

Bedrest was the closest thing to Hell Daph could imagine.

She lay in the center of the bed on her back, arms and legs spread-eagle like a starfish. Her tail was draped over the footboard, the mass of fur spilling over the side of the bed and nearly touching the floor. Her belly, swollen and heavy, bulged out from her midsection, her protruding bellybutton the highest point on her body – the peak of a furry mountain. The baby was due in a week, maybe less considering Daph’s previous experiences with childbirth. She felt fine enough, even if more than a little uncomfortable, but her new doctor insisted on keeping Daph off her paws for the last two weeks of her pregnancy. He was lucky there had been nothing throwable within her reach.

On a gorgeous, sunny day in mid-Spring, Daph was trapped inside, staring at a point on the ceiling as her brain slowly turned to liquid. She’d tried to watch Netflix, getting fifteen minutes into one show, ten minutes into another, and five minutes into a third before giving up and deciding to take a boredom-nap. The baby was still wide-awake, wiggling around in whatever room was left inside her mother. She was head-down, but attempting to turn on her side, much to Daph’s discomfort as she stroked the side of her belly and tried to coax her into a more comfortable position.

With her other hand, Daph plucked her cell phone from its spot on her forehead and watched the time ooze by, tick by agonizing tick.

11:58.

11:59.

12:00.

At exactly noon, she swiped up and dialed the first name in her contacts: her girlfriend/fiancee/wife/co-parent Holly. The phone rang for a long while without being answered. Daph was about to hang up and call again, but the dial tone on the other end was suddenly interrupted by the sound of the receiver being dropped before Holly’s voice came in.

“Daph?” She sounded out of breath. “Daph, what’s going on? Is it time? Is the baby coming?”

“I fuckin’ wish,” Daph huffed, patting her stomach. “It’d be the only exciting thing to happen in two fuckin’ weekth.”

“*Oh* thank God.” Holly sighed into the phone. “But are you okay? Is everything okay?”

“I’m tho goddamn bored I’m about to thtart throwing shit out the window, but I’m good. Anyway, are you gonna come home to eat today?”

“I don’t know yet, ask me closer to lunch.”

“It *ith* lunch.”

Holly paused. “Oh. I guess it is.” She followed with a sigh, clicking her tongue against her teeth a few times.

“I gueth not,” said Daph.

“I really *want* to, but it’s been back-to-back-to-back all day long. I probably won’t even have time for my full lunch break.”

“Yeah, I getcha,” said Daph, nodding even while they couldn’t see each other. “I wath just thuper bored and hoping I’d get to thee you before tonight.”

“Me too, but I saved up all my time off for after the birth. Once she’s born, you’re going to be getting sick of me.”

“Probably not,” Daph smirked. She grunted from a bubble of indigestion and slid a palm across her belly. “That’th what suckth about this, though. I’m *so* close we gotta put off everything until *after* it happenth, but ‘til it actually *doeth*, I got nothing to do but jutht sit here.”

“I know.”

“I used to run every fuckin’ *day* when I was a thurrogate, up to the day I was due. Doctor Whats-his-name doethn’t know what he’th fuckin’ talking about.”

“I know.” Holly had heard all this before and knew the bare minimum to humor her. “You’re almost done, okay? Just remember that.”

“I can’t ever *forget it*, either,” Daph grumbled as the baby stirred again. She wasn’t very big – they estimated she’d be around 6 pounds at birth – but she felt gargantuan from the inside.

“I need to go find something to eat,” said Holly. “I’ll be busy, but call me if anything happens.”
“Thure thing.”

Holly made a kissing noise with her lips as a goodbye before ending the call, leaving Daph in silence. She balanced her phone on top of her belly and stretched. A moment later, as she received a text message, it vibrated and sent an uncomfortable, buzzing tingle up Daph’s spine before she snatched it up again. The message was from her friend Georgia, and read ‘*We HAVE to try one of these*’ above a link. Daph, happy to have something to look at other than her popcorn ceiling, thumbed the link.

It opened to the website for a local ice cream parlor, *Munchies Creamery*. Daph herself preferred frozen yogurt – regular ice cream was too sweet for her teeth – but Munchies was good at what they did. What made Daph sit up in bed, eyes wide and mouth watering, was the limited-edition flavor of the month. Peanut butter and salted caramel ice cream, mixed together with chocolate-covered almonds and crushed graham crackers before being drizzled with Nutella. They called it ‘The Nuthouse Special’ and had photoshopped a straight-jacket around the bottom of the cone.

“Holy *shit*,” Daph said to an empty room. Flopping onto her back, she held her phone over her face and scrolled down for more details. With a shock, she realized what Georgia apparently hadn’t: this was the last day of the special. If she didn’t go today, the flavor of the month would become something called Tutti-Frutti Sherbert, which Daph took as a personal insult.

She opened her GPS in search of the closest Munchies. It wasn’t a question of *if* she would go get this ice cream, but *how*. After some digging, she found that the only remaining Munchies in New York City was on 8th Street in St. Mark’s Place, a long way from her apartment on 92nd Street. It was a long trip even without being nine months pregnant, but Daph had a craving, and God help anyone or anything that got in the way of a pregnant Daph’s craving.

Rolling onto her side with a grunt, Daph did a kind of full-body earthworm wiggle to make it to the side of the bed before she was able to sit up. The weight of her baby belly settled down into her hips, her poor pelvis snarling with an uncomfortable throb. She rocked back-and-forth before kicking herself upright. Her legs were still strong from eight and a half months of jogging, but the bite of pain in her paws was something she would just have to walk out.

