

# The Hungry

by Kerry Donoghue

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Buick DeGaulle did not turn his head in time after he belched.

"Buick, please," his wife complained from underneath him. After eight years of marriage, Glory was almost immune to the stench of bratwurst and white onions. But almost only counts in horseshoes, and she was playing to win. "Not when we're trying to make a baby."

"Uh-"

They finished. Buick muscled out five quick push-ups, kissed her nose on the last one, and sprung up to use the bathroom. Glory lay prostrate, willing her body to work like it should, yearning for completion. When he returned to the kitchen floor, she had her legs in the air.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm helping our unborn child find the way home," she said.

Buick wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I didn't hurt you, did I? You're getting so darn skinny."

"Thank you, honey." Glory remained on her back, curled on the sliver of checkered linoleum that was their kitchen. It was too small, like their savings account and their Milwaukee apartment, but it was what they could afford, especially since they'd finally decided to start trying for a baby. Although they both wanted children, they could never agree on the timing. Buick insisted on a higher credit limit and health insurance first, while Glory craved it all now: the whole brood, a Christmas portrait, parent-teacher conferences.

Six months ago, she had found eleven wiry gray hairs shooting out from her scalp and it was as if all the clocks in her body struck, a loud and public tolling. "Before we turn thirty-five," she'd said one night during bowling league, her eyes pleading. "We don't want to run out of chances." She made sure they had intercourse at least four times a week, even when she wasn't in the mood, and she'd stopped drinking, refusing the usual Thirsty Thursday Pabst pitchers and Jaegermeister shots, just to prove how serious she was.

And Buick had agreed. Maybe he didn't say it out loud, but his brown eyes implied it, she knew them well enough, and he hugged her while she buried her worry in his broad shoulders right there in the parking lot, just like they used to do in high school. They stood there that May, swaying in the lake breeze, forming a wordless pact that echoed the deepest beats of the dusk and her heart.

Buick buttered his flaxseed waffles, glancing at his wife still contorted on the kitchen floor. "Don't want you disappearing on me, baby."

"I'm not going anywhere." Glory smiled as she rolled up. He'd miss her if she were gone—another reason he'd be a good father. His comment assured her that she'd chosen the right man to father her child and she decided to reward herself by not eating for the rest of the morning.

"We really have to fix that hole." There was a black gash in their wall, right where the front door always slammed. Although they tried to hide it with framed IKEA posters and plastic ferns, the hole gaped without apologies, a stale yawn into the drywall, their lives.

She began the Lamaze breaths she'd been practicing for months—in through the nose, out through the mouth—to calm herself. When that didn't work, she imagined how she'd decorate the nursery—all pastels, with a woodland scene and two wide-eyed fawns sipping at the edge of a sparkling lake. The soothing came like a cool hand on the forehead.

Buick swallowed a handful of baby carrots and stared at her kneecaps. "You lost some weight recently?"

Glory turned her head and smiled. "A little, I guess."

Truth was, she had halved her calorie intake during the last few months to prepare her body for a child. She ate only two meals a day now, and one of those was a non-fat latte for breakfast. Sometimes, just to keep her mouth busy, she'd even snack on ice cubes, a trick that made her feel full without adding any extra calories. The very motion of sucking on them burned calories. It was like cleaning the house for a new guest: the more she exercised, or the less she ate, the cleaner her house felt and the more inviting it would be for newcomers.

She brought her legs down and clenched her pelvic muscles in quick sets to make sure her son—or daughter, but hopefully a son that they would name Hershel after her dead father—would get to where he needed to go. Hershel. It sounded better than blue-collar, tougher. Buick's auntie had told him about his namesake just once ("Cause that's where you were made, baby boy"), and he'd vowed to give his own kid a better backstory.

He hunched in front of the refrigerator. "Thirsty?"

"Parched."

"Me too." Buick poured himself a glass of milk, and for her, a glass of tap water. "I'm liking this new frisky you." He downed his milk in several quick gulps, sighing with pleasure at the end.

Glory sipped her water. She did not sigh.

Later that morning, at the wobbly card table they used as a dinette, Glory and Buick surveyed the piles. They kept their products right out in the open, hoping that the visual presence would be a nagging, yet effective, reminder to sell more, to make more money. Masking tape divided the table into two heaps. On the left, Glory had stacked all her cosmetics: neat rose-colored piles of eyeshadow, mascara, lotions. On the right, blue boxes of antioxidants, minerals, energy bars, and omegas towered.

