

Too Late

Written by Kyle Lindo

I've spent most of the morning trying to convince myself I'm overthinking things.

Darren and I have talked about our future before. Marriage has come up. Moving in together has gone from something we joke about to something that feels increasingly inevitable.

That should make me happy.

It does. Mostly.

We're not teenagers making promises we don't understand. I'm thirty-two. He's thirty-three. We know each other better than most couples probably do after ten years.

Still, my stomach has been in knots all morning.

The afternoon is gloomy, the sky covered in gray clouds that look like they could open up at any moment. I reach for my phone at a red light and check it even though I know Darren hasn't called me back.

I tried him before I left home. No answer.

I'm not surprised. That man is good at a lot of things. Keeping track of his phone isn't one of them. Half the time, he doesn't even know where he left it. I consider calling again, but there's no point. I'm already on my way over.

I've known Darren for most of my life. I've talked to him about things I wouldn't tell anyone else. Somehow, that hasn't stopped me from second-guessing every step we've taken since we decided to be more than friends.

I've known him since elementary school, back when all he did was tease me for how skinny I was. I would respond by reminding him that his head was entirely too big for the rest of his body.

Somehow, insulting each other turned into friendship, and that friendship stretched across most of our lives.

There were years when we were closer than others. Relationships happened. Jobs happened. Life sent us in different directions, but whenever we found our way back to each other, it never felt like we had to start over.

When my grandmother died, Darren was there. He didn't give me some speech about grief or ask me to tell him what I needed. He just showed up.

Years later, when he was going through a custody battle that seemed to consume every part of his life, I became the person he called when he needed to be angry, scared or both. I listened to him worry about lawyers, court dates and whether somebody else could determine how much time he was allowed to spend with his son.

That's what Darren and I were good at. Showing up for each other.

Maybe that's why changing the relationship scared me as much as it did.

His feelings changed first. Mine took a little longer to admit.

When Darren finally told me how he felt, I had just gotten out of another relationship. My first reaction wasn't excitement. It was fear. Not because I couldn't imagine being with him. The problem was that I could.

If I dated somebody else and it failed, I lost a boyfriend. If Darren and I failed, I could lose somebody who had been part of my life since I was a child.

I took the chance anyway.

Almost a year later, I'm still glad I did.

The problem is, Darren has always seemed more comfortable with where we're headed than I am.

A few months ago, he told me he could see me being his wife. He said it casually, like he was telling me what he wanted for dinner.

I laughed, but he was serious.

We've talked about living together too. I've already warned him that if it happens, his habit of sleeping with the television loud enough for the entire neighborhood to hear isn't coming with him.

"You're gonna have to turn that noise down when we live together."

He scoffed. "Our house and you already making rules?"

"Somebody has to."

That was it. A stupid little conversation that somehow made the whole thing feel more real.

Our house.

I repeat the words in my head as I drive.

Darren is ready for that. I know he is. I think I am too, although I'm probably the reason we haven't made any real plans yet. It's not that I don't want any of this. I love him. I can see us living together, getting married and building a life together. I just thought we'd have more time before all of it started feeling so real.

Maybe that's all this is. Things are changing, and I've never been as comfortable with change as Darren is.

I glance at my phone again before the light turns green and check if he called me back.

Still Nothing.

His car is outside when I pull up.

I park behind it and sit for a moment with both hands resting on the steering wheel.

Apparently, the drive didn't do much to settle my nerves.

“Fuck it,” I whisper.

I’ll figure it out when I see him.

Darren gave me a key to his place a few months ago, so I don’t bother knocking. I unlock the door, push it open and immediately spot him stretched across the couch.

“Of course you sleep through my phone calls,” I say.

He doesn’t respond.

I close the door behind me and put my purse down. The television is on, which explains everything. Darren fell asleep watching one of his chaotic crime shows again.

I smile to myself and leave him alone. If he’s asleep, I might as well let him rest for a little while.

The kitchen, however, is another problem.

There are dishes piled in the sink, an empty bottle sitting on the counter and enough clutter around the stove to irritate me immediately. I look back toward the living room.

This is one of those things I will not tolerate once we live together.

I turn on the faucet and start washing the dishes.

Cleaning has always been one of those things I do without thinking. If I see a mess long enough, eventually I start fixing it, whether it’s mine or not. Darren knows this and has absolutely used it to his advantage.

By the time I finish the dishes and wipe down the counter, I’m surprised he hasn’t gotten up. The television has been playing the entire time, and Darren is still in the same position.

“Darren?”

Nothing.

He's always been a heavy sleeper. I've watched this man fall asleep in a room full of people and stay asleep while everybody talked around him, so I tell myself that's all this is.

Still, I walk into the living room.

"You plan on sleeping all day?"

He doesn't move.

I step closer and say his name again. When he still doesn't respond, something about the room starts to feel different. The television suddenly seems louder, and for the first time, I notice just how still he is.

