

Adhesions – by Ellen T. McKnight

The pressure in Kit's abdomen was sudden and real, as if a man had pressed his hand down on her belly. Driving into the two-foot pothole on Halsted, she'd noticed nothing; bumping out on the far edge, it was there. Her brow contracted as her attention shot inward – *What is that?* – then cleared. Maybe her uterus was supposed to feel this heavy at eight weeks. Anything that confirmed she was pregnant was good.

She swerved to avoid another pothole. She had to stop spacing out like this. No one at the paper even knew. Oh, they'd known about her surgery, but not that it had worked – the adhesions removed as she'd prayed for – or that she and Jeremy had conceived on the first cycle out. She sensed the glow on her face and tried to tone it down. She'd never been this happy before; it embarrassed her. More than that, she didn't want to tempt fate. "Thanks," she whispered huskily, her daily mantra, her ward against the dangers of good luck.

She parked her Camry in an open lot and walked the five blocks to her office at the Tribune. The doctor had said to keep up her walking. Anyway, the continuing pressure in her abdomen made her feel uncomfortably full. A brisk walk, some juice, and she'd use the restroom; then she'd be able to settle down to work.

Upstairs, she *hey'*ed her way through the maze of cubicles, careful to keep her hand on the strap of her work bag to prevent any telltale straying to her belly. She'd wait to tell them until she was three months along – just to be sure. She let herself into her tiny windowless office which was bursting with paper, but obsessively ordered, notes and drafts in tidy piles, yellow post-its on each one

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reminding her what to do next. Compulsive, she knew. She'd driven them crazy at the fertility clinic, all those lists she'd come in with, all the research she'd done. Her attempt to organize the unbearable into submission. To keep how much it mattered from leaching out.

She slotted the papers from her bag to the piles on her desk. Not even Jeremy knew how she felt, not really. He'd been supportive, but also amused. If they had a kid, if they didn't have a kid – he'd be okay either way. He was the type who lived in the moment. The first time she'd spotted him, across the floor at a benefit, he'd been talking to some clients with an insouciance that made the suits around him look pompous and tight. His own jacket hung loosely. He laughed with genuine amusement at his own funny stories. He laughed at other people's too.

Once she'd seen him that night, she couldn't take her eyes off him. She'd worked her way into the crowd around him and stood smiling as if she belonged. She couldn't believe her own temerity, but then Jeremy beckoned her closer.

"And you are - ?" he'd asked, cheeks creasing.

"Kit Franklin." She'd liked how deep his voice was – it left room for her throaty alto – as his height made her gawky tallness seem comfortable for once. His rough palm swallowed her slender one.

"Jeremy Harris. Sorry about the calluses. I'm addicted to tennis."

"You should tell me about your latest match."

She wasn't a successful journalist for no reason; she knew how to draw somebody out. His eyes lit up, and, without seeming to, he moved closer to her. They ended up sitting together despite the strict ordering of the tables. Jeremy simply picked up the place card and handed it to the disconcerted man about to sit down. His smile conceded his errant ways, at the same time giving into them. Conciliation blended with shrug. He would have

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been the boy who drove his mother crazy, even as she doted on him.

“So you write for the paper,” he said. “Not the latest fire or gang shooting, I hope.”

“No, they let me think. I do background stories, news features, analysis pieces. Of course, there might be a fire or gang shooting in the foreground somewhere. But I get to talk about the decline of civilization part.”

He chuckled. “I put together deals. Couldn’t be more different – except for maybe one thing. I imagine we both have to be able to read people.”

He gave her a look then, straight in the eyes, that made her feel transparent.

Flustered, she’d had trouble recapturing the conversation, but Jeremy hadn’t lost a beat. He’d squired her out on the dance floor, got her another drink, took her by the hand for more dancing, then asked for her coat check and valet slip, paid for them both, and somehow before she knew it, they’d left together in her car, with him the one driving it.

Soon enough they’d fallen into a pattern: Friday nights out after work, then her place; Saturday nights out, then his. Sunday mornings with fresh bagels and the New York Times. Breezy, sophisticated, urbane. Sunday evenings they’d go their separate ways for the week, concentrating on work, interspersing cell calls, trading quick commentaries on the absurd.

