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Attachments

Written by Rainbow Rowell

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Rainbow Rowell



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CHAPTER 1

From: Jennifer Scribner-Snyder
To: Beth Fremont
Sent: Wed, 08/18/1999 9:06 AM
Subject: Where are you?

Would it kill you to get here before noon? I'm sitting here among the shards of my life as I know it, and you . . . if I know you, you just woke up. You're probably eating oatmeal and watching *Sally Jessy Raphael*. E-mail me when you get in, before you do anything else. Don't even read the comics.

<<**Beth to Jennifer**>> Okay, I'm putting you before the comics, but make it quick. I've got an ongoing argument with Derek about whether *For Better or For Worse* is set in Canada, and today might be the day they prove me right.

<<**Jennifer to Beth**>> I think I'm pregnant.

<<**Beth to Jennifer**>> What? Why do you think you're pregnant?

<<**Jennifer to Beth**>> I had three drinks last Saturday.

<<**Beth to Jennifer**>> I think we need to have a little talk about the birds and the bees. That's not exactly how it happens.

<<**Jennifer to Beth**>> Whenever I have too much to drink, I start to feel pregnant. I think it's because I never drink, and it

would just figure that the *one time* I decide to loosen up, I get pregnant. Three hours of weakness, and now I'm going to spend the rest of my life wrestling with the special needs of a fetal alcoholic.

<<Beth to Jennifer>> I don't think they call them that.

<<Jennifer to Beth>> Its little eyes will be too far apart, and everyone will look at me in the grocery store and whisper, "Look at that horrible lush. She couldn't part with her Zima for nine months. It's tragic."

<<Beth to Jennifer>> You drink Zima?

<<Jennifer to Beth>> It's really quite refreshing.

<<Beth to Jennifer>> You're not pregnant.

<<Jennifer to Beth>> I am.

Normally, two days before my period, my face is broken out, and I get pre-cramps cramping. But my skin is as clear as a baby's bottom. And instead of cramps, I feel this strangeness in my womb region. Almost a presence.

<<Beth to Jennifer>> I dare you to call Ask-A-Nurse and tell them that you've got a presence in your womb region.

<<Jennifer to Beth>> Given: This is not my first pregnancy scare. I will acknowledge that thinking I'm pregnant is practically a part of my monthly premenstrual regimen. But I'm telling you, *this is different*. I feel different. It's like my body is telling me, "It has Begun."

I can't stop worrying about what happens next. First I get sick. And then I get fat. And then I die of an aneurysm in the delivery room.

<<Beth to Jennifer>> OR . . . and then you give birth to a beautiful child. (See how you've tricked me into playing along with your pregnancy fiction?)

<<Jennifer to Beth>> OR . . . and then I give birth to a beautiful child, whom I never see because he spends all his waking hours at the day-care center with some minimum-wage slave he thinks is his

mother. Mitch and I try to eat dinner together after the baby's in bed, but we're both so tired all the time. I start to doze off while he tells me about his day; he's relieved because he wasn't up to talking anyway. He eats his sloppy joe in silence and thinks about the shapely new consumer-science teacher at the high school. She wears black pumps and nude panty hose and rayon skirts that shimmy up her thighs whenever she sits down.

<<**Beth to Jennifer**>> What does Mitch think? (About the Presence in your womb. Not the new consumer-science teacher.)

<<**Jennifer to Beth**>> He thinks I should take a pregnancy test.

<<**Beth to Jennifer**>> Good man. Perhaps a common-sensical kind of guy like Mitch would have been better off with that home ec teacher. (She'd never make sloppy joes for dinner.) But I guess he's stuck with you, especially now that there's a special-needs child on the way.

CHAPTER 2

“LINCOLN, YOU LOOK terrible.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He’d have to take her word for it. He hadn’t looked in a mirror today. Or yesterday. Lincoln rubbed his eyes and ran his fingers through his hair, trying to smooth it down . . . or maybe just over. Maybe he should have combed it when he got out of the shower last night.

“Seriously, look at you. And look at the clock. It’s noon. Did you just wake up?”