“Thith is the last cheat day before you’re born, alright?” Daph said to her baby as she squatted over a clean laundry bin in search of something she could wear. “Don’t tell other mom.” Daph felt a small nudge from inside, followed by a tickle that she took to be her daughter’s tail.

While there wasn’t much left that fit her well, Daph was able to squeeze herself into a striped, sleeveless top the color of Neapolitan ice cream. It hugged her belly so tight it looked painted on, but at least it looked presentable in public. The denim maternity shorts she bought last month were less so. Clearly designed for much a much earlier stage of pregnancy, the elastic was stretched to its absolute limit just to contain Daph’s prodigious bump and the legs rose uncomfortably high up her thighs. As she plucked the tag off with a quick yank, she was determined to wear the shorts out at least once before the baby came. Besides, the past Winter had been a miserable slog and she wanted to enjoy the sunlight.

After tossing her phone, keys, and wallet into a nylon bag, Daph took a deep breath and headed for the door, the taste of caramel already a phantom on her tongue. She stopped, however, after catching a glimpse of herself in the full length wall mirror by the exit. As big as she ever was, Daph stepped back and walked her hands down her belly, turning to the side to get a better look at herself. The baby was already dropped – she could practically feel her in her hips already – and anyone could tell it was only a matter of days before she went into labor.

Chewing on her tongue, Daph rocked in place with her hands around her stomach and thought over her plans for the afternoon. It was a long way to Munchies and she was in a delicate state. Was this really such a good idea?

“We’ll be real quick,” Daph said both to the baby and to herself. “It’s just downtown, it’ll be fine. The train’ll put us right there, we’ll barely even have to walk. Right? It’s not a big deal, right?”

The baby nudged her with a fist. She didn’t have an opinion.

“Right, right. It’s right downtown, it’s a nice fuckin’ day outside, why not? Walks are good, walks are good for me.” Daph pulled open the door and locked it from the other side, letting it swing closed as she penguin-waddled to the elevators and talked to herself all the way. “Maybe we can even take a cab or an Uber or something. Why not? I’m the one that’s about to fuckin’ give birth, why can’t I live it up for an afternoon? Why do I gotta sit home in the dark like it’s the fuckin’ 1950s?”

She made it to the elevators and slapped the down button with the side of her fist. Watching the numbers climb to her floor, Daph licked her lips and patted a beat against her belly. “You bet your fuckin’ ass I’m gonna get some ice cream today.”

In little time, Daph emerged into the noontime sun, blinking at the light like a nocturnal creature woken from a long hibernation, and headed for the subway station at the end of the block. She had learned from experience that pregnancy tended to turn heads, especially while as close to term as she was. It wasn’t an unpleasant side effect; people tended to be more aware of her, let her through crowds more easily, and sometimes gave their place to her in lines. Even on the short walk to the train station, Daph noticed more than a few people give her a second glance with raised eyebrows and even got offered help while walking down the concrete steps. Not all attention was good attention, of course, but things were looking good so far.

Daph spun her Metrocard in her fingers, frowning at the turnstile and dreading the tight squeeze it would give her already sore body. Fortunately, the station agent noticed and unlocked one of the emergency doors for her just as the train rumbled to the platform. Breaking into as much of a run as she could manage, Daph hustled to the open doors at a glacier’s pace, feeling herself bounce with every step. Her heart skipped a beat as the doors began to close again, but a stocky bear man in a button-up caught the corner with his thick hand and waved her forward.

“*Hoh* fuck,” Daph gasped as she skidded to a halt and caught herself on a pole. Though the car was packed, the other passengers did what they could to give her space as the doors closed behind her with a *clunk*. She caught eyes with the bear and gave him a smile. “Thankth, bro.”

“You were really booking it,” he said. “I was impressed.”

“You should see me without the handicap.” Daph thumped her belly with a wink, then side-walked down the car as it started to rumble down the track, being careful not to bump anyone with her belly or tail. The seats on both sides were full, the passengers uniformly staring at their phones. The first one she caught eyes with was a chubby, middle-aged opossum man, who was using both hands to eat a gargantuan sub sandwich wrapped in greasy butcher paper. The two stared at one another for a few minutes, with Daph frowning while drumming her fingers atop her very obviously pregnant stomach and trying to maintain her balance on the shifting train.

“Are you fuckin’ therious?” she asked as the man took a slow, deliberate bite of his sandwich.

“I’m eating, ain’t I?” he said through a full mouth. “I gotta use both hands.”

“It’s a sandwich, dude, the whole point is-” Daph began, but she was interrupted by a young, quick voice from behind.

“Oh oh oh, here! Take mine, take my seat.” A tall dalmatian in a blazer hopped up from the bench and dusted it off before offering it to Daph, his tail wagging up a storm.

“You’re my *hero*,” she said, shuffling past him and tucking her tail under her arm before flopping into the seat he left. Breathing a sigh, Daph wiggled her paws and leaned back, letting her belly fill her lap. When she glanced up, the dalmatian was still watching her.

“Thankth, dude. I got a long way to go and I didn’t wanna do it standing up.”

“Oh yeah, oh yeah, no problem,” he said, grabbing onto the ceiling bar as the train wobbled. “You kinda looked like you needed it. More than me, anyway. I’ve been sitting around all day, might as well give my seat to someone that needs it, y’know.” He laughed. At what, Daph wasn’t sure. He had a nervous energy about him, but was young enough to still seem harmless.

