

Seen

“What if I cheated on you?”

Hattie always came at Tom with wild scenarios: what if you found a prettier girlfriend, what if I cheated on you, what if there’s a nuclear winter and the survival of humanity depends on you hooking up with Barbara Palvin? He’d told her he liked Barbara Palvin once when she was watching the Victoria’s Secret runway show. Once. And she’d asked in the first place. He loved her, all right, but she returned that love like a hug with its claws in your back.

“Then I’d break up with you,” Tom texted back. Put his thumb over the wink emoji, thought it was funnier if he didn’t. Drier.

A gray checkmark winked. Sent. Delivered: 12:39 a.m.

He fell asleep waiting for the response.

There are two lines that matter. The first is the Control Line. It’s crisp and red. It’s there so you can see if the Positive Test Line looks stark enough. If it’s not, it could mean anything else: you’re early in the pregnancy and you’re barely producing hCG, you didn’t pee on it long enough, you drank too much water that day...

Hattie’s was crisp and red.

Tom once described his family as “traditional.” Hattie had taken this to mean they would disapprove of her on sight: the nose stud, the pink fringes in her hair. Tom introduced her at Aunt Rita’s birthday party, promising it would be a piece of cake, since they were all such nice people. Hattie imagined a coven of withered women who would cast spells with their eyes. She wore a sweater over the tattoos.

But Tom was right. The women of the family Martin were huggers who squealed when someone they loved—which was everybody—entered the room. They only spoke in jokes and quips, all through smiles the size of pumpkins. They hugged her with big meaty arms.

Then Aunt Rita singled her out after dinner. “Hattie, darlin’. What’s that tattoo of yours say?”

“What?”

“There on your wrist.”

“Oh. ‘Do not go gentle into that good night.’”

Aunt Rita considered that a minute, then pulled her sleeve own back. A black scribble rested between wrist and elbow. “Rage,” she read. “Rage against the dying of the light.” Her husband elbowed her. “What? I was young once.” That brought Hattie immeasurable relief.

After they sang the birthday song, Tom gave Hattie's nose a little honk and asked, "piece of cake?"

"I'm surprised," Hattie said. "It really was."

Tom looked at her, wondering what "it" meant, then turned and showed the sliver of Oreo cake he'd plated for her. Did she want any? Hattie turned red and said yes. The women Martin all ate cake, after all, and they were happy. That was when she decided that she could be a Martin one day. And just as happy.

Hattie tossed the pregnancy test in the trash. She grew a heightened sense of things in the bathroom. When life changes that fast, you start noticing things you didn't notice before: the heat humming in the laundry room, the crisp red hue of the bottle of Drano.

She'd texted: "what if I cheated on you?"

Her phone buzzed. Then I'd break up with you. 12:41 a.m.

No winkie face, no emoji. Her reply remained gray, never turning blue, which would indicate it had been seen. She skipped the texting and called him back. No answer.

But she knew how to wake him up.

Tom woke the next morning to nine missed calls and the police at his door. That was when they told him.

They brought him to Hattie's. He didn't have to look at Hattie, but there were plenty of uniforms there. One was a chatty woman wearing rubber gloves. She was full of information: Drano has a pH of 14 because it's basically liquidized lye, she said, which means it's strong enough to eat copper piping if it's old enough. And, well, a human esophagus isn't strong like copper.

One of the investigators pulled up a pregnancy test wand in its plastic sheath. "Guessing you didn't know about this?"

"No," Tom said. Then, though no one had asked: "I would have forgiven her."

There was milk spilled in the kitchen, so the investigators guessed Hattie had taken a capful of Drano, read the label and saw you were supposed to get a cup of water or milk in you and then call 9-1-1.

Tom asked if Hattie had suffered. But he didn't have to listen for the answer. He knew it was a stupid question once it came out.

Hattie's mother—another Hattie—still lived in the trailer of Hattie the Younger's childhood. Tom delivered the news. Hattie the Elder had the far-off look of someone doing all the calculations on the spot.

"She didn't mean it," she said finally. "Bet she thought she'd call 9-1-1 and they'd pump her clean. Then guess who feels really bad for her? Visits her in the hospital?"

"I don't think she wanted to die in the first place."

"No. Not that one. I used to slap her up and down and she'd get in the bathroom and cut herself. On the outside part of her wrists. She claimed she didn't know how to do it. Still threatened to do it for real next time. Never did. Never would."

"How do you know?"

She held up her wrist, showing scars as thin and white as liquid paper. "Because she's me. You can take the trailer park outta the girl..."

On the way home, Tom thought about the last message he'd sent to Hattie—his Hattie. He'd sent it so obviously as a joke. Didn't even need the emoji. It would be funnier that way. Drier. "Then I'd break up with you."

It was dry all right. Ha-ha.

"Then I'd break up with you," he'd said.

He checked it. Overnight, its checkmark had turned blue.

Everything else was gray.