I reach down and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Darren, wake up."

I shake him. His body moves with my hand, but he doesn't wake up.

"Come on."

I shake him harder.

"Darren."

For the first time, it occurs to me that maybe he isn't sleeping.

The thought is so ridiculous that I reject it almost immediately. Of course he's sleeping. He's right here. I just walked into his house and found him on the couch like I've done before.

I lean closer and try to feel his breath.

I don't.

Maybe I'm doing it wrong.

I move my hand closer to his face and wait, but I still don't feel anything. My heart starts pounding.

"Darren, wake up."

I shake his shoulder again, harder this time.

“Wake up.”

He doesn’t.

“Darren!”

The sound of my own voice scares me.

I grab my phone, but my fingers are shaking badly enough that I nearly drop it. I call my mother.

She answers on the second ring.

“Hey, baby.”

“Ma.”

She hears it immediately.

“What’s wrong?”

“Something’s wrong with Darren. He won’t wake up.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I came in and he was on the couch. I thought he was sleeping, but he won’t wake up.”

“Is he breathing?”

“I don’t think so.”

There’s a brief pause, but when she speaks again, her voice is calm.

“Okay. I need you to check his pulse.”

“How?”

“Put two fingers on the side of his neck, right under his jaw.”

I kneel beside the couch and press my fingers against Darren's neck. My hand is shaking so badly that I have to steady it with the other one.

"Do you feel anything?"

I don't answer right away. I move my fingers slightly and press again, waiting for something I'm not even sure I'll recognize.

Nothing.

"Tiara?"

"No."

Saying it makes my chest tighten.

"I don't feel anything."

"Okay. Call 911 right now. I'm coming."

I stare at Darren. Some irrational part of me still believes he could open his eyes and ask why I'm standing over him acting crazy.

"Tiara, call 911."

"Okay."

I hang up and dial.

Everything after that happens in pieces.

I remember the dispatcher asking me questions and having to repeat herself because I couldn't understand what she was saying. I remember kneeling beside Darren, then standing near the door, although I don't remember moving between the two places. By the time I hear sirens outside, my hands hurt from how tightly I've been clenching them.

The paramedics take over the room almost immediately. Police arrive too. People move around Darren's apartment asking questions I should know how to answer.

"How long has he been like this?"

"I don't know."

"When did you last speak to him?"

"Yesterday."

"Had he been sick?"

"No."

The answer comes automatically, but then I remember his cough.

"He had a cough."

One of the paramedics looks at me. "How long?"

"I don't know. A couple weeks, maybe. I kept telling him to get it checked."

My mind grabs onto that immediately.

"I told him to go to the doctor. He kept saying it was just a cough."

The paramedic asks me something else, and I answer him. I don't know why the cough suddenly feels so important. Nobody has told me it has anything to do with what's happening. I just keep thinking about all the times I heard him cough and told him he needed to get it checked.

So I stand against the wall and answer whatever they ask.

His name. His age. Whether he takes medication or has any medical conditions I know about. I answer what I can and say I don't know when I can't.

At some point, the panic disappears. I don't notice it happening. One minute my heart is beating so hard I can hear it, and the next I'm standing there watching strangers move through Darren's apartment like this is happening to somebody else.

I've eaten here. Slept here. Argued here. I know which cabinet Darren keeps the glasses in and which drawer gets stuck if you pull it too quickly. Now there are paramedics in his living room and police near his front door.

Eventually, one of the paramedics comes over to me.

"Tiara?"

I look at him.

He says something about how long Darren may have been there. Then something about there being no pulse when they arrived and that they weren't able to revive him.

I hear him.

But somewhere between one sentence and the next, my attention drifts past him toward the kitchen.

The dishes I washed are drying beside the sink.

I washed those.

I stood there with the water running, rinsing plates and wiping down Darren's counter while he was lying on the couch.

The paramedic is still talking.

Then I hear the words that matter.

"I'm sorry. He's gone."

I look at him again.

I nod.

I don't know why. Maybe because he stops talking afterward, and I assume that's what I'm supposed to do.

I understand what he said. I know what it means.

Still, nothing happens.

I don't scream or collapse. I don't cry.

My eyes go back to the dishes.

Less than an hour ago, I was standing there cleaning Darren's kitchen while he was dead in the next room.

I should have known.

I don't know how, but I should have.

Someone asks whether there's anybody they can call. I tell them his mother needs to know. After that, I lose track of who calls her or what else is said. The afternoon is starting to feel like a collection of things happening around me rather than things I'm part of.

When Darren's mother eventually walks through the front door, the first thing she sees is the police.

Then she sees me.

"Tiara?"

I stand up straighter without meaning to. Her eyes move past me toward the living room.

"What happened?"

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

"What happened to my son?"

I know the answer. I just can't say it.

Her eyes move between my face and the people behind me, and I watch the moment she understands.

"No."

She shakes her head and tries to move past me.