Glory flipped through her orders, her fingertips rustling carbon-paper, tapping numbers into a calculator without even looking. Her bookkeeping skills were impeccable, which was one reason she knew she'd be a good mom. She also liked to organize, make lists, and map out each week's activities on the wall calendar. She was at her best when she was in control.

"Are we going to make rent this month?" Buick asked.

"It's going to be tight." Glory sighed. "I should probably host another makeover party."

Buick organized his weight-gainer shakes. "No. I'll set up a table at the gym. If I'm there lifting every day, I might as well make some money."

She balled her hands on her hips. "You won't be able to set up a table in the gym if we can't pay this month's membership."

Silence fluttered down like cobwebs. The phone rang.

Buick answered. "Sterling!" He took the phone into the bedroom to talk to his younger brother.

After all her calculations, their total monthly sales were less than four thousand dollars: still not enough to deposit anything into a savings account after they paid rent, two credit card bills, a car lease, groceries, and the health insurance. Glory smoothed her palms up and down her legs, her fingers sliding along the sharp shin line, down the scars and the prickly parts that the Nair missed. She snuck in a few leg lifts under the table to relax. Each movement burned one calorie that put her closer to her child. Just the thought of baby powder gave her the energy to do a few more lifts.

Buick ducked back into the kitchen. "Sterling's coming over for dinner," he said. "Is that okay?"

"Do we even have enough food for him to eat with us?"

"He's blood, Glory."

"And you can't deny blood."

Sterling arrived at the apartment with automotive fanfare. Although Buick loomed over six feet tall and had to duck under doorways, his brother was squat, which he made up for with a monster truck. The truck showcased gold flames airbrushed along the bed and a bobbling devil head mounted to the dashboard. Sterling had worked day and night construction jobs to get his frame raised so he could look down on traffic, even though he had to use a blue crate to hop in and out of the cab.

Buick opened the front door to find Sterling leaning like a cowboy about to enter a saloon.

"Come here often?" Sterling asked.

"Did a few hours ago, if you know what I'm saying."

Glory rolled her eyes. "I can hear you," she shouted.

Sterling strode the three and a half steps from the front door to the kitchen where Glory sat tying curls of sparkly ribbon around her product bags. "Hi, little mama."

He kissed the crown of her head and Glory hoped he hadn't mussed the strategically placed strands that covered the thinning sections. She had been losing hair lately, catching stringy brown clumps that looked like drowned mice when she was in the shower. That was another reason they had to have a baby soon.

Sterling groaned. "You two still on those stupid pyramid schemes?"

"They're not schemes," Buick said. "They're streams. Of income."

"Why don't you just get real jobs?"

"These are real jobs," Glory said. "I even got promoted to the 'Super Seller' tier because of my outstanding sales." She smirked and pointed to the round pin on her lapel: "Ask Me! I'm a Certified Super Seller!"

Buick stretched, his muscles cresting with each extension. "Like any job, Sterling, it takes a while to climb the ladder. But so far, so good. We're living the dream right here in the comfort of our own home, and how many other people can say that?" He put on a foam cheesehead, flexing his biceps and roaring like the Packers had just scored a touchdown.

Sterling took the carton of milk from the refrigerator. "Alls I'm saying is, maybe if you got yourselves some nine-to-fivers, you could fix that big old hole in your wall." He poured himself a tall glass.

Glory focused on the ribbon, the strands bouncing into curlicues as she dragged them along the scissor blades. She knew female customers loved special girly details because it felt more intimate, like they were making a friend and getting better skin, all in the same transaction. She tied a sweet little bow. The transformation was enchanting.

"Besides," Sterling said, "how're you going to raise a baby in this dinky closet while you're selling lipstick for a living?"

