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## Groundless

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**Groundless**

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B.A. Sociology, Howard University, 2017

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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## Abstract

*Groundless* is a collection of realist short stories that follow original characters as they move into a new understanding of themselves. They may think they are grounded in who they are, but each character learns new things that often contradict what they think they know about themselves. As with anyone, it is important that these characters re-examine who they think they are and look outward – what has made them that way? Is their perception accurate? Are they being fair to themselves and those around them? New understandings of what they believe about themselves and about their world are always possible. Themes of self-awareness, independence, honesty, and communication unite these stories. Inspired by writers concerned with emotional complexity and clear narratives, these stories follow in the same tradition. Using traditional methods of storytelling, they are written about and for the new-age woman of color who is not afraid to make decisions that are right for them.

*Keywords:* short fiction, literary fiction, realist fiction, marriage, family, therapy, death

## The Fix

When Wayne first heard that Rochelle was starting therapy, he wasn't quite sure what to think. "Is everything ok?"

"Everything's fine, but Luther wants another opinion on the new hire."

As far as Wayne knew, you only went to therapy if you had some serious issues, but he trusted that she was just doing research. Wayne liked Luther, Rochelle's boss and a long time therapist. They'd met a handful of times at Rochelle's office, and she spoke highly of him. But if he thought something were wrong with his wife, he wanted to know. "You know you can talk to me too, right? If anything's bothering you, you know."

"I know." She placed a kiss on his cheek. "And I would, or I will. But nothing's wrong. I'm a little interested in Dr. Morris, though. He's pretty quiet. I can see why Luther wants an inside scoop."

After a few weeks, Rochelle began to come home from her sessions and ask him questions. They started off simple enough, with questions like "What do you love most about me?"

"Easy, your cooking." The both laughed, but he could tell she was waiting for a more serious answer. "I like that you're a good listener."

Then the questions began to probe a bit more. Rather than asking his opinions of her, she'd ask about him. "How do you usually solve problems?" or "What do you want most out of life?"

"Are these the questions Dr. Morris asks you?" He posed the question lightly, but honestly, each question made him more nervous than the last.

"Yeah, I figured I'd bring them home. They don't lead to much in session."

Wayne didn't believe her, though. Even asking questions like this was unlike Rochelle. They didn't talk about their feelings in explicit terms too often, but that was because they'd always had an intimate understanding of each other without having those tough conversations. Plus, Wayne wasn't sure how to answer these – they'd been together for years; didn't she know that he liked to look at something from as many perspectives as possible before making a move? And that he was most concerned with making the people he loved proud?

Rochelle was a decidedly different person after going to therapy. He both assumed that this was a benefit of therapy, and was wary of what it made her think about him, or them. But he remained supportive, answering the probing questions as best as he could and asking her about the sessions as casually as possible. He didn't want to point out that things seemed different just yet. For all he knew, intense, intimate conversations with a professional had some sort of "it gets worse before it gets better" effect. Even her demeanor was different. Rochelle had always been mild and even-tempered with a self-deprecating sense of humor, something they had in common. But the jokes had ceased, and were now replaced with long, pensive silences that he attempted to fill with jokes of his own.

One evening, he asked if she was enjoying therapy. There was silence for a while, before she replied "I think I'm supposed to be learning about myself, but nothing new yet."

-

When Luther had first recommended that Rochelle attend therapy, she'd been resistant, but he persisted. "It's only so Dr. Morris can get some hours under his belt. You

can let me know how helpful he is, at your discretion, of course. We want to make sure he's a good fit at the practice. Besides, therapy's something that everyone can benefit from. I'm recommending you because I trust you, not because I think of you in any particular way."

During her first session with Dr. Morris, was surprised. The degrees and certificates on the wall aged him more than his appearance did, as he looked barely old enough to drink. He wasn't saying much, which she learned from Luther was the best way to go as a professional. After the requisite biographical information, he asked why she was here.

"Uh, Dr. Nelson said I should see you."

"Why?"

"If I'm also being honest, he wants to make sure you're a good fit here. But he also said everyone can benefit from talking to someone, so here I am."

Dr. Morris said nothing at this, so Rochelle fished around for something to fill the silence. "Thank you for taking the time to see me."

"So what do you want to talk about?" His tone was measured, almost uninterested, and Rochelle wished she was talking to Wayne, or even Luther.

"I don't know. That's why I'm here, I suppose." Because of privacy reasons, she never discussed Luther's sessions with him, so she knew little about what actually happened in therapist's office except for the chatter she tried to ignore in the waiting room. She assumed Dr. Morris would have questions. "So..."

He asked how she was doing, and she said she was fine. He asked about her family, and all of her responses were short and honest. There'd been no traumatic

experience growing up. She had a healthy work-life balance. She wasn't depressed, and experienced what she thought was a normal amount of anxiety. She was content.

Even after visiting Dr. Morris a second times, Rochelle felt as if she was doing it wrong since there had been no dramatic breakthroughs. She assumed the first session where he only said about five words was a fluke, and hoped that he would take a different approach by taking the lead in later appointments.

-

During her fifth session, after a night of not enough sleep, Rochelle began to cry during Dr. Morris's standard questions. She figured it was a result of her fatigue, but he asked about her emotions anyway.

“Do you cry often?”

“Sure, at movies and commercials. Videos of dogs and babies make me cry all the time.”

“Are you sad when you cry?”

“If it's a sad show, then, yes. Most of the time I'm crying because I'm happy.”

She was trying her best to be honest, really thinking about her answers before she responded. She'd told herself before this session that it would be best if she was completely vulnerable with Dr. Morris, as it would help him uncover something juicy faster. So far, he hadn't gotten to anything significant.

“What about when something in your own life makes you cry? Are you sad then?”

Rochelle only cried unprompted when she was stressed or tired. Otherwise, she rarely felt sad. She knew this about herself. But, she thought a while before offering an



answer just to make sure she wasn't forgetting anything important.

"No, not really." Her tears from the beginning of the session had dried on her face, making her face feel raw and cracked.

Dr. Morris abruptly switched topics. "What do you like to do?"

The entire session went on as the previous had. He asked a question, and she would offer an honest answer that he didn't follow up on. So much for the breakthrough she thought would come.

When she told Wayne about it later that day, he was amused.

"Maybe you just needed to cry today."

"I don't know. Maybe this guy's a quack or something. He doesn't really talk about anything significant. I'm seeing him for no reason."

"Could I come? I want to see what he's all about."

Rochelle hadn't considered bringing Wayne before, but she was happy to take him along. He'd always had a knack for judging other people well, so she welcomed the idea.

-

Their first joint sessions were fine. They mostly talked to each other while Dr. Morris listened. Nothing spectacular happened, and their conversations flowed almost the same way they did at home: slightly stunted because of the formal setting and the empty eyes of Dr. Morris, but with moments of their usual banter.

