

Fool rush

IT'S A BAD HABIT but one Mark doesn't want to kick. Rebecca has nicknames for him—Speed Freak, Speed Racer, Speedy Gonzales, Road Runner, and she does that *beep beep* sound when she calls him this. Two speeding tickets in the last three months. One more and his license will be suspended and then he'll really be fucked because how will you get to work, Rebecca likes to say. So he's been driving real slow and steady, always conscious of the amount of pressure to the gas pedal, the rubber padding wasted, thin as a memory. They're on their way to a shop Rebecca's aunt told them about, a place run by an old Mexican lady who sewed for the wives of governors and politicians back home. She makes the cutest baptism clothes for babies, Aunt Debbie said, dresses with so many frills and laces they looked like wedding cakes, nice pants and tuxedo shirts for the boys. And all real cheap. Even though the kid's not due for another four months, Rebecca's convinced that it's never too early to plan these things out. And so, on his only day off this week, they're driving west on the freeway towards L.A., Mark watching the speed limit signs along the road—55, 65, 70—chanting them like when he was a quarterback in high school calling plays.

Rebecca thinks he needs to channel his anger and control his impulses. But how, he wonders, when these things are inside him? At times, Mark imagines he can see them under the sheen of his skin. Dwarf time bombs, millions of black beads with small fuses swimming inside his blood, flowing

through the webs of his veins. He's alive, though, at those moments, when the anger surges and pulses at his temples, when the cravings and urges take over. He inhales quicker and quicker, his eyes open wider, and he swallows everything up, devouring it all.

"Meditate," Rebecca says when, just after they cross the 10/15 interchange, some asshole in a huge truck shoves into their lane without signaling. "You're way too impulsive."

"But did you see that?"

"Babe, just let the anger wash over you. Do breathing exercises. Do yoga with me." Her chest moves up and down, heaving like when she mounts him.

"Yeah, yeah."

Not that they were fucking much these days. Not since they found out about the baby, anyway. Weeks have gone by without so much as a kiss. Cold showers ain't working. They never have. Jerking off feels good, but it bores Mark after a while, even when he asks Rebecca to take care of him or when he does it himself while sitting in their bedroom with the blinds drawn, watching her mom on all fours in the backyard, pulling weeds or pruning her rose bushes. She's in her early fifties with graying hair and wrinkles forming around her eyes and across her neck, but her tits are still firm, her hips wide, thighs trim and muscular.

Lately, fucking is always on his mind. Every waking hour of each day he thinks about it, salivating like a dog, watching girls coming into the shoe store in the mall where he works. In halter tops made of thin fabric, tight and sleek. And they flirt with him when their men aren't around. Asking, What shoes do you think I look good in? Hey, do you like the color my toenails are painted? They come in all day, parading through like models in a fashion runway show, and it's the best part of his miserable, fucking job. And there's Geneva now, a seasonal sales associate Trell just hired. Real sweet and goody-goody with thick braids and an ass you wouldn't believe. He told Trell about this fantasy he had; Mark finds her in the back room up on the ladder, putting some overstock away. She turns, unzips his pants, and you know the rest, dog.

"Mark, you don't know when to quit," Trell had said. It was early morning and they were tearing through shipment, pulling out boxes of Adidas and etnies, New Balances and Pumas. "She's still in high school, man. You're, what, thirty?"

"Twenty-seven," Mark said. "And she's not in high school, for your information. I asked."

"You one crazy motherfucker," Trell said as he went to open the store's gate; a handful of customers already waited, circling the front like vultures. "You better keep it zipped up. I don't want my only assistant manager getting fired for sexual harassment right before the holiday season."

"I can't help it," Mark said. "I got an illness. An incurable disease."

"Whatever. Just no monkey business."

"The ladies can't help themselves."

He's not thinking of the road, of the speed limit, too lost in thought, imagining Geneva going down on him, imagining a three-way with Rebecca and her mom. Then he feels a hand on his arm, long fingernails digging into his flesh.

"Mark," Rebecca shouts. "Look!"

The speedometer reads 80. "Shit." He scopes out the rearview mirror, praying there's no black and white cruising up behind them.

"Be more careful next time, babe."

"Yeah, yeah." He eases up on the gas and drifts out of the fast lane.

Five months pregnant. *Five months*. She's showing big-time, and the sight of the stomach makes his do flips and somersaults. He *is* excited about this baby. Really. He just wasn't planning on a kid now. Not yet. A few years down the line, sure. But not at this moment. That's how these things always go, his old man said when Mark told him. Like a scratched record with the needle stuck on the same spot, repeating the beat over and over. That's how it happened with you. Your mother and I weren't ready when you came. Neither were your grandparents with me.