“Mom, I don’t get off work until one A.M.”

She frowned, then handed him a spoon. “Here,” she said, “stir these beans.” She turned on the mixer and half shouted over it. “I still don’t understand what you do in that place that can’t be done in daylight. . . . No, honey, not like that, you’re just petting them. Really *stir*.”

Lincoln stirred harder. The whole kitchen smelled like ham and onions and something else, something sweet. His stomach was growling. “I told you,” he said, trying to be heard, “somebody has to be there. In case there’s a computer problem, and . . . I don’t know . . .”

“What don’t you know?” She turned off the mixer and looked at him.

“I think maybe they want me to work at night so that I don’t get close to anyone else.”

“What?”

“Well, if I got to know people,” he said, “I might . . .”

“Stir. Talk and stir.”

“If I got to know people”—he stirred—“I might not feel so impartial when I’m enforcing the rules.”

“I still don’t like that you read other people’s mail. Especially at night, in an empty building. That shouldn’t be someone’s job.” She tasted whatever she was mixing with her finger, then held the bowl out to him. “Here, taste this . . . What kind of world do we live in, where that’s a career?”

He ran his finger around the edge of the bowl and tasted it. Icing.

“Can you taste the maple syrup?”

He nodded. “The building isn’t really empty,” he said. “There are people working up in the newsroom.”

“Do you talk to them?”

“No. But I read their e-mail.”

“It’s not right. How can people express themselves in a place like that? Knowing someone’s lurking in their thoughts.”

“I’m not in their thoughts. I’m in their computers, in the company’s computers. Everyone knows it’s happening . . .” It was hopeless trying to explain it to her. She’d never even seen e-mail.

“Give me that spoon,” she sighed. “You’ll ruin the whole batch.” He gave her the spoon and sat down at the kitchen table, next to a plate of steaming corn bread. “We had a mailman once,” she said. “Remember? He’d read our postcards? And he’d always make these knowing comments. ‘Your friend is having a good time in South Carolina, I see.’ Or, ‘I’ve never been to Mount Rushmore myself.’ They must all read postcards, all those mailmen. Mail people. It’s a repetitive job. But this one was almost proud of it—gloaty. I think he told the neighbors that I subscribed to *Ms.*”

“It’s not like that,” Lincoln said, rubbing his eyes again. “I only read enough to see if they’re breaking a rule. It’s not like I’m reading their diaries or something.”

His mother wasn’t listening.

“Are you hungry? You look hungry. You look deficient, if you want to know the truth. Here, honey, hand me that plate.” He got up and handed her a plate, and she caught him by the wrist. “Lincoln . . . What’s wrong with your hands?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Look at your fingers—they’re gray.”

“It’s ink.”

“What?”

“*Ink.*”

WHEN LINCOLN WORKED at McDonald’s in high school, the cooking oil got into everything. When he came home at night, he felt all over the way your hands feel when you get done eating French fries. The oil would get into his skin and his hair. The next day, he would sweat it out into his school clothes.

At *The Courier*, it was ink. A gray film over everything, no matter how much anyone cleaned. A gray stain on the textured walls and the acoustic ceiling tiles.

The night copy editors actually handled the papers, every edition, hot off the presses. They left gray fingerprints on their keyboards and desks. They reminded Lincoln of moles. Serious people with thick glasses and gray skin. *That might just be the lighting*, he thought. Maybe he wouldn’t recognize them in the sunshine. In full color.

They surely wouldn’t recognize him. Lincoln spent most of his time at work in the information technology office downstairs. It had been a darkroom about five years and two dozen fluorescent lights ago, and with all of the lights and the computer servers, it was like sitting inside a headache.

Lincoln liked getting called up to the newsroom, to reboot a machine or sort out a printer. The newsroom was wide and open, with a long wall of windows, and it was never completely empty. The nightside editors worked as late as he did. They sat in a clump at one end of the room, under a bank of televisions. There were two, who sat together, right next to the printer, who were young and pretty. (Yes, Lincoln had decided, you *could* be both pretty and molelike.) He wondered if people who worked nights went on dates during the day.