

NIGHT COMING



WHY DOESN'T THE KEY FIT?

Nikki hesitated for a second in the early dusk, wondering if she was at the right house—whether the hundred-year-old, rambling Tudor was really where she had lived the past three years. She put down her briefcase and purse, then, looking around nervously, tried the door with both hands.

Nikki had left work early hoping to avoid just this kind of meeting between herself, a locked door, and sundown. The spiral topiaries flanking her front door stood mute. She flinched as a squirrel darted across the damp cedar mulch.

“Damn!” she said, jiggling the key impatiently in the swollen lock. “Damn it all!”

It was stupid, she knew, but suddenly she wanted to cry. Maybe it was the tension that had built up during the desperate rush home to meet Jason, only to see that he hadn’t made it there yet, the house disappearing into blackness, the porch cold and unlit.

Maybe it was because she didn’t really want to go with him to the Diaspora Ball after all. They went to the benefit for African

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American art at the museum every year. She was tired, feeling nauseated. Couldn't they skip it, just this once?

Stemming her burning tears, she gathered her things and clomped to the back of the house, her sleek pumps crushing the brittle leaves in her wake. The motion-sensitive lights along the side of the house blinked on, momentarily holding her startled in their beams.

Entering the back yard, Nikki scanned it quickly: the brick barbecue pit, the teak outdoor furniture, the star-white mums offering a last bloom before frost.

No one was there.

Of course no one's back here, she thought, sniffing courageously. *This neighborhood is safe.*

It was as if the house had been waiting for those magic words. The key turned easily in the back door's lock. Pushing it open with clammy hands, she tread cautiously into the warmth of the kitchen.

"Whew," Nikki said, immediately flipping on the light and locking the door behind her. Putting the briefcase down, she kicked off her shoes and rolled down her panty hose, which, of late, had grown even more confining.

Hungry, she opened the refrigerator. The fare was typical of DINKs—couples with double income, no kids. Leftover Chinese, a bottle of Fat Bastard chardonnay, fruit-on-the-bottom yogurt, Diet Coke.

Nikki eyed the wine but thought better of it, slamming the door. Instead, she took out a box of Cheerios from the pantry and munched to quell her nervous stomach.

"Just a few handfuls," she promised herself, glancing at the clock. "Jason will be home soon and we'll eat dinner at the gala."

She dialed his cell but got his voicemail and hung up. Shrugging, she took her briefcase with her as she wended through the downstairs, turning on all the lights. It was already five thirty. It wasn't like Jason to be late without letting her know where he was—especially lately.

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Maybe there's been an accident, she thought. Maybe he'll never walk again. Maybe he's . . .

"He's just running late," she said, her voice echoing around the vaulted ceiling. She tried his cell again. No answer.

Placing her briefcase on the coffee table, Nikki plopped onto the leather sofa. Her stomach quivered. Her muscles drew taut like a cat's. She tried to concentrate on the paperwork she'd brought home but stopped after only few minutes. It was futile. The words had no meaning. She felt like an actress, improvising busyness for some invisible audience.

Every once in a while, Nikki touched the back of her neck where her short black hair lay in soft curls against her chai-tea skin. Had she imagined that swift puff of air—a stranger's warm breath?

She thought about the bottle of wine chilling in the refrigerator and was tempted to dash back through the empty house to take a sip. Instead, she picked up the remote, turning on the design channel. But soon she found her attention shifting from flat-screen TV to the neighborhood-security truck outside, its yellow patrol lights splitting the night.

"You'll love it in Detroit," Jason had said about his hometown.

That was five years ago, only weeks after they'd graduated from Emory's business school. Nikki remembered the wide grin on Jason's handsome chestnut face as he'd flapped open his offer letter from General Motors. She'd thrown her arms around him, her heart clutching. Her mediocre grades had left her without similar options.

Nikki's mother had cried when she'd found out her baby girl was moving from Atlanta to Detroit, of all places. Nikki had cried, too, as she'd followed Jason to the Motor City, red-eyed and rudderless.

The newlyweds had sublet a loft in Midtown next to Wayne State University that first summer. Jason had convinced her that it would be a hip place to live, a place where the hookers coexisted with yoga studios, free-trade coffee shops, and trendy resale stores.