Wayne often joked about how strange it was that Dr. Morris never took notes. "I don't even think he listens. He just sits there and counts the money we're paying him in his head."

Rochelle agreed, but Wayne insisted they kept going. Rochelle didn't expect it, but she figured if he wanted to "ensure they remained happy," as he told her when she asked why he was interested in going, she wasn't going to argue.

After a few weeks of joint sessions, Dr. Morris asked if they enjoyed being around each other. He asked similar questions often, but this time Rochelle said "Of course," and Wayne said "Usually." Dr. Morris' expression flickered into one of interest that he hadn't displayed before, and Rochelle listened as he and Wayne discussed what that meant. When she was asked how his answer made her feel, all she could say was that she was surprised.

"Really?" Wayne turned to her with a hurt look in his eyes. "We're always together, wouldn't you rather be alone sometimes?"

"We do spend a lot of time together, but I always enjoy it. I've never wished I was elsewhere."

"That's common, actually," Dr. Morris interjected. "When you become codependent, sometimes you lose your own interests."

"We're not codependent," she corrected him. "We're married. Have been for five years. We have our own interests."

Dr. Morris' face was once again uninterested. "That is true. You can be both. There's nothing wrong with that."

Rochelle wasn't quite sure what to focus on: how blindsided she was by Wayne's answer, Dr. Morris' sudden show of interest, or the sudden defensiveness that she'd never experienced before. She left that session uneasy, but Wayne continued to behave as usual. He obviously wasn't as concerned by their different perceptions of their time together.

She didn't bring up her unease until their next session.

“So you've been upset with me for a week? Why would you wait to bring it up now?”

This time, Dr. Morris had a note pad.

-

Rochelle wasn't convinced that Wayne was telling the truth. His left eyebrow was raised ever so slightly, as was his voice, which didn't usually quiver. He shifted his weight back and forth between his feet. The closer Rochelle looked, she could see a few of his fingers twitching as his arms hung limply by his side. It looked like an attempt at a casual stance, but Rochelle was sure it was a façade.

“So you really didn't mean that?” she asked, with a strategic change in wording so that he couldn't accuse her of posing the same question four times.

“No, I didn't mean it,” he sighed. “When I say ‘I wish I didn't have to come home’ it means I don't want to leave the bar because I haven't see those guys in weeks. It doesn't mean I hate spending time with you. What's going on? Will you get a grip?”

Rochelle was almost ready to get a grip until he explicitly asked her to. Now, she was flying off the handle, grip be damned. She exploded, but on a smaller scale than she'd been for the past 30 minutes. Rather than accusing him of hating her, she quickly and quietly remarked on how hurt she'd been when she overheard him before he pressed end call. How she waited for him to come home because she didn't want to overreact. How lately, it felt like he never wanted to be around her. How, as his wife, knowing he would rather spend time with his friends felt like a reminder of their lack of friendship, something Dr. Morris had been commenting on in the last three sessions. All the while,

Wayne continued to shuffle and twitch and quiver.

When she finally paused to catch her breath and the few snuffles that threatened to spill out, he got a word in.

“I’m sorry I hurt your feelings. It was not my intention. How can I do better next time?”

Rochelle’s interest was piqued because of the language he was using. It was exactly how Dr. Morris taught them to apologize to each other. Wayne rarely had to apologize, as lately it was Rochelle who unintentionally hurt his feelings. It felt weird, and a little like relief, to be on the receiving end. Again, though, Rochelle wasn’t sure he meant it. It felt like a canned answer.

“Is that sincere? You don’t sound like you mean- “

“Rochelle, I’m tired.”

“I’m sorry.”

Wayne’s face twisted in confusion and he sucked in a breath. “Why are you sorry? Are you not accepting my apology?”

“No, I do. I’m sorry.” She heard herself apologizing again, and defensively put her hand up to acknowledge that, yes, she was making the mistake again. “I accept.”

“And what about next time? How can I make intentional decisions to value your feelings and perception of my own actions?”

“I don’t know. But I accept your apology.” Her energy and mania had peaked and dipped throughout the night, and she was almost positive it wouldn’t peak again. She had no answer for next time. She wasn’t sure what was happening right now.

“I’m going to shower. I’m ready to talk when you are.” He turned to walk away,

but he hadn't made enough of a pivot before he rolled his eyes. Rochelle noticed and said nothing.

-

Wayne let the hot water roll down his back without flinching. He couldn't figure out what he'd said that upset Rochelle. Rather, he could see how the wording of his comment could have been misconstrued to upset her, but his apology had been genuine, even though he was honestly a little exhausted. The week before, she'd been upset because he forgot to pick up her package during his lunch break. It'd been an honest mistake; he ended getting the lunchtime detention shift and couldn't leave the high school. When Rochelle got home that night, he was making fresh pasta and was excited to surprise her since he'd noticed that she'd been a bit withdrawn. When she asked him where the package was, he realized his mistake and was apologetic. But she'd taken a tone similar to the tone she had tonight, and didn't seem to enjoy the dinner he prepared.

This was right after their third session with Dr. Morris, which he'd been happy to attend. Though he'd been asking her if anything was wrong for a few weeks, she told him that everything was fine. But while her words reassured him that their five-year marriage sustained without issue, her behavior told another story. She'd been walking around the house a bit teary. At times, she'd be warm and loving, like the Rochelle he knew. Other times, she'd be cold and distant. Knowing her as well as he did, it seemed as if she was unsure of herself. There wasn't any family drama he knew of, and she said work wasn't any more stressful than usual. He was an attentive husband, but occasionally he got tired and slacked on his usual attention. And that always seemed to be when Rochelle would take on the tone that was part inquisitive, part accusatory. And she always leaned into the

therapy language, which made him nervous. Wayne thought that they communicated well, but Dr. Morris gave them a script that drained their conversations of any emotions, leaving them with only utterances that didn't convey what they actually meant. Wayne was still willing to attend the sessions, and listen to his wife, but he felt a growing alienation rather than the closeness he assumed would come with professional help.

-

The next day, Rochelle updated the client spreadsheet while aimlessly thinking about her night. Luther's 9:45 appointment was running a little long, and his next appointment sat across from her in the warm waiting room. Every week for the last four months Rochelle had watched the Thompsons sit close together on the bench and speak lowly to each other. Genevieve Thompson always flipped through the latest issue of *People* and occasionally pointed to a picture and showed Warren, her husband, who occupied himself on his phone. Sometimes they'd laugh together, sometimes they would wear identical expressions of disgust, and other times he would stare blankly and Genevieve would have to explain to him who was in the picture, what they were doing, and why their celebrity status deserved this level of scrutiny.

