



Ethiel
by Sharon Cullars

Ethiel's jaw tightened as the hospital clerk mispronounced her name.

"Ethel Waylon," he repeated when she didn't answer the first time.

Ethiel stood up from the vinyl waiting room chair, walked over to take a seat at the clerk's window where he waited to take her information.

"That's E-theel," she enunciated. "Ethiel Waylon, spelled E-t-h-i-e-l."

The man jotted down the correct spelling, his expression drear even at nearly eight in the morning. She recognized the look. It told so much about him. He hated his job, the people he worked with, the ones he was supposed to service. This was all so beneath him. He didn't know why he had to deal with all this pettiness.

Probably hadn't been laid in a good month, either.

When he looked up again at her, it was as though he had read that last from her mind. And he finally smiled, his eyes flashing downward for the hot second it took him to realize this was no A-cup sitting in front of him. C-cups demanded respect.

"OK, Ms. Waylon, I'll need your insurance card and your ID." Another blazing smile.

Men often smiled at her that way. She couldn't care less.

The next ten minutes passed in a blur. And then she was in another chair in the sitting area, this time waiting to be called in to see a doctor at last.

She knew what this was all about, knew why she was here. Her body was lying to her. It was telling her there was a parasite growing inside her. The sickness in the

morning, the fever, the lack of appetite one day, the ravenous pig-outs the next. And she hadn't had her period in several months.

Besides, there was that tell-tale bulge, just going into its full roundness.

Her body was lying to her. She wasn't pregnant. It had to be a tumor. Or something equally dreadful.

In an hour, Dr. Amina Rawat told her otherwise. The tests confirmed that something indeed was growing inside her. About twenty weeks along now. Five months.

Dr. Rawat waited for Ethiel's reaction but what she got was totally unexpected.

"Well, I'll be a fucking Virgin Mary!"

The petite doctor let a few seconds pass before asking, "I take it then that this is a surprise to you?"

"Uhm...yeah. Since there's no way I can be pregnant. I've only been with one person in the past ten years, and she's a woman, so either someone got something past me or...or..." Ethiel couldn't fill in the sentence, was afraid to.

Dr. Rawat's composure didn't waver as she asked, "So, you think that maybe someone...some man...took advantage of you, then?"

Ethiel thought about the limited times she might have been roofied, but she also knew how diligent she was whenever she was out with friends or alone, always standing sentry over her drinks, often soft than not. It had been a long time since she'd gotten drunk.

In the last five months, she hadn't even had an unconscious moment as she no longer slept. Even with the plethora of prescriptions her former doctor (actually, "late doctor" who had met with an unfortunate accident) had prescribed for her, she just never seemed to be able to drift off. It was as though her body no longer needed to rest.

This, she didn't tell the new doctor.

"Is there still time to take care of...this?" She nodded to her stomach.

"It's not advisable in the second trimester, unless certain medical issues are involved."

"Not advisable, but still doable." She purposely posed this as a non-question, because she didn't want to be discouraged out of what she was going to do.

Her doctor didn't comment, but instead asked, "Do you want to contact the police? I mean, if you've been assaulted..."

Ethiel shook her head. "And tell them what? I don't even know what. Or when. All I want is this...thing...out of me."

And then maybe she could sleep again.

When she left the doctor's office, she had a plan. As well as a lot of anger. And, though she hated to admit it to herself, more than an edge of fear. In over thirty years, she had never not been in control of her life. But this thing inside her was robbing her of her autonomy, her self-definition. She was not a mother, and she didn't plan on becoming one.

The doctor had given her brochures and phone numbers. They were burning a hole in her purse, inside her brain. *You don't have to go through this alone...* read the caption on the blue trifold with an older woman comforting a younger, more distressed one. A big lie. She was alone. Now.

