

Going Out of Business

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April 2018:

You wouldn't even need to see the clearance signs in the windows to know that Toys "R" Us is in its death throws. The doors slide open and despite the kids' screams at the check-out counters, the store balloons with silence. Shelves are still packed with wiffle-balls, bubbles, kids' sun-glasses, pool inflatables. Clothing racks are heavy with springy onesies, sun-dresses, and cargo shorts. Imagine the sounds of life that will occupy them. Imagine those things at home. Imagine the sounds of laughter, breath pulling in and out of green lungs, and the sounds of small sneakers shwishing through earthy, sun-baked grass.

The silence that shares the same space is uncomfortable.

Just last week, Toys R' Us reported that they'd be closing or selling their 7 hundred something stores across the U.S. and Europe. Now, *10% OFF* flyers hang from shelves that are still loaded with merchandise.

<u>Original Price</u>	<u>Now</u>
5.00	4.50
12.00	10.80
24.00	21.60
36.00	32.40
52.00	46.80

A tall woman with curly hair digs through her wallet as she stands near the child-sized instruments. "Do you have any gifts cards," she asks the two red-headed girls at her side.

“The store’s closing,” one girl says smartly, “You don’t have to worry about the price.”

Other parents with kids dawdle down the aisles. One man is checking out bicycles with his son; the other son is strumming on the guitar made popular in Disney’s *Coco*. A few aisles down, a young woman is pushing a cart; one boy is strapped in the baby seat while another boy presses the buttons on an action figure. Her stomach bows out below her breasts. Maybe she’s pregnant with another boy.

In Toys “R” Us’ bankruptcy report, they cited their profits could be blamed on the fact that millennials weren’t having enough children.

July 2017:

My nephew’s ninth birthday party was at the end of the month, right in the middle of our last week in Richmond, IN. Green eyes, golden hair, golden skin, and strawberry freckles speckled across his nose and cheeks, Vincent resembles a Renaissance cherub in basketball shorts and sneakers.

Every year for the past few years, his birthday party has been held in the Glenn Miller Park. In fact, Glenn Miller is the exclusive place to celebrate. Every year, hundreds lay down blankets and lawn chairs on Roosevelt Hill, thus named after Teddy’s visit to campaign for then-president McKinley. Richmond’s Fourth of July concert blares until the sun goes down and ends with the yearly firework display. My friend’s marriage ceremony and pot luck reception was held in a shelter near that hill. I once celebrated my birthday standing in the steam that piddles by Roosevelt Hill and empties in a small lake, the length of which is traditional to walk after my family has finished eating our fill of birthday pizza.

My sister and Vincent's father used to reserve park shelters—preferably the ones closest to the playground, but that year, we ended in a shelter a t-shirt cannon's shot from it. Vincent's birthday snuck up on us all, and his mother was pregnant again.

When Chris and I pulled into a spot, Alisha was shuffling around in a maxi dress to set out the Little Ceasar's pizza, sodas, and birthday cupcakes. Usually when Vincent sees us step out of the car, he runs at a dead sprint to hug us around the hips. That year, he was occupied with the toys he'd already received from his mother.

The air under the shelter was cool and offered a soft, welcome breeze. I said hello to Alisha. Her heavy eyeliner was smeared at the corners of her eyes, and her hair had been quickly swept back with a hairband so that I could see the pinched white skin in one eyebrow—the scar left by an eyebrow ring.

"Hey!" she said when we hugged. I'm always surprised by how hard she squeezes me. They're the kind of hugs that leave a pain at the base of my skull that lingers for minutes. Maybe she was trying to make up for all the hugs we didn't get as children together. Maybe being a parent made her realize how important it is. Either way, I became self-conscious of our touching skin and quickly pulled away.

"No hug? What? You don't love me anymore?" I rounded on Vincent where he was playing with his toy.

"No, I love you Aunt Kaylyn," he said with a thick-tongued mouth as he dug his head into my stomach and threw an arm around my legs. The back of his basketball jersey was moist with sweat.

“Chris!” Vincent yelled then, nearly butting Chris in the groin with his head as he went in for a big, tight hug. Chris pat Vincent’s back and smiled at me: *I feel sorry for this kid.*

Maybe once I felt bad about how much more Vincent appeared to love Chris than me, but it has passed. I suspect it has less to do with my aunting ability, and more to do with his identification of Chris as not only another male, but most importantly, a loving one.

“Whatcha got there, Vincent?”

“Beyblade! My mom got it for me for my birthday! You want to play with me?” He starts pulling on Chris’ hand.

“Maybe in a little bit, bud.”

“Come play with me!” Vincent started to whine and pulled harder.

“Vincent! Stop it!” Alisha yelled. Vincent went wide-eyed and started to mope. He was nine years old, but his twisted mouth reminded me of an infant.

Chris and I exchanged looks. *She didn’t have to do that.*

“Hey, we’ll play with you in a minute, okay?” Vincent’s nod was exaggerated, and he moved away to play on his own.