Glory spun around to glare knife-eyes at Buick. "You told him?" Her first instinct, which probably would have put her in prison, was to sock Buick clear across his betraying face. They had promised each other not to tell anyone else so there wouldn't be any pressure. She knew she loved Buick more than anything, which is why she felt she could kill him with her bare hands. Yes, she was only five feet tall and knew a pounding from her fists would be like walking through a turnstile to him. But whenever she got this angry, which was around a certain time each month and over silly things such as putting the toilet seat down, her eyes would automatically overflow. Tears always ruined her argument. Usually a ten-minute breather and king-size Snickers helped, but they hadn't been to the grocery store in two weeks. She stormed to the bathroom before Buick could see her crying.

"Sterling," Buick said, slamming the refrigerator shut. "Save something for us, will you?"

Glory gripped the bathroom sink. She splashed water on her face, shuddering as the cool dribbled along her burning cheeks. The water gurgled and swirled down the drain, a rusty circle that she could never make shine, no matter how hard she scrubbed. Then it was quiet. She inhaled into a cotton towel and her anger diffused within the familiar fabric softener, the muffled silence. She glared into the mirror, stepped closer. Glory wasn't sure when all those fine lines had appeared around her eyes, her mouth, and even her forehead, but there they were, like captured screams from her aging skin.

Since she was already inspecting, she turned sideways and considered her profile. Her thighs had stretched wider than she expected over the years, leaving dark pink claw marks along her hips as if her body was trying to escape itself. No wonder she couldn't get pregnant—she was hideous. She took off her shirt. And her pants. And then her bra, and when she had stripped all the way down, she jiggled. What was the point of having all this equipment if she wasn't going to use it? If they didn't act quickly, it would all go to waste. She sucked in, noticing how, even with her skin pulled taut, her body still dimpled in places other than her cheeks, as if she were a thin plastic bag stuffed with too many groceries. She did four reps of calf-raises, four sets of wall-sits. When she was done, she hooked her fingers onto the sides of her panties and tugged them to her ankles to see if she could find anything else that needed work. She paused.

In her underwear, she saw the wrong answer to all her questions. She reached for the tampons under the sink.

Buick tapped on the bathroom door. "Will you let me know if you need anything, sweetie?"

Later in bed that night, Glory let Buick play with her hair. Moonlight seeped through the skylight and when he noticed her crying, he cradled her. It was a thoughtful gesture that hinted at his parenting potential. It also proved he wasn't afraid of tears, which would come in handy if they accidentally had a daughter. She let herself get scooped, using her yielding body to tell him that yes, she forgave him. She'd been more prone to the chills lately anyway, and it felt good to blanket herself in his chest hair, to smell deep into him and be so small.

"I know this is a tough time for you right now," he said.

Glory nodded, still crying. She had found nine more gray hairs, jutting out like frozen electricity, and was glad the lights were off so he couldn't see them, too.

"We're working so hard for this, and it's just not happening," he said. "But it will, don't worry. We'll just work harder."

"Really?" She liked when he was decisive, when he became husbandly and made her feel safe and girlish. That's another reason she knew he'd be a good father. She pictured Hershel as a teenager sneaking out of the house, Buick reprimanding him with a stern voice and a firm hug. Forgiveness warmed her as she sunk deeper into his brawn, his breath, soothing, safe.

"I mean it. I'm really going to try. I want this."

"You do?" Her heart was a happy rattle in her chest.

"Yeah, honey. I'm tired of penny-pinching, and having holes in the house, and not being able to dine out anymore. It's time for us to get serious. For me to step up and be a man."

It was as if he had read and memorized the secret script inside her. "I'm so happy you say that, Buick. I didn't realize how much I wanted a child until recently."

"Well, that's a whole other topic," he said. "Let's just focus on this first."

Glory stopped crying. "But I thought that's what we were talking about."

"I'm talking about money. I had a chat with Sterling while you were in the bathroom and it's time I put my best asset back to work."

Glory froze, a stopwatch poised before the next second.

"The vitamins, the makeup. They aren't working out like we thought they would."

"Nothing is."

"Besides, you know how hungry I always am," he said.

"Practically starving."

"Well, I'm going back to being a competitive eater. But this time, I'm serious. No more county fair challenges. I'm going whole hog for you and me and our future." He placed her palm on the firm barrel of his abdomen. "I'm built for this."

Glory felt herself shatter into tiny pebbles. Pieces of her rolled away from his hands, his stomach, and every word tumbling out of his mouth until she was completely buried.

