company, they don't like to hear his music. I'm watching him. I think I love Nick, just a little. He is useful and sweet in ways that Davey is not. Nick is smarter and wants to be a lawyer so he can change things. He doesn't say what he wants to change, but he watches a lot of lawyer television series and tells me that lawyers are the ones who make the rules. He's whispering that to me now, his lawyer dream and I stare at him, my eyes glazing over and wishing I had something to drink, water maybe. I feel like his lips would be soft and beautiful as pillows and I want to touch them with my fingers to see if they really are like pillows, but as I move to do so, to reach up and touch them Davey yells something and Nick looks away from me.

Davey and Nick are laughing at a joke that I don't get. Nick pushes me with his elbow and points at Davey, both of them laughing hysterically. I don't like when no one looks at me. I don't like when people laugh and I don't understand. Nick elbows me again, pressing his white fleshy elbow into the slight bulging fat of my belly. I hiss in pain, delayed. I clutch my stomach and roll forward, leaning on my knees and thighs, pressing my face into my jeans. They laugh, they must think I'm laughing, but I'm not laughing and I'm not crying, but holding myself.

Hey, Lace, what's up? asks Davey.

I'm fucked.

What? It's safe here, says Nick.

I'm pregnant. I'm carrying a human, I say.

Suddenly, we all seem sober and I feel completely inside myself as both Nick and Davey look at me, look at each other, and then look at their hands. I explain

to them that I've been reading what to do to myself, to get rid of it, this human without the authorities knowing, but I'm not sure. Inside, I say, knowing that you have to do something inside to get it out. Davey is kicking the wall and cussing and Nick grabs him to tell him to be quiet, but Nick gets shoved across the room. Nick leaves for a moment which turns into a few minutes and then comes back with a few magazines.

Look, these are old, contrabands. Maybe they're something in here, he says.

I know what to do, says Davey. I have to punch her.

I look at him confused, imagining his fist slamming into my face and wondering if that will stop the human from growing.

My mom, he continues, she said that she lost one once, on accident and didn't tell anyone for fear, because my dad beat her when he was mad. But she was glad it happened. She had already had three. She said he kicked her in the stomach and she lost it. Lay down, Davey says to me pointing to the floor.

She'll scream, says Nick, looking at me and I sit scared happy knowing that they will take it out of me, the human. Nick takes a pair of socks from his drawer and puts it in my mouth and helps me to the floor. Davey starts kicking me in the stomach and I clench with pain, trying to pull myself up into a little ball as he kicks and kicks. Tears fall from my eyes and yet I don't make a sound.

He stops and says, well?

I wait for my breath to slow, the bloom of painful heat rushes in me. I wonder if he hurt anything else inside of me, because it feels like his shoe has gone all the way through me. I take the sock out.

Go check, he demands.

I limp out of the room and go to the one bathroom in the hallway silently not to disturb Nick's parents. His parents are from another generation and their parents are from another generation. Nick lives in some other world. They tell stories of the different time and of different laws, but I wonder if they are true. He says that there use to not be so much security, that there were not always cameras on every house, on every phone line, on all the computers. But somehow it changed. His parents refuse to own electronic gadgets. They don't even have clocks. But as in all houses, lights turn on at a certain time to get up and turn off when it's time to go to sleep, the oven heats at the proper moments and the phone rings when there's a message from the government. Nick's father knows a little about electronics and fixes things so that they have control. That is why Nick claims there are no cameras in his house or outside his house.

In the bathroom I sit on the pot and pee. I look for the telltale signs of my monthly, but just as there hasn't been one for four months there is not one now. I press my hands into my belly trying to force something down and out, that human being. But all I feel is acute pain. I cry because I did not want this and I had been warned, but it was my fault if it were to happen. It is always the girl's fault because she suffers the consequences, even if the guy cared. Davey even pulled out most times, though Nick didn't.

I get back to Nick's room and the guys are gone. So I wait on a couch, thinking maybe it takes more time to release itself. Davey comes in then and tells me to lift my shirt. I shake my head, but do it anyway. Shit, is all he says as he pushes me down on the couch to feel my belly. He presses his palms around, as if he can tell what is where. I'm in pain, not so much for being kicked, but more for how this can ruin my life. No one is allowed a pregnancy without permission and those that do disappear, sometimes forever. Davey asked me how long and I tell him that I think it's been several months. He says he can feel the hardness of my belly, but I don't really know what he means. My body is a mystery to me.

Nick comes back and hands me a cup of hot fluid.

What is it? I ask.

I don't think you want to know, says Nick. It was in the book though, on women's problems.

No, I want to know, I say.

I just put everything in it 'cause I figured we have to do everything now. It's coffee, turpentine, Penny Royal tea, and Queen Anne's lace. I made a whole pot, I think you should drink it, he says.

Okay, I say. I force gulp after gulp of the bitter liquid down my throat and it burns. I get it down and then I run to the bathroom to throw up. I do this twice, and each time the guys ask me if it is out yet, the human, and I tell them no.

There's another way, says Nick, according to this, but it's like surgery.

Can't we wait? I ask because surgery is illegal. If you're caught in someone's house doing it, the person who owns the house is charged. Maybe it takes awhile for this tea and the punches, I say, looking from guy to guy. Davey has a gleam in his eye like the one he has when I watch him play video games, conquering demons, excelling to the next level. Video games are stupid now. They go on forever. I'm sure that at some point I remember when they only had 24 or 30 levels, but now it just gets harder and harder in each level. There seems to be no end.

Baby, I can't have them take you, says Davey. I look at him kneeling and then I look at Nick. Nick meets my eyes sadly, as if he wished he could do something, change something, get someone. In his hand he holds a piece of wire and he taps it against his thigh.

It can't be that bad, Davey says. You just stick it in and swirl it a few times.

You do it, I say to Nick.

Nick and Davey take off my pants and get a flashlight. They peer inside me and then slide the metal up. The sock is in my mouth and this time I do scream, but I scream into the wadded fabric. Davey mumbles, hold on baby, hold on. And Nick, his brow drips with sweat and his hand shakes. I scream again in an envelope of pain. Nick pets my head pulling the metal from between my legs. Blood streams from the metal and runs in tiny rivulets across his fingers.

I think it worked, he says.

I moan in response. I hear a hum in my ears, a high-pitched whine in the room that starts to pull me away from me. I fade into a whiteness, a tiny pinhole vision.

I awake and it feels as if Davey has just kicked me again and again, but he is holding my head. Something warm and sticky is pressed between my legs and Nick paces across the room.

You fell asleep, says Davey who strokes my face.

I want to tell my parents, says Nick.

No, says Davey.

Do you always bleed this much, Lace, says Nick.

I moan in response.

But it has to come out, says Davey. There's bound to be more in there than normal.

I fade out again, my ears stuffed with cotton and I can almost hear them arguing, but I can't. Everything I see is white and yet I don't really see anything, I feel hungry maybe thirsty, lightheaded. The high-pitched whine returns again, humming, buzzing.

Laura Madeline Wiseman is an award winning writer teaching in the southwest. Her works have appeared in *13th Moon*, *The Comstock Review*, *Fiction International*, *Poetry Motel*, *Driftwood*, *Familiar*, *Spire Magazine*, *Colere*, *Clare*, *Flyway Literature Review*, *Nebula*, and other publications. She writes for *Empowerment4Women* and is the Literary Editor for *IntheFray*.