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For Nikki, Detroit had been her first real adventure. Raised by a black, middle-class Atlanta family, she'd walked on the debutante stage at sixteen and graduated from Spelman College at twenty with a marketing degree—the third generation to attend the historically black women's college. She'd applied to Emory to assuage her parents, who'd kept asking, "What are you going to do now?" Her grades in business school were lackluster, reflecting both her waning interest in the subject and her ambivalence toward graduating. But when she'd met Jason Sykes, a well-heeled Detroiter who had a way with numbers and women, she decided that her investment in graduate school would pay off in one way that she hadn't predicted. They married after their first year.

She'd been immediately seduced by the side of Detroit that never made newspaper headlines. There was the large, tight-knit black upper class, with their galas and vacations on Martha's Vineyard. There were the unbelievably long July days when the sun didn't set until after nine. During her first summer, the city seemed to be in permanent celebration with endless concerts, happy hours, ethnic foods, and festivals.

Maybe Jason was right, Nikki had thought. Detroit just gets a bad rap.

But being from Atlanta, she had no way of knowing that she was experiencing only a seasonal euphoria. As summer turned to fall, a paralyzing darkness encroached upon the city. By December, it seemed to cut the afternoons in two. Nikki found herself leaving the house in the morning and coming home at night without ever seeing the sun. For months on end, the drag of winter circled from gray to black, then back again.

Thankfully, she'd landed a position as a private banker with a suburban boutique bank that first fall. The high-powered job helped rescue her mood. Their second year, they'd bought a house in the exclusive Palmer Woods, the same integrated, ritzy neighborhood where Jason had grown up.

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Despite her privileged upbringing, Nikki had a hard time comprehending the wealth that the stately homes in Palmer Woods represented.

“The Archbishop of the Detroit Archdiocese lived there,” Jason had said, pointing to a sprawling estate that looked more like a castle than a house. “Then one of the Pistons moved in—can you believe it? And that’s the old Fisher mansion.”

Fisher, she realized, as in Alfred Fisher, the auto baron. As in one of the many car moguls that blossomed in Detroit in the early twentieth century. Jason was full of stories like that, stories that made her think of the neighborhood of stone mansions, carriage houses, and English gardens as something out of a fairy tale.

“During World War II,” he said, “people had to wall off entire sections of their homes to save energy. Neighborhood patrols went around at night and knocked on people’s doors if any light was showing through the draped windows. Some people filled their attics with sand in case the roof caught on fire.”

When Nikki looked at him quizzically, he added, “The threat of air raids.”

Their own house had only three owners, the last of whom had sealed the drafty milk chute and turned the maid’s quarters into an exercise room. But it was the back staircase—the one that went from the maid’s room to the kitchen—that had given Nikki pause.

“Why would we need that nowadays?” she’d asked as they considered putting down an offer.

Jason had looked at her and shrugged. “I don’t know. A secret escape route?”

It had been just a joke, but many nights since, Nikki had lain awake imagining herself scampering down the back stairs to escape an intruder. Or worse, an intruder creeping up the hidden staircase to where they lay sleeping.

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Nikki had quickly filled the den, dining room, and master bedroom with furniture from mail-order catalogs—the hard-working couple barely had time for grocery shopping, much less interior decorating. They left the rest of the sprawling Tudor empty. On weekends, she and Jason spent Sundays trolling for antiques to accent the other rooms.

But deep down, Nikki worried that escape would be harder when weighed down by useless things.

Outside, a car pulled up in the driveway, the headlights forming prison-bar shadows through the blinds.

Jason! Nikki thought. But before she could get up, the car backed out, then headed in the opposite direction down the winding, elm-lined street.

She sighed heavily, hating herself for being so clingy. It was nearly six thirty according to the dull, green read-out on the cable box. *I guess I should get ready,* she thought, sighing.

Her footfalls creaked on the refinished maple stairs. She laughed at herself for wondering—if only for a second—whether the sounds were coming from someone else lurking inside the old house.

In the bathroom, she took off her St. John knitted suit. She couldn't help but notice the slight bulge of her stomach, which made her self-conscious even though it was easily hidden beneath her straight-cut jackets.

After running a bath, she sat upright in the claw-foot tub, with only the sounds of the settling house to keep her company. She thought about turning on the television in the master bedroom or putting on some Miles Davis, but what if someone tried to break in and she couldn't hear?

Jason will be home soon, she thought. The warm water was like a baptism. She breathed in the lavender aroma of the suds and let her shoulders relax.