They'd always seemed a healthy couple to Rochelle. At 42 and 45, they were almost twice her age. From the few minutes she saw them every month, they seemed to have a good balance of individual and shared interests, something Dr. Morris emphasized when Rochelle and Wayne had their Monday afternoon session in the suite next door to Luther's. Ever since she and Wayne had begun to experience some friction after visiting Dr. Morris, she used the Thompsons to read her own relationship. Did they speak lowly to each other when sharing time together? Yes, often. But it didn't look the way it did for

the Thompsons. They didn't share a laugh, or sit so close. Rochelle and Wayne spoke lowly to each other over the kitchen table, or in the car, where they weren't close enough to hear each other, so they often had to repeat what was said. Or, Wayne would repeat himself when Rochelle couldn't hear him. If she felt like she was speaking too low to be understood, she would wait for him to ask her to repeat herself, but he never did.

Rochelle looked up as Genevieve approached her desk. "What can I help you with, Mrs. Thompson?"

"Sorry to bother, but Warren and I will have to go. We have another appointment this afternoon."

"Oh, that's no problem. I'll let Dr. Nelson know. I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

Genevieve gathered her things as Warren waited for her at the door. Once they left, Rochelle looked at the clock. As soon as Luther finished with his client, she would go to lunch at the Mediterranean restaurant on the ground level of their building. She'd completed her morning duties of scheduling appointments, following up on emails, and updating Luther's notes. The Thompsons' waiting room behavior and her own study of them was her favorite distraction, but that was no longer an option. She briefly considered texting Wayne, but she knew it was fifth period and his eleventh graders held his attention. She would rather not reach out at all than to attempt a conversation and not receive a response.

Luther's office door opened, and he walked out behind his client. Victor was new to the practice, so Rochelle knew almost nothing about him. In his initial call to inquire about services, he asked if there was anyone trained to help divorcees specifically.

Rochelle had told him no, but Luther later corrected her.

“We help anyone, Rochelle. We may advertise marriage counseling, but we’re trained for anything. You know that.” He said it only to help her better assist potential clients, but it made her a bit uncomfortable. It felt like a very pointed clarification.

Rochelle took Victor through the first-time checkout process, then wished him well before he left. When she stood up to peek into Luther’s office and tell him that she was headed out for lunch, he was already in the doorway.

“You want to grab lunch, Rochelle?”

Lunch with Luther was rare, but Rochelle always enjoyed it. Luther was a jovial older man who reminded her of her favorite uncle. He had a sweet sense of humor and talked more about his adult children and grandchildren than himself. Clients loved him, and Rochelle considered him a dear friend though they didn’t spend time together outside of the office and their conversations remained surface level. “I don’t need to know about your issues too,” he always said.

As they took the elevator down, Luther caught her up on his latest news. “Claire wants to stay in for her birthday, but I told her that we all want to celebrate her. Can you believe she doesn’t want to do anything?” His over the top gestures filled the small space, and Rochelle happily stood to the side to make room for him. “My own wife, who has asked for an extravagant celebration every year, all of a sudden turns 68 and doesn’t want to make a fuss.”

“I’m sure she’ll appreciate staying at home, some peace and quiet. Maybe she’s over the big celebrations. It’s unexpected, but it sounds like it’s what she really wants.”

Luther side eyed Rochelle and laughed. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned from my



years of trying not to analyze my own relationship, it's that people can't really surprise you. Not if you know them well enough."

-

Wayne followed Rochelle through the grocery store, shivering as they passed the frozen vegetables. They usually shopped alone, switching off the responsibility whenever they ran out of the necessities. But after Rochelle's comments about spending time together, Wayne thought doing this together would help. A casual, low-stakes activity would allow them to bond.

"Baby," he called to her. "Do you want cookies and cream? Neapolitan?" Those were her two favorite flavors. Though he preferred butter pecan himself, he was ok with compromising. He could get his favorite next time he shopped alone.

She slowed down in front of him, turning around to face him and place her foot on the bottom of the cart. "Doesn't matter to me. Do you want to get butter pecan?"

Though she sounded innocent enough, Wayne wasn't sure if this was a test or not. All of this was unusual – the therapy, the language, the tests. He felt like he'd been walking on eggshells recently, or across the occasional minefield. He hesitated to answer, looking in her eyes for longer than necessary to decide if it was safe or not. "I can do butter pecan, I guess."

"Ok! It's been a while. That would be good." She smiled and turned, continuing down the aisle. He was safe.

Wayne really hoped things were ok between them. He wanted things to go back to the way they were before, when he wasn't so nervous all the time. In all of their years of dating and marriage, they'd existed in a way that felt right to him. Only mildly

affectionate, as was their way, but always on the same page. They had a natural chemistry, supported each other, and understood each other. But it was around the time that they began seeing Dr. Morris that things seemed to shift. In their second session, he'd asked "How often do you guys hug or hold hands?"

"Not very often," Wayne had explained. "We spend time together, but we don't touch. We both like our personal space."

"Interesting."

He hadn't realized it immediately, but after that, Rochelle seemed to be physically reaching out to him more than usual. He didn't know what to do in response at first, but he tried to respond correctly. Sometimes, he felt like he was doing it right, squeezing her hand when she grabbed his, or rubbing her back when she would sit close to him without warning. Other times, he was unprepared and froze. Those were the times when he felt guilty. But he was also, and more importantly, confused. Rochelle didn't express any desire to be closer to him, so why did he feel like he'd missed something?

He pushed the cart up, attempting to walk in step with her.

-

Four hours later, Rochelle lay awake. She was almost diagonal in their king sized bed in an attempt to have some sort of physical contact with Wayne. Her shin was against the back of his calf, but that was as close as she could get without making the bed squeak. His back looked larger than usual turned away from her.

His phone was on the other side of his body, and it vibrated every few minutes. She knew they were emails, but she was bothered because he didn't even move when it shook the mattress below him. Yet whenever she tried to maneuver her knee or ankle he

shifted so that they remained separated. She hated that, even in his unconscious state, he didn't seem to want to be near her.

She closed her eyes and let out a breath louder than she meant to. What would Dr. Morris say? "You may be overthinking, Rochelle." No, he wouldn't say that. "You are right, Wayne's tendency to move away from you in his sleep confirms that he hates you." No, he wouldn't say that either. Those sounded more like the voices in her own head. She tried to conjure up Dr. Morris's voice, but instead she got the image of him, sitting in his computer chair in a wrinkled shirt and worn down dress shoes. In her head, he was silent. He stared at the two of them without an ounce of emotion. He had the face of someone just listening, waiting for a groundbreaking statement. Rochelle liked to imagine him with a thick pair of glasses to ease the imaginary tension.