“It’s cool of you, I appreciate it.”

The dalmatian nodded, his tail still wagging. Daph couldn’t help but notice that the blazer seemed a size too big for his skinny shoulders. The sleeve slid an inch past his knuckles as he held a hand out for her to shake. “I’m Calvin,” he said.

“What’s up, Calvin.” Daph took his hand, which was limp like dead fish in her grip. “Daph.”

“Daph?” He repeated it, raising his eyebrows. “Interesting.”

“Thank my mom.”

“I will.”

Daph blinked, frowning at him. Calvin quickly changed the subject. “Wh-Where are you headed?”

“Down to get some ice cream around SoHo.” She deliberately avoided specifics.

“Whoa, pretty long trip for some ice cream.”

“For real, but I’m on baby watch and needed a reason to get outta the houthouse.”

Calvin smiled and nodded, but didn’t have anything left to say. Daph, assuming that was the end of it, gave him a quick smile of her own, then leaned back and watched the dim rush of lights as the train rumbled along. At least she was comfortable for a long trip.

After a few stops, she noticed Calvin stealing sidelong glances at her belly. It was eye magnet, she knew that as well as anyone, but he was being shady about it in a way that made her uncomfortable. When they met eyes again, he cleared his throat and stuttered, “So how far along are you?”

“Bout as far along as you can be,” Daph sighed, poking the underside of her bump with a finger. It was firm with very little give beneath her fur and looked as heavy as it felt.

“Well you...you look great,” Calvin said, nodding hard enough for his ears to flop.

“Thankth.”

“It’s probably pretty tough. Sometimes. I bet.”

“Thure. Motht of the time.” Daph shrugged and rubbed a spot where the baby was stirring. “But it’s worth it, y’know? Building a family and all that shit.”

“G-Good thing you’ve got...a *husband* around to help.” Calvin was trying to sound casual, but something in his eyes seemed tense and alert. Daph chose her words carefully.

“Uh, nope. No...not a huthband.”

“Oh really? That’s pretty interesting.” Calvin nodded, switching hands on the bar and wiping the other on his pant leg. “Hey, will you marry me?”

Daph started laughing. “You’re funny.”

Calvin, who wasn’t laughing, raised an eyebrow.

Daph’s expression fell. “Oh fuck.”

“I know, I know,” Calvin said holding a defensive hand up. “But I’m not like other guys. I’m not the kind of guy to just get a woman pregnant and then leave, I’m not like that. I *respect* women, okay?”

“Dude. Dude. Calvin. Hey.” Daph held up a finger, wiggling it in front of the dalmatian’s mouth until he stopped talking. “You’re barkin’ up the *wrong* tree, Broseph. I don’t have a *huthband* cause I have a *wife*. Okay? Not on the fuckin’ market.”

“A wife?” Calvin stared at her as if the circuits in his brain were struggling to connect. After a moment, he said, “You can’t raise a baby like that. Not without a father figure around.”

“Oh my God,” Daph groaned, flopping back and pinching the bridge of her nose. The baby turned over in her womb as if even she were trying to get away from Calvin.

“My dad left my mom for a stripper before I was born, so I know how important it is to have a good father in a little kid’s life. I’m not the kind of man he was.”

“No, you’re totally a *real* different kinda guy,” said Daph, trying not to make eye contact.

“I know I am. I’m a nice guy, I’d be good to you *and* the baby,” Calvin said, sincerely. Daph sincerely wished she remembered her taser.

The windows lit up and the train rumbled, squealing as it slowed to a stop. Before the doors were even open, Daph slid to the edge of her seat and used all the strength in her legs to stand, cradling her belly with one arm.

“Y’know what? This ith my thtop right here. I remembered I had a thing I needed to fuckin’ do.” As the subway doors slid open with a clunk, the crowd in the car – those who must have overheard the conversation – parted in unison to allow Daph off the train first. She glanced back once she was on the platform and saw that Calvin was blocked from leaving by the opossum, who had evidently finished his sandwich.

“*Take my number!*” He screamed, balling up a scrap of paper and throwing it through the subway doors as they closed. It hit the ground, bounced once, then rolled into the gap between the train and the platform. Daph watched him through the windows as the train rumbled away, feeling her shoulders relax.

“...I gueth we could walk for little bit,” she mumbled to the baby. “It’th a...nice day, anyway.”

Up on the street, she glanced up at a sign and found she was on 52nd Street, well outside walking distance of St. Mark’s Place. Daph would have to get back on the train at some point, but decided some fresh air would clear her head. As fresh as the air in Manhattan could get, anyway.

The weight of Daph’s pregnancy started to really hit her after a couple blocks. The sore spot in her lower back had returned, her paws were swollen and sensitive, and the looseness of her joints made it hard for her to keep her balance. Her body was telling her, ‘*Get your ass back into bed and wait for this baby,*’ while her heart was still set on The Nuthouse Special. She’d gotten too far to turn back and was determined to eat that ice cream, even if she had to do it in the delivery room.

Daph was slower than everyone else on the street, but they all gave her a wide berth to huff and puff without bumping into anyone. At one point, as she stopped to catch her breath next to a gutted payphone booth, a bovine woman with a teenager at her side stopped and passed Daph a bottle of water from her purse and left without a word. Dumbstruck for a moment by the surprise generosity, she cracked the top and drained half of it in one gulp, water leaking from the corners of her mouth, before taking another breath just to finish it off, wringing the empty bottle in her first with a loud *squelch* of crumpling plastic. Rejuvenated, if still sore, Daph shook the soreness from her paws and shuffled back into the flow of foot traffic with all the grace of a dumptruck.