Buick had been on a competitive eating kick two years ago, after his bodybuilding endeavors ended when he refused to juice. Of course, she was proud of him for doing the right thing, but a secret part of her missed crawling over his body, the strong length of his muscles, not to mention the award money. But when he was in competitive eating mode, it meant his body went soft and his focus went to the left of her. It meant more waiting.

"Don't you think it's a step back?" she asked.

"I just need you to trust me."

"I do, Buick. But time's ticking."

He sighed. "I know. That's why I want to focus on this. For us."

"For how long?"

"For as long as it takes."

"But I want a baby now."

"C'mon, look around," he said, gesturing in the dark room. "You think this place is ready?"

In the kitchen, a few silent-treatment days later, Buick sat at the table with an egg timer and a pitcher of water. His strong forearms bulged even larger in the morning light, as if he'd increased his reps. Had he been working out more? She softened. Maybe it really would be different this time.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Training."

As Buick timed himself drinking the entire pitcher, she grabbed an open cosmetics box and began sorting bottles.

"And what are you doing?" he asked.

"Trying to fill this empty box."

Glory avoided his eyes. She felt stiff, as if they were just learning how to slow-dance together. That's probably how it would feel to raise a teenager, though, so she wrote it off as good practice. These things happened sometimes, Motherhood magazine warned about it, and even her girlfriends had stories. It was nothing to worry about.

"You'd make a good father, you know."

"How do you know?" he asked. "What if I'm not dad material?"

"Why wouldn't you be?"

"I don't know. Money. Age. Maybe I'm not cut out for it after all."

Glory stared deep into the hole by the door, wondering how cold it was inside, if it reeked, damp and moldy. The room spun. "I don't understand. I married you because you wanted to have kids, Buick. That's what we both wanted."

Buick raised the pitcher to his lips and chugged.

Glory downed her coffee and then poured another cup, the heat singeing the edges of her empty stomach. She gazed out the kitchen window, fixating on the vacant lot next door. The construction company had never returned to collect their supplies, the dry and faded wood beams left over from a project unfinished. It was a real eyesore. She watched a woodpecker disappear.

While she waited for the buzzer to sound, she opened the refrigerator.

The timer screeched like a buzz saw through the taut air.

"By the way, I think we're out of milk," he finally said, wiping his mouth.

Glory closed the door. "I see that."

After Glory changed into her work clothes—all black, just like the professionals at the Macy's counters—she packed the box in their sedan. "I'm going to set up a table at the beauty shop today. I'll be back later."

"Aren't you going to eat breakfast first?"

Glory's stomach rumbled. "I'm not hungry."

At the mall, she arranged her table outside the beauty salon so she could catch the customers as they left, when they were flattered by their new haircuts and more likely to buy products. She could also stop mall customers with the offer of free samples.

"Well, ma'am," she'd say, "I hardly notice your crow's feet. But if you want to prevent the aging process, I recommend this."

"Swimsuit season is just around the corner. Are your legs beach-ready?"

"This lip plumper works just like collagen, but without the needles."

For eight hours, Glory approached women—and if they were especially vain, their boyfriends and husbands—offering to show them how to stay young, desirable. First, she'd disarm them with a compliment, usually about their shoes or handbag, details only women noticed. That would force them to talk to her, even if it was just a mumbled "thank you." Next, she'd trap them with a free sample. "Would you like a free sample of our latest anti-cellulite crème? Makes a great gift for your best friend," she'd say, knowing full well that they'd accept the sample only to run home and smear it on themselves in the privacy of a locked bathroom. Once they came to the table, feeling guilty for taking a free sample, they would then feel obligated to browse, or at least pretend to browse. And that's when she could sell. Get them to the table, and the odds were higher they'd buy something.

By the time night inked the sky, she realized she hadn't eaten anything all day. She thought of getting dinner at the food court, a soft pretzel or a peanut butter cookie. But it was so close to dinnertime. She didn't want to miss any of the after-work stragglers. She decided she'd just wait until she got home and she clenched her glutes for sets of ten seconds. After an hour, she packed up her box and drove home. She'd sold \$213 worth of products, and a good empty feeling settled in her stomach. Glory decided not to ruin a nice thing and went straight to bed when she got home.

