



the Sorry Bell

by Theresa Shea Illustration by Sam Weber

ACROSS TOWN ON THAT COLD JANUARY morning, Lorraine Crewes stayed in bed long after her usual morning routine should have begun. Burrowed deep beneath the duvet, she stared up at the stippled white plaster ceiling and tried hard to focus on one spot. Her eyes blurred and focused, blurred and focused. She blinked rapidly when they began to tear.

A feeble light pressed against the white sheers on the south window facing the backyard. It was a deceptive winter light. It could be eight o'clock or noon.

She had told her staff at the flower shop not to expect her for a couple of days. Business was always slow between Christmas and Valentine's Day. And even more so when customers worried about their flowers freezing before they could get them safely into their car and then home. It was a good time to take a break.

She rolled over to Ron's side of the bed and rested her head in the indentation in his pillow. For once she was glad it was Monday. The weekend had been awful. On Sunday, she and Ron had planned to go cross-country skiing at Elk Island Park, but the temperature had plummeted and they'd spent the afternoon at home instead, catching up on chores. She couldn't remember the last time they had just hung around the house together. In the last few years, she'd made sure to keep herself busy. She preferred not to think. It didn't do any good. A woman in one of her infertility sessions had summed it up brilliantly: "My head is like a bad neighbourhood," she had said. "I shouldn't be in it alone." Lorraine had laughed along with the rest of the women in the room, but it was true, wasn't it? She shouldn't be in her head alone.

Still another woman had complained about her mother. "She can't understand why I don't just adopt. In her day if a woman couldn't have a child she either moved on with life or adopted. And maybe it *was* that simple then, but women back then didn't have the options we have today." Again, all of the women in the room had nodded their heads as if they'd

been given similar advice. Another woman interrupted. "People tell me I should adopt because then I'll get pregnant. There seems to be a lot of women out there who get pregnant once they adopt a child." Her sarcasm was obvious and Lorraine shook her head at how insensitive even well-meaning people could be.

Lorraine pictured her own mother. She saw the obligatory cross floating in the hollow of her throat below her porcelain face. And she saw her mother's mouth move with what she thought were words of comfort and encouragement. "Have faith, Lorraine. God will provide." If she had a nickel for every time she'd heard that growing up, she could have paid for all her infertility treatments. If, as her mother so fervently believed, God did take care of His flock, then clearly Lorraine was a lost sheep because God *hadn't* provided, had He? Any simpleton could see that. "Be patient," her mother went on. "Just think of poor Abraham and Sarah. They were rewarded, weren't they?"

Abraham and Sarah? She didn't have until she was ninety years old to get pregnant. She'd be forty next year. She was already fifteen years behind schedule.

The bed frame creaked as she stretched her legs and flexed her toes. Somewhere in the distance a siren wailed. Hard granules of snow pelted against the window like a bird pecking to gain entrance. Suddenly a picture of her husband's pained face rose before her. Poor Ron, she thought. Perhaps she could have better prepared him for the conversation. It had probably looked like a regular Sunday afternoon. He had sat down for lunch dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved sweatshirt with *Jasper* emblazoned on the front and a picture of two roving elk, fully antlered. He'd bought that shirt on their honeymoon. Strange that he'd chosen that particular day to pull it from the back of his drawer.

Ron picked up his sandwich and bit cleanly through the rye bread and the soft egg filling beneath. A blob of mayonnaise hooked onto the whiskers of his dark

moustache and danced there as he chewed. He was unshaven and a dark shadow was spreading over the bottom half of his face. Lorraine tried to see him freshly, as another woman might. He was a good-looking man, tall and lean with a full head of hair. The crow's feet around his eyes only added to his appeal. Not like her own that suggested she had been baffled for a lifetime.

The house shuddered as a gust of wind rattled the storm windows. She bit into an orange slice. The tough skin burst and juice filled her mouth. How unfortunate, she thought, to still recognize her husband's good looks but not feel any desire for him. She inhaled deeply and let the air out slowly through pursed lips.

