

Shame (As Experienced in a Walmart Bathroom)

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Sunday and Monday, I think nothing of it. I'm back home in my familiar small town after being away at college for months, and I have more important things on my mind. I can finally push all of my campus-related worries to the back of my mind and focus instead on the comfort of being surrounded by people I trust. I'm home. I don't have to worry about grades, boys, drama, or anything. Anyway, my period frequently takes until Tuesday to kick into gear, and besides, I just changed my birth control. My hormones are still sorting themselves out. A couple of days *sans* period are nothing to worry about.

However, Tuesday arrives with no blood. A small paranoid part of me yells "Oh no!" but mostly I ignore it and go on with my day, happy to be spending time with my family.

On Wednesday, still nothing. At this point I'm growing nervous. I know some people's periods are all over the place, but mine are very regular. They always appear by Tuesday—always. I pull out my calendar and try to figure out how many times I've had sex this month. Only twice. *That's not very much, I think. You're being irrational. You use protection. This is just what happens when you change birth control.*

Another day goes by. I sit in my bed Thursday night and stare at my stomach. I place my hands over it. Breathe in, out. *What if there's a person in there?* I wonder. *There's not a person in there; there is definitely not a person in there... What if there is?*

I think back to those two encounters, those two different boys. A Sunday night and then the following Monday. *That's so close together. Would I have to get a paternity test? Who would I rather it be?* The first guy was a one-night hookup. The second ghosted me after we'd gone on six or seven dates. *If I could figure out who the guy was, would I tell him? Would he care? Would he even pick up the phone?* I can feel the tension where it sits in my neck and shoulders. The guy who ghosted me didn't use a condom. I was afraid to ask him to. *How dumb can you get?* I ask myself. *Really excellent job establishing boundaries, you idiot. Now look where it's got you.*

Friday, real anxiety begins setting in. I call my best friend.

"I know this is dumb and unrealistic, but I'm freaked out."

He laughs and asks what's going on.

"My period is almost a week late, and I had sex with two different guys this month, and I'm scared that I'm pregnant."

"You're using one, sometimes two types of birth control? There's no way you're pregnant. You don't need to worry."

“Okay, but what if? Are abortions even legal in this state?”

“I don’t know, but you can always come visit me in California and get one here.”

We laugh. He continues to tell me I’m worked up over nothing, and I calm down some, though I keep surreptitiously peering at my stomach.

Later in the day, though, my fear picks back up. I imagine calling one of those boys. *How would I say this?* “I’ll cut to the chase,” I begin, talking to my empty bedroom. “I’m pregnant.” Then I snatch the words back quickly, before they have time to become true. *Would I actually get an abortion? How guilty would that make me feel?* I look for the feminist in me to tell me that an abortion would be a perfectly valid choice, but she’s silent. *What if I kept it?* I consider the idea for a moment; I consider college, my lack of income, my inability to properly take care of myself, much less another person. *Everything would change.* Still, I think, very briefly, of the name Elena.

Saturday dawns and my underwear is still clean, so I find an excuse to go to Walmart. I would go to CVS since it’s closer, but my aunt works there, and I can’t risk running into her. Unless it becomes an unavoidable reality, my family can’t know that this disaster was even a possibility. I don’t think they’d be angry; they’re always supportive. But if I told them, I’d be forced to confront my own shame head-on.

As I’m driving down the road, I’m so distracted I almost run a red light. At this point, I’ve convinced myself that I really am pregnant. I think of Donna in *Mama Mia* saying, “I was a stupid, reckless little slut.” Normally, I think the word “slut” is a fake concept invented by the patriarchy to control female sexuality. Right now, I just think it’s another word for me.

I park the car, and as I walk through the automatic doors into the building, I hold my chin up and try to convince myself of my confidence. This time, my inner-feminist rallies, and reminds me that *no one has any right to judge you, pregnant or not.* Stopping by the beauty section, I grab some lotion (the reason I gave my parents for the errand), and then I walk six aisles over.

The Family Planning section is, of course, in plain view of the pharmacy window. I try to act like I’m looking at condoms—still embarrassing, but nowhere near as bad as the truth—while I read the labels of the pregnancy tests. “Guaranteed accuracy!” “Results up to four days before menstruation!” “Can tell you six days sooner!”

The whole time, I watch for people I know. This is a 4,000-person town; you can’t go anywhere without running into someone. After a hasty deliberation period, I grab the cheapest test, nothing name brand, and rush to the self-checkout. I hold the box close against my body, only to realize “Pregnancy Test” is written in pretty pink font on every side, even the skinny ones. There’s also a large picture of a woman smiling at her positive test results, who I immediately dislike. I awkwardly cross my arms to cover the exposed sections of the box as best I can.

In the checkout line, my eyes dart back and forth as I survey the room for people I recognize. Thankfully, no one appears. When a register opens, I scan my items as fast as possible, relieved that I'm now able to hide them in a flimsy plastic bag. I reach into my wallet to fish out my debit card, but change my mind, grabbing a twenty instead. My mom can still see my bank account purchases. Cash can't be tracked. As soon as the receipt prints, I throw it out.

Then, squaring my shoulders, I march toward the large sign labeled "Restrooms," feeling like a soldier entering battle: not brave, but terrified. The bathroom, blessedly, is empty. I hurry into the big stall at the end and latch the door. *Safe at last.* I perch on the toilet and open the box. It takes a few tries—my hands are shaky. When I unfold the paper inside, I'm glad to see that the directions are large and clear, unlike most instruction manuals.

*Take cap off,
Pee for five seconds,
Replace cap,
Leave flat for two
minutes, Learn your fate.*

I watch, anxiously, as the thin blue lines start to develop. No, line. Singular. Two minutes have passed and there is only one. My body sags in on itself as I thank a god I don't usually believe in. I shove the whole thing, directions, box, second test—every bit of incriminating evidence—into the miniature trash receptacle on the stall wall. I walk out of the bathroom hot, embarrassed, and absurdly grateful. *You're okay. You're okay. You were being ridiculous. You're okay.* Leaving the store as quickly as possible, I keep my head down and refuse to make eye contact as I scurry across the parking lot, relaxing only when I'm safe in the driver's seat.

