

Rebekah Orton
Stroller

Courtney turned the Civic onto a one-way alley between the narrow houses. She stopped the car on a patch of gravel and opened her phone to double check the address. Just like the ad had said: *FREE: Stroller. On my porch til U pick it up*, posted at 2:34 AM. 2:34 AM was practically day time in a college town, but there weren't any students out in the alley. In a fit of responsibility, she began to text Jeff. She couldn't figure out what to say. She considered, briefly, just driving back to his place—their place—and climbing back into her blankets to wait. But grabbing the stroller wouldn't take more than a minute; she popped another Tums in her mouth, pushed the door open and got out of the car.

A crumbling sidewalk led to the house. Five porch steps and then she reached for the stroller's handle and let her hands rest. She closed her eyes and imagined sun on her face, the sound of the river next to her and a gurgling baby in the front seat. She sighed contentedly as she nearly peeked forward to see what the baby looked like.

The porch light flipped on, offensively bright. Courtney could feel her heartbeat in her fingertips.

A guy, nineteen, maybe twenty, flung open the door. "You owe me five bucks, Todd."

"Already?" A stocky guy with a beer in one hand—Todd?—materialized behind the first.

Todd laughed. "Dude, where's my phone?" He reached his empty hand in his pocket, pulled out a cell phone, and snapped her picture. "Look how scared you are."

He turned the phone towards her and she saw herself, illuminated by the flash, her eyes feral, everything else blackness. She dropped her hands from the stroller.

"Why didn't you record her?" the first guy asked.

"Record her standing there? I need more warning."

They both looked at her.

"You wanna do it again?" the first guy asked.

"I'm sorry?" She was having a hard time following what the guys were talking about.

"Look, you can have the stroller, but do you mind coming in for a bit, just so we can get a movie?"

A movie? She didn't understand what he meant, and the bizarre way he bobbed between her and the second guy made her nervous. He seemed too small to be dangerous, but there were two of them, and it was dark outside.

In the seconds when she considered her options, Todd stepped off the porch and slung his arm around her. "Just come in. Have a beer."

She tried to struggle out from under his arm, but Todd nearly lifted her over the threshold. Behind them the other guy made a joke about earning the stroller after five minutes inside.

The house was strewn with the type of clutter Jeff abhorred: piles of cans and discarded clothing, a collection of pizza boxes, and an ancient, sagging couch empty except for a pair of running shoes. A sock draped over the edge of each shoe like a second tongue.

"You're way too hot to have a baby," Todd said as he removed his arm from her shoulder. "You adopt?"

She shook her head and turned to the door, but found the other guy was in her way. She turned back to Todd. "I really should go."

"That's Ben. I'm Todd." He gestured with his beer. "How old's the kid?"

"There's not..." She moved toward the door, and Ben stepped in her path.

"You want your beer in a glass?"

"I don't drink," she said, just like she had for the last month.

"You're pregnant!" Todd said this like a kid who just got the right answer on a math test. Courtney found herself smiling at his enthusiasm.

"Maybe we should have her move the car," Ben said.

"What for?" Todd handed her a beer anyway and gestured to the couch. She sat, holding the bottle. It was wet already with condensation, and the fecund smell turned her stomach. When she turned her head she smelled the used socks in the tennis shoes on the arm of the couch next to her. Would they knock her down if she tried to get out? Five minutes in the house. She really hoped she didn't throw up.

They both turned to examine her. Todd had leaned far back on the other end of the couch. His body spread the way Jeff's sometimes did at parties, one arm along the back of the couch, fingers curled around a bottle, foot on his knee. He took a languid draw of beer.

Ben cleared his throat and asked them both, "You think we need some sort of act? A knife or something?"

Something dropped inside of Courtney.

Todd smacked Ben's arm. "Excuse my friend here. He's got boundary problems."

It took Courtney a minute to realize she should laugh. Still, these guys couldn't be anything more than dumb college kids looking for a laugh with a free stroller. She leaned forward to extricate herself from the broken springs of the couch.

"Don't go!" Todd said. "Tell us about yourself."

They both leaned forward, as if they were actually expecting her to spill out the whole story. How she'd met Jeff two years ago when they were both sophomores. How they'd been living together for the last nine months, but the place still felt like his apartment, and it felt like his car, and she felt like his girlfriend, even though he'd never introduced her as anything other than Courtney. They'd graduate soon, and they'd never really talked about what was going to happen next, he perhaps because he hadn't thought beyond the semester and she because she thought of little else, yet couldn't seem to find a moment to bring it up that didn't feel desperate or reaching.

In March, she'd been late for the first time, even though they'd been using protection. She'd borrowed Jeff's car during classes one day and drove fifteen minutes north of campus to a pharmacy where she wouldn't know anyone to buy a two-pack of pregnancy tests.