She walked down Rush, her mind barely registering the people walking toward her; none of it seemed to compute. The faces were blurs, singular binaries of zeros and ones that never seemed to translate into actual images. She felt sick, didn't know whether it was the baby or the idea of the baby or the realization that someone had gotten her pregnant and she couldn't remember.

She hailed a cab to her Rogers Park walk-up just five minutes away from the beach. As usual on a Friday summer day, groups of teenagers lounged or strolled, their expressions merging youthful innocence with something more venal, a self-realization that the world belonged to them and everyone else was simply visiting. Two boys just a few steps from her doorway said something to her as she passed, their voices at a decibel loud enough for her to hear but not to decipher the words.

Her normal instinct was to walk faster to her door. But she was anything but normal today.

She turned back to them. One had been leaning against the building but he stood straight as he sensed her attack. His mouth had a lazy smile, half sneer. The owner of the world noting the visitor on his turf.

"Yeah, what?" He was waiting. So was she. She wanted to say something. But it wasn't fear that was holding her tongue. It was something painful and hurtful.

Something angry and visceral. Something that wanted her to slap that smirk off his face, tear the balls from his eyes, split the tongue with her claw...

Claw?

The word parsed her brain and her hand clenched in response. Standing in front of this young punk was a killer waiting to burst forth. Waiting, gauging...

"Bitch, what're you staring at? Want some of this?" He grabbed his package which didn't even fill his hand. The image was so pathetic that the kill inside dwindled to human proportions, allowing her to see a boy trying on his manhood with tired kiddy rituals. He wasn't worth the bloodletting.

"Go home to your mama," she said quietly, drowsily even.

"Who you talking to, bitch?"

"I guess I'm talking to a son of a bitch. Go find her."

He reached out to strike, but her hand was quicker. The marks on his face weren't those from human nails; they dug much deeper, through several layers of flesh. The scream was delicious as she walked back to the door, leaving the boys stunned, one screaming, one comforting with words. "Oh man, look what she did to yo face!"

She carried the smell of his blood up the stairs to her apartment on the third floor. Some of it stained her doorknob as she entered.

Part of her conscious told her she'd just done something dangerously stupid. Young thugs with a need to prove their dicks were bound to come around to settle issues. But the smell of the blood told her this wasn't a brave animal. His soul was curdled with the odor of something sour, decomposing. She smelled disease and

decay; the young turk wasn't long for this world. Inside her mind, something dark beckoned, told her to run, to chase...

Her phone rang her out of her reverie. The jangling sound ripped through the psychosis, brought her back to her place, here and now. She was a woman, pregnant, having delusions, alone in a apartment no longer cramped because it was missing someone who used to live there.

She walked to the entertainment center, where the cordless base rested on one of the lacquered shelves, picked it up.

"...your prescription is ready for pickup," said the toneless recording. "If you have any questions, please call the pharmacy at (773) 551-...." She hung up before the automaton voice finished her message. The prescription was for the urinary tract infection Dr. Rawat had discovered through one of the tests.

Her disappointment was palpable. Outside of message bots, no one should have been calling. Any of her friends would know she should be at work. Except Pam. But Pam wouldn't have been calling. Not now. Unless there was something she had left behind. Pam was thorough and organized. If she'd left something behind, it would have been deliberate, an excuse to come back, a reason for them to talk, to settle matters. To fall into each other's arms.

Pam hadn't left anything behind.

Ethiel didn't realize she still had her keys in her hands until she pushed her finger into one of the sharper bladed grooves. The pain settled her and she dropped the keys on the floor.

On her way to the kitchen, she picked up a growing pile of paper plates sitting on the small dinette table that she had ignored for most of the week. Congealed cheese and sausage from a steady diet of pizza stained the plates, the table. Along side sat four near empty cans of Diet Pepsi with dregs of warm, flat soda. She managed the plates and two cans, walked them to the kitchenette garbage, pitched them, came back for the remainder. She then wet a paper towel, cleaned off the table, wiped up crust flakes from the chairs.