When had she become a woman afraid to stay alone in her own house? It was the news. The constant stories of carjackings and

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murders. The endless stream of black men in mug shots, or bent low with their hands cuffed, being pushed into the back of police cruisers.

No, it wasn't just the news—it was the way the different social classes bumped up against each other in Detroit. In Atlanta, this house—all five thousand square feet of it—wouldn't come complete with poor neighbors.

Nikki added more hot water to her bath and closed her eyes. She remembered her first Halloween in Palmer Woods. How she'd gone and bought three bags of candy even though she'd seen very few children in the neighborhood.

That Halloween had been particularly cold, and she'd wondered how the children were going to show off their angel's wings and Superman capes if they were bundled up like Eskimos. She'd just come home from work and had barely finished a bowl of pumpkin soup before the doorbell rang.

She'd put on her witch's hat and run to the door, expecting to see tiny tots hollering, "Trick or treat!" But more often than not, there were adults and teenagers, most with only a half-cocked attempt at a costume—the stark, white face paint of the "Dead Presidents," or a terrifying Freddie Krueger mask—holding out a pillowcase for candy. They came in droves all night, tumbling out of buses and church vans, hungry adults vying with children for the best candy.

The enormity of it shocked and depressed her. As she opened the door, some of them peeked inside. "You have a nice house," they'd say and she'd blush, Marie Antoinette doling out her little pieces of cake.

Within an hour after sunset, she'd run out of candy and had started combing the kitchen for bags of chips, apples, anything. She finally closed the door and turned off all of the lights, trembling. And still, the footsteps came.

That was Detroit. A city where there was no place to hide.

"Nikki? Nikki!" Her husband's voice came suddenly from the front stairs, his keys jangling in his hand.

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Nikki felt a wash of relief. “I’m in the tub getting ready. Where were you?”

“On an international conference call—couldn’t get away to call you. Sorry.”

Just like that, there he was grinning in the doorway, his teal silk tie setting off his russet complexion. “Is that what you’re wearing?” he asked, his eyes lingering on the bubbles glistening against her amber skin.

In his presence, the noises of the house silenced themselves. Her fears shriveled.

“Stop playing,” she said. “Get dressed.”



There's no such thing as a little bit pregnant.

Nikki was surprised at how true the old adage was, how completely pregnancy had changed everything, even though she was only twelve weeks and barely showing. Even now, as Jason helped her into her vintage Mouton coat, she felt a tip in the balance between them, a perplexing reliance upon him that she hadn't felt in their five-year marriage.

“Careful,” he said, tucking her into the Cadillac.

Nikki noticed, too, how her own senses had become heightened. As they walked up the marble steps to the Detroit Institute of Arts, the cold spotlight of the moon caused her to squint. She could almost hear the brittle tree limbs overhead clacking in the autumn wind. Jason's cologne was suddenly overpowering. Was there something distant in his touch as he guided her by the elbow into the Diaspora Ball?

The surprise of her pregnancy wasn't helping. When she had emerged from the bathroom crying with joy, Jason had held her too tightly and whispered in her ear, “Are you sure?” He'd been full of reasons why they shouldn't have a baby: He traveled too much. They

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didn't have enough savings for a nanny and private school. They'd just bought the house.

Nikki had listened to his rational arguments and smiled. At least he was thinking like a father even if he suddenly wasn't sure he wanted to be one, she'd thought. Maybe what he needed was time to get used to the idea.

Since then, the baby had floated between them in a sea of silence.

"Julie!" came Jason's greeting as he planted the customary kiss on an acquaintance's cheek. "Julie, you remember my wife? Nikki . . ."

Nikki smiled and offered a limp handshake. There was an effort at conversation—the Pistons, the mayoral election, the coming auto show—then on to another couple. Sipping club soda with a lime twist, Nikki soon found herself wandering away from Jason's salesman-like energy. She needed to breathe.

She found herself where she always ended up whenever she visited the art institute, even when she came there for Thursday-night jazz or Sunday brunch with Bach: the *Nkonde*, a nail figure from the Congo.

It was like no other artifact in the African collection. Standing nearly four feet tall and carved out of ebony, its features were oddly un-African—a jutting chin, a sharp nose, and bony cheeks. Against the palette of the smooth, smoky wood were the figure's half-moon eyes, as white and dazed as those painted on a sarcophagus. Nikki hadn't noticed the cowrie-shell belly button before. Tonight, it seemed to gape with rawness, as if the figure had just been yanked from an umbilical cord.