Soon my father arrived, then my mother with the rest of my adult siblings, and finally my Grandma. Chris and I stuck with Grandma. Though it was a beautiful day, and my eyes soaked up the sunniness like a rag, I avoided the corner where Alisha was standing. Both of her children’s daddies were there: Vincent’s father, Chuckie, was a hulking recovering-Juggalo and had once admitted to Alisha that he’d had a sexy dream about me; the new baby’s father, David, was some corn-fed country boy in blocky steeltoed boots and faded blue jeans. He’d lurked around her circle of friends and had been dumped by one just

the day before he'd charmed my sister into a hook-up. Under normal circumstances, Chuckie and David would never talk to one another. I make a point never to talk to either.

April 2017:

The shelter where we sat was the same shelter where, just a couple months prior, Alisha and David held the baby's gender reveal party.

The whole thing was overdone. Alisha wore a pink t-shirt and pink and blue eyeliner. David wore only a beat-up blue crew neck as though it'd spoil his sense of masculinity to wear anything else. Pink and blue cupcakes. Pink and blue plates, cups, and napkins.

The color combination used to be one of my favorites. My sixth birthday, I was gifted a swirly colored set of pencils. The pink and blue one was my favorite, and when I lost it, I grieved. It was the best color combination, and I longed to buy play makeups, erasers, and toys it appeared on. I don't know when I stopped noticing it, but I did. Sometime in my early twenties, perhaps, when I became 'woke' to an amalgamation of gender inequality, capitalism, and materialism. What once was a symbol of youthful femininity became a vulgar representation of gender bifurcation.

All that pink and blue shit under the shelter made me nauseous. If it wasn't assault enough on the eyes, party-goers were also asked to string Mardi Gras beads around their necks that correlated with their best guess of the baby's sex. Most people stuffed in the shelter fluttered with excitement about the new baby, and when Alisha thought tension had been suspended long enough, she and David played a game in which they shuffled around with toy guns and awkwardly shot pink and blue powder onto Vincent's white t-shirt.

When Alisha planned the party, I'm sure she imagined something out of a stock image. Something fun and equally touching, but Alisha, David, and Vincent played to a confused, silent crowd. I wasn't sure when the sex was revealed exactly. They just dropped the guns eventually and walked back to the shelter.

"So, what's the baby?" someone had to ask.

"A girl. It's a girl," she said, as though the display had been perfectly obvious.

My mother had channeled her inner medium, and screamed, "I knew it!" My grandma smiled so that the chip in her front tooth showed; I knew she was thinking of all the frilly dresses, socks, and hair clips she would buy. Even my other siblings were enthusiastic for their first niece. Their words dissolved amid their laughter like sugar in warm water. And I was disappointed.

Soon, the party supplies were packed into trunks and my family stood in a circle before we went our separate ways. Before we left, I announced my own exciting news.

"So, I scheduled an appointment to get my tubes tied."

The reception of my news wasn't as warm as Alisha's.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" my mother asked. "You don't want little Kaylyns running around?" She laughed, but in a way I've come to understand as condescension.

A fiery, bristly challenge starts in my gut and ends in my finger tips every time I've ever been asked the question.

"Yes. I'm very sure."

The silence hummed in the circle between us, and Grandma finally chimed in, "If that's what you wanna do hun, there's nothing we can do to stop ya." She'd already known, of course. She and Chris were the only people I wanted with me for the procedure.

Dad asked logistical questions: is it inpatient or outpatient? is it covered by insurance? how soon can I get back to work? Alisha was standing across from me with her fists on her waist. Ever since she found out she was pregnant with her baby girl, she knew how much I wanted a tubal ligation. She spoke eventually.

“Isn’t it weird to think we would have been due about the same time?”

February 2017:

I had my IUD for six months. It’s common for women to experience cramping and abnormal bleeding for the first 2-3. To bleed longer than that might mean a perforated uterus, thus rendering a woman infertile in some cases. When I started spotting two weeks before my cycle was due, I took it as more adjustment period. It was also typical for me to spot after drinking alcohol; I worked a minimum wage job and was waiting for a response from the only grad school I applied to—of course I was drinking.

One night after work, there was more pain than usual after one of those grueling shifts. It started as a dull ache, then stung, then bit hard enough to stop my breathing. Every cell in me clenched down onto my middle because moving killed. The pain would recede only to come back again.

I remember naproxen didn’t help. I remember agreeing to the emergency room. I remember the nurse in reception asking, on a scale of 1-10, how badly did it hurt.

“10,” I answered as my body threatened to tear itself in half right there in that chair.

“We’ll have to take a urine sample,” the doctor said, “just in case.” I wanted to laugh at the futility of her request. IUDs, next to abstinence, are the most effective form of birth control. 99.6%. In my hospital smock, I prayed to something I don’t believe in:

Dear god, please let this thing have perforated my uterus.

Then the doctor came back into my room.

“Well...you’re pregnant.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“No, I’m not.”