That little bit of cleaning made her feel better only for the few seconds it took her to look around and see the damage her eyes had refused to see. Her plants were dying. A pile of unwrapped newspapers had gathered near the door. Dust muted the glass of her living room table. And there was a not so clean smell permeating the rooms. Something a little foul.

The only place untouched in the apartment was the bedroom. Ethiel hadn't been able to sleep in there since Pam walked out over a week ago. Pam, the neatnik, had made the bed, had left the window partially open to let in fresh air, had watered the African violets that sat along the window ledge. Ethiel peeked around at the silent room, looked over at the grailed bed covered with a comforter of gold and dark velvet panels, threaded with asian flowers. "Opulent" was how Pam had described it when she spotted the cover at Costco during one of their shopping jags just before their first move. "The bedroom is the sanctuary. It's where you leave your shit at the door, and find a little salvation from folk and mess and pain. This is for us, babe."

Pam had decorated everything. The African prints on the walls, the throwrugs, the plants. She hadn't wanted any of it when she left. Because she said, she had to leave the pain behind.

"I'm not pregnant! I haven't been with anyone!" Ethiel whispered to the empty room – the same words she had told to her lover who hadn't believed her then, would probably believe her even less now.

Her denial had hurt both of them. But now she could see that she hadn't lapsed, she hadn't betrayed Pam. Someone had betrayed her, had stolen a few moments, seconds, hours? – from her. And the thought had never occurred to either one of them because Ethiel had insisted she wasn't pregnant, and with a hardening belly that a lover can span and caress and transfix upon, Ethiel's denial was as much an admission that there was something she wasn't facing up to, couldn't face. Guilt from straying.

"You should've told me this was just an experiment for you. I would have understood. But I can't live with a liar."

Pam's dark brown hair gathered around her delicate chin. Her east African features were from a father long dead, her eyes from her Korean mother who had thrown her out when she discovered that her daughter would never marry. The combination was startling as they were beautiful. Ethiel, with flatter features, had always felt plain with her lover. Until they made love, and then Ethiel became the most beautiful woman on the planet, wanted as she was by a woman so desirable.

She didn't want to live without Pam. And even now, if she told Pam what she suspected – she found she still was unable to say the word since leaving the doctor's office – would Pam believe her?

Or had her lover finally latched onto the excuse she needed to walk away, something that Ethiel had sensed months before her body started to change?

She could still try to call – if she only knew where Pam had gone.

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On Tuesday, she'd called and made the appointment for the following Friday. A consultation to go over her options and the risks of a late-term procedure. What she needed to do had to be decided then. She couldn't afford to wait too much longer.

In the meantime, the thing grew. She could almost swear she felt the physical sensation of his body expanding, stretching out, trying to feel his surroundings. His?

Why was she so certain it was male? That it was a tiny creature with a tinier penis growing inside her? Not that she would ever know or care. There were no sonograms in her future. No pitter patter, no cries from a little voice afraid of the dark, no ringing in the middle of the night to tell her that her son had been arrested, killed, jailed, had hurt someone, had raped someone...

There. The word had come easily. And with it, all of the hatred that should have gone to the father settled on his son, instead. She was dicing a tomato for the stew. The blade was bloodied with the gooey carnage. It would be so easy just to slip it along her abdomen, to let it slide in, rupture his sac, to bleed just enough. To sleep

again. To sleep in Pam's arms again. The vile thing had done more harm than he would ever know. That he would ever get the chance to know.

Every bite she took now she resented, knowing that it fed him also. As she did the extra bouts to the bathroom because of the need to release the poisons he spewed inside her. She wanted, no, she needed him gone. A tear splashed down on the cutting board, merged into a globule of tomato skin.