"Ron?"

He looked up from his plate. The lower rim of his moustache had accumulated more food.

"There's something I need to talk to you about."

He nodded and swallowed before reaching for a napkin to wipe his mouth. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

Her stomach clenched. She had thought about this conversation so many times. Once or twice she'd even found the perfect words, only to lose them before writing them down.

"It's been a rough few years," she began, keeping her eyes glued to the table. "And I'm sure I'm mostly to blame for them, but I've given it a lot of thought, and I think I need some time to myself."

Ron sat back and nodded, as if he'd seen it coming. "What do you mean? Do you want to take a trip on your own or something?"

She stood up and put her plate on the counter, pushing the orange seeds into the garbage beneath the sink. "No," she said, turning to face him again. "I was thinking that I'd like to live by myself for awhile."

Ron stared blankly. His eyes slowly registered her words.

"I'm not sure I'm following you. You want to live by yourself?" His voice was flat as he took a moment to recall what

else she had said. "And you've given it a lot of thought?"

The coffee pot wheezed on the counter as it drew up the last bit of water to percolate. The sound magnified in the room when there was a sudden lull in the wind outside. Lorraine pressed the small of her back into the counter behind her and felt better when it hurt. She wanted to be sure to feel what was happening.

Ron folded his arms over his chest. She watched the colour drain from his face until his lips were a thin blue line under his moustache. He stood up and walked to the

She knew she wasn't being fair to him. He had done things that he hadn't expected to do. She would never forget the look of terror on his face when he learned he'd be responsible for administering the fertility drugs at home. This was a man who hated needles! At their first in vitro appointment the doctor gave them a small box filled with ampoules of liquid that would induce ovulation. *For intramuscular injections, the small print on the box read. To be injected deep into a large muscle.*

"You need to get the needle straight into the muscle," the doctor had instructed.

The eggs would be fertilized. The best ones would be reinserted into her womb. An ultrasound would determine if any of the eggs had "stuck."

sliding glass doors to gather his thoughts. When he turned to speak, his voice was tight in his throat. "How long have you been thinking about it? Months? Years?"

Lorraine stared at her husband and wished she could cross the small distance between them and embrace him. If there were some way she could just disappear for awhile, without hurting him, she would do it.

"Do you feel sorry for me or something?" he continued. "Have you stayed because you thought I'd fall apart without you? Is that it?"

She squirmed under his scrutiny and sat down at the table again. "Please just listen. I haven't stayed out of pity, if that's what you think. I just need some time to myself." There was no point in telling him that all their efforts to get pregnant had messed up their sex life. Spontaneity had long gone by the wayside and been replaced with thermometers, calendars and scheduled appointments. They had often joked about their predicament. "See you at 5:12 for intercourse!" Ron once said as he left for work. He didn't need to be told that they'd lost something along the way. Plus, she'd been the one who hadn't wanted to give up. From the start, Ron had told her that he'd do what she wanted but that he'd also be okay not to have children. She had been annoyed by how easy it seemed for him. Sure, he'd be fine with kids, but he'd be fine without them too.

Ron paled visibly. "What happens if I miss?"

"You won't miss if you go slowly. Don't try to rush it."

The men had moved behind Lorraine. She was bent over a chair and couldn't see their faces anymore. It was hard to offer any encouragement in that position.

"But there must be nerves in there," Ron said. "What if I hit one?"

Lorraine tried to slow her breathing. She imagined the blinding pain, her leg collapsing beneath her, nerve damage, partial paralysis.

The doctor proceeded slowly. He put his hand on her bare rump. "Just watch closely," he said. "You'll get the hang of it after the first few injections."

She tried not to flinch when she felt the sharp prick of the needle and the hot length of steel. Then she felt a playful slap on her bum, the doctor's signal that he was finished.