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IUD

Failed “Must Remove” Ultrasound
Blood Sample Body on bed on wheels with nurse Blonde Peppy
Blue scrubs Me, naked Air on flesh never near outside
“How many kids do you have?” “Two cats” “How exciting! My daughter got
pregnant with an IUD too. She had twins.” But. I don’t want. Children. Must. Abort.
Money, I don’t have. I. Would. Rather. Die.

Pregnant **PREGNANT**

Pregnant

PREGNANT



PREGNANT

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PREGNANT

My blood would be taken again in 48 hours. HCG levels would double if viable pregnancy. Went home. Cried. Bed. Savings, we did have some for Wilmington if accepted.

Work, then at-home pregnancy test. And another test. And another. All, in a row, on bathroom shelf. Was pregnant, but was pregnant-er? Drink: beer. rum. coffee liqueur. tequila. When go to hospital, nurse take blood again. "Will I get the results back now?" "You'll have to call the office when they open Monday morning." But, so far away. Home. Go to bathroom alone. Stopped spotting. Bad sign. Punch. Self. Stomach. Hard. Again. And again. When Chris ask what sound, say Toilet Seat. Black. hole. This thing. LEACH! KILL IT! MYy Body! Nothing nothingnothingnothingHATEgoddamnthisfuckingmonsterKILLME! MMMMmmmmMMMMMMmmmmmmmmMmmmmMMmmmmMMmmmmmmMMmmmmM

Monday. At other work. Office job. Want Chris with me, but cannot wait. Step outside. Call, "OBGYN's office." "I'm calling about the results of my blood test: K-A-Y-L-Y-N F-L-O-R-A." "Thanks!"

Pause. No one else knows yet. Will someone hear me?

"Yes, Kaylyn? So, it looks like when you visited the emergency room, your HCG level was 54. The levels for a viable pregnancy should be doubling every 24 hours. When you had your blood taken on Saturday, it was only 55. Usually this is indicative of a miscarriage or an ectopic pregnancy."

Thank you so much.

1998

Space is so large. So scary. My eye-year-old eyes look at the stars from my bedroom window like I was challenging each visible star, individually. But I never won. Eventually I felt something looking back. I rolled over in my sheets, covered my face and dreamt of

demons, humiliation, and death. When I was outside in the dark, I couldn't look at the stars without feeling like I was about to be sucked up. Sometimes still, I cannot look up at the stars for long without feeling like I need to lay down on the ground to keep from falling off of the earth.

Armageddon and *Deep Impact* came out the same year. *Armageddon* is funny, and though meteorites did destroy cities all over the world, the final event of the movie takes place beyond our atmosphere. When Bruce Willis' character blows up the Texas-sized asteroid headed for Earth, it's about as visible as the day-time moon. Honestly, I never saw *Deep Impact*—at least, I didn't see it through my fingers when I held them over my face. I didn't need to. The movie poster was horrifying enough. It depicted the moment a continent-sized asteroid hit the earth. A fiery explosion haloed the impact area; a man and woman embraced in their final moments are transposed over it.

At eight, I imagined what this would be like. To see this thing. Maybe first it was the size of a basketball. Then the size of a house, then my middle school, and eventually, large enough to fill my scope of vision, I would no longer have a notion of its size and its distance from me. Of my death. I wouldn't know how many seconds my life clung to.

It filled me with horror.

I decided then I'd never have children. I couldn't bare the thought of my children—my family—living long enough in time to see an asteroid strike, or the sun explode, or for the earth to get swallowed up in a black hole. To want children in spite of the threat of their terror was selfish, and I didn't want to be selfish.

July 2017

My 27th birthday, we picked up the keys to our new apartment in Wilmington, North Carolina. We'd stuffed nonessentials into Chris' car so we'd have less to bring with us two weeks from then, when we'd officially move in. We stayed in the new apartment for a couple of days, trying to break it in, then we headed back to Indiana to collect the rest of our things and say goodbye to friends and family.

During the last bit of our time in Richmond, we went to the local toy store, Veaches, to find something for Vincent's birthday. The store opened in 1938 and had always been a facet in the community. It'd even undergone renovation in 2014 with the help of NBC News' initiative, "Main Street Makeover." Its old, grimy storefront appearance became a cheery, vibrant one. The initiative was to turn around failing small businesses. Indeed, toy sales were up to \$38,000 at that year's end.

What was immediately striking about Veaches was its color palette; you couldn't tell gender had been codified. There were no separate aisles of pink Barbies, then aisles of blue action figures. It was mixed with earthy tones of hand puppets and stuffed animals. The pastels of hand-stitched dollies. A rack of hats ranging from cowboy to astronaut. From the second level, there came the sound trains on their miniature tracks. A second part of the store was full of educational toys: puzzles, games, science sets, 3-D stegosaurus construction sets, and more. It had the feel a place lodged in time. Yet, it didn't last. After 79 years of business, it was closing its doors at the beginning of August.