He went so well with her reinvention, he could have been designed to keep her there.

She caught a glimpse of her wry expression in the photo of Chicago’s skyline hanging above her desk. But she had nothing to apologize for. After all those years with Mark in college and grad school, she’d craved someone self-sufficient. Someone who would let her be. Not like Mark – he was always after her.

“You should lose weight,” Mark announced one day. “I want to feel your hip bones.”

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She'd been in his bed with his hand on her pelvis. Her body had knotted under his touch. Was that supposed to be a come-on? She'd flung away his hand and stalked off to the bathroom. "It's just an idea. You'd look cute that way. Don't you want to be more attractive?" His voice needling into her as she'd stood glaring at herself in the mirror.

She squared off another pile of papers. How dare Mark worm his way into her brain again? She'd sworn off thinking of him years ago. The constant focus of his eyes, the insistence of his voice. "You changed your hair. I'm not sure I like it." His unrelenting assessment as she'd attempted to grow up. A part of her had wanted to beg for his approval despite her show of defiance – had pretended not to diet when he complained about her weight, but later that same day, had left dinner early to throw up.

That was what she should associate with Mark. The taste of vomit, the acid burn down her throat. Then came the day when she couldn't stop puking, when the IUD they'd been using got her infected and scarred. That must be why she found herself thinking of Mark again now; he'd as good as put those adhesions in her abdomen, the ones that she'd just had removed.

She loosened her hand from her belly where she'd been rubbing. That was right: they were gone now. The adhesions were gone and Mark was gone; and her baby with Jeremy was growing in that once gaunt belly of hers. This uncomfortable fullness could be her womb swelling with life. *Hey little one*, she crooned in her head. She put both hands on her stomach, proudly this time, and spun around on the toes of her pumps.

"Kit?" Bill, her editor, poked his head in her office. "The Baxter case? Companion piece to the hearing today?" He pulled out of her doorway before she could reply. He had a habit of making statements into questions, when he meant "Get your ass in gear."

"No problem," she said to the empty doorway.

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She had one more call to make before writing it up. She took the file with her to the restroom. She wanted to try again; the pressure in her abdomen seemed to be increasing.

She caught herself tapping her head behind the ear, her old substitute for wood. She'd always had this fear that good fortune would trigger a payback. She knew that didn't make sense: it was the way she'd been raised. A direct look meant trouble, that Mom's rage was about to take over. Otherwise Kit had barely been visible.

That had to be why she'd fallen for Mark in the first place – it was stunning to have a guy pay attention to her. She remembered when they met at school, how he'd pelted her with questions: "Where are you from? Why'd you come here?" She couldn't believe how appealing it had been. The clack of his step matching hers, the way his blue eyes bore into her brown. Mark's stare gave her a sudden physical existence. No wonder that what he saw had come to seem like the only thing real about her.

She shook the water off her hands above the sink. Enough of that. She'd rejected those needs long ago. Jeremy wasn't concerned about her insides; he took her as she came. And she made sure the way she came was light, confident and smart.

Back in her office, she forced herself to focus. The pressure was worse when she sat down; she closed the door, unzipped her slacks and let her shirt hang loose, then dialed up Baxter's mother. Baxter was a male teacher accused of having a liaison with a 16-year-old student – not an unusual story – but interesting to her readers because they claimed it was love. Baxter's mother had yet to answer her messages. But this time, halfway through her message, someone picked up. An elderly voice stuttered out "Hello."

"This is Kit Franklin, with the Chicago Tribune. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

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"Yes, I recognize your voice. It's very low. So, what can I tell you about my boy?"

The words caught at Kit: "my boy." They were all someone's, weren't they? She found her questions softening as they came out. They talked about Baxter as a child. Why he became a teacher. Kit wondered, could *she* be having a boy?

"I don't believe what they're accusing him of." His mother broke into her thoughts, her voice hard; then it faltered. "Actually, I'm not sure. Please don't include this. Maybe he truly loves her. Is that so bad? We can't always control how we feel. What's wrong?"

