

My assistant starts going off at 3.26AM. Fed up of being sleep deprived for the last six nights, I made active preparations in order to avoid this precise situation, but it turns out that makeshift earplugs made of paper tissues lose against eighty decibels right next to your head. Note to self: poor project planning.

“Play the message,” I croak. I’m still half hoping it’s just an unfunny joke, but as soon as I recognise the voice and the deep hum in the background, it’s clear my wishes were left unheard.

“There’s another rotten one.”

The first time it happened, the voicemail was long, confused, and panicked. With each following one, it got shorter, more tired, and more apathetic. Now it’s reduced to a single sentence. There isn’t more that needs to be said.

I wish there was.

Pavlov would be pleased to see how well conditioned I am to that sound. Within minutes I’m ready to go. Luckily, there are no cohabitants that would get wakened by the slam of the front door. Perhaps it’s not exactly luck, more of a side effect of my job, and not always a pleasant one. This is no time for deep thoughts though.

On the road I clutch onto the steering wheel with both hands. It’s an old car, one with a gearstick and all. Nearly all my acquaintances own a self-driving Tesla or a cheap knock-off of it, but I like the whiteness of my knuckles as I am holding on, the feeling of being in control. After all, it is one of the few things I can still exert my will over. I am now approaching the Planting Clinic. It’s large, flashy, and everything about it screams cutting edge technology. Most of all it reminds me of an amusement park. Indeed, it works like one, except instead of children it’s hundreds of adults who enter full of expectations and exit dazzled.

I pass the spectacle and turn into a narrow driveway leading to concrete cuboids conveniently hidden from the sight of affluent clients. These buildings don’t have names, they are officially labelled by a mix of numbers and letters – but we sometimes collectively call them “The Plantation”, in a mocking reference to the Clinic’s name. After all, it’s not far from truth.

Block 1A2. I perform a mouth swab and wait about 30 seconds while my DNA gets amplified, sequenced, and microsatellite repeats compared against the library. We’ve had an entire lecture on how amazingly fast and safe this technology is, but is still annoyingly slow for practical use, let alone for emergencies which have been increasing lately. First and foremost, it’s disgusting.

When I’m finally allowed to enter, I am immediately blinded by ever-present lights. They are on 24/7. Again, that’s apparently for safety, but I’m sure they could use some natural darkness. My pupils barely begin to accommodate to the brightness when I notice a figure approaching me. It must be Jackson, it’s always him. It’s admirable that he hasn’t broken down under the pressure of recent events, but it also worries me, because such inner strength must come at a cost. Indeed, every time we meet he looks slightly unhealthier, waxy skin and sinking cheeks. However, he still maintains his mental capacity and, so far, sanity, which is why they keep him.

We nod to each other and I follow him through the aisles. I’m always prepared to see something horrible, but when we reach the destination, nothing distinguishes the Biobag from the others, except for a slowly flashing red diode above it. And the fact that the tiny, undeveloped human being in it is dead.

It is always hard to find anything to say. We stand silent for what feels like countless minutes, watching the fragile thing with its closed eyes and a heart that doesn't beat. It could just be asleep. Could. The possibility leaves a bitter taste on the tongue. I understand the company's rationale behind their nomenclature. Planting, Biobag, rotten. An attempt to depersonalise the process, as if we're talking seeds or cattle. But when you're here, it all fails.

Jackson eventually interrupts the quietude. "No signs of external damage. Qualitative markers all unchanged. Same situation as with the previous cases." He sounds robotic. "Do you want to check for yourself, or –"

I don't. I suddenly can't breathe and I need to get out of here as soon as possible, so I shake my head vigorously. "Thanks, Jackson – maybe later," I manage to squeak out with a constricted throat. He gets the hint and disappears among the bags. I mobilise my frozen legs and promptly follow his example, except I am headed for the control centre. I actually envy Jackson at this moment – for him, the job is over. Mine is only beginning.

The control room looks like one of those flight dispatch centres. It has a semicircle of windows overlooking the hall. The other half contains numerous screens plastered all over it like some kind of a wallpaper. They are monitoring absolutely everything – the process underwent substantial refinement since the time they first put a lamb in the bag. Here, the foetuses become pure numbers. It's a welcome phenomenon because it allows me to forget what I saw minutes ago and slide into a mechanical mode.

I start by checking the cruder data from the past twenty-four-hour period, the amniotic fluid flow, oxygenator function, temperature, then move onto the finer aspects of the system. Blood glucose, nutrition supply, erythropoietin, lactate – everything is within physiological range with three decimal places precision. They don't even need supplementary infusions of haemoglobin anymore now that a synthetic maternal liver has been added. Finally, I look at blood flow, although I already know there won't be anything wrong with it. The arteriovenous circuit is the only system they couldn't improve upon. Anything they tried to change, the tiny heart would protest vehemently. In the end, they kept the original pumpless circuit and based the minimum age for the foetal transfer on the time the myocardium starts beating. Eight weeks, much to the dismay of all the eager to-be mothers who can't wait to take the burden off themselves so they can continue smoking, drinking, and having all sorts of fun before they pick up the baby at the end of the "pregnancy" as if it's an Amazon delivery.

I am nearly done with the inspection which is slowly becoming another routine, prepared to be left with no explanations again, when I notice something peculiar. The heart rate and blood pressure were ever so slightly elevated in the past ten hours. This can't be due to faulty machinery; the heart must have reacted to a change in internal conditions. But I've just checked everything, and the system was in perfect homeostasis. Unless...

A faint dark suspicion sprouts in my mind and grows clearer with each moment. All those times I thought I scrutinized every single detail, I was missing a big chunk. We don't check for inflammation in the control centre. It's the responsibility of the microbiology department, and we barely communicate because sepsis has been virtually eliminated these days. The sterilisation of Biobags was one of the first steps in their development. Contamination is excluded unless the bag has been opened.

The bags should almost never be opened.

It only takes me a few minutes to go over the security footage and I am holding the evidence. I feel my heartbeat up in my throat. We kept reviewing the most minuscule details, wondering where we went wrong, when the cause was much simpler. But the thought was so horrid the no one dared to consider it.

I run frantically to the microbiology centre. I know she's still there.

I catch her in the doorway. She looks bewildered. "Oh, hello. I was just..." I don't have the patience. I push her back into the laboratory and drag her towards her computer. She is pale and doesn't try to fight back as I play her the recording, the recording of herself tiptoeing among the bags, briefly stopping at one, and leaving. I play the one from last night, and the scene repeats. Skip back four days. The scene repeats. A week ago. Repeat...

"Stop – stop!" she wails. She is shaking, tears pouring uncontrollably. But I won't stop. The videos keep playing, on and on, one like the other, like a stuck recording. They keep playing until they have her in a sobbing pile on the ground.

I don't need to ask questions. Amidst hiccups, words pour out of her almost against her will. "I – I just can't watch them... They shouldn't... exist... like this, it's not right... Don't the mothers know what they're losing?" She hugs her stomach tightly. Her shirt is slightly tucked up and I notice a faint scar on her abdomen.

"I would give anything to have my baby in there again."