

Better than Onions

by

James Frazier

“He said I could bring a frog if I liked animals, otherwise he had rats. What the hell are you getting me into Alyssa?”

“Don’t bring a frog, it’s no big deal.”

“I’m not like political, but that Roe v. Wade decision is pretty great. I won’t need to get the thing done by like a veterinarian if I test positive.”

“Pat, shut up. What if someone picks up the phone?”

“My parents are at dinner. I’m listening to the album with ‘Kashmir’ on it. Then, I’ll put on ‘Sweet Leaf’ by Sabbath.” That was the code for marijuana. Pat and Alyssa said they were “listening to ‘Sweet Leaf’” because marijuana was an illegal drug and their parents would totally freak out. The girls knew that anyone in their respective houses could pick up the landline phone and overhear part of their conversation. “So you should come over.”

“I can’t. So, day trip to Oceanside tomorrow?”

“Yea, I guess.”

“They say over the counter tests will be a thing in the next two to three years.”

Pat wanted to smash the phone back onto its stand, hard. Alyssa would hear the loud crack as Pat's arm banged the appliance back onto the table. Instead, Pat twiddled the phone's chord between her fingers and thought for a moment. "That's so great. Nine months is like my time frame. So this is a college kid?"

"Yea he goes to UC San Diego."

"That school's like 15 years old. Is he competent at this?"

"Yea, Regina used him. And Bonnie."

"Ok, meet me tomorrow for coffee and help me plan this day trip." Pat hung up the phone. And, she really did listen to "Sweet Leaf." She also enjoyed a nice Hawaiian strain from her connect in L.A. Alyssa said hanging out at the Whiskey A Go Go was out of fashion. But, *Master of Reality* and *Paranoid* held up even four years later. And Pat loved those kinds of bands: Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Aerosmith, Alice Cooper and even The Doors.

Pat had been told that she looked like Victoria Cunningham, playmate of the month for May, 1974. Pat liked that observation. She was tall with olive skin and dark hair. And Pat liked the Whiskey A Go Go. She could get into shows there any time she wanted, free. Alyssa was getting into that new disco thing which was less psychedelic, but, there was more cocaine. That was Alyssa's thing.

Pat trusted that Alyssa would set her up with someone good to do the pregnancy test. Pat didn't want her family to find out about the situation so going to her doctor was out of the question.

"In two or three years, they'll have tests over the counter that you can buy," Pat said out loud in a mocking sing song voice. "Goddamn kid could be a toddler by then. Thank god the court did that Roe thing." Pat knew a girl named Dolores who had a procedure done under the table before the court's decision. The surgery

left Dolores infertile. “I can at least go to a real doctor now. If this weird shit comes back positive.”

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Pat met her friend for coffee the next morning and the girls drove to Oceanside. The house was easy to recognize as it had two railroad ties out front that were filled with sand. Apparently, people used brushes and different gardening tools to draw shapes in the sand. “It’s called a zen garden. I drew a peace sign after I got my test,” Alyssa remarked. Aside from that one peculiar feature, the house looked otherwise unassuming and quiet.

The girls approached the front door. An average looking man answered the door. Pat thought he looked square. The man wore thick frame glasses and a short sleeve plaid shirt. He said his name was Oliver. Oliver looked like a typical UC San Diego student. “Welcome,” he said as he extended his arm and gestured for Alyssa and Pat to enter the house.

“I'm coming inside. But, just so we're clear. You asked me to bring a frog to your house.”

“Pat, calm down,” Alyssa suggested.

Oliver gave Pat a compassionate look and tilted his head. “I think I said, ‘I use rats for the test, but, if you’re way into animal rights, you could bring a frog. That’s arguably a more humane way to do this. But, I have a stock of rats and frogs are harder for me to maintain so I pass that cost onto my customers.’”

“Ok, so you're like a full on mad scientist. But, a frog or a rat will tell me if I'm pregnant?”

“Absolutely,” Oliver reassured Pat.

“Alright then I got your money professor. But, there has to be a better way to

do this.”

Oliver smiled and his mood appeared to lighten, his jaw relaxed and he put his thumbs in his pants pockets. “I know Alyssa. I don't know you, but you look like Cleopatra or another Egyptian royal.”

“Flattery gets you everywhere, I like guys who are smooth.” Pat loved compliments. “I like that you said I look like Cleopatra or someone like that.”

“Know how they tested for pregnancy in ancient Egypt?”

“How?”

“In ancient Egypt women would put two bags in their garden. One of flour and the other of spelt—“

“—what?” Pat interrupted Oliver’s story with a pointed stare.

“Spelt’s another type of flour. Women would water each bag with urine for several days and if seeds sprouted in both bags than she was pregnant. If only one of the bags sprouted than that was an indicator of the child’s sex.”