Then there it was again. That thump on her ceiling. The sound that had been so persistent in the last week that she'd had to call in the maintenance man, Mr. Gorman, who'd gone up to the roof of the building to check it out. He'd come down after an hour, shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't know what to tell you. I've checked the chimney and the pipes just above your ceiling. I tell you, there's nothing there. Nada. Are you sure the sound is coming from above you? I mean, it could be coming from the Langleys downstairs."

Etheil had shaken her head. "No. I'm telling you, it's above me. And it's always around the same time now. Seven-thirty. It starts then and it keeps going for about half an hour, sometimes as long as an hour. It's driving me crazy."

"Well, the only thing I can tell you is that you either have some critter up there with a schedule, or maybe you need to get your hearing checked."

She must have given him a look. The look. Because he winced, backed up a couple of steps. "I'm not saying that you're crazy or anything like that. I'm just saying that you could have that condition...whadda they call it?...that condition that that actor

who played Captain Kirk had. Tintin..Tintillitus or something like that. You know, where your ears ring?"

With a voice that reached down to a lower register, foreign to her ears, she told him, enunciating every syllable, "The sound is a thump, not a ring. Like someone is knocking on my ceiling. Now, if you can't fix the problem, then I'll have to call the landlord and let him know that he has an angry tenant who is getting angrier by the day." Her voice rose along the sentence until the last syllables were almost a shriek.

He'd scurried out of the apartment, looking back at her with bulging eyes. He'd look frightened. Which had been curious enough.

That he refused to come back was even more curious. Mr. Lange, her landlord, had called to tell her that. "I'm sorry, Ms. Waylon, but Gil says he can't help you. That I need to find someone else for you for your particular problem. Now, I've tried to talk with him, but he's insistent that something happened when he was there in the apartment with you, but he won't tell me what."

Days later, the thump was there again. In the ceiling. Seven-thirty. Right on time.

She dropped the tomato slices into the Romaine lettuce, along with flakes of Albacore tuna. As she completed the salad, she ignored the tempo of the thump above her, pretended that the rhythm of her belly was not moving in time with the beat. Something that had happened a previous night, also.

"Your day is coming soon," she looked at her stomach and promised her child. And with a sudden ambiguity, she didn't know whether her words were a threat or a welcome.

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"OK, open your legs just a little wider. You're going to feel a pinch when I insert the speculum. Just try to relax."

Having someone about to insert cold metal into your cervix was not an occasion to relax. Her body stiffened against the doctor's wishes and she tried to think of something pleasant, something to get her mind off the man standing in front of her open thighs peering into places she had never seen. Places that mirrored places that she had explored on someone else. The thought of Pam coincided with the pain that shot through as the pinch became intense. Through the pain, she tried not to think of Pam never coming back. Or worse, of Pam loving someone else and erasing the ten years between them as though they had never been.

Here she lay, in her thirties, killing off her child. Contemplating how she'd let herself become someone's victim, determining to get her life back. To retrieve the normal that had seeped out of her existence, leaving her open and bare to things that shouldn't be happening. Violent thoughts, thumping ceilings, a fetus growing inside her that had no business being there. She wanted her life back. She wanted to be just a clothing buyer again, planning for seasonal trends, going to the parties and meeting the designers who travelled into Chicago. Having Pam on her arm, dressed in something that clung to her lithe body, sparkling along with the luminescence of her eyes,

entrancing everybody, making Ethiel feel special. She wanted the quiet talks when the rain was coming down outside their windows, the smell of vanilla burning in wax, the violin strumming from the bedroom as Pam practiced for another concert. Second chair in the orchestra, something Pam had worked hard for. She had missed her last concert and was now being replaced according to the director, whom Ethiel had called after Pam left, trying to track her down.

How could Pam have left town without telling anyone?

The question was forgotten with another pinch, a stab really. The doctor was telling her to relax again. In her mind, she was beating the shit out of him with a bat. No, she was tearing at him, ripping his insides apart...like he was ripping hers.

"OK, you may feel some cramping after I insert the dilator. Again, just try to relax..."