She tried to maneuver her ankle again, and this time, it fit snugly under his. *Progress!* she shouted at Dr. Morris. His face didn't change. He still waited for Rochelle to make that meaningful discovery. She didn't think this counted. Her body was uncomfortably contorted and her foot would fall asleep in a matter of minutes. The phone still vibrated. This time, Wayne shifted and slowly pushed his phone away. His feet changed positions, and Rochelle found her foot suddenly rejected by his as he straightened his legs and let out a snore. She assessed their positioning, and decided it wasn't worth another attempt. She turned to face the other way, lying with her back almost against his. There was just enough space between them to feel a breeze on her back above the comforter. Her bones cracked in relief as she settled into a more natural position. Closing her eyes, she stopped herself from analyzing their current position to try to fall asleep again.

Dr. Morris finally spoke up from behind his made up glasses. *Is this really progress?*

-

The first thing Wayne noticed when he entered the waiting room was just how quiet it was. Rochelle's desk was empty, as were all of the chairs. He'd always found it curious that there was no quiet TV or music playing in Luther's suite, but now it was a little eerie.

It was almost time for Rochelle's lunch break and he'd come to surprise her. He held a card he picked from the pharmacy for her. It was simple, white stock with blue and green cursive that read *I love you* on the front and *now and forever* inside. It wasn't the type of sentiment he'd usually pick out, but he figured he could try something new. If Rochelle was trying therapy, he could try being sweet.

Before he could think of where to look for her, she appeared behind him.

"Wayne?"

He couldn't control his jump and nearly dropped his bag in surprise. Picking it up for him, she continued around him to her desk.

"I wasn't expecting you today. What's going on?" Her tone was nervous, the opposite of what he wanted.

"Nothing, I just thought we could go to lunch." He noticed that her curious look changed to one of mild humor, and registered that as an ok sign. "A quick lunch, if you can."

"Well, I have a lot of work to do..."

"It's ok," he interrupted, losing resolve. This wasn't a good idea. They didn't

surprise each other often.

“But we can have lunch. You did come all the way here.” She sat at her desk, clicking all over the screen and presumably getting ready to go. Wayne wasn’t sure what to do while he waited, so he sat across from her while.

Luther emerged from his office poised to walk to Rochelle’s desk, and Wayne cleared his throat to make his presence known.

“Wayne, what are you doing here?” Luther approached him with his hand stretched out for a handshake. Wayne stood, and returned the firm grip, then gestured to Rochelle.

“I’m here to take Rochelle to lunch. How are you, Luther?”

“I can’t complain. It’s good to see you. I heard you’ve been seeing Dr. Morris, how’s that been?”

Wayne looked from Rochelle to Luther to back. She looked back at him, saying nothing. This was another test.

“It’s going well. Rochelle and I have been learning a lot.” He didn’t look back at her to see if he was right this time.

“That’s good. Alright, well I guess I can bother you after lunch. Have fun, you two.”

Rochelle gathered her things.

-

Sitting across from Wayne in the small café, Rochelle noticed that he looked...stiff. He sat too straight, and seemed to be thinking about each move before he made it. He hesitated before reaching for his water. He lifted his hand to his collar before

he decided to remove his coat. Rochelle watched and waited. Was he feeling guilty about something?

“So, I got you a card.” He handed the brown envelope to her, and only held her gaze for a second before looking away.

“Do you want me to open this now?”

“Yes, if you want to.”

What was this? Was it a confession? Some sort of peace offering? She turned the envelope in her hand, eyeing it carefully.

“Or you don’t have to. It’s not a big deal.”

She carefully opened the flap, pulling out the card and reading it silently. It was sweet, and unlike him. Something was definitely wrong.

“Wayne, is there anything you want to tell me?” She didn’t know what she wanted to hear, but she needed something to make sense.

“I just want to tell you that I’m here for you. I think things have been rough lately and I wanted to remind you that I love you.”

So no confession. Her nerves now morphed into confusion. “Thank you. What do you mean, *rough*?”

He took an anxious sip of water before he explained. “I don’t know, you just seem a little more distant, or guarded, than usual. I don’t know if I did something wrong, but if I did, please tell me.”

Rochelle considered this – had he done anything wrong? He did explicitly say that he wished he didn’t have to come home that night. Was that wrong?

“And even if I didn’t do anything wrong, I want to apologize. I haven’t been there

for you how you need me to be. I don't know what that looks like, but I haven't been doing a good job."

*This is progress*, Dr. Morris said. From what, exactly, Rochelle wasn't sure.

-

It had been a quiet few days in their house. Wayne had been busy with parent-teacher conferences for three days, and Rochelle was training new staff at the practice. Aside from greetings in the morning and before bed, they hadn't spoken to or seen much of each other.

Wayne knew the surprise lunch had been awkward, and the card unexpected, but he didn't know what else to do. Rochelle wasn't letting him in on anything, and he felt that he was in a weird sort of limbo. Whenever he tried to identify a problem, he could only see Dr. Morris's face in his head. He'd gone through all of the other possibilities. Rochelle wasn't pregnant. He assumed there was no other man. The only thing that had changed in the last few weeks was therapy. Wayne didn't want to blame a well-meaning professional, but he needed to figure out what was making his relationship the ordeal it had become.

He sat in the front room of their home for a while. He didn't realize it had gotten dark outside. He felt silly, and turned the light on as to not scare Rochelle, who would be home in a few minutes. They would finally both be home this evening. They would figure things out, he assured himself.

-

When Rochelle parked in front of the house, she decided to stay in the car for a little. The temperature was perfect, and her relaxation playlist was doing exactly what she needed it to. Minutes ago, she'd been prepared to go inside and tell Wayne all that she

learned from Luther, but now that she saw his car sitting in front of hers, she'd lost resolve. When she'd texted him "I have so much to tell you when I get home" after lunch, it seemed like something to laugh about. Now that she sat with the knowledge that she did, it felt much more like evidence of her mistake.

Wayne was sitting on the couch when Rochelle finally entered the house.

"How was your day?"

"It was alright. Stressful, but nothing out of the ordinary. How was yours? What did you want to tell me so bad?"

"I had lunch with Luther today, and guess what he told me about Dr. Morris?"

Wayne visibly braced himself.

"Turns out, he's not all that great afterwards after all."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Luther was telling me about his wife's birthday. And he told me about Dr. Morris's wife as well, and, get this, it turns out that he's been married for six or seven years but is headed straight for a divorce."

Wayne looked down at his lap, and Rochelle shuffled from one foot to the other. She thought he would be happy to hear this, but his face remained still as he continued to look straight ahead. She realized that this was the opposite of where they stood a few weeks ago when she'd been upset with Wayne. She regretted that now.

"So, is he still going to work there?"