What always drew her to the *Nkonde* was its torso, jabbed with rusted nails, screws, and blades. According to the museum placard, when two parties reached an agreement, they'd drive a nail into its body to seal the deal. If anyone broke the promise, the *Nkonde's* spirit would punish him.

The *Nkonde's* body was a garment of promises, spikes sticking horribly from its chest, belly, shoulders, and even its chin. The figure's mouth

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was partially open in punctured surprise. Nikki gazed at it in horrified fascination, wondering how the parties had decided where to impale the figure to memorialize their contracts. What were they doing now, the proof of their promises locked behind a glass case in a museum?

The din of the party faded as Nikki stood there, entranced. She was suddenly aware of the low-grade nausea that was her constant companion. Her head started to swim. It seemed like the figure wanted to tell her something.

Then came the sound—a man’s familiar laughter echoing in the empty exhibit hall.

“What *else* do you want me to do to you?”

Low murmurs. A woman’s muffled giggles.

“Jason?” Nikki whispered, as the *Nkonde* stared back, eyes hard white.

Her heart began to pound. Nikki spun around, but she was alone in the gallery. Had she imagined the voices? She fought to tamp down the bile gathering at her throat. She fled back to the crowd, hoping to make an escape. She was nearly to the door when someone grabbed her arm.

“Nikki? I didn’t know you were here!”

It was her sorority sister, Terry Hines, dressed, as always, in shades of pink and green.

“Hey, Terry,” Nikki managed foggily.

“Girl, are you OK?”

Nikki blinked twice. *Try to get it together.* “I—I’m pregnant.”

As soon as the words left her lips, she regretted the slip. Detroit was a small, big town. People were constantly cross-pollinating. Gossip took root quickly.

“What!” Terry shrieked, her garnet lips shimmering against her dark honey skin. Then, lowering her voice conspiratorially, she asked, “How far along are you? Do you need to sit down?”

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Before she could answer, Jason was at her side. “There you are!” he said, exasperated. “I was wondering where you’d wandered off to!” He sidled up to her, lovingly planting a kiss on her cheek.

“My God, Jason, Nikki just told me!” gushed Terry, not catching the look of foreboding in Nikki’s eyes.

Jason glanced from Terry’s exuberant face to Nikki’s miserable one, sizing up the awkward pause.

“The baby?” Terry prompted.

Jason was taken aback. “Oh!” he said, smiling uneasily. “Yeah! Imagine me—a dad!”

“We’re not really telling people yet,” Nikki said. “It’s still early, you know. . . .”

Terry’s eyes grew large and she covered her mouth as if to cap a secret. “Of course,” she said. “But I just know that everything will be fine.”

“I’d better get you home,” Jason said. “You look a little pale.”

Nikki nodded, letting him lead her toward the door, his hand firm around her waist. Her body went limp against his, seeking forgiveness.

Outside, the night air had turned frosty. “It slipped,” Nikki said finally, as they waited for their car.

Jason nodded but said nothing. As they rode home, she glared at the sights along Woodward, the strange people with their nightshade business, shivering in the cold.

Jason noticed her trembling and turned up the heat. The fan only blew the freezing air harder and she reached up to close the vents. She could feel his eyes on her, but he said nothing to lighten the mood. The moon, yellowing as it rose, followed them home.

His silence humiliated her, and she wondered how he’d managed to turn the tables so quickly. Wasn’t it he who’d just backed another woman against a display case and fondled her? Wasn’t it he who’d

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suddenly been unable to come home on time like he used to, who always left her waiting, who wouldn't return her calls?

When they arrived home, he walked around to her side of the car to help her out. On the porch, he was about to put the keys in the lock, but instead he turned and said, "I don't want a baby."

He stared at her, his eyes accusing her of ruining everything. But she stared back, her feet planted and steady, the queasiness fading into resolve.

"I do," she said back, the shivering suddenly ceasing. "I do."

He lowered his eyes. For a long moment, he didn't speak. "It's cold out here," he said finally. "Let's talk inside."

He leaned to put the key in the door, but like a dark invitation, it swung open by itself. His eyes shot her a question: "Didn't you lock the door?" But it was too late.

Inside the house, the night moved.