They had given her a muscle relaxant, so she shouldn't be feeling this much pain. Yet every touch, every movement seem to tear through her. Even now, she was beginning to cramp, to tighten up. He was inserting a tube that ran to the suction machine just near her waist. A nurse stood on the other side of the bed.

For all her independence, her supposed strength, she wished someone was there holding her hand. If not Pam, her mother. But her mother had died of lung cancer two years before. It had been an ugly death. She had held her mother's hand then. And Pam had held her when she got home from the hospital, after her mother had taken her last breath.

She pretended that she felt a touch on her hand. Thought that if she looked up, she would see her mother standing there, her face unweathered, just like it had been before the cancer hit. She tried to breath life into her dead mother as she took life from the child that shouldn't have been.

Even if she wanted to change her mind now, she couldn't. She was already dilated. Soon, the vacuum would suck out everything living in her uterus. The act would bring death.

But something was wrong. The machine was on; she could feel the tugging they had warned her about.

But nothing was coming out.

She looked at the doctor's face as he checked the machine, then checked the tube.

"Carol," he called to the nurse, who was already coming around the bed.

"I don't understand," Carol, the nurse told him as they both gesticulated their frustration with frowns and hand motions and a call on the PA asking for another nurse. But the second nurse was just as stumped at the other two. After another five minutes, the doctor gave up and turned off the machine. He walked to the head of her cot.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Waylon, but there's something wrong with the equipment. At this point, you're fully dilated..."

"No, she's not, Dr.Mathis. Look here."

In two steps, he was peering between her legs again, his face puzzled. "But that's impossible. She *was* dilated. I don't understand what is going on here."

And suddenly Ethiel knew. And the thought caused her to shudder. The first nurse must have seen her tremor, came to her. "It's all right, we're going to figure this out."

But already Ethiel was sitting up. The cramping, the pain, all of it was subsiding.

Because the baby was no longer in danger.

Because it knew it couldn't be killed.

The baby wasn't human. At least, half of him wasn't. The half that been stowed into her body one night when she...had slept and dreamed of someone in her room. The week when Pam had been touring the Midwest with the orchestra. The memory no longer hid from her. Or rather, the baby no longer hid it from her. She wasn't a threat to him anymore. He didn't have to pretend to be normal. Not now.

Because the baby was in control of her. Now and before. Now and forever.

Drowning out the protests from the doctor and nurses about her needing to stay, she dressed quickly, running from something she couldn't outrun.

She called a cab, waited with the other women in the seating area, trying not to see the faces of those who had yet to go in and those who had recovered enough to go home or wherever they would go to block out the memory.

On the ride home, she tried to remember other things, but couldn't. The fear blocked her now. She couldn't think, didn't want to think, had to think what to do.

Another Friday, another sunny day. More kids ran along the street. Some rode bikes, some skated. Kids everywhere.

It wasn't as though she and Pam hadn't discussed it. But the event was always somewhere in the future, and they had both decided that Pam would carry the child. It would be her genes they would bring forth. Because Pam wanted an artist, a musical prodigy. And Ethiel had just wanted a girl (or boy) who looked like Pam.

At the door, she put in her key at the same time she felt something push into her side.

"Thought I'd let you get away with that, bitch?"

He was right beside her, his breath on her cheek, so close to her that no one could see the gun, could hear what he was saying to her.

Before, the baby's anger had moved her, had made her strike out. But now he had deserted her to her fate.

"Open the door!"

The teen's breathing was irregular. He was afraid. She sensed it with her human senses, and with something else not human.

She could hear his heart beating. It was beating too fast. In someone older, it would stress his system, bring on an attack.

Her fingers were numb; she couldn't feel the key slipping into the lock, but somehow it did. And within seconds, the door was open.

The stairway was narrow; the lower two landings had doors on either side, east and west. Not a sound from any of them. The people in this building worked and it was just a little before two. She was home because she had taken off time from the department store for medical reasons.