Over the next few days, iced interactions ("Could you please put the toilet seat down, just once in your life?") slowly defrosted until Glory and Buick warmed back to normal. Accidental touching didn't make her flinch and she was relieved she could stop busying herself with fake tasks ("Time to alphabetize the soups in the cabinet.") to avoid his confused eyes. They even had intercourse twice. But noticed Buick had started stocking their refrigerator with donut holes, shredded cabbage, frozen chicken wings—foods they never ate.

Sterling also started coming over more often than usual, which normally would've annoyed Glory since he ate all their food, used their shower, and watched their television, extra costs that could have been avoided if he chipped in sixty-five dollars each month. But Buick wouldn't hear of it. Luckily, Sterling had started bringing over pepperoni pizzas or meatball sandwiches for dinner, so Glory couldn't be too angry.

"You have to do it just like Kobayashi," Sterling said one night, showing Buick website videos of the unassuming Japanese eating champion. "That guy's a third your size and can eat your whole weight in hamburgers."

"I should stop chewing, then," Buick said. "Looks like I've got to start swallowing things whole."

"It's probably time for that now."

So Buick started small, with plain donut holes. He dunked them in water, then shoved them towards the dark horseshoe of his throat to swallow them. When he could control his gag reflex, he began training without water, and when he was comfortable swallowing unchewed pieces, he moved on to chicken wings. Because bones and hot sauce were involved, though, the wings were his biggest challenge. Between practices, he expanded his stomach to fighting size by loading up on shredded cabbage. "If I'm facing 12,500 calories in one sitting," he'd say, "then I better make sure this old gut can stretch to the size of a football."

Glory watched his lips opening to each piece, his tongue wet and welcoming. The stress of money and baby-making and being the perfect mother had stifled her appetite, like someone had shoved a dry napkin down her throat. No more casseroles, or cheese curds, or even State Fair cream puffs. No more nachos grande for lunch. And worse, no more Friday night fish fry. They couldn't afford these luxuries anymore, even though the cravings would spike so sharp in her stomach that she considered plowing over an old lady in a crosswalk just to ransack the nearest convenience store for cookies. So she stared eating shredded cabbage dinners, too.

"Don't you want a little something more than just cabbage, hon?" Buick asked her one night.

Glory glanced down at the way her shirt clung to her flat stomach. Then her eye caught her watch. 6:51p.m. She just knew she was ovulating, and realized her intuition was yet another reason she'd make a good mom. She could tell when it was going to rain and when the pie crust was done baking before the timer even buzzed. "Yes, baby. I do want something more." She walked to the couch and started unbuttoning.

"Can't I finish my dinner first?"

"No, now." She stripped off her pants. "We can do it standing this time if you want." She'd heard it helped the little swimmers upstream if she was already standing.

"I'm not really feeling it right now, Glor." He slurped more cabbage. "Can we do it later?"

"How much later do you want to wait, Buick? You haven't been selling any vitamins, you haven't entered any contests yet and I'm still not pregnant." She remembered she was topless and sucked in her stomach.

"That's not really selling it to me."

"You're the one person I shouldn't have to sell anything to."

He glared at her, his silence shouting.

Glory changed her tone. "Come on, baby. It'll just be a few minutes. We can add the living room wall to our list of places we've done it."

Buick sighed. After a low belch, he wiped the cabbage strands from his lips and then walked to his wife.

As they moved together, Glory thought about the products on their kitchen table. She began to calculate how much more moisturizer she'd need to sell each week (\$125), and how many Optimus Weight Gainer shakes Buick would have to sell each month (thirty-six!). Bouncing against their framed wedding portraits, her own face laughing back at her, she remembered the cellulite that must be visible on her thighs. If he could see the ugly stuff, he probably wouldn't want to touch her anymore. And then she wouldn't get pregnant, and then all her aunts and cousins and neighbors would secretly look down on her as less than a woman, or worse, as That Woman Who Can't Have a Baby, Poor Thing. Glory angled her hips in a way that would make the dimples less noticeable.

Buick squeezed her tighter. "Can't get a good grip on you."

Glory imagined his thick fingers disappearing into the pitted skin of her thighs until he was knuckle-deep in all her fat, she, too disgusting to touch. Buick's body had softened lately, but he still felt dense and strong, like a sack of rice. He could wear his extra weight as a medal of manhood. It was so easy for men. She flexed to tighten any extra skin that could be flopping around, and wondered how many calories she'd burned.