"That helps to make me feel a lot better, pop," he'd said. "Thanks."

The timing's all out of whack. Things are out of sequence, happening too fast, and now there's no way of turning back now.



HE MET REBECCA LAST YEAR. She was working part-time at the Chinese restaurant in the mall food court, and Mark timed his lunch breaks for when she was there, scooping out nuggets of glazed chicken and over-fried egg rolls to shoppers pushing baby carriages, store bags hooked over their arms like animal pelts as they glanced at the bright menus. He always ordered the same thing—chow mein and hot tea to drink.

"Hot tea?" she made a face that day.

"Yeah. Hot tea. What's wrong?"

"It's just no one ever orders hot tea to drink."

He gave her a look.

She said, "I think it's different. That's all. Classy."

From then on he ate there, and she would always give him an extra scoop of chow mein at no additional charge. It was all her. Flirting with him that way, feeding him extra, calling him classy and mature because he drank tea. When they went out for the first time, he knew what she was about. Mark picked her up, and there she was, sporting this fine matching shirt and blouse set. The night was warm, and she wore her hair up so that he could see her long neck, a constellation of moles dotting the nape. His mom and dad were away that weekend, so they went back to his place. Forty-five minutes into the date, they were on the bed

going at it. And each date after that ended up the same way. Trell called it "friendship with benefits."

The trick was finding where to go since they both lived at home. Sometimes they parked places late at night—his elementary school, a deserted street next to a cemetery, an abandoned dirt lot. Once they rented a hotel room, a real dump with stained carpet and furniture that leaned painfully against the walls. The bed was too soft, but it did the job. She was on the pill supposedly, so he never suited up, and naturally it happened. His seed did what it was meant to do: wiggling through a channel, penetrating the wall, fertilizing the egg. An embryo. A fetus. A life. A baby. His. His.

An abortion is out of the question, her folks said. The old man told him, We're Catholic and Catholics don't believe in killing an innocent life. So there would be no getting rid of it. They were married right away. And then he moved in with Rebecca and her parents. And now here he is. Driving slower than slow on the freeway with cars riding his ass, honking, zooming around and flipping him off.

One morning not long ago, he woke up, showered, and stood in front of the full-length mirror Rebecca had bought and put in the bedroom so that she could watch the stomach grow little by little. She was still asleep, rolling around under the covers like some hibernating bear, and he was staring at her reflection in the mirror. That's when he saw it. A flab of skin around his waist, loose and jiggling. He noticed his hair thinning a few weeks later.

Hereditary, his dad said.

Fucked up, Mark responded.

In high school he was athletic. A quarterback for the football team. There was talk of college scholarships. He ran. Lifted weights for a while. But now there's no time for exercising, for a gym with expensive fees, money he can't afford to spend. Besides, Mark tells himself, he gets enough at work with the running back and forth around the sales floor, the climbing up and down of the ladder to get shoes, the boxes of shipment, the long hours on his feet.

Still, his body's gone limp, his muscles atrophied, dried up. The big arms are gone and so are the abs that were so defined you could run your fingers across them and they'd make a sound like music. He's no longer handsome, and his face has become an ordinary face, one you couldn't pick out of a line-up, one that's so average you can't help but feel sorry for him. He's shorter now, his pants always falling down beneath his newly formed gut, and they drag, the edges getting frayed and dirty from walking out to the dumpster when he's getting rid of trash or through the wet parking lot. And now there's the matter of his thinning wavy red hair.

You've got confidence, charm. That's what a high school teacher once told him, that he was charming and that this quality would carry

him far. She had raised her arm and swept her hand across her desk, knocking down a picture of her kids. *Far*, she said. All breathy. But she was dead wrong. It got him nowhere faster. It didn't carry him anywhere.

He looks over at Rebecca now, her stomach swelling out, getting bigger and bigger each minute in the car. Doing 65 miles an hour. It'll be forever till they get there. So he keeps himself busy by thinking about *far*.



WHEN THEY REACH WEST COVINA, about twenty miles from L.A., Rebecca pulls out a notepad and pen from her purse and begins jotting things down.

"What's that for?" he asks.

She looks up, concentration all over her face. "Possible baby names."

You're kidding me, he thinks. "Isn't it too soon?"

"Not at all. Come on. Let's think of some."

He presses harder on the gas pedal, the engine growling, resisting the surge of power, fighting hard to conquer it. "I'd rather not."

"You're no fun," she says, and continues her scribbling.

He lets himself think about Geneva again. Closing with her has been the hardest. Just the two of them, all alone. While he counts the deposits and shuts down the registers, she straightens the floor, puts boxes of shoes away, and wipes the display shelves. When she bends down, his eyes fall on the thin cloth strip of her thong panties riding up above her waistline. And when she pants while vacuuming, it gets him going good and solid.

