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MAGIC 8-BALL

EMILY ROSE DORAN

I bought the Magic 8-Ball as a gag gift for our daughter, Blanche. It was nestled neatly on top of the Slinkys and fluorescent yo-yos overflowing the one-dollar bin by the checkout line, and I thought, heck, why not?

“You buy her too much junk,” I could hear my husband say.

“Yeah, well, how about you go shopping, then?” My head snapped back.

I wished I were better at thinking of comebacks, especially when we talked and it counted. But I wasn't, and that was that.

I got home and craned my neck to look at the bags of groceries piled precariously on the back seat. The Magic 8-Ball was peeping out of my purse, perfectly round and smooth—“Do you want this in a bag?” the frog-eyed cashier had asked. “No, I'll just take it,” I said—so I grabbed it.

“What are the odds Cal will help me take in the groceries?” I asked, shaking the 8-Ball. I laughed at myself because no one else was there to laugh at the thirty-eight-year-old woman talking to herself in the parked car in the driveway.

“Very doubtful,” it said.

“Dammit.”

It took me two trips to bring the groceries inside. I saw Cal sitting on the couch when I lugged the last load up the stairs.

“Why didn’t you help me carry in groceries?” I puffed.

He looked over his book, surprised. “I didn’t hear you get home,” he said.

I decided I would give Blanche the Magic 8-Ball tomorrow.

That night, as Cal was brushing his teeth and I was debating which pajamas to wear (holey college T-shirt over Hanes briefs? silky red camisole? scratchy flannels?), I thought of the Magic 8-Ball tucked in the drawer of my bedside table next to half-squeezed bottles of hand lotion and a small calendar with the twenty-sixth circled in red, like it was every month. Watching the bathroom door, I carefully pulled out the 8-ball and hunched over it.

“Will we have sex tonight?” I whispered, rattling its liquidy insides like I had imagined doing to Blanche when she was a baby and had made me depressed.

“My sources say no.”

A hasty follow-up question: “What if I wear my special black panties?”

“Don’t count on it.”

“Mother of—”

“Babe, who you talking to?”

“Just checking my messages!” I dropped the 8-Ball into the drawer and shut it. “Scratchy flannels it is.”

I never did give Blanche the Magic 8-Ball. No use wasting such a precious device on someone who wouldn’t appreciate it. For weeks, it predicted my future accurately. It knew that Cal would be inattentive and distant—inconsiderate, even. And Blanche, well, Blanche was an eight-year-old girl who thought only of herself, like all kids that age.

I began to ask it more intimate, involved questions.

“Will Cal and I ever have another baby?”

“Better not tell you now.”

“Why not?”

Silence.

“Will I—will we . . . find happiness?”

“Outlook not so good.”

“Is Cal having an affair?”

“Signs point to yes.”

Signs? What signs?

“That bastard.”

I watched him. I watched him as he left for work in the morning, and, as soon as his car was out of sight, I would check his emails. I waited for him to come home and would bombard him with barbed hints about infidelity while I made meatloaf. I eavesdropped on his phone calls and looked up every woman’s name he mentioned on the Internet. Who was this “Janet Smith,” and why did she live only five miles away in sunny, suburban Williamsville? I pictured her belly, swollen and beautiful in a way mine had never been. I couldn’t shake the image.

“Should I just ask him?” I once asked the 8-Ball when I started to grow concerned that I was taking things too far.

“My reply is no.”

“Should I find her?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“What—what should I do when I find her?”

“Better not tell you now.”

Three months later, I was rubbing my belly and putting together a puzzle with Blanche when Cal put down his newspaper and said, “They still haven’t found that client of mine. From this winter, you remember? Really tragic. Poor woman is probably in a ditch somewhere, or in the back of some guy’s trunk.”

“Yes, very sad.”

“I wonder if they’ll ever find her.”

“Don’t count on it.”