Buick was close to finishing, head back, mouth slack. Glory always liked to watch his climax because she wanted to remember exactly what his face looked like at the moment they made their baby. It would be her private snapshot. Buick grunted. Then, right before he finished, he pulled out of her.

"Buick, what are you doing?"

"I can't."

Glory slid on her pants to hide her nasty flab and then lifted her legs in the air. There had to be a little in her still. She rolled farther back towards her head this time to make sure Hershel had plenty of opportunity to make himself comfortable.

"I'm sorry." Buick knelt on the carpet, his huge body bent and surrendering. "It's not you, Glory. I love you. That will never change."

"Then why are you talking like it already has?"

"I just need to figure out what I'm doing here."

Although Glory felt anxiety scorching a deep pit inside her, she decided to soothe her husband. Maybe he was having a mid-life crisis. She needed to be there for him. He had just given her what she wanted, hopefully, and in order to keep a happy, stable family for Hershel, she'd have to compromise and give Buick things he wanted, too. It was just a misunderstanding. Everything was fine.

"It'll happen, Buick." She clenched and released her abs to distract herself from crying. Clenched, released.

Three months later, Buick toasted an entire loaf of Wonder Bread for breakfast.

"This is the psych part of the training," he said when she joined him at the table. He'd gained twenty-five pounds, mostly around his belly. "I've got to fill up fast, before I realize I'm full. That's the trick."

Glory knew that same trick too, but decided to let him have his moment. They had only had intercourse four times since The Incident.

"So," Buick said. "Are we ready to do this?" He rubbed his hands together. "I just have to change and we'll be all set." Buick strolled into their bedroom.

When he returned, he was wearing his work clothes – a white t-shirt tucked into black athletic tear-away pants. "The white makes me look tanner," he said when he'd first created the outfit, "which makes me look healthier. You've got to be what you're selling, babe." They drove to the gym.

Since Buick and Glory still had one day left on their membership, they arranged their display table inside, next to the ellipticals. Glory figured that blowing up a balloon was just like doing stomach crunches, so she blew up twenty and taped them around the table. She also knew they could lure more people to their table if Buick offered free food, so he rationed several lemon-flavored energy bars and poured samples of vanilla protein shakes into paper cups.

After two hours passed without a sale, a little boy and his Lycra-clad mother walked by the table toward the drinking fountain.

"Mommy, balloons!" he squealed.

"Whee!" She lifted him to the faucet. Water poured down the front of his shirt, cascading over the silver edges of the fountain and onto the floor.

"Hey there, little guy!" Buick waved. "He's adorable!"

Even though Glory felt a knifing twist inside her as she watched her husband with the child, she forced a smile. "Would you like a balloon?" Glory asked the boy. "I've got a special one just for you." She held out a red balloon.

The boy wiped the excess water away with his stained shirt. Glory promised herself she would never let her own child be so sloppy.

The boy's eyes widened. "Can I, Mommy?"

Glory softened. He had blond hair, the color of late summer peaches, and she knew that the little boy, with his shiny hazel eyes and tiny spread fingers, would be an echo of her firstborn son.

"Of course you can, baby."

He tackled the balloon. It bounced off Glory's forehead and onto the floor, popping with a burst of shriveled red. "Eat my dust!"

Glory recoiled while Buick laughed.

The mother whispered to her son. Then she rolled her eyes at Glory and Buick. "Kids!" She shook her head in exasperation. "I'm sure you know how it feels."

"No," Glory said. "We don't."

The woman blushed. "Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Trust me, I'm sorry to live it," Glory said. "But when we do have a child, I can assure you we won't let him act like that."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm just saying, if we wanted an animal, we'd get a dog."

The woman gasped and walked away, dragging her little boy by the wrist.

Buick stared at her. "What's gotten into you, Glory?"

Glory shrugged, but knew exactly what had gotten into her. She felt bone-sure, just as she had on her wedding day when she stood facing Buick.

"It's time to eat."

Buick shook his head, sighing. "Do you want me to go get lunch?"

"You stay where you are, I'll bring it home."

