Hysterically Beautiful Women

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I sit on Amy’s bed, staring at the tree-shadows making patterns on the walls, while
Amy lies curled in the fetal position, consciously or subconsciously imitating
what’s inside her. She’s three months along, at the point where most mothers-to-
be start spreading the happy news to friends and family: *We’re pregnant! Due in
January!* Amy’s text to me, though, had come early, stark in its use of the first
person: *I’m pregnant. I’m fucked.* We’re twenty-five, unemployed grad students
staring down undergrad loans, wondering where the last decade went—mooning
over boys in high school, studying abroad in college, grabbing hold of our first jobs
and then coming away empty-handed when the economy tanked. This isn’t my
baby, but *fucked* is a description I understand.

The radio’s playing in the living room, soft and boppy, and I recognize the
Counting Crows. —I always think they’re singing about ‘hysterically beautiful
women,’ I say. —Women so gorgeous they’d send men into fits.

Amy stares at me blankly. Her face is drenched in sweat, her dark eyes huge. She
looks on the verge of hysteria herself, the kind that used to get women confined to
their four-posters. Womb-sickness, doctors called it. By strict definition, Amy
would qualify: she throws up every fifteen minutes, retching until her stomach has
nothing left to give and then retching some more. I hold her thick, black hair away
from the vomit. Amy has always been the beautiful princess; I make a plain but
competent lady-in-waiting.

—Read to me, she says, waving a listless hand at her prenatal care book. —Tell me
this phase passes. Tell me it passes quickly.

The book lies between us, open to pictures of hale and hearty pregnant women,
none hunched over a toilet. I flip through pages and we look on as these models of
maternity sit in chairs and stand near sinks and knit sweaters. Amy curls herself a
little more tightly and I hate these book-women a little more thoroughly, with an
instinctual passion. No one can be as perfect as the women shown here:
functioning wombs, charming husbands, stylish wardrobes, high-paying jobs. It’d
be stupid for me, who has none of those things, to compare myself to the woman on page twenty, who’s explaining the impending baby to her older child. But I know that when I go back to my own room, Amy will turn the pages herself, wondering why something as simple as standing upright has turned into a Sisyphean task.

—I want an abortion, she says.

I snap the book closed. —Say the word, I tell her. —We’ll get in the car. I’ll take you to...

It’s my turn to wave my hand vaguely. I’m not sure what facilities are nearby, how many clinics remain now that funding’s been cut.

—Or maybe I don’t, Amy says, after a minute.

She fingers a small silver cross around her neck, a gift from her father in the year after her mother’s death. She’s mentioned church to me once or twice since she lost her part-time barista job, and I remember how it used to be when we were little: a sea of white faces, mine and my family’s and Amy’s father’s among them, and then Amy, whose dead mother had been Japanese. The other kids pulling at the corners of their eyelids when they saw her, knowing our Sunday school teachers wouldn’t catch them but forgetting the damage Amy and I could inflict with a well-aimed elbow or fist. I’d stopped wearing my own silver cross when we were in college. I thought Amy had, too.

—I’d feel like a failure, she says.

—You’re not a failure, I say.

I watch the shadow-patterns on the walls break apart as wind whips through the trees outside. Amy’s room is pastel-pink and white, a paint job better suited to a nursery than the bedroom of a full-grown woman; she’d decorated when this place had belonged to her and her boyfriend, before he’d moved out and I’d moved in. It had only taken that one text—I’m pregnant. I’m fucked.—to set that chain of events in motion.

—Yes, she says, —I am.

—You and me both.
She doesn’t ask me to elaborate. She already knows; we’ve always shared secrets. At ten, we shielded our parents from the bullying and comeuppances that happened at Sunday school, wiping the tears from Amy’s face and devising new ways to explain the bruises on our elbows and knuckles. At twenty, we slurped the names of boys we’d slept with, drunk with shame and anger because self-proclaimed Nice Guys had convinced us that climbing on top and doing all the work was a form of female empowerment.

And then at twenty-four, doctors had found something wrong with my uterus, something that interrupted the life I’d planned with the truly nice guy I’d finally found. The hysterectomy took less time than I’d imagined: less time than it took the nice guy to decide he didn’t want to be with a womb-less woman, less time than it had taken my body to rid itself, pre-operation, of the tiny cells that had begun to gather and form into a new generation. *I can’t get pregnant anymore*, I’d texted Amy afterward. *I feel fucked*. She’d stayed at my place while I sobbed my way through a weekend, the both of us wishing that this was something we could physically fight, take out behind the Sunday school room and threaten until it gave into our joint willpower, if only for a week. And then I’d pieced my feelings back together and moved on, because with no job, no income, no man, and no womb, there was no other choice.

I re-open the prenatal care book to a collage of beautiful women spreading their pregnancy news to their loved ones. When I look more closely, though, the women in these photos seem not quite right. Their smiles are all the same, lips tight over their teeth, as if they’re reining in their own womb-sickness. The women present this smile to husbands, doctors, and friends, who smile back and tell them they’ll be wonderful mothers.

But Amy does not look more closely.

—It wouldn’t be failing, I say.

She rolls onto her back and joins me in watching the shadows dance. —Ignore me, she says, finally. —I’m being hysterical. Keep reading.

The women in the photos have regained their composure, and I think about slamming the cover shut, throwing the book out a window, and then packing my things: no job, no income, no man, no womb, and now no home, no best friend. But I don’t. I will not respond with my own hysteria.
—This passes, I tell her. —This passes quickly.

RACHAEL WARECKI received the 2017 Tiferet Prize in Fiction, and her short stories have previously appeared in *The Los Angeles Review, The Masters Review, Midwestern Gothic*, and elsewhere. She has been accepted to residencies at Ragdale and the Wellstone Center, she is the current fiction editor of *The Nervous Breakdown*, and she holds an MFA in Fiction from Antioch University Los Angeles. She is currently at work on a novel.