"It's okay, Ron," she lied, massaging her behind as she straightened. "It's not so bad."

He didn't look convinced. "Look," he said to the doctor. "If I'm going to do this at home, with nobody else around to help me, I need more than just watching you give one needle. There must be something else..."

Lorraine looked at the ampoules cradled seven to a box. She would take home two boxes. Ron would give her one injection a

day for the next two weeks. The invisible fluid would heat her ovaries to a low boil. She pictured a Bunsen burner's blue flame. On a normal menstrual cycle, one egg would drop from her Fallopian tubes. Once artificially stimulated, her body would drop as many as two dozen. Fourteen months of eggs condensed into one month. Fourteen chances to get some high quality eggs to remove, fertilize and reinsert. It was dizzying. She wanted to understand how the fluid worked, but she didn't want to think what it might be doing to her body. She had one goal in mind: a baby. The eggs would be fertilized. The best ones would be reinserted into her womb. She would then carry her body around gently for two weeks at which time an ultrasound would determine if any of the eggs had "stuck." She counted the ampoules again. Seven per box. In her mind they all wore a pink or blue cap.

The doctor had tried to reassure Ron. "Nobody likes giving needles," he laughed. "Even me. But here's a little trick that might help you at home." He told Lorraine to pull her underwear on. Then he asked her to turn around and bend over the chair again. "I'm going to lift your gown now for a moment. I hope these aren't your favourite underwear," he added, as an aside. He took a blue felt pen and drew a circle over the spot where the needle should go in. "Cut this out when you get home," he told Ron, "and make your wife wear them each time you give an injection. That should help you feel better about getting it into the muscle."

There had been many needles along the way, and many drugs. Drugs with names that sounded like they should be administered to cattle, except that the word 'human' was thrown in sometimes: Gonadotropin-releasing hormone, Clomiphene, human menopausal gonadotropin (Pergonal), follicle-stimulating hormone, human chorionic gonadotropin, Danazol, Leuprolide: the list went on. It seemed there wasn't a drug she hadn't taken in those desperate years. And the side effects had been awful at times: nausea, dizziness, hot flashes, headaches, acne, weight gain, cramps, bloating and pelvic inflammation. But she knew that getting pregnant wasn't going to be easy. At every step the doctors announced the statistics and asked if she wanted to con-

tinue. Over time, she was numbed by the details and began imagining the statistics as sheep to count that would lull her to sleep. *She had a fifteen percent chance of bringing home a live baby. Her chances decreased with each treatment cycle. Twenty-five percent of IVF pregnancies miscarry. Multiple pregnancies are a possibility.*

"Yes," she always replied. "Yes, I'm willing to go on," or, "Yes, I'm willing to try that." And Ron squeezed her hand in support. She would do everything she could. She would beat the odds.

Unexplained infertility. That's what the experts determined after all the tests, pills, blood tests, ultrasounds, injections and urine samples. Unexplained infertility. It was like that game she'd played as a child, when someone rang a little bell and said, *Sorry* when they bumped you from your spot. *Sorry*, the experts said. They had no idea why she didn't conceive.

She and Ron had been so hopeful. After each in vitro cycle she had rested and pampered herself for the two weeks leading to the ultrasound. And on that day, the two of them showed up holding hands like high school kids going to the prom. Such a brave face they had put on. And how pathetic it all seemed when the technician looked for some small sac like a snail suctioned to her uterine wall and found nothing. *Sorry*, the little bell rang yet again.

"Look," Ron said, turning from the door and jarring her back to the frigid afternoon. "I know the last few years have been stressful. They haven't exactly been easy for me either. But we've been through worse, I don't see why..."

She held up her hand to silence him. "I know this sounds corny, but all I ever wanted was to be a mother, and now that we've decided to stop the treatments, I have to let that go. So here I am," she laughed weakly and gestured with her hands, "thirty-nine and I don't know what I want to be when I grow up."