Rochelle made her way around Wayne to sit next to him. "He's not going to get fired or anything, but I think it does put things in perspective."

"What do you mean?"



“Well, this doesn’t mean we have to disregard everything he told us. As far as I know, all of his qualifications still hold up.”

“Ok...” Wayne looked from his lap to the wall, stiff again.

“I’m sure we can still work through some of the things he pointed out.”

“Sure.”

“But, I don’t think we need to stick to his script so closely. If he was using it himself, it didn’t work out for him. And if he wasn’t, then, I guess we don’t have to either.”

Wayne let out a long sigh.

Rochelle wanted to laugh at how all of this had turned out, but she didn’t. She knew she had more to say. “And also, I want to apologize. I think a lot of this is my fault.”

Wayne began to say something, but she stopped him.

“No, really, I realized that I have changed. And even though that lunch you pulled was weird, I know it was only because of how I’ve been acting.” She leaned back into the couch, getting more comfortable. “And I think it’s directly connected to Dr. Morris. Or therapy, more broadly. But this whole situation has been strange.”

Wayne sat back, too, and turned to look at her. “I thought things were strange, too. I thought maybe it was something I did.”

“I thought it was something you did, too. But it wasn’t. It was me, and Luther telling me to go to therapy, and Dr. Morris not being what I expected, and you being honest.” She took a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. “It was all of that, but it was mostly me.”

Wayne didn't say anything for a while, and they sat in silence, looking at each other. When she leaned into him to rest her head on his shoulder, he didn't move. He simply grabbed her hand and, slowly, began to run his thumb over her palm.

"And I understand if you're upset with me for making this much more than it needs to be." She added, "I don't know why I let him turn me into someone I'm not."

"You don't think he's been helping us? Helping us get closer?"

"No. I think he's been giving us problems with no solutions." She felt Wayne nod in response, which made her want to tell the whole truth. "Or I think I've been making up problems to make talking to him feel right."

Wayne remained silent, and it reminded Rochelle of why she appreciated him. She had a lot to say, and had to think through her thoughts, and he always let her.

"Luther told me that talking to someone didn't mean anything was wrong, but I think in my head, something needed to be."

This finally made Wayne laugh. "You tell me every day about how great people like Mr. and Mrs. Thompson are, and you thought something needed to be wrong?"

"I know." She couldn't help but laugh at herself too. "To be fair, they are better than us. They hold hands a lot."

Wayne picked up their joined hands and raised them to his mouth, placing a small kiss on her knuckles. "Nope, we do that now. What else do they have they we don't?"

"Age?"

"That's true."

They sat for a bit longer, saying nothing, but staying connected. If she didn't know any better, she would think that Wayne was sleep, but he still massaged her hand.

“Well,” he finally said, “does this mean we can stop going to Dr. Morris?”

“It does. I don’t think either of us needs to see him anymore.”

“That’s probably for the best.” Rochelle didn’t want to admit that she’d been wrong, but she knew that Wayne understood her. She wanted to say more, but stopped herself, quieting her mind and sinking into her husband. When she finally looked at the clock on the wall, she realized they’d been sitting that way, hand-in-hand, for an hour.

## Self-Care

The picture on the crinkled page taunted Nadine. The perfectly sculpted domes of chocolate frosting were a washed out gray as opposed to the rich brown they'd been in the email. She'd begrudgingly joined the email list for Nailed It! With Jeannine, the latest internet venture from her cousin two states away who wanted to be Pinterest famous. The automated email was far too colorful for Nadine. It showcased animated rainbow sprinkles and a dancing stick of butter, both of which encouraged her to quickly click the link to the cake recipe and choose the grayscale printer friendly version. Nadine typically deleted Jeannine's newsletters as soon as she saw the notification—she was no cook, as everyone knew—but she had been craving desserts at her desk the morning it arrived in her inbox and she felt it was fated. Though Jeannine had dubbed this recipe “Grandma's Perfect Yellow Cake,” Nadine didn't actually remember their grandmother making this cake. Grandma preferred a double old fashioned on her porch after too many family members had bombarded her for the Sunday dinners she never seemed to enjoy. Perhaps this was from Jeannine's other grandmother.

The print out was covered in flour and other unidentifiable powders and liquids. Though she didn't wear glasses, Nadine squinted at the page to read whether the batter called for two teaspoons or two tablespoons of vanilla extract. The only thing she could see clearly was 2 t, the rest as good as gone. Though she wanted to pretend she didn't know how the page had gotten so ruined, she was guilty of stuffing it in her bag as she left work a few days before, and leaving it there until she went to the grocery store this afternoon to buy the ingredients. She'd also purchased an apron (which she never needed before, since she didn't cook) and oven mitts, figuring she shouldn't rely on only the

dishcloth for all of her planned interaction with the oven. She'd held the loose sheet of paper as she walked up and down the aisle, except for the few times she stuffed it in the basket to reach for something that was particularly high on a shelf, or when she had to open up the egg cartoons as she awkwardly held the refrigerator door open with her left hip. She wasn't sure why she had to do this, but everyone else in the store looked at the eggs before they got them. She figured she should just make sure they were all there.

Yup, 12 eggs all accounted for.

Nadine was no cook, nor was she a baker. She made enough money as a consultant to order whatever she wanted whenever she wanted, so she had no idea whether a teaspoon or tablespoon was more appropriate. She opened the little vial of vanilla and sniffed. The smell was strong, and there wasn't much in the vial anyway, so she figured the recipe probably called for two teaspoons. Rather than her own voice, she heard Jeannine's in her head. "Are you sure?" Jeannine's voice asked with the annoying strain she'd developed from the coughing fits she experienced as a child. "No," Nadine replied to the voice in her head, and it echoed throughout her kitchen. The maintenance man had commented on the acoustics in her condo last time he'd come by, to which she replied, "It's because I don't have much furniture."

"It's the high ceilings, too, and the materials. Recording studios tend to have these floors."

"I'm a minimalist," she countered, though she knew the maintenance man wasn't trying to argue. "I don't want a lot of furniture."

"I have a nephew like that. That must be a young person's thing. He calls me a hoarder just because I have pictures on my mantel."

Nadine wasn't that young. At 32, she was the oldest person on her neighborhood softball team by a few months, but the youngest person, and only woman, in her Monday morning briefings. In her experience, older men assumed she was young because she was single and childless. Older women didn't care about her exact age, just her lack of a romantic partner.