A few nights ago, he waited outside the main entrance of the mall with her until the dad came for her. The parking lot was empty, and the security guards patrolled the perimeter in a flashy white Bronco. They sat on the wooden benches, the floodlights turning everything yellow and soft. Geneva told him about the classes she was taking at the community college.

"What's your favorite one?" he asked.

She smiled. "Human Sexuality." Just then her dad drove up in a Volvo and waved at them from the car. He was balding and wore a thick sweat-shirt, a sagging and worried look on his face.

"See you tomorrow, Mark," Geneva said. "Goodnight." She walked over, and the old man waved again before pulling away.

He walked towards his car in the far distance, got in, started it, and took his time driving home. He didn't want to think about Rebecca, the baby on the way, of falling asleep that night, waking up and finding that it's ten years later and he's still in the same spot. Unmoving. Older but no more wiser.

At City Terrace, traffic slows to a crawl. In the distance he can see the outlines of the buildings clustered around downtown jutting out from

the ground like the pipes of a massive organ. He imagines it up there, on the highest floor of the tallest one, looking down on all the movement, all the madness. People bumping against one another in their cars while speeding down the endless threads of freeways. Up ahead there are flashing lights, a tow truck, two CHP officers waving cars through. Rebecca sets the pad and pencil down on the car seat between them and sighs.

"You wanted to come," he tells her.

"I wasn't saying anything."

When he's sure she's not looking, he glances down at the pad. There's a string of names—Emily, Antoinette, Rochelle, Abigail, Rosemary, Isabelle. Towards the bottom of the page, she's drawn hearts and his last name, Walker, in the center.

"What about boy names?" he asks. The notepad tumbles onto the floor. "They're all girl names."

At the accident site, the concrete glitters with shards of broken glass. A Honda Accord has rear-ended a Toyota Prius. The drivers of each car stand along the center divider. One of them is on her cell phone. The other, a man with a red face and bulging eyes, talks to an EMT, pointing and flailing his arms about.

"What about boy names?" Mark asks again. Once past the accident, traffic still stays heavy, bumper-to-bumper, as they merge onto the 101 and move into downtown L.A.

"What about boy names?" she repeats. "I had an ultrasound done. We're having a little girl." She folds her arms, proud, arrogant, like she's just proven a point, won an argument, trumped him.

The cars on all lanes of the 101 refuse to move. A helicopter whizzes by up above, a radio news crew no doubt reporting another accident, a stalled vehicle. Another forty minutes added to the commute just like yesterday and the day before, like tomorrow and the next day and the next year.

A school bus crowded with children creeps up beside them, and Mark doesn't notice it until he hears shouts and laughter over the sound of traffic. The children look out through the windows, wave their small hands up in the air, their palms white, almost transparent.

"A girl, Mark," Rebecca repeats after a moment of silence. "What do you think about that?"

One of the kids on the bus makes faces at some of the drivers. He's pressed his nose up to the glass so that it resembles a pig's snout. He puffs his cheeks out like a blowfish, crosses his eyes, and flips people off.

"Mark," Rebecca shouts. "Are you even listening to me?"

All he can think to do is roll the window down, shout, "What the fuck?" But there's too much noise; screeching brakes, groaning engines, car stereos blasting music, honks and everywhere the air is coated thick with the smell of heaviness and dread and heat and it's crowded and

he thinks, *What if I just stop the fucking car? What if I just get out and run and run and keep running way past all this bullshit?*



THE DRESS SHOP'S CRAMMED in between a liquor store and a podiatrist office. White dresses and baby tuxedos hang from a string in the window, dangling back and forth, and the whole scene gives Mark the creeps.

"I'm waiting here," he tells Rebecca.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm waiting in here."

She shakes her head. "Fine." She eases out of the car and goes inside. A while later, she returns with something in a plastic bag.

"Don't you want to see it?"

"No. I'm sure whatever you got is just fine."

They drive the rest of the way home without saying a word. There's no more traffic, so they get back at something resembling a decent hour. Inside, Mark heads straight for bed because Trell has scheduled him to open the store the next day. Downstairs, he hears Rebecca's mom talking loudly, making a big show about the dress.

"Did he help you pick it?" she asks.

He can't hear what Rebecca says. It is, Mark imagines, something negative about him. About how it frustrates her that Mark acts the way he does sometimes, that more often than not, he goes about like he doesn't care for the baby, that he doesn't seem ready for fatherhood.