She shifted her gaze over Ron's shoulder. In the backyard the sun reflected off the snow. Tiny air particles glistened and danced in the sun's rays.

"Maybe it's time to look at adoption again." Ron's voice sounded as if from a distance.

Even before their first trip to the clinic he had proposed adopting. But how could

she adopt before trying everything to have her own? She wanted the baby to be *their* baby. She wanted to carry it inside of her own body for nine months and give birth to it. And she was certain that she could. Medical advancements had worked miracles to help women like her. All she needed was a jump start and she'd be fine. She was sure of that. Only hindsight revealed that she'd spent too much time believing in science.

"I just need some time on my own," she said again.

Ron picked up his plate and carried it to the sink. He poured himself a mug of coffee. "What can I say?" he finally said. "I don't want you to go."

THE AFTERNOON HAD PASSED SLOWLY. Ron disappeared downstairs to mark student assignments. Lorraine knew he wouldn't resurface until dinner time. She stood at the sink and washed the dishes. Then she took a warm cloth and wiped the counters and the kitchen table. She was surprised to not feel a greater relief now that the conversation was over. Instead, she felt annoyed. She had expected her husband to put up more of a fight. She had steeled herself for a lengthy conversation, but it had ended in less than ten minutes. Twelve years of marriage dissolved in a ten-minute conversation on a frigid winter afternoon. Maybe that's what she'd remember in the years to come, the wind howling, the ice crystals shimmering, the furnace kicking on and off. Being housebound. *What can I say?* he had asked, already conceding defeat. *What can I say?* As if he had a million reasons for her to stay, countless examples of happiness right at his fingertips, each one of them another stitch more firmly binding them together. But in the end he had said nothing but the obvious, *I don't want you to go*, and disappeared into the basement.

The hours passed, the winds increased. By that evening the temperature had dropped to minus 40. Ice fog hung in thick clouds beneath the street lamps. *Stay inside if you can*, weather announcers warned. *Exposed flesh will become frostbitten in seconds.* Lorraine and Ron had slept wrapped in each other's arms, drawn together by a mutual bond of sadness and despair.

And now he was gone. She lay in his vacated spot in the bed and drifted in and out of a light sleep. In the kitchen, the

fridge hummed the same old tune it never tired of. She was startled from a dream when the wall behind her cracked loudly as the bungalow's old brick foundation readjusted itself in the deep freeze.

Slowly the day's light chased the shadows into the corners of the room. Thin shafts of sunlight forced their way through the sheer curtains and gradually gained strength. Despite the cold, it would be a sunny day.

Finally, just before 10:00 a.m., she sat upright in bed. She walked naked to the bathroom and her left wrist bounced hard against her hipbone. The sudden impact of bone on bone startled her. She looked down and was surprised to see her pelvic bones jutting out. Nestled between the bone hollow was her sunken abdomen. In the bathroom, she cupped warm water into her palms and brought them up to her face, rinsing once, twice, three times. Then she toweled herself dry and stared into the mirror; bloodshot and swollen eyes stared back. The small pocket of skin beneath them looked puffy and translucent. She pursed her mouth in concern and then stared at the pleats that circled her mouth. How quickly aging crept up on a body. She stepped back from the sink and shook her head. Then she placed her dark-rimmed glasses on the bridge of her nose, hoping they would conceal some of the puffiness around her eyes.

The coffee brewed in the kitchen while she hurriedly made the bed and threw some clothes into the hamper. Suddenly she was late. All that useless lounging around in bed hadn't helped. She had an appointment to view an apartment she'd seen advertised in the weekend paper; the price was right, and it was within walking distance to her downtown shop. She had to get as far away from the suburbs as possible. Far away from the baby strollers and playgrounds and girl scouts and road hockey and soccer fields and trick-or-treaters and anything remotely connected to what she couldn't have, the woman she couldn't be.

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