Vanilla extract poured into the mixer that had only been decoration before, Nadine moved to alternately add the flour mixture and the milk per the instructions. She picked the milk up with her right hand and the bowl of flour with her left. She didn't know how much to alternate at a time, so she poured a few drops of the milk before tipping the bowl into the mixer. Her powdery hands slipped, and the bowl bounced off the side of the mixture and onto the counter, mix oozing out of the bowl. She saw the mix flowing to the edge of the counter, and dropped the cup of milk to scoop up the mix in time. She didn't notice the trajectory of the milk until she felt a room temperature splash on her leg. Her hands were too full of flour goo to clean it up. She counted her losses: luckily there was more milk where that came from. There was no way she would have started her cake mix over again.

Maneuvering around the spilled milk on the floor to her sink to clean off her hands, she heard the ping of her phone interrupt her Friday Night playlist. The last time her mother had visited, she made fun of her playlist for being calming rather than energizing. "Don't you want to go out on Fridays? Why does your Friday sound like you're pondering the meaning of life?"

"Mom, I work a long week. Friday is the last day I want to go out." She'd been exasperated, but she knew her 64-year-old mother was probably on her way out with her

girlfriends, so she wouldn't get the idea of spending a weekend, or every weekend, in. That, Nadine considered, was one of the many perks of having a wealthy daughter who made sure the mortgage and bills were covered. No need to get to sleep at a reasonable hour when you enjoyed early retirement.

There was another ping, and she looked at her batter-covered watch to check the notification. It was an email from Arnold, her assistant who always sent emails when neither of them should be working. Nadine was grateful that the content of the email wasn't displayed on her watch. She knew that would turn her attention away from the task at hand. She had a cake to worry about.

She looked back at the milk on the floor. There was no discernible shape, but she tried to dig into her subconscious and see if the splatter meant anything to her like all the psychiatrists in the movies ask. Her real therapist from four years ago had never asked anything so asinine, but that therapist didn't last, so maybe splatter association was what she needed. *Hm, looks like a cloud. Or a bush? A misshapen shrub, yeah.* The water still ran over her clean hands until it was uncomfortably hot, but she continued to look at the spreading liquid. *Huh. A shrub that hasn't been tended in a while. Like one in front of a house that's been recently vacated. The landscapers have stopped coming. The shrub is what's keeping the house from being sold. It's bringing down property values of the entire neighborhood. Someone needs to clean it up—I'd call someone immediately. I can't imagine my property looking so out of order. That's why I don't need a house. No shrubbery.* Nadine saw the steam rising in front of her before she registered the burn in her hands. "Shit." She pulled her hands out of the water, skipping over the milk to run to the freezer.

Needing to cool her hands off immediately, she opened the freezer and plunged her hands into the pile of ice in the corner of the door. She remembered something her mother used to say when she was in elementary school. When school was canceled because of snow, Nadine and her father would take the lid of a trash bin and use it to sled down the hill of their modest lawn. As it began to get darker and colder, her father would retire to the living room where he could see her from the window while also catching the six o'clock news. Between the layers her mother insisted she wear and the cold that still found a way to creep between the nylon tights and wool pants, she could barely move. But she would continue to sled, walking back up the lawn to enjoy another three second descent. Out there, under the illusion that she was truly alone in the quiet night to sled as much as she liked, she felt free. She could smell the burning fire wafting out of her own chimney, and watched cars trudge home, the occasional neighbor honking or waving. Too cold to wave back, she would go up and down until her father finally called her in for dinner. She would rip her stiff gloves off as soon as she entered the house, and her mother would tell her to take off her outer layers and stand by the radiator. "It's tempting, but don't do anything like run your hands under hot water," she would say as she fixed her a cup of hot chocolate. "It'll shock you. You want to warm up slowly." Eight-year-old Nadine had always been tempted to try it anyway, but never did. She imagined the same was true with ice on burns, though she had no experience.

Pulling her hands out of the freezer, there seemed to be no noticeable damage, so she took stock of her progress. The milk was still on the ground. There was powder on every surface. From where she stood, she couldn't see the text on the recipe at all, just stains and crinkled paper. Her clothes had a confusing assortment of both wet and dry



stains. Her phone pinged again, but the watch face didn't light up. Shaking her wrist, the screen flickered for a second, and she could make out a water drop symbol. Overwhelmed by the condition of her state-of-the-art chef's kitchen, the showpiece of her home, she retired to her bedroom to regroup.

40 minutes later, Nadine emerged from her bedroom in a fresh t-shirt and sweatpants. She couldn't remember the last time she'd worn them. The drawstring was so loose that they barely stayed on her hips, and the hem on the left leg was so frayed that she had to put on slippers to stop her heel from sliding on the fabric. Her long braids, which she usually pulled into a bun for work, were now placed in a sloppy ponytail. She caught a reflection of herself in the mirror and almost did a double take. She would never let herself be seen like this.

It was 9:42 p.m. She had to get this cake in the oven soon or else it would be too late and she would give up. She could still hear Jeannine in her head, taunting her with her Pinterest smile and baking abilities.

"The recipe is quite simple," Jeannine teased.

"Go fuck yourself," Nadine said to no one. The words echoed off the high ceilings in her empty kitchen.

She spent a few minutes cleaning with her usual intensity. At the start of her baking endeavor, she thought this might be a chance to let loose: cook without cleaning, following steps without letting her careful nature interrupt. But round one had knocked her out, and it was time to reenter the ring with everything she had. Within six minutes, the floor was dry and the counter was powder free. Her remaining ingredients were lined up

by height on her right side, the mixer in the center, and her new color printout of the recipe on her left. She picked up where she left off, slowly mixing milk and batter into the bowl, then took both bowl and measuring cup to the sink as soon as she was finished. “I’ll wash them later, but I need them out of the way now” she explained to imaginary Jeannine, who was scoffing at her Type A tendencies.

She prepared the pans, 9-inches and never used, and carefully poured the batter into each. She leaned over to eye them side by side, making sure they were evenly filled. The oven had been heating for well over an hour, so she attributed her sweat to that rather than the challenge that all of the precise measurements presented. She neatly placed the pans in the oven, sweating even more. The gold pendant of her necklace burnt her chest a little after she closed the oven door, but she moved on to get started on the icing. Her Friday Night playlist had long ended, and the music had switched to alternative rock. She wasn’t sure who had programmed this music for her, but she didn’t know what else to listen to, so she let it play.

Butter and cocoa powder safely in the designated icing bowl, she began to beat them until “creamy and smooth,” as the recipe directed. Once the texture was to her liking, she began to mix in the sugar and milk. She fell into a rhythm, alternating hands as the mixer slowly whirred in front of her. She thought of her father cooking dinner almost every night for as long as she could remember. He was a messy chef, “a creative” he called himself, and the kitchen was often in an even worse condition than hers had been. He had plenty of cookbooks, but always used the red one with faded gold text on the front. It was the oldest and thickest on the windowsill, and the spine was covered in duct tape. With no binding, the yellowed pages often fell out in thick sections, but her father always

placed them back in the cover and handled it with utmost care. The text was fading, but her father had already memorized most of the essential elements, and used it merely for reference. Nadine knew that if the red cookbook was open on a Sunday night, they would be eating like kings for the next few days. *I'll ask my mother where that cookbook is.* She could ask her father, but it would feel odd to talk to him. She hadn't said more than a few words to him in over a year. When her mother called to update her on the latest social developments, Nadine would simply ask that she say hello to her father for her. He never asked to speak to her, or called, but she figured that was just a habit. He had never been much of a talker, but he was a loving presence in all of her memories. No reason to bother him over a book he hadn't used in years.