A gasp had escaped her – the pressure was squeezing her guts. Kit doubled over, wedged a hand against her belly. "Jus' a cramp. Please go on." She tried to take notes as Baxter's mother continued, then wrapped up the call.

Bracing her arms on the chair, she worked her way to a stand, then took her cell to the end of the hall for better reception. She pressed Jeremy's name and waited, leaning into the sealed window behind some Yucca trees in chrome pots.

"Kit?" He made her name a question.

"Jeremy, something's wrong." The words tumbled out. "I'm having trouble in the bathroom. There's all this pressure." Suddenly, she was too desperate to go on.

"Hey hon, I'm in the middle of things. You should call the doctor if you're worried. Let me know how it works out."

Call ended. Kit stared at the screen. But that had always been their agreement: if you were at work and couldn't talk, that was that. Why had she called him anyway? What could he do, help her go? She was letting herself get unnerved. Not the new self she'd crafted out of that IUD infection: a woman who could manage fine on her own. Disgust had given her the push she'd needed to

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end things with Mark. That was what attention got you: poisoned inside. She was better off without.

But she hadn't counted on the adhesions. That her body would try to fix things. That scar tissue could be knit whole cloth by freaked antibodies and fill her uterus like a smothering bandage. But her recent surgery had taken care of that, hadn't it? And she was pregnant, oh my God, she was pregnant. Even curled against the glass, holding a silent phone, her other hand clenched against her belly, she could feel a rush of joy flash over her skin.

She could endure anything to have this child. Anything.

She pressed for her doctor's office. She started to leave the usual "please call" kind of message, then found herself begging. "Please have her call me, please, right away." She clapped the phone shut, appalled.

Hormones: that must be her reason for overreacting. But why did she have this feeling that the pressure continued to build? It had to be her imagination. She hobbled back to the restroom to try again, but no luck. She closed her office door behind her, rocked back and forth on her chair.

The rocking seemed to ease the pressure. The chair's industrial fabric pricked her legs through her pants; closing her eyes, she pretended it was worn velour, like the old green armchair she used to hide in when she was little. She pictured herself there now, rocking herself and her baby. "Hush," she breathed, "it'll be okay."

She wanted to call Jeremy back, but her neediness scared her. Even when she'd talked him into trying for a child, she'd managed to keep it glib, almost self-mocking. Hiding her yearning in a *hey, what the hell*. She mentally scanned her list of colleagues, neighbors, other women who worked out at her health club. Plenty of people for sarcastic chitchat, no one for total panic. Baxter's mom had seemed more sympathetic than her friends. What was this world that Kit had created for herself? This one

in which she had no one to talk to about something as personal and crude as her intestines shutting down?

She timed her breaths to the rocking. She remembered when the pain started in grad school. At first she'd ignored it, then tried to fix it on her own. She'd started a regimen of stretching. She'd douched with a product in a pink floral box. A part of her had wanted out of the trap with Mark so badly, she felt capable of having invented the whole thing as an excuse. Even when it turned out that her uterus was infected and filled with scar tissue, she'd wondered if somehow it was her fault. Her brain using her body to bring about an escape she was otherwise too weak to demand. Her mouth curled with distaste; no wonder she hadn't been able to bear being the same person after the surgery. And yet . . . her frown shifted; she was no longer so sure about this new self of hers.

She shook her head. All that mattered right now was her baby.

The baby, she thought, startled, pulling up and scattering her papers. What if this wasn't something normal like constipation? What if the baby was being crushed? She grabbed her cell and wallet, and yanked open the door. Her editor stumbled in, his hand on the knob. "Move it," Kit yelled. She lurched past him to the elevator, then hurried out to the curb and signaled a cab.

The cab stank of cigarettes, overlaid by the chemical pine of an air freshener. Kit cracked open the window and breathed through the slit. The smells of Chicago wafted in: a blend of exhaust, rubber tires and dust, with a hint of Lake Michigan lacing through. She shut her eyes, aimed her nose at that bit of lake.

Deep inside, she sensed an echo to her heartbeat. The merest, soundless throb. Her more cynical self began to scoff, but she'd never felt so un-alone inside herself before.

