

Protect

by Amanda Nazario

We—Tom, Jamie, Tracy, and I—are sitting under the lights of the clinic waiting room, which are hard, cold and yellow. Tom has bought a bag of almonds and passes it around; we each take a couple. We wait for my name to be called. Nobody mentions Bret Doehler but I'm thinking about him, and so are the rest of us, as the almonds break up between our molars. Once my name is called, we won't be allowed to be together anymore—Tom will stay and wait for me in the wine bar, Jamie has an audition and Tracy has to go walk a dog. Without talking, we collaborate on the crossword, shielding the paper with our bodies, wishing the almond bites didn't make so much noise. The fabric on the waiting room chairs is stained and matted, but has been cleaned over and over.

The clue is "Shower, to Chantal." I'm the only one of us who knows the answer is DOUCHE, and before I can write it in I start laughing. Like in tenth grade health class, suppressing the laughter makes me want to laugh more; Tracy makes comfort noises and tries to hold my shoulders. I stage-whisper, *No! I'm laughing!* though there are tears in my eyes, and now I have no idea anymore what I'm doing. Jamie frowns, looks over at magazines on the table, because he is the one who warned me a long time ago to stay away from Bret Doehler.

The door opens to let out some people who have already finished getting tests. When I see Bret, it is not surprising that here is where we should finally meet again—I look at his dull eyes and remember dreams I've had where we stretched our arms across something vast and almost touched. He's wearing a jacket with stripes on the sleeves, his hair is in a ponytail. Glumly, he nods at me, Tom, Jamie, and Tracy, understanding that we came together while he came alone. His sadness makes me want to say to everyone here, all these

scared people—too-young girlfriends and boyfriends, daughters with angry mothers, hipster ladies in full sleeves of tattoos, young women whose faces are puffed with sleep, their names hanging from gold chains around their necks—*we are all the same, we're humans, all of us are alive.*

I stand up, scattering almonds all over the rug, and Bret walks to me. We close our arms around each other. When this hug is over I will still smell like him.