She could pretend she lived in another apartment, go to another door, not make it easy for him to kill her or whatever he planned to do. But she could see the gun now. It's sheen was muted in the dark, but it was there. Too metallic to be a toy. Any ruse would only anger him.

She wanted her anger now. She needed it.

"C'mon, baby," she called a silent plea to it. To her son. To it.

On the third landing, her apartment ran from either side. No neighbors to hear. The second she walked through the door, the gun lammed into her head and she fell to the floor, her body shifting awkwardly. A pain shot up her arm as it made contact with the wood. She moved her fingers. Nothing was broken. Yet.

She looked into the face that she hadn't seen in nearly two weeks. The scars were ugly grooves, taking away from the smooth handsomeness he had owned earlier. They would heal in time, but there would be those streaks reminding him that he had been punked out by some woman. And with his friend a witness to blab it all over the neighborhood.

He was going to get his respect back.

Even on this warm day, he wore Timbaland boots. And a jacket with some urban logo. Obviously, these things were important to him.

He reached down and grabbed one of her breasts, squeezed it until she winced. He nodded with satisfaction at that. It wasn't her sex he wanted; it was her humiliation, her pain that would avenge his humiliation. She knew his type. Had grown

up around those like him. Her father had been one of those types. Had to have his woman, her mother, on the floor, cowering.

Until her mother stabbed him to death. Her mother's cigarette habit developed after that. Nerves.

"Get up!" he yelled. She didn't know why he was yelling. He had the gun.

But he didn't have the power. Not like he needed. Not like he wanted.

Her fingers tingled. The blood raced through her veins in waves of fire. She heard two...no three...heartbeats now, all going at their own rhythm. One so fast, she didn't know why his heart wasn't bursting. Her own, just a little fast, but steady. The other heartbeat, so light she could barely hear it...but it was there. Slow, calm. In control.

A three-chord pattern she had heard before. On another occasion. Seven-thirty in the evening. Almost three weeks ago.

This time, the feeling swept over her more quickly. The morph didn't hurt as much. Didn't take as long. Her body was getting used to it. Just a slight stretching of her skin, enough to accommodate elongated limbs. The claws burst through with no pain.

Myths and movies had it wrong. The canines weren't as long, the skin not as hirsute. Just extra fuzz really. No snout, nothing so wolvine as to be obvious what she was. What her pregnancy had made her. Forever, or just gestational, she didn't know.

The baby protected the mother because her body protected him. He needed her healthy and alive.

The screams didn't last long. The boy tried to run, reached for the door. She stopped him with one swipe that took off a large section from the back of his head. In the muffled apartment (sound-proofed at Mr. Lange's expense after the tenants complained), she made good work of the young would-be killer. The claws ripped through his chest, stilled his heart at last. His eyes stared up at her.

She remember another pair of eyes, stilled beyond life.

Her wolvine self remembered the woman who had lived with her human half. So delicate and petite.

An argument. The woman had come back, saying they could work through this...

...if Ethiel got rid of the baby. Ethiel had agreed that if she was actually pregnant, then, yes, she would get rid of it. She would kill it. But even then, she swore there had to be a mistake. She couldn't be pregnant.

The baby inside her had understood, though. It hadn't realized that it was invincible inside the woman's body. So he had thought the other one a threat. And he had been forced to defend himself.

The maintenance man had said there was nothing in the chimney. But the creature knew what Ethiel hadn't, that the man hadn't actually looked. Because if he had, he would have found what was there, trapped deep within its recesses. Trapped for at least three weeks. The foul smell was barely noticeable now. And at seventy, air was blown upward; some kind of timer set for the building, a blast that was forced past the body, causing a thumping sound.

Deep within the beast she had become, a beast that was slowly morphing back to her human self, Ethiel realized with anguish that Pam would never be coming back.