As the mixer did its job, Nadine considered the complete 180 she'd made. The milk had almost gotten the best of her, but she'd come back strong and made the icing without any hiccups. She let it sit in the bowl, then peeked on the cakes through the oven door. They seemed to be rising nicely. Though she couldn't see the color clearly through the tint on the oven window, she trusted they were fine.

Taking a seat on the barstool at the island, she considered her day. She'd woken up 40 minutes earlier than usual for a board meeting at another office. She sat through the meeting with her corporate smile and most attentive face, and the men around the table waited for her input on the funding issues before they made a decision. Though she had valuable things to add, and they respected her opinion, she knew within three minutes that her presence wasn't necessary. She could have emailed her thoughts on the matter. As she walked out of the building, she called Arnold to tell him to refrain from adding future board meetings to her schedule.

She decided to take an early lunch, stopping by a bistro to catch up on her social life. The group message she'd long ago muted between her college friends had over 200 messages, and though she didn't reply often, she liked to keep up with what was going on. Brandy was still very pregnant, and Keira was still engaged. She was shocked to read that Sam and her boyfriend were no longer together, but it was suggested that it was because she'd gotten a promotion that her boyfriend didn't support. Nadine could relate to that. She typed out a quick hello, and she expected a response from her friends saying they missed her, or it was good to hear from her. She checked the thread while she ate, but no response came.

Next, she checked her family email chain. They were planning a family reunion, and she'd provided her Aunt Sheila with the old AOL address she only had access to on her phone. For the first few weeks of planning, she toyed with the idea of losing her phone so that she wouldn't be bombarded by the incessant notifications, but she knew that she wouldn't hear the end of it from her mother if she didn't stay updated on the latest plans. It looked like her aunt had settled on Raleigh as the perfect location. She stopped reading after eight replies from angry cousins, then returned to her French onion soup. Schedule reminders steadily arrived from the calendar Arnold updated, but she ignored them for another hour before she finally made her way to her desk.

She was grateful to have another weekend in. To stop herself from only focusing on work, she'd decided to do something every day for herself, per Arnold's suggestion. The cake was for her – she would eat and enjoy it at her leisure. The fact that she preferred brownies didn't matter, only that she made it herself and didn't have to share. On Saturday, she would go to the bookstore that was next door to her building. When she'd

first moved in she had gone in a few times, but for the past few months' work had taken up every minute of her time and she found herself rushing by the bookstore without so much as a glance at the window display. She hadn't decided what she would do on Sunday yet, but she wanted it to be something fun.

Nadine couldn't remember the last time she'd had an experience that someone else would define as fun, just the artificial fun she pretended to have on the rare occasion she accompanied her teammates to drinks after practice. She joined the team to stay in shape and release any anger that accumulated throughout the work week, not have casual conversation with women she didn't care to get to know. Though everyone she spent most of her time with was incredibly busy, they had the ability to carve out time to enjoy themselves. John, whose office neighbored hers and who had a hard time controlling the volume of all of his conversations, was working on rebuilding the deck in his backyard. It didn't sound especially fun to her, but he must have been enjoying it by the way he always offered updates as if she asked for them. Taylor, the new assistant director, was a photographer and had been preparing her first show for a few weeks. Her voice always got a little higher whenever she discussed the highlights and tones she had to edit. Nadine sounded the same no matter what she was talking about.

The oven timer began to beep, and Nadine held her breath as she opened the oven door. The cakes looked good – golden brown and fluffy. Letting out a hushed “Hell yeah,” she removed them from the oven and set them on the counter. *Ok, here's the real test.* Pulling a toothpick from the cabinet that she rarely opened, she stuck it in the center of each pan. When it came back clean, she couldn't stop herself from stomping her feet in celebration. She knew she followed all of the directions as closely as possible, but she

didn't expect everything to turn out so well. Usually, she wasn't one to doubt herself, but baking a cake was so unlike all of the other things she was good at, like identifying flaws in systems and improving operations.

She waited a few minute before removing the cakes from the pan and sitting them on metal racks. Now that she had to wait for the cakes to cool, she wasn't quite sure what to do with herself. Everything she was no longer using was already cleaned and put away. She would usually open her laptop to finally view those alerts from Arnold, but she wanted to honor her commitment to taking a Friday night away from her work. She finally had a few messages from her friends, but decided that she wanted to be truly alone, and would look at them later. She went to the wine fridge to grab a celebratory bottle. She rarely drank at home, as she was usually already sipping from the chardonnay she kept in her desk drawer by the afternoon and immediately going to bed when she was finally home. Because of this, she had a few bottles of Cabernet she'd been gifted that had yet to be opened. She decided to just sit.

Perhaps this was some version of meditation. She changed the music to a 70s Soul playlist, something that made her think of her parents. She turned up the volume so that it went from a pleasant background noise to the only thing she could hear. Now that the oven was off, she turned on her fireplace and sat on the couch. She took down her ponytail, sat cross-legged on the couch, and closed her eyes. Glass of wine in hand, she tried to measure her breathing. *You successfully made a cake*, she thought. "You successfully made a cake," she said. "You successfully made a cake!" she shouted. Eyes closed, she lifted her head toward the ceiling and smiled. The air smelled sweet and warm, something she didn't realize could be smelled. Nadine didn't know why she was so

surprised. She'd been successful in just about everything she'd ever done. She was well-off. She was respected at work. Some of her relationships were strained, sure, but she was aware of that. Perhaps it was the creative aspect of the cake that was unexpected. She was incredibly business savvy, but not the most innovative. She considered sharing her cake-success with Jeannine, who she noticed had been fairly quiet in her head since she found her baking groove, but she knew she wouldn't. "Thank your grandmother for the recipe," she said, eyes still closed.

Someone with a gravelly voice was swooning about love in the background, and Nadine sipped from her glass and tried to measure her breathing. She might look for a yoga class for Sunday. And also call her father. He would appreciate her baking, and would most likely humor some jokes about Jeannine, too. She'd take a few pictures and send them to her friends, who would make fun of her excitement, but she wouldn't mind. She may not be able to cover the cake with sprinkles and sit it nicely on a cake pan like Jeannine had done for her recipe, but there was nothing like a beautiful-iced cake. "Beautifully-iced," she snorted. She wouldn't accomplish that either, but beauty was subjective. Either way, she was proud.