Glory hurried to the nearby supermarket, critiquing her reflection in every storefront window. She tried to catch herself in natural poses, like when she was striding down the sidewalk or waiting for the light to change, to see how other people saw her. Maybe she didn't deserve to be pregnant. Maybe she was still too fat. Although her hip bones had just started to jut out, she liked the way they looked with the low-rise jeans she'd bought from the teen section of the department store. The hip bones and those jeans shaved ten years off her age. But even though she weighed the same as a high school junior, or maybe even a sophomore on a good day, she was, in fact, almost past her peak baby-making years. Her eggs were rotting inside her at this very moment. She pictured baby Hershel coming out in a puff of dust.

When she entered the supermarket, she had to pass the pharmacy section to get to the deli. Ovulation thermometers, condoms (no thanks), and pregnancy tests all stared back at her like fat kids waiting to be chosen in gym class. Glory knew she had less than twenty dollars to spend on lunch, so she bought Buick a roast beef hoagie and then grabbed herself two pregnancy tests.

As Glory waited in line to pay, she stared at the red laser lines crossing in the cashier's scanner. She caught herself fixating, and had to remind herself to stop, to breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth. The gossip rags advertised photos of "Hot Hollywood Mamas," their post-baby bodies fit, fashionable. She just knew it was fate telling her that since she hadn't had her monthly in seven weeks, this could really be it. She'd been cleaning house for months and she was almost perfect. She deserved a reward. She wanted to rip into the pregnancy tests with the fury of a child at a birthday party.

The supermarket had a single-stall bathroom with plenty of room to pace as she waited for the results. She could also burn some anxiety with tricep dips on the sink ledge. Her hands shook as she sat on the toilet. She had only been intimate with Buick nine times over the last forty-six days. While she activated the tests, someone knocked on the bathroom door.

"I'm going as fast as I can," Glory called.

More than anything, Glory wanted to be a good mom, the kind with the hockey photo pinned to her purse, who would let the scouts camp overnight outside in a tent, and maybe, when Hershel was older, drink—but only inside the house, and only one hard cider. She imagined all the photos they'd frame from summers up north and Hershel's first ski lesson on the bunny hills. They'd be happy and giggling and all the hours of labor that she'd been in, without an epidural because she wanted to see if she could do it, would be worthwhile.

Glory wadded her purse under her T-shirt, admiring her womanly reflection in the mirror. On instinct, her left hand rested atop her lumpy belly while her other hand curved underneath. It was yet another sign she'd be a good mom—it just came naturally to her. And she knew what kind of pregnant she wanted to be—the cute kind, where her body stayed small and the baby was just a round ball that looked darling under maternity shirts. Strangers would want to rub her belly and she'd blush and glow from all the attention.

She stared at her watch. Was it broken?

The lady outside knocked again. "Time's running out, ma'am. Can you give someone else a turn already?"

Glory turned away from the mirror and, still holding the test sticks in her left hand, she did one, two, three tricep dips until she felt the excitement burn and she knew the calories were just falling away, far from her clean house that was all ready for a new guest.

"How much time do you need?" the lady complained. She slapped at the door.

"Almost done," Glory called out. She added fifteen seconds to the suggested wait time, took a deep breath and then looked.

During her walk home, Glory felt like she was starring in her own romantic comedy, with flute music and sunlight and chirpy birds. She was tempted to skip all the way home, but she wanted to take it easy, to do everything right. As she walked, she replayed it over and over. All her hard work had paid off. Glory was bursting.

At their apartment complex Sterling had shoved his monster truck into a parking spot, just like he had probably shoved himself onto their couch. Glory gritted her teeth. She envisioned ways to kick him out once she got home so that she could talk to her husband in private. Didn't he have to go hunting this weekend? Wasn't there a Brewers game he could watch at the bar? When she arrived at the apartment, however, their tiny living room was thick with construction workers.

No one noticed as she entered. At her height, she could only glance through elbows or the rowdy spaces between men. The air smelled like lumber and dirt and nickels.

Then she saw Buick. On the kitchen table, he had replaced their cosmetics and vitamins with two platters of orange-stained chicken wings. He'd shoved all the products into a toppling heap, and Glory thought about how hard it would be to sell anything in damaged boxes. Everyone liked to think their boxes were nice and new.

"Honey," Buick called. "I'm over here." He pulled her to the least crowded corner of their kitchen, his brown eyes melting with worry.

