



IF TOMORROW NEVER COMES

By Marlo Schalesky

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Only the fog is real. Only the sand. Only the crashing of the sea upon the restless shore. The rest is a dream. It has to be. I say it again and again until I believe it, because I cannot be here. Not now. Not with mist dusting my eyelashes, sand tickling my toes, salt bitter on my lips. Not when the whole world has narrowed to a strip of beach, a puff of fog, and a single gull crying in an invisible sky.

This is crazy. Impossible. And I'm too old for crazy. I won't be some loony old woman with a house full of cats. I refuse to be.

Besides, I prefer dogs.

I touch my neck, and my breath stops. The chain is gone. My locket.

My mother's voice teases me. "Not impossible, hon. Improbable. Because with God all things are possible." Her words, spoken in that ancient, quavering tone, hide a laugh turned wheezy with age. I hear her again. "Someday you'll lose that locket, Thea Jean. You just wait." Her grin turns the sides of her eyes into folds of old parchment. "And that's when the adventure will really begin."

But I don't want any adventure. All I want is a comfortable chair, a good book, the sounds of my grandchildren playing tag under the California sun, and my Boxer at my feet.

I want to go home.

I glance out over the ripples of Monterey Bay. White-capped waves. Dark water. And then I know. That's what I need to wake me up, get me home. I need a cold slap in the face. Something to shake me from this crazy-old-cat-lady delusion.

I stride forward until the surf kisses my feet, the waves swirl around my ankles, knees, waist, arms. Cold. Icy. Welcome.

The water engulfs me. And suddenly it doesn't feel like a dream.

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Fog closed in around Kinna Henley as she fell to her knees and pawed in the sand. The grains bit into her hands, filling her fingernails like black soot. And still she dug. Deep into the oozing wetness. Deep enough to bury her sin. Or at least the evidence of it.

No, not sin. She wouldn't call it that. Desperation, maybe. Determination. But not sin. God wouldn't bless that, and He had to bless today. He just had to. She was betting everything on it.

Kinna glanced over her shoulder. Somewhere, a gull cried. Once. Only once. Somewhere, water broke along rocks and sand. Somewhere, the sun rose over the horizon.

But not here.

Here, there was nothing but the fog, and the shore, and the sand beneath her fingers. Alone.

Barren.

She hated that word.

With a deep breath, Kinna reached into the pocket of her nurse's smock and pulled out six empty prescription vials that didn't bear her name. She held them in her palm. Minute bits of liquid shimmered in the bottoms, reflecting only gray, all that was left of the medication that held her hope, flowed through her veins, and ended in her ovaries. Expensive medication she couldn't afford on her own. But she needed it. She'd tried too long, prayed too long, believed too long...for nothing.

This medication, this Perganol, would change all that. It had to. She closed her fist.

What's done is done. I had to take it, God. Don't You see? I had to.

She turned her hand over, opened it, and dropped the vials into the hole. Then she covered them and pushed a fat, heavy rock over the top. Gone. Buried.

She wouldn't think of how those vials had been accidentally sent to the hospital. Of how they were supposed to be returned. Of how she said they had been. Or how she slipped them into the pocket of her smock instead. She'd told herself it didn't matter, no one would know, no one would care, no one would be hurt. She made herself believe this was the only way. And it was. Nothing else had worked. Not charting her temperature, not a million tests, not herbal remedies, not two failed attempts at adoption. Not even prayer.

A dozen long years of it all had taught her that. God promised happily ever after, but so far, all she'd gotten was month after month of disappointment, pain, and the fear that nothing may ever change.

But now, change would come. The medication was gone, the vials hidden, her ovaries full to bursting.

Finally.

A sound came. A shout, maybe. Kinna leapt up and turned, but no one was there. No one walking down the beach. No one swimming in the surf. No one making sandcastles along the shore.

She wouldn't think of that. She would not remember the first time she had knelt in this sand, dug in it, made castles at the edge of the water. She wouldn't remember the boy who made her believe fairy tales could come true. Or what happened between them after that.

That was gone. Past. All that remained was the promise that had flowed out of those stolen vials and into her blood. That was all that mattered.

Today, everything would change.

Kinna picked up her bag and strode down the silent beach, her elbows bent, her arms swinging. Fast, determined. Five minutes up, five minutes back, turn and go again. Twice more, and she'd check exercise off her list for the day. Once, she exercised for fun. Now, it was a means to an end, a way to prepare her body, to convince herself that she was doing everything she could, everything she should. That's what life had become.

She sighed and quickened her pace. She missed the old Kinna, the one who laughed easily, who teased, who jogged along the beach just to feel the breeze in her hair and to smell the salty scent of the sea. The Kinna who still believed in fairy tales.