“Huh. What’s the opposite of a fun fact?” Pat mused out loud.

“Tell her about the onions,” Alyssa laughed.

“That test didn't work,” Oliver advised. “But, in ancient Greece women would shove onions into their...area—“

“—hoochie coochie,” Alyssa interrupted laughing.

“...Yea. In there. And, the theory was that the woman wasn’t pregnant if her breath smelled like onions in the morning. That test didn’t work but the piss garden test was actually effective about 70% of the time. My method’s even more reliable

than that.”

“Alright. Anything's better than onions,” Pat reflected. “Give me a cup and I'll give you a sample. But, after that, I want to see and understand how this is all going to work.”

“Sounds good.” Oliver produced a sealable vial and gestured towards the house's restroom. “It's in there, just bring me the vile when you're done.”

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Pat closed the bathroom door and handed Oliver the vile. He examined it and made a sly expression. “Now, I'll perform the ancient Roman art of uromancy.” Alyssa laughed at Oliver's routine.

“Professor, I don't need a show. Stick to whatever this job is. And, don't make things up.”

Oliver noted Alyssa's laughter and continued his comedy routine. “I can divine your future from the bubbles in your pee. See how they're large and far apart, that means you'll be lucky with love and finances in the years to come.”

“I'm unlucky in that I'm hearing a hacky Johnny Carson bit right now. Comedy's not going to work out for you so what are you going to do when they start selling over the counter pregnancy tests?”

Oliver smiled. “I had a buddy I referred girls to who did abortions until the court did that ruling. I do surprising well just from this. Girls come from all over southern California to get this test done. I get women down from LA every week so I'll miss the money. I sell acid too but that's not enough on its own.”

Pat nodded. “First of all that’s good to know and I might hit you up for that another day. But, just show me your setup and let’s get this done.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yea I like to know how the sausage is made.”

“Alright.” Oliver walked Pat and Alyssa into a sterile work room at the back of the house. The room had a large walk in closet, a hand washing station and a table with several medical supplies. “I keep several Sprague-Dawley rats in that closet in different cages. They’re easy to order and maintain. I’ll inject your sample into one of the rats. Then, in about a week, I’ll terminate the rat and examine its ovaries. If the baby rat has mature, egg producing ovaries, than you’re pregnant. If not, than you’re not.”

Pat took a deep breath. “So, I’m paying you to kill a rat?”

“Well, with frogs, you can leave the frog alive and the test is just whether they lay eggs or not. But, rats are easier for me to maintain and I can just order supplies from Sprague-Dawley. They sell the albino lab rats, the white with the red eyes and it’s not that big a deal to order those.”

Pat contemplated her circumstances. She was troubled by the fact that a sentient being would lose its life. On the one hand, Pat wasn’t ready to have kids and she didn’t want to start a family. But, she felt deeply troubled about sacrificing an animal, even a lab rat, on the alter of science to learn whether she was or wasn’t carrying a child. “Alyssa, I woulda brought a frog if you told me.”

Alyssa looked surprised. “Really?”

“Yea, I’m going to make a peace sign in the zen garden after this. Oliver, I guess inject my urine into the rat and then kill it so that I can learn if I’m an expectant mother.”

“Sounds good, and it’s been at least 15 days since your missed period?”

“Yep. How do I get with you about the results? I don't wanna come back here.”

“Well, I can call you or the dad. Do you know who the dad would be?”

Pat laughed. “He wouldn’t be. Did Alyssa give you her house phone?”

Alyssa nodded. “It’s a discreet call. Phone rings and he asks for you and then you get a yes or a no. I’ve never gotten any inappropriate calls after that and I gave my number like eight months ago.”

Pat gave Oliver her phone number and a pile of cash. “Thank you for doing this. I feel sick and I don't want to come back here.”

“I'm sorry and I understand.” Oliver had a conciliatory look on his face.

Pat turned on her heel and walked out of the house. She passed the zen garden and got into the driver’s seat of her car. Alyssa was slower leaving the house and Pat waited for about five minutes as Alyssa made her way to the vehicle. The girls drove away from the house in silence.

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About a week later, the phone rang at Pat’s house. Pat’s father answered and the caller asked to speak with Pat. “Honey, it’s a boy called Oliver.”

Pat jumped and ran to the phone. “Hi.”

“No.”

“It’s negative?”

“You're all good.”

“How many rats do you kill in a week for the UC San Diego medical experiments?”

“What? Oh, are you an animal rights person now?”

Pat twisted the phone cord between her fingers. “Not especially, but, how many?”

“Maybe 10-20.”

“I hope you have to find a new job soon and that they figure out an over the counter way to do this. What will you do when that happens?”

“...I don't know. I'll have to find a square job I suppose.”

Pat slammed the phone onto the receiver. Oliver's ear ached with the loud thud as the call disconnected.