"Good luck, Buick!" someone yelled. "We've got our eye on you!"

Buick sighed. "I wasn't expecting this."

She gripped his hand as someone jostled her from behind. "Neither was I."

"I'm so nervous. What if I'm not ready? What do I do?"

Glory looked at her husband, at the anxiety etched onto his face, lining his forehead. She had so much to say. "Seems you don't really have a choice. But this is real, and it's happening right now. You just have to go for it."

"Everyone's watching. They'll know if I screw up."

Glory wanted to tell him that she knew, finally, that she had the answer tucked away in her body, and it was growing as they spoke. "Maybe this is your moment," she said. "You just have to jump."

Buick rubbed his palm over his head. "I don't want you to see me like this."

Sterling cut in. "It's go time."

"Did you bring all this on?" Glory asked him.

"Sure did. It's a little surprise Buick needed."

Buick kissed her on the cheek. "Here goes nothing." He walked to the card table.

Sterling, an inch taller than normal in his construction boots, assumed his usual place next to the refrigerator. A carton of milk sat open on the counter, near an empty glass. He cupped his hands like a megaphone. "Food warriors to the table, please."

Buick and the other man, who was not as tall but who had a belly girth that suggested twins, hi-fived and sat down. Both wore bibs tied around their necks.

"Contestant number one is a force of his own. Part man, part machine, all stomach. He skids into this competition with the pedal to the metal. Let's welcome Buick DeGaulle to the table!"

The men hollered. Someone threw a balled napkin at Buick.

"Contestant number two, stronger than the jaws of life, is Tony 'The Mouth' Jenkins!"

Everyone booed. Tony pouted and pretended to cry.

"Today we eat with Picnic Style Rules. Winner gets three hundred bucks." Sterling inhaled. "Competitors, start your enzymes! On your mark! Get set! Eat!"

Through the crowd, Glory saw Buick grab the tiny wings, drag the bone along his front teeth, and use his tongue to shove the meat down the back of his throat. She knew he had been practicing that for weeks, his "chew-free" technique from the Internet videos. The Mouth ate the same way. Both men had orange fists and smeared cheeks.

"Watch out, folks! We've got Buick DeGaulle double-parked in first place at fifteen wings with The Mouth chomping close behind at thirteen!"

Glory felt woozy. She hadn't eaten anything solid in days. The room spun as she looked at all the men crammed into the apartment. Her house. Her clean, neat house.

Sterling yanked an invisible cord. "Doot doot! Looks like Buick DeGaulle is in the fast lane to first place! Can he do it, folks?"

"Doubtful!" someone yelled. "Sissy!"

"It's wing-to-wing between Buick and Tony! Buick is at forty-two, but The Mouth is snapping away at forty!"

Glory caught a glimpse of Buick concentrating, trying to finish. His face, red and sweaty, scrunched as if he had been shoving something too heavy to move.

"Uh oh, looks like someone has the meat sweats," Sterling sang. "Push through it man, you're almost there!"

Buick winced as he opened his mouth wider than he ever had before. A long belch seeped out. Glory couldn't close her eyes in time and she saw her husband in a memory she knew she wouldn't want to have.

"Tony or Buick? Who's it gonna be for Circle Street Wing Champion? Three, two, one!"

Glory turned back to the kitchen. The milk carton, half-opened, was still on the countertop. She snapped the cardboard mouth shut and as it closed, a whiff of sour sweetness drifted into the air. She opened it again, then stuck her nose inside and inhaled, over and over, until she couldn't tell if it was fresh anymore, until the smell became a part of her kitchen, her life, her world. She waited, hoping to hear her husband's name echo in the confines of the tiny apartment.

*A few months ago, literary bruiser KERRY DONOGHUE finally got some street cred. Her story, "The Pearl," won first place in the Southern Gothic Shorts competition, and was published in the 2009 anthology, Southern Gothic Shorts: New Short Stories in the Southern Gothic Tradition. She earned her MFA from the University of San Francisco in 2008, and wreaks short fiction havoc on the city with her writing group, Team Forever Stamps. She currently lives in San Francisco, is very much against the extinction of the serial comma, and is not ashamed to arm-wrestle you until you agree that Bob's Donuts are, in fact, the best in the city.*