Standing at an intersection by herself, she leaned over the curb and was ready to make her move over the crosswalk when the light changed, but was interrupted by a tiny shape at her elbow that Daph didn’t realize was talking to her.

“Hey lady,” it said. Daph turned and met eyes with a twelve year old lion cub wearing a flat-bill hat, basketball shoes, and a baggy t-shirt with ‘EVERY FUCKING DAY BRO’ written in blocky capital letters. He was frowning at her like *she* was bothering *him*, one of his pointed teeth peeking past his lip.

“What?” Daph answered.

“Are you having a baby or whatever?” he said.

She paused, glancing back to her belly as if to make sure. “...Yeah?”

The kid sniffed a wiped his nose, then turned back to another lion cub standing behind him, dressed similarly but with a thinner, older face. A brother, Daph assumed. The brother nodded before holding his cell phone up sideways, evidently recording a video. The kid whipped back toward Daph, a wild and uncomfortable smile on his face.

“So my *bro* and I are trying to go out and do some *good* in the *community* and stuff,” said the kid. He was shouting, his voice grating against Daph’s ear. “Would it be cool if we helped you cross the street?”

Daph blinked, glancing between the kid and his brother’s camera.

“It’s to show all our followers how to treat people who might need help and stuff,” said the brother behind the camera.

While trying to make sense of...whatever this was, the light changed on the other side of the street and a digital timer began counting down from twenty. With a shrug, Daph shook her head and answered, “Uh...thure?”

“Oh sweet, sweet! Just follow me, okay?” The kid in the hat took Daph’s hand and started across the street, walking ahead of her while snickering and glancing back at his brother, who was following behind.

“Listen guys, if you like this video and wanna see more challenges from us, make sure to like, favorite, subscribe, and ring the bell, okay? And if you *really* wanna support the Marshall Twins, go to our merch store and check out our *sick* new hats and shirts to *officially* join the *Pride*.”

“Kid, can you watch where you’re goin’?” Daph said as she waddled behind him. The timer was down to ten and it seemed like they were slowing down rather than speeding up. Even as pregnant as she was, Daph was sure she could walk faster than this kid.

“Sorry, ma’am. Sorry, we’ll get there in just a sec.” Only halfway across the street, the two of them had slowed to barely a crawl as the light was getting ready to change. He and his brother were snickering under their breath, stealing glances at one another. Daph was about to jerk her hand away and cross the distance on her own, but the two brothers suddenly darted by her in a sprint, just as the light changed.

“*Crosswalk Challenge!*” shouted the kid, holding his hand to his head as he ran. “*Crosswalk Challenge!*”

“Hey! *Hey!* What the *fuck!*” Daph screamed after them just as the light finally changed with her standing the center of the road. A few of the waiting cars drove past her, but most of them pulled right up to the white line and honked, their drivers waving at her impatiently. Fuming, Daph waved at them as she crossed to the sidewalk, silently mouthing ‘*Sorry*’ to anyone she caught eyes with. The cars rumbled at her back as soon as she was out of the way and she leaned against the pole to catch her breath.

“Thothe little *fuckerth*,” Daph grumbled. “Piece of shit little...thnot nosed fuckin’ *fuckerth*.” She put a hand on her belly, calmed by the movements of the baby. It was her that Daph was worried about more; she was in a precarious state as it was without some little twerps putting her in danger for internet clout. She made a mental note to remember to look up the ‘Marshall Twins’ later on, though she wasn’t entirely sure what she was going to do with the information.

Once she was calm again, Daph continued her journey south. Grand Central was a few blocks away and she could catch a train the rest of the way to the Lower East Side. After crossing a few blocks without incident, Daph paused at the sight of a young border collie girl standing on the corner of 46th and Madison. It was hard to tell her age, but she was definitely smaller than the two boys Daph had run into. She had on a sun dress and carried a tiny, purple purse while scanning the crowd of pedestrians as if looking for someone. After spotting Daph, her eyes lit up and she crossed the sidewalk toward her.

“Excuse me,” she said, her voice high and dainty. “I’m supposed to meet my mom at the train station, but I’m nervous about crossing the street by myself. Can you help me?”

Daph’s heart melted. It was surely a result of pregnancy hormones, but she felt on the verge of tears. She caught a flash *deja-vu* – this wasn’t the first time children she didn’t know approached her for one reason for another. It made her uncomfortable at first, but she was looking particularly maternal at the moment and she couldn’t really blame them.

“*Yeah. Yeah yeah, no problem. 46 it's pretty busy around this time of day, anyway.*” Daph held out her hand and suppressed a joyful sob as the little girl put her hand in hers, imagining that this was how she would walk with her daughter once she was old enough. The light changed and the crowd bustled across the street. Daph and the little girl took up the rear, both of them walking slowly to keep pace with one another.

“You taking your mom's time at Grand Central, right? I wait on my way there, you want me to come with you?”

“Um...no, that's okay.”

“You there? The other streets might be busy, too.” Daph paused. “Sorry, sorry, I know you aren't supposed to talk to strangers and stuff. I'm about to have a little girl myself and I just wanna make sure you get where you're go-”

The little girl stopped. Daph turned back and found she had taken a phone out of her purse and was recording a video from a selfie angle. Daph's eyes flicked to the counter on the crosswalk. It was counting down. Five. Four. Three.