How strange that having a child used to seem like something that only other people did. Mark had found the

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very thought of churning out babies primitive, something a superior person would be above. She'd never agreed with that, but it had seemed rather remote. Something earthy and vaguely unpleasant, experienced by people she didn't know.

Marrying Jeremy had changed that. Not because he'd pushed for kids – in his less offensive way, he'd been as evasive about the concept as Mark had been. No, the change had been her. As she'd prepared herself for their grand exit at the reception, she'd overheard Jeremy and his best man chatting about clients. All of a sudden, her own work concerns had seemed to recede. “I want a baby,” she'd whispered to the mirror, and felt her whole life reorient as if she'd gone through the glass and come out in reverse.

“Jeremy,” she said out loud, not realizing until the cabbie peered back at her. *Jeremy*, she repeated in her head, his name taking on the sound of a plea. *I'm a mess over this. I'm not as tough as you think. You've married a fraud.* By the time they pulled up at the hospital, she couldn't hide her tears. She pressed a twenty into the cabbie's hand, and the automatic doors whooshed open. She entered the unnatural chill of the ER.

The woman at the desk glanced up, then turned back to her screen and asked for Kit's information. She copied her insurance card without a word. Everyone must come in here crying; Kit didn't even bother trying to stop. She didn't know if it was the pain or the thought of what she might be losing. The chance to be the mom that she wished she'd had – getting to love as she'd never been loved. Unconditional, extravagant love. Attention could be positive, she was sure it could, even if the only proof she had were her instincts about this child.

Could there be a chance to share love like that with Jeremy as well?

In the waiting room, she pulled out her cell, but hesitated, still nervous to call him. She felt as if she were

unraveling by the moment; Jeremy wouldn't have a clue. From his standpoint, she had a little problem which she needed to get checked. She knew Jeremy appreciated her autonomy, her self-reliance. He'd recognize that version of her; the other he'd never known.

And the other Kit was back – she couldn't deny it anymore. She was a neurotic, needy mess. If she hid it from Jeremy and lost this baby, what then? Eventually she'd lose Jeremy too. The gap between them would only get bigger. A crevice no adhesions could bridge.

But if she did have this child, then he'd *have* to know. Despite her tears, she laughed out loud. Jeremy would be in for the surprise of his life. The last thing she wanted was to raise another super-Kit. She was determined on that, with or without him.

"*You* won't need to be perfect," she muttered, then sensed someone's eyes and fell silent. Okay, it would be their secret for now. Kit would be the baby's old green armchair, like the one she'd kept searching for since the day she came home from school to find it gone. "Rummage sale," Mom said from the kitchen. Kit wandered the house for days without sitting, avoiding her mom's cold vinyl chairs, the only kind left in the house. "I clean them, so I get to pick," Mom added, perhaps sensing an unusual dissension. Well, now, Kit got to pick. A worn, comfy armchair sounded about right.

She couldn't look farther from perfect than she did right now: rocking back and forth on the plastic waiting room chair, mumbling to herself, her shirt hanging out, her pants unzipped, tears streaming down her face. So what? An almost holy kind of stubbornness coursed through her as they came to get her. She could beat this, she could, even though they made her sign off on emergency surgery, even though she had to agree they could remove everything. "But save the baby if you possibly can," she scribbled. The nurse frowned, then gave a terse nod.

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Kit woke to the sound of that same nurse halfway through a repeating sentence, like an automated recording: “ – still pregnant, you’re still pregnant, you’re still – ah, you’re awake.” A smile played over the nurse’s face.

“I’m still pregnant?” Kit felt the glow coming back.

“Some new adhesions were trapping fluid outside your uterus. The doctors drained out 1,000 cc’s. But the baby’s fine. I’ll get your husband – he’s a nervous wreck.”

Jeremy was here? Someone must have called him. Maybe that receptionist who’d seemed so inured. Now, all at once, Kit wanted him.

The nurse moved aside and there he was in the doorway, his back hunched as if uncertain. Then Kit saw his face. His eyes sagged, and his mouth looked strangely broken.

“Jeremy,” she called out. His eyes lifted to hers.

The chance to fix things. She felt as if her whole life had been in preparation just for this.