Wait Three Minutes
by Mara McCloy

All day she just sees plus signs. Weaved into the fabric of the red bricks, in small designs of button down shirts passing her in the hallway, in the creases of her knuckles, and in the dents on her wrist she made with her own anxious fingernails. She knows he is about to pass down C-hall. They always pass by each other at this time and bump shoulders, and he laughs but she shudders. But today she sits curled up in a bathroom stall, knees up so no one can see her shoes, until she knows she can walk into English class right as it begins.

I heard you’re pregnant, the girl next to her whispers across the aisle of desks in straight mundane rows.

Where did you hear that?

Alright class lets get settled.

She adjusts her hips back into the plastic seat so that her knees face toward the front of the classroom. Her teacher begins to pass back their most recent essays, handing her an A+, but not without whispering, please see me after class.

She pops her knuckles and tries to divert her eyes away from the empty ones all trying to x-ray her. See her insides. See with their own that the rumors are true. Her teacher begins lecturing on the art of the extended metaphor with mint green powerpoint slides and white lace applique design running the borders of the screen. Surrounding her classroom are rows and rows of those inspirational posters:

Don’t be afraid to stand out

Shoot for the moon, even if you miss you’ll land among the stars

Treat everyone with kindness
Respect everyone, respect yourself

You are free to choose but you are not free from the consequences of your choice

What if it wasn’t a choice?

The room is black. Darker than a normal bedroom with all the lights off. The only sliver she can see is the light white as Snow peeping through the blackout curtains, and the television drowning out whatever happens behind the closed door. Anytime she closes her eyes, she just sees that same shade of darkness. The cross above the window. And it’s all she sees now until she feels a hand fall gently on her shoulder, moving her back and forth in her chair. She opens her eyes.

You okay?

Yes. Yes! Sorry, I’m just tired.

I wanted to talk to you about your story. Is everything alright at home? With friends?

Oh of course! It’s just fiction. It’s just fiction.

Okay. I won’t pry, just wanted you to know you had a safe space.

Instead of her stomach dropping, it seems to slowly fade. Melting and molding away into her other organs. Her teacher’s voice is just a brisk hush.

Her next class is Math. She makes it just in time for class again, having to walk up the stairs to upper B-hall and then back down to lower A to avoid his walking path. The school is layed out with halls crossing each other to create perpendicular lines. It makes it easy to hide in the corners, and peak around them before walking further. She melts into another plastic chair, the metal phillips head screws cold against her back.
The hair on the back of her neck stands up and his cold spearmint breath is all she can breathe. His fingertips are cold and so are his eyes. Beady. Sharp. His eyes are so close to hers, she can see the icicles of his eye’s blue iris.

*Please sit down!*

Her eyes open and she realizes that she’s standing over her chair now, her finger shoved into the cross-shaped screw, piercing her skin with pressure. She turns around and sees the eyes again. Her teacher with her arms crossing her chest. The eyes are all different and individual, seeing through her, breaking her icy protective layer, exposing her.

*Oh! Sorry just got lost in thought.*

She takes her seat, shaking her head, and rubbing her dry hands across her forehead, leaving reddened swollen skin behind. She reaches into her backpack, pulling out her math notebook, pencil, and eraser, folding her hands on top of her desk. Looking to her left, the eyes are still there. But the eyes whisper:

*Did you hear she’s pregnant?*

*Her boyfriend is so hot.*

*Maybe he would have my babies.*

*I thought he was sleeping with that other girl?*

*I heard he beats her.*

The whispers become a flurry. Like she is out in the Snow, laying deep in the frozen ground ready to make a Snow angel, but she is covered by solid ice before she can choose to be free. She gathers her things, and walks out of class. The air follows her as she runs. Like bright straight lines of many colors are following her in every direction. Her eyesight narrows and widens with speed, and she turns corners and runs down stairs. Busting through the doors at the front of the
school, the Snow begins to fall at a brisk pace that May 11th. She falls gently onto the cold ground, positioned to begin her Snow angel, but instead is suffocated by the falling flurries. She lays in the star shape, allowing her body to be left in the cold. For the Snow to cover her up and she doesn’t have to move. Maybe if she lays here long enough, it will all melt, it won’t freeze, and she’ll be free.

What are you doing?

She opens her eyes and her sister’s bright white face is above hers, cupping Snow’s sweating cheeks between her hands, moving her face back and forth.

It’s like 100 degrees out here why are you laying here? They sent me to come find you. They said you ran out of class? Is it happening again?

Her voice is so distant. A winter breeze blowing in. Snow can feel her dampened skin, and thinks the ice must have melted away.

I’ll call mom. Don’t worry don’t worry she’ll be here soon. Just stay put.

Her cross earrings dangle parallel to her neck. A small sparkle in the center, that gently sways back and forth as she pushes herself up, grabbing her phone in a hurry. The sparkle is stuck in Snow’s eye, flashing back and forth, and back and forth.

It’s dark again, and the sunlight peeking through the curtain surrounds his frame. His hands rest heavy against her shoulders, pushing her into the bed, as if she could even melt further away. She feels her shoulders pop, and her white skin is cold and damp.

Snow feels something against her ear,

Baby? I’m on my way honey, I’m on my way. Please hang in there it’s gonna be okay. I love you. Just hold your sister’s hand. I’m coming.
The toilet seat feels cold beneath her. She holds the box in her hand with shaking palms. Her hips throb as her swollen and purpling thighs feel the pressure of the white glass seat. She holds the instructions in her hand:

*Test as early as six days before your missed period.*

*Put the test strip in the urine for 5 seconds.*

*Wait three minutes.*

Snow feels two soft sticks underneath her frame, lifting her up out of the pillowy Snow beneath her. She opens her eyes and sees the face of her mother. A deepening blue. No confusing lines. Not cold but warm. The kind of warm of a towel fresh out of the dryer, or the bath water after it cools off. Snow curls her head into her mother’s shoulder, her eyes zeroing in on the black buttons running up and down her cardigan, with black cross stitching holding them in place. She can feel the dampness of her chest.

*It’s gonna be okay honey. I have you now.*

*I’m not going anywhere, I won’t let go of your hand.*

*Wait three minutes.*

*A plus sign means positive: pregnant.*

*A minus sign means negative: not pregnant.*

She holds that thin piece of plastic in her palm. She looks in the mirror above the sink, her pale face holds a cold complexion. The rosiness of her cheeks has faded, and all she sees now are lines shaped like icicles. She grabs the plus sign and shoves it deep into the bottom of the garbage, covering it in the piles and piles of snowball shaped paper towels. He waits outside of the bathroom, his back leaning against the wall, with one leg crossing over the other, his arms crossing his chest. Snow looks into his eyes, letting out an icy tension,
It's….uh….negative.

Thank god. THANK GOD. Don’t tell anyone.

Wait three minutes.

A plus sign means positive: pregnant

I’ve still got your hand.

We’re almost home. You’re safe.

The blanket surrounding her feels warm, and the Snow fades away as the icicles of her face grow numb. Her body melts into the mattress, and she feels his hands on her shoulders.