“*Crosswalk Ditch Challenge!*” the collie girl shouted, her voice piercing and loud enough to carry down the block. She jerked her hand away and ran back where she came, leaving Daph once again stranded in the intersection as the light changed.

“*Fuck you!*” Daph screamed, ignoring the honking cars as she stomped and raged, her tail whipping from side-to-side. “*God damn it! I hope you get hit by bus you little asshole!*”

The little girl turned and gave Daph the finger before disappearing into the crowd.

A taxi pulled up close to Daph and honked its horn, making her jump. Slapping the hood, she shouted, “Fuck you, too! I'm fuckin' *pregnant*, gimme a goddamn minute!” With her balled fists at her sides, she marched to the other side of the sidewalk while bearing a seething hatred for all children not currently housed in her womb.

Daph walked nearly the way to Grand Central, seething with rage while muttering obscenities under her breath. The baby had woken up and started kicking again, in what Daph chose to believe was emotional support. At the 43rd street crossing, Daph spotted another kid on the corner and slowed to a stop. He was a chipmunk – bigger than the collie girl but smaller than the lion brothers – wearing a basketball jersey, mesh shorts, and a thick silver chain around his neck. He was holding his phone in his hand and clearly searching for a mark. He hadn't spotted Daph yet.

She thought about crossing to the other side of the street, but didn't want to make an extra walk just because of some crotch goblin. Instead, she began to hatch a plan. With a smile on her face, Daph headed for the intersection, walking as slowly as possible with one hand on her lower back and the other cradling her belly, making sure she was extra-visible. It didn't take long for the chipmunk kid to spot her.

“Hey! Pregnant lady!” he shouted, waving her down. Daph played dumb, glancing around before pointing at herself. The kid ran up to her, his phone held up below his face. “You help crossing the street?” She could tell from his accent the kid was from Jersey.

“Huh? Oh my God, *thank you!*” said Daph, her voice soft. “I'm just moving so *thlow* these days, I wait worried I wouldn't make it across in time. Thank you *tho much.*”

“No problem, no problem.” The kid glanced at the camera and bit his lip while trying not to laugh. Daph did the same thing.

When the light changed, she made a grunt sound and started waddling across behind the crowd, the chipmunk kid at her side. She barely lifted her paws from the sidewalk and kept her eye trained on the timer on the pole. Once again, they were in the center of the crosswalk as the kid began to slow down. Daph did the same thing, making sure to stay parallel to him. Once number changed to five, the kid snatched his hand back and turned on his heel.

“*Crosswalk Chal-*” He was interrupted by a sharp gag as he was nearly jerked off his feet. The instant he spun around, Daph grabbed the back of his chain and held it like a collar, holding him there.

He tried to pull away, to jerk out of her grip, but it held firm. Daph smirked. She'd been doing pull-ups since the second trimester. Compared to that, this kid was as light as a feather.

"Let me go! What the *fuck!*" He tried to pull away from her again only to choke himself. Daph wasn't trying to hurt the kid, so she switched from his chain to the back of his shirt.

"What'th wrong? I thought you were gonna help me cross the thtreet?" she said, her voice still soft and innocent. Looking up, she watched the light count down on the corner. Three. Two. One.

The kid stopped struggling and stared in wide-eyed horror as the light changed from red to green. An SUV pulled just past the white line and honked, scaring the kid half to death.

"*Let me go!*" he shrieked, pulling on Daph's rock-hard fist.

"How about you walk me the retht of the way, instead?" she said. "And I'll let you go when we're on the thidewalk."

"*It's just a prank!*" he whimpered as the SUV pulled forward another inch. More cars began laying on their horns behind it.

"New prank. It'th called the 'get my ass kicked by a pissed off pregnant chick challenge.' Guess who winth?"

"*Fuck! Fine! God!*" The kid stopped trying to pull back and hurried past Daph to the other side of the street. She didn't let go and kept up in a soft jog behind him, giving him a sharp tug when he started moving too fast. In little time, they made it to the sidewalk and Daph released her grip on the kid's shirt. He darted away once he was given freedom, stopping halfway down the block to yell, "You're fucking *crazy!*"

"Thankth for your help!" Daph said with a smile, waving him away. Then she turned, feeling very pleased with herself, and skipped away toward the train station – at least as much as she was able to.

She caught the next train on the same line as earlier. Before stepping into the car, she paused to make sure there wasn't any sight of Calvin, as unlikely as it would be to find him there. The train wasn't nearly as packed as last time and a young deer girl gave up her seat for Daph without argument. The two of them eventually struck up a conversation and the girl spent much of the trip fawning over Daph's belly. She let her feel the baby move and it nearly brought tears to the doe's eyes. She had to get off at 28th Street, but the brief interaction left Daph with a warm sensation that lasted the rest of the train ride.

The line ended at 14th Street, which wasn't quite close enough but too close to bother getting on another train for. Daph's hips were starting to ache from the weight as she pulled herself back up to the street to walk the rest of the way. She made the decision to take an Uber back home, no matter the cost, but she was going to get that fucking ice cream if it killed her.

Daph's awkward waddle had turned into a stagger as she plodded down the sidewalk, stopping every few feet to catch her breath. Sitting on the train had caused exhaustion to catch up to her and the small aches and twinges that had bothered her that morning were angry and throbbing. Her paws felt like they were going to drop off at any second and the baby felt more like a solid, iron ball in her belly that occasionally hiccuped. With only six blocks to go, Daph had doubts she would make it.