Nadine figured it had been long enough, so she unfolded herself from the couch to finally ice the cake. She laughed a little as she swayed, the aged Cabernet settling into her bloodstream and her head. The music was still loud, so she danced her way over to the counter, pulling all of the bowls she needed in front of her. Grabbing a spatula, she began to smooth the icing over the tops of the cake. The back-and-forth motion of her hands across the pillowy tops of the cake felt therapeutic. She didn't think about anything else, just made sure her two hands worked together to spin the cakes and cover the tops at the

right speed. As the golden color was covered by the rich brown, she began to feel light inside. This was it, the final step. She'd grocery shopped, she prepared, she cooked, and now she finished. After this, all she had to do was enjoy the outcome of all of her hard work. She could smell the cake, and the chocolate, and it was more intoxicating than the wine. Covering the last inch, she stepped back to look at the frosted cake in all of its glory. Satisfied, she licked the bit of icing that had moved off of her fingers, and thought about adding something.

She checked the fridge, but nothing in there seemed appropriate. Unsure of what even belonged on a cake, she looked in her pantry, and found only dry pasta and cans of soup. She reminded herself to stop eating out so much and go grocery shopping. She looked around her kitchen, glancing at the cake for a few seconds to draw some inspiration. Remembering she had a few random candles in a sider drawer, she settled on celebrating in that way. The candles were from her last birthday, when Arnold surprised her with cupcakes at work and embarrassingly called everyone into the lounge to sing to her and watch her blow them out. At the time, it didn't seem odd that she only knew a few of the twenty or so people singing to her. She just knew that it was too much fanfare.

She dug into the spare drawer, the only unkempt place in her kitchen, possibly her entire home. Fishing the candles out from under her stack of old takeout menus, she could only find one – pink and blue striped with orange polka dots on it. “This'll do.” She quickly wiped off the sticky candle, then carefully placed it in the center of the cake. It pierces the top of the cake in one smooth motion, and Nadine's mouth watered a bit. She quickly found a lighter and lit the wick, then stepped back to consider what to do next. It wasn't her birthday, so she didn't know if it would be right to make a wish. There was no



song, and no reason to turn out the lights for herself. The small flame mirrored that of her fireplace in the background. It didn't look too bad, if she could say so herself, so she grabbed her phone to snap a picture as a woman in the background cooed about her lover over a dramatic bassline. The picture wasn't as high quality as the one on Jeannine's recipe. There was a bit of icing on the counter and a dirty bowl was in the back of the shot, but the cake looked damn good. "Ok," Nadine sighed. "Happy Friday."

She blew out the candle, then pulled it out of the cake to lick the icing off as she did when she celebrated birthdays as a child. Setting it down, she admired the cake one last time before grabbing a knife to commence the cutting. She positioned the tip right over the center, then flicked her wrist and made the first cut in one smooth motion. Turning the plate, she repeated the motion to cut her slice. She pulled it from the cake and onto her waiting dessert plate, which came from a set of dishes that was perpetually clean.

"Beautiful," Jeannine said, finally offering Nadine her imaginary support. Nadine looked at the slice of cake, the alternating layers of gold and chocolate brown, and was beside herself. "Goddamn it, this looks good." She set a place at the island, napkin and fork and wine glass. Sitting down, she pulled the plate her face to smell the cake one last time. Not able to wait anymore, she dug her fork in the cake. She admired how the entire slice bounced as she broke the piece off, and slowly, slowly, brought the fork to her mouth.

It was...interesting. The texture was perfect, moist and airy. But the taste was definitely off. It tasted like the powder that had covered her counter earlier. It may have been the flour, or the baking powder. Something wasn't allowing the butter and vanilla to

take center stage, as Jeannine's recipe had promised. And the icing looked delicious, but when mixed with the flavor of the cake, was more bitter than she expected.

She took a sip of wine and tried another, larger piece. Same thing, only worse. Had she measured something incorrectly? Missed an ingredient? She eyed the cake with suspicion. Not understanding, she tried to remember each individual steps. Had she forgotten something when she went to change her clothes? Maybe the spilled milk had thrown off her measurements? But everything had looked so perfect as she mixed it. She hadn't tasted everything, sure, but Nadine thought that was because she wasn't supposed to eat raw egg. It was one of the many rules she always followed just as closely as she followed the recipe.

She considered that maybe it was Jeannine, not her, who had messed up. "Your grandmother makes a horrible cake," she said. She was now sure this wasn't a recipe from the grandmother they shared, who, even though never seemed excited to be bombarded by family every weekend, never cooked a bad meal. All of the excitement and pride she felt just a minute before was diminished. She thought about making her way through the entire slice, but knew that she would never eat something that tasted like this if she paid for it. She pushed the slice away from her and got up from her seat. Her first instinct was to throw the whole cake away, but that felt particularly wasteful. Grabbing a roll of plastic wrap, she began to cover the cake, messing up the smooth frosting on the top. She didn't realize she was crying until a tear fell onto the second layer of wrap, but she ignored it and kept covering the cake.

She sniffled as she put the cake in the fridge and continued to clean up. Mechanically, she followed her nightly routine – dishes in sink, then in dishwasher.

Ingredients returned to their cabinets. Counter wiped off, then dishcloths hung on the bar to dry. Fireplace off, then speaker, then living room lamp. She continued to sniffle, cursing herself for crying over a cake. As she closed her curtains, she looked down at the street. It was almost midnight, and she could see the activity of folks enjoying an evening downtown, but she was up far enough to not hear any of it.

“They probably can’t make a cake either,” she told herself. “That shit’s hard.” Curtains closed, she made sure her front door was locked before she returned to her kitchen to turn off those lights too. She thought about the cake in her fridge, disappointing and surprisingly nasty. It probably didn’t deserve to be thought of in those terms, and Nadine thought that even though it didn’t taste great, she still made it on her own. *Not good enough*, she thought, then grabbed her wine glass and retired to her room, thinking about the work she’d get to tomorrow.

## Tradition

Desiree stood on the side of the stage, pulling on her lanyard as she waited to hear her name introduced. The grating voice of Dr. Park rang through the small meeting room, and microphone feedback cut through every other word he spoke. He persisted, unfazed by the interruptions. One look at the attendees told Desiree that they were losing interest and incentive.

Noah was close enough on her left that she could feel the little hairs on his arms against the back of her hand. He had slipped out of his dermatology session 30 minutes early to make it here on time. He'd heard Desiree's presentation on the newest developments in osteopathy once on the plane, twice last night in her room, and listened as she went over the bullet points this morning over