But soon, she would believe again. She would laugh, tease, but not jog. Not for nine months, anyway. Because now her dreams would come true and the pain would end. God would finally do for her what she'd asked, begged, and pleaded for so many years.

Once, she'd been so sure that God would answer. So sure of her faith. God would not disappoint her, would not let her down. After all, But the years eroded that faith, washing it away, bit by bit, as surely as the sea washed out the sand on the shore.

Until today.

Now, she had faith again. She would stop being that woman filled with pain and doubt. She would be filled with faith...and more.

Right, God? She slowed. Doctor's orders. Or at least, nurse's orders.

God didn't answer.

But it didn't matter. She'd waited long enough. Tried, prayed, hoped. And finally, she'd happened upon those vials as if they were meant for her. As though it didn't matter if she just slipped them into her pocket. A simple act. Easy. So why did she still have to bury them in the sand?

She knew the signs of guilt. Growing up as a pastor's daughter taught her that. She knew a lot about guilt.

I did what I had to do. That's all. I can't live like this anymore. It's got to change.

She'd done what she never would have believed. Kinna Henley had become a thief.

She gripped her bag until it creased in her hand, pressing into the flesh of her fingers. Once, she'd wept and stormed, screamed and threatened. She'd sobbed into too many pillows, curled in too many corners, slammed too many doors.

Until now.

A chill slipped under her nurse's smock and twirled around the short hairs near her neck. It was so cold here, so lonely. Not even the call of a gull or the chatter of a sea lion kept her company. Nothing but endless waves and the eerie silence of the mist.

And God, just as silent.

This time, God, don't let me down. Please... Not again.

This time she'd made plans, acted on them. This time, she'd sold her soul. *No, it's not that bad. It's not!*

What if...? What if I fail again?

But it wouldn't come to that. It couldn't.

God would listen. God would relent.

Kinna didn't want fame or fortune, shoes, clothes, or the latest Prada handbag. She didn't want a new car, a new house, or even a new job. All she wanted was a child, a baby of her own. What she'd always wanted, as long as she could remember. A husband, a baby, and happily ever after.

Didn't God say that to His faithful? Didn't He say that all she had to do was pray? How could it be too much to ask for what every other woman in the world seemed to have? Just a baby. To be a mother. Nothing more. It seemed so simple, so normal, so impossible.

This was her last chance. At least that's what the doctor said. "*One more cycle, Kinna.*" Cycles, not months. Everything was measured in cycles now. "*And then you need to consider in vitro fertilization.*"

But she couldn't afford IVF. She couldn't even afford Perganol. The credit cards were maxed, the house mortgaged and mortgaged again. And Jimmy had said no more debt.

She closed her eyes. She'd done everything right. Perfect. She'd taken her prenatal vitamins, eaten her vegetables, not allowed a drop of caffeine to touch her lips, walked each afternoon. She'd charted her basal body temperature for a week, logged the dates, bought not one but two ovulation predictor kits with seven sticks each. She'd tested every day, twice a day, from day eleven to day fifteen. And this day, the time was finally right—the perfect time to conceive.

And, of course, there were the vials.

Around her, the fog swirled and thickened. The ocean murmured words of doubt. She wouldn't listen to that. Not anymore.

She kicked a bit of sand at her feet. A string of dried kelp slid between her toes and sandals. She flicked it away, then reached into her bag and took out the ovulation predictor stick she'd put there. Two lines, both thick, equal. She squeezed it in her hand and then pulled a picture from her bag, a funny photo of a laughing baby with tulips scattered around her. The perfect baby.

Her thumb brushed the baby's face. She blinked.

Stop it, Kinna. God wouldn't let you find that picture if He didn't intend to answer your prayers. She glanced up. *Don't forget, God. I have faith.*

Kinna reached the end of the beach and turned. Then she saw a glimmer in the sand. Silver buried in the tan-and-white blanket of a million tiny grains. She stooped and picked up the long chain, the dull necklace. She turned it over. An oval locket, old and worn. She grimaced. She had one just like it, except hers was new. A gift from Jimmy, who claimed it was an original. How like him to get a cheap knockoff and pretend it was something more.

She ran her finger over the intricate double-tulip design on the locket's surface. She opened it, and a bit of sand fell onto her fingers. She brushed it away.

Inside were two photos—an old man and an old woman, their faces wrinkled but still unfaded by time, clear enough that she could see their smiles, could tell they were happy.

Happy faces, content faces, his half hidden behind thick glasses, hers yellowed by the years. Faces that made her ache. Once, she thought she would look happy like that when she grew old. She and Jimmy. And they would. Just as soon as God answered her prayers.

Kinna closed the locket, dropped it into her bag, and listened as the chain rattled against the ovulation stick.

And then someone screamed.

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