Breaking away from the flow of traffic, Daph found an unoccupied wall to lean against and massaged the underside of her belly, working fingers into her sore muscles. The relief was euphoric and Daph had to bite her tongue to keep from groaning too loud. This close to the Financial District, most of the passing pedestrians looked like business people. All of them wore suits worth more than Daph's apartment, most of them were talking on the phone, and very few of them looked to be having a pleasant day. Some of them glanced Daph's way – eyes inevitably drawn to her belly – but they paid her little mind as they shuffled past.

The only break in the monotony came from a muscular zebra in a tight, black t-shirt, expensive jeans, and a denim vest. He stepped out of a nearby doorway, his face buried in his phone, and glanced

around as if looking for someone. When they met eyes, the zebra waved at her and Daph started thinking seriously about buying sunglasses.

“Excuse me! Miss Squirrel?” the zebra shouted. “Hey! Pregnant lady!”

“I hear you,” Daph waved back without bothering to stand.

“You wanna make twenty bucks?”

Daph scowled. “I got a girlfriend, asshole.”

“No, that’s not...” The zebra made a frustrated snort before approaching her. He held out a hand. “Name’s Huey. I’m a social media manager and I’ve got about twenty minutes to put a new product photo on Instagram. Would you model for it?”

“You...want me to *model*?” Daph glanced at her reflection in the nearby window. She had bags under her eyes, her fur was disheveled, and the water she was retaining made her look bloated.

“Not all of you, just...” Huey gestured vaguely to her belly. “This part. Your face won’t be on camera at all, I swear.”

“This ith fuckin’ weird, dude,” said Daph, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s just a product photo, okay? I have to get this up before the end of the hour and they don’t want me doing just pictures of the can on the sidewalk anymore. I saw you and I had an idea. Five minutes for twenty bucks. Twenty-five. How about it?”

Daph clicked her tongue against her teeth, tapping her paw somewhere unseen below her protruding middle. If the guy was telling the truth, making some extra cash for essentially standing still sounded pretty good. And if her face wasn’t on camera, no one would know it was her if it turned out to be something weird.

“Fuck it,” Daph shrugged. “Thure.”

Huey pumped his fist before walking backward down the sidewalk. “Yes. Good. Be right back, gotta get my kit. *Please* don’t go anywhere.” He disappeared back through the door he’d come from, returning a minute later with a backpack and a tall, white can in one hand.

“Wait, you wanna uthe a pregnant model to advertithe *beer*?” Daph asked, pointing to the can.

“It’s not beer.” Huey handed the can to her, turning the label out. In jagged, heavy-metal font, the words *Liquid Death* were emblazened on the top of the can above a stylized drawing of a skull. “It’s water.”

She held the can up to her eye and read the label. “This ith thome fucked-up looking water, then.”

“It’s just branding, there’s nothing special in it. You can drink that, after.” Huey slotted his cell phone into a bizarre, one-handed camera rig with a pair of lights on the sides. “What’d you say your name was?”

“Daph.”

“Daph, cool. Can you lift that up?” Huey pointed to the maternity shirt stretched over her stomach.

“Right here?” Daph glanced around her. With a shrug, she slid back her shirt to just below her sternum, exposing her furry bump to the open air. She shivered as wind blew across it.

“Great, great.” Huey moved closer and sank to one knee, holding the camera at level with her belly. “Angle a little to...yeah, that’s great. Hold the can from the top in your left hand, turn the label out. Put it about on level with your stomach. Then, with your other hand, angle it around the front and flash the camera your best metal horns.” Huey demonstrated, curling his thumb and middle fingers while extending his index and pinky.

Daph followed his instructions, contorting her arms in an uncomfortable tangle around her belly. A businesswoman in a suit stopped behind the zebra and gave both of them a puzzled look before moving on.

“Oh, hang on. Hang on.” Huey put down the camera and dug into his backpack. With a spray bottle, he spritzed the outside of the can in Daph’s hand until water beaded on its surface, then turned it slightly to better angle. “Okay, now just hold that for a minute.”

“How long ith ‘a minute?’” Daph said, her voice strained. Her wrist was getting sore and the baby was starting to kick without her mother to calm her down.

“Just...about...” Huey held the camera up and a blink of light briefly blinded Daph, making her flinch. “*There* we go. I- Oh.” He frowned at the photo. “This looks weird, I think your kid was moving. One more, I promise.”

“Hurry it up.”

Huey readied the camera and Daph closed her eyes in preparation. After a flash beyond her lids, she peeked one eye open and found Huey standing up.

“Got it. This’ll work. I got the perfect caption, too. You on Instagram? You want a credit?”

“Yeah, it’th *Daphtastic*.” After spelling it out, she held out her hand. “Can I see it?”

Huey passed her the phone. It was really awe-inspiring to look at her own pregnant body from someone else’s photo and get an idea of how other people saw her. No wonder she’d been getting looks all day. From the look of the photo, she was ready to drop any minute.

“Looks good, right?” Huey said, holding out his hand. Daph didn’t hand the phone back.

“Y’know,” she said, carefully, “when you think about it, my *daughter* wath modelin’ in thith, too. And I think *she* deserveth thome compenthathion, don’t you?”

“Lady, don’t bust my balls. I’m on a deadline.” Huey reached for the phone, but Daph held it away.

“C’mon, little kidth get paid. Why shouldn’t a fetuth?”

Huey scowled, checked his watch, then dug into his pocket for his wallet. Pulling out a pair of twenties, he fanned them in his fingers and held out his other hand. Daph, grinning, passed him the phone and snatched the bills at the same time. She hadn’t actually expected that to work.