“No. Where is he?”

Somebody stops her before she can reach the living room. She says Darren’s name, louder this time, and then again.

The sound she makes after that doesn’t sound like anything I’ve heard before.

Her knees buckle.

I reach her before I have time to think and wrap my arms around her. She grabs onto me, and suddenly most of her weight is against my body.

I hold her.

I rub her back while she cries against my shoulder. She keeps saying her son’s name, and every time she does, I understand that she’s talking about the same Darren who was supposed to wake up when I walked through the door.

My eyes stay dry.

I know I should be crying too, but I’m not.

I just keep holding his mother.

My mother drives me home.

I don’t remember exactly when she arrived at Darren’s place or how long we stayed after that. There are entire stretches of the afternoon that already feel missing.

I remember leaving, though. My charger was still plugged into the wall, and a sweater I’d left the week before was still there. I left them both.

Taking something would have felt too much like admitting I wouldn’t be coming back.

The drive home is nothing like the drive there.

My mother doesn't force conversation. Every few minutes, she looks over at me, but I keep my eyes on the window.

People are doing normal things outside. A woman pushes a stroller along the sidewalk. Two men stand outside a gas station laughing. Cars stop when the light turns red and move again when it turns green.

The world looks the same.

That bothers me for some reason.

I look down at my phone. Messages have started coming in, but I don't open any of them.

Then I think about Darren's son.

He's only seven. Over the last year, he and I have gotten close enough to have our own little relationship, with our own jokes and things we tease each other about. I've watched Darren with him enough times to know that being a father was one of the most important parts of his life.

Somebody has to tell him.

I push the thought away.

My mother reaches across the console and puts her hand on my leg.

"You okay?"

I don't have the energy to answer her. I just keep looking out the window.

She squeezes my leg and keeps driving.

When we get home, my mother asks if I want her to stay. I tell her yes.

For a while, she sits with me in the living room. Neither of us talks much. I stare at the television even though it isn't on, and every now and then she asks if I need water or something to eat. I tell her no to everything.

Eventually, I tell her I want to be alone.

She looks at me for a moment. "You sure?"

I nod.

She hugs me before she leaves. I hug her back, then lock the door behind her.

The house is quiet. I take off my shoes and put my purse where I always put it. My phone goes on the counter. I walk into the kitchen and open the refrigerator, stare inside for a few seconds, then close it again.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do now.

There are people I should probably call. There are messages on my phone I should answer. I'm sure there are things happening at Darren's apartment right now that I should know about, but part of me still feels like I could drive back over there and find everything the way it was before.

I go to my bedroom and sit on the edge of the bed. Everything looks exactly the way it did when I left this morning. There's a glass of water on the nightstand and clothes piled over the back of a chair. For some reason, seeing everything exactly where I left it makes being home feel strange.

I lie back and stare at the ceiling. Every now and then, something from Darren's apartment comes back to me. His mother saying his name. The paramedic standing in front of me. Darren lying on the couch. None of it stays with me for very long. My mind keeps moving away from it before I can think about any of it too much.

My phone vibrates somewhere in the other room, but I leave it there.

After a while, I sit up and look around the bedroom. My eyes pass over the nightstand, the clothes on the chair and then the dresser.

I stop.

For the first time since I walked into Darren's apartment, I remember this morning.

I get up and walk to the dresser. When I pull open the drawer, all three pregnancy tests are still there.

Positive.

I stare at them, and suddenly this morning comes rushing back to me. I remember sitting on the edge of the bathtub with the first one in my hand, taking another because I needed to be sure, and then taking a third because apparently two still weren't enough. By then, I knew. I was pregnant.

I sat there for what felt like forever trying to figure out how I felt about it. I was happy somewhere underneath all the fear, but mostly I couldn't stop thinking about how much everything was about to change. Darren and I hadn't even been together for a year. We were talking about living together and getting married, and now there was a baby.

I just thought we'd have more time.

I sit down on the edge of the bed and look at the tests again.

My eyes start to burn.

I reach into the drawer and pick up one of the tests. For a few seconds, I just sit there looking at it.

Then the first tear falls.

I wipe it away, but another one follows. My chest tightens when I try to take a breath, and suddenly I'm crying harder than I can control.

I can't stay upright for long. I lower myself to the floor beside the bed and pull my knees toward my chest, still holding the test as the sobs keep coming. Everything I haven't been able to feel all day finally catches up with me at once.

I don't know how long I stay there. At some point, I stop trying to wipe my face or catch my breath. I just sit on the floor beside my bed with the pregnancy test still in my hand and let myself cry.

I start pleading with God to send Darren back to me. I promise I'll do anything if I can just have him back. I don't care how fast everything was happening anymore. I don't care if we were ready or if we had any idea what we were doing. I just want another chance. I want the future I was so afraid of this morning. I want all of it, as long as I get to have it with him.

I know it doesn't work that way.

But I keep praying anyway.