Nope, he tells himself. *No way. No way.*



THE MALL'S EMPTY except for the old people who come each morning to walk, sporting bright sweats and brand new sneakers. They start out in front of the main entrance at the ground floor, walk from one end towards Macy's on the opposite side, around the tall planters, past the elevators, up the escalators to the second floor, back across, then through the food court. Once finished, they end up at *Jumpin' Java* and sit at the tables, sipping coffee, out of breath, fanning their wrinkled faces, talking old people shit.

Strolling up to the store's front, he sees someone waiting outside. It's Geneva, holding a stack of books and a notepad.

"Hey," she says. Her eyes are puffy, and she wears no makeup, her face raw and clean.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, taking his keys and unlocking the front door. The store's dark, and she stands in the middle of the sales floor, waiting for him to switch all the lights on before moving.

"Trell called last night and asked if I could cover for whoever was supposed to open with you."

"Lucky me," he says, winking at her.

She rolls her eyes. "Yeah, I guess."

"We can get to know each other better." He smiles as he turns the computers on.

"Whatever." Geneva strolls to the stock room to put her things away.

Throughout the week, mall management started setting up the Christmas decorations. They hung garland over the second-floor railings and giant wreaths above the entrances, strung twinkling lights from the ceiling, and started piping non-denominational holiday songs through the speakers. They set up the gaudy Christmas tree, decked out in red bows and glass ornaments, figurines and more lights, in the mall's main courtyard. Right next to the tree is Santa's Village, a red shack with fake snow on the roof. Oversized candy canes and presents and foam elves and reindeer are arranged around the chair where Santa sits. Since the shoe store's one of the shops in the main courtyard, Mark can see everything. The parents and kids have already formed way before the employees arrive in their red and white striped tights, their pointy elf shoes and costume ears.

The minute they open, it's slammed, and Mark doesn't have much of a chance to get the sweet talk going with Geneva. The whole morning's spent running back and forth into the stock room to pull out boxes of shoes.

"They try but don't buy," he says to Geneva.

"Heard that."

Out front, the Santa conga line keeps growing until the back ends a few feet in front of the store. Kids are crying and shouting, running around their parents who keep glancing forward, stretching their necks to see just how much longer it will be before the pose, the flash, then home.

"Lord have mercy," Mark hears Geneva say to a customer when she looks out into the courtyard. "Times like this I'm glad I got no kids."

"You know it," the customer replies.

Santa's Village stays busy all day, and the line grows longer and longer until it wraps all the way around the courtyard. All the parents wear wasted looks on their faces, and this makes Mark remember Geneva's father, the tired way he'd waved at him as they sped off that night.

In the break room—getting a pair of size eleven Converse One Star high tops for a goofy-looking guy with big teeth and bad acne—Mark sits to catch his breath. The desk where he and Trell do their paperwork is crowded as usual with empty soda and coffee cups. Pushing them aside, he notices Geneva's schoolbooks stacked on top of one another. Her Human Sexuality book is full of diagrams of male and female body parts: a vagina, two flaccid penises, one circumcised, and the other uncircumcised. There are chapters on venereal diseases and sexual promiscuity, prostate cancer and ovarian cysts, old age and declining sexual urges.

Mark arrives at the section on childbirth and parenthood. The illustration of a pregnant woman shows the baby's normal position just before it's about to be born. In the drawing, the baby's head points downward, pushing against the uterine walls, almost popping out. Another page shows a detailed picture of the formation of an embryo. At first it's nothing more than a mass of flesh, misshapen, terrifying, without hands or legs. As the development continues, there's a spinal cord, then highways of veins carrying bubbles of red blood cells and nutrients. There's a round head, a brain, two black pebbles for eyes. *Like a baby bird*, Mark thinks. *Featherless*. Above each picture are numbers charting the weeks of development: 24, 48, 56, 72.

Right around the weeks where Rebecca is, he learns that it has already formed a heart, lungs, that it's old enough to put a thumb in its mouth, to kick and dream and yawn. He traces the image with his finger, lets it stay there for a brief moment before tossing the book back on the desk, the cups rattling and toppling over.

Back out on the sales floor there are no customers, the bucktoothed kid wanting the size elevens long gone. Geneva's behind the register, wiping down the counter with glass cleaner. "You look so serious," she says then giggles and winks at him. She reaches out and strokes his thigh with her hand.

It's almost noon, and Trelle will be coming in less than an hour to relieve him. That doesn't give Mark much time, so he moves in on her fast.

"You got a boyfriend?"

"No." She smiles and licks her lips. She leans in and whispers into his ear, "You're cute."

"I know."

This is the best part, he thinks. *I love it. I really fucking do.*

It's the pursuit, the chase, what it does to him, that makes it all worth the risk.