“Congratulations or whatever,” Huey sniffed. “You can keep the can.”

He gathered up his kit and hurried back inside. Daph, curious, popped the can of the *Liquid Death* and took a small, investigative sip. Smacking her lips, she paused, frowning, then took a larger gulp.

“Well,” she said to herself, “that...thure is water.” Daph covered her belly and finished half of the can. Freshly hydrated and with an extra forty bucks in her pocket, Daph stood from her spot on the wall and continued on her journey.

Munchies was on the bottom floor of an old brownstone on 8th Street, sandwiched between a microbrewery and a grimy hot dog counter. Daph spotted it on the other side of the street and felt a wave of relief wash over her. The taste of salted caramel was already on her tongue and the baby wiggled excitedly inside her with the same enthusiasm. As her eyes traveled down to the street, she realized the people standing on the corner were at the end of a long line leading out from the front door. Apparently, Daph hadn’t been the only one excited about ice cream that day. Determined, she took a deep breath and hurried across the street to grab a spot in line.

She found a spot behind a short, black-and-white rabbit with his long ears tied behind his head in a ponytail. His face was buried in his cell phone and he hadn’t seemed to notice her yet. Feeling curious, Daph took out her own phone and opened Instagram in search of the *Liquid Death* social media account. On it was the photograph of her own belly, doctored slightly to make the colors of the can pop. The city street was visible just beyond the curve of her bump, the people walking by blurred out of focus.

“*From the Womb to the Tomb, Liquid Death will come to us all. Murder Your Thirst.*”

“...Huh.” She tapped the little heart icon beneath the photo. That *was* a good caption.

While scrolling through the feed, Daph noticed the line starting to move and shuffled forward. Without looking, she took a step too far and jabbed the rabbit in front of her with her belly. He jumped, startled at the touch, and dropped his phone to clatter on the sidewalk.

“Oh *shit*,” she gasped. “Oh my God, I’m *tho* thorry. Ith it okay?”

“No problem, it’s in a case.” The rabbit squatted in place as he plucked the phone off the sidewalk. Dusting it off, he turned to face Daph, holding it up to show her it was undamaged. He had a black spot over his right eye and a dark, scruffy beard around his chin. Raising his eyebrows at the sight of her baby bump, he smirked. “Okay, that makes more sense.”

“I kinda got a blind thpot around that area,” said Daph. Something about the rabbit caught her eye and made her blink. He was wearing trendy, dark clothing with a light jacket over a tight v-neck shirt. That shirt was made even tighter by a distinctive roundness to his stomach that Daph was quick to recognize. She frowned, her brain chugging along at max capacity, and stared for longer than she should have. When Daph finally tore her eyes away, the rabbit was watching her with a raised eyebrow, as if waiting for her to ask the right question.

“Hang on...” Daph pointed. “Are you...”

The rabbit smirked and gently held a finger over his lips before moving his hand to the dome on his stomach. “Right around four months, more or less.”

Daph cocked her head to the side and touched her own belly, recalling her own size five months ago. “...Are you thure? That doethn’t look like only four.”

“It does when there’s two in there,” the rabbit sighed, holding up a peace sign and wiggling his fingers.

“*Oh*. Yeah, I shoul~~da~~ know~~n~~. Good luck, dude.” Daph chuckled, but quickly stopped. “Oh, wait. Thorry, I didn’t mean to...”

“*Dude* works.” He stowed his phone in his jacket pocket and turned to hold out his hand, leaning to the side to avoid their bumps colliding. “Marcus. He-slash-him.”

“Daph.” She shook his hand. “Dumb-slash-ass. My bad, I didn’t mean to clock you or anything like that.”

“It’s not really a secret, I’m just trying not to get recognized.” Marcus tugged on his shirt and rested his hands against his belly before glancing at it sheepishly. “And I’m feeling kind of talkative. Would you mind?” He raised a hand and held it a few inches above Daph’s belly.

“Knock yourthelf out,” Daph said, moving her hands to her hips. “She won’t be doing much movin’ until after the ice cream.”

Marcus touched the side of her stomach, only to pull his hand away in surprise. “Oh wow, it’s so firm. When are you due?”

“Any fuckin~~g~~ thecond, dude,” Daph sighed.

Marcus swallowed and pursed his lips. “So this is what I’ll have to look forward to, huh?”

“Bad newth.” Daph held up a finger. “I’m only having *one*.”

“I was afraid of that,” Marcus said with a nervous laugh as he moved his hand to his belly. He was only shorter than Daph by an inch, but he also seemed naturally petite and lacked her muscle mass. He would blow up like a watermelon in a garden hose by the time his twins were due.

“I *should* be on bedretht right now, but *she* wanted a snack.” The baby turned in the cramped space, making Daph grunt in discomfort. She didn’t like taking the blame for her mom’s decision. Marcus winced in sympathetic pain.

“Does it hurt when she does that?”

“Nah, it’th just uncomfortable.” She pointed at his stomach again. “Are they your firtht?”

Marcus nodded.

“Twinth on the first try, lucky you.”

“Ask me in four months if I’m still feeling lucky.”

“Lithen, it really won’t be that bad,” said Daph, waving her hand. “By the time they get real big, they thtop movin’ around as much and you got an excuthe to sit around on your ass until you pop your cork.”

“You really sound like the expert. I guess she’s not your first?”

Daph frowned and wobbled her hand in the air. “Yeth and no. She’th my firtht kid, but this ain’t my firtht rodeo.” She patted her belly like a drum and the two of them shuffled forward as the line moved.

The line passing through Munchies was longer than she expected, but Daph was surprised to find she didn’t mind. She passed the time giving Marcus pregnancy advice, assuaging some of his fears, and bonding over their shared anxiety toward parenthood. Eventually, the conversation drifted to Daph’s excruciatingly interesting day and the effort it had taken to get there. They were close to the front of the line as Daph pulled up the Instagram post she ‘modeled’ for and showed it to Marcus.

“Yeah, that’s you alright,” he said, zooming into the photo. “And he just picked you out on the street? Out of the blue?”

“Look, thomething nobody tells you ith that, when you’re thith far along, you’re gonna attract attention,” Daph said with a weary sigh. “It’th not always bad attention, but you’re gonna stick out either way. *You* noticed me, right?”

“You were kind of hard to ignore.” Marcus paused, scrolling up the phone. “This your Instagram?”

Daph nodded. Marcus handed the phone back and took out his own.

“I’m going to follow you. Do me a favor: post something when your baby’s born. If we don’t run into each other again, I want to see.”

“Shit, dude, I’m gonna post her slimy baby face everywhere I can once she’s outta there.” Daph’s phone buzzed from the notification as the account *Blackhare* followed her. As she opened his account, she said, “You do the thame, alright? That bump’th got me all curious.”

Glancing down at her phone, Daph followed Marcus’s account and scrolled down out of curiosity. Her eyes widened. Daph’s account had about thirty followers, most of them friends or family. Marcus had thirty *thousand*.

“...Hey, Marcus, what do you do?” she asked. “Like, what’th your job?”

“I’m a musician,” he answered, casually. Daph continued to scroll. Most of his photos were of himself behind a turntable, lit by neon lights and lasers. She recalled him mentioning ‘not wanting to get recognized’ and was starting to put the pieces together.

“Are you famous or thomething?”

“I dunno. Maybe a little.” He glanced at her over his shoulder and shrugged. “Does *Blackhare* ring a bell?”

“I think my girlfriend might know you,” puzzled Daph, trying to recall if the rabbit’s name was among Holly’s music collection.

“Want me to sign something?”

“Don’t have anything for ya *to* sign.”

“Sure you do.” Marcus took a sharpie from his pocket and thumped it against Daph’s baby bump like a drumstick.

“Fuck it, go for it,” Daph said with a chuckle as she rolled back her shirt. Marcus squatted down slightly and bit his tongue as he carefully traced his signature onto the white fur of Daph’s tummy. She tried hard not to giggle at being tickled and only let one out as he finished.

“That’s great, that’ll kill on socials.” Marcus held up his phone. “Can I?”

“Go for it. Not like I can even thee it from here.”

He snapped a picture on his phone and showed it to Daph right before someone inside Munchies shouted “*Next please!*” They were both surprised to find themselves, at last, at the front of the line.

“Yes. God, I’ve been craving this all week,” Marcus said, licking his lips. He gave her a grin before hurrying inside, his stubby rabbit tail wiggling with glee.

While waiting, Daph rolled her shirt down and typed out a text to Holly.

Do you know Marcus Blackhare? I think I just met him

WHAT? WHERE? WHAT DID HE SAY? Holly responded almost immediately.

LES. Around St. Marks. He’s cool.

Did you get an autograph? Please get me an autograph. I’ll love your forever. This message was followed soon after by another. *Wait, aren’t you supposed to be home?*

Getting on the train, no service. Love U.

Daph pocketed her phone just as Marcus stepped out of Munchies with none other than the Nuthouse Special in his hand. It was transcendent, looking like everything Daph hoped it would be and more. The Nutella drizzle glistened in the afternoon sunlight, a cold fog drifted down Marcus’s wrist from the ice cream, and the almonds were fat and plentiful.

“Holy fuck.”

“*I know.*” Marcus switched the cone to his other hand and gave Daph another handshake. “Hey, thanks for being cool. You did more than I think you know.”

“You’re gonna be fine, dude. Jutht take it easy.” She let go of Marcus’s hand and gave his bump a friendly pat, then waddled as fast as she could through the doorway.

She was here. She was finally here. After such a long journey, Daph could hardly believe she was finally standing inside Munchies, the Nuthouse Special well within her grasp. The tile was cold on her paws and just the anticipation of ice cream was making her mouth water. Standing in the middle of the tiny parlor, her hands circling her nine month pregnant belly, Daph nearly wept with relief.

“Ma’am?” said the young beaver girl behind the counter. “We’re ready for you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Daph said. “Gimme a thecond.”

Regaining her composure, she reflected on how much of a unique pain in the ass her trip downtown had been. It would’ve probably been wiser just to stick with her bedrest, but she was sure the ice cream would make it more than worth it. Besides, with only a few steps remaining, she’d made it all the way to St. Marks place without any incident but discomfort. If that was a sign of anything, it was more good luck than bad.

“Alright, I’m ready.” Daph licked her lips and took a few long strides toward the counter. “Can I get a Nuthouse Special in a waffle coOooh God!”

The moment she arrived at the counter, a sudden and familiar *pop* sensation beneath her legs hit her. She felt a warm fluid soaking her inner thighs and making pitter-patter noises against the tile floor. The long walk must have finally worked something loose. As a contraction gripped Daph’s belly, she held onto the counter and sighed through clenched teeth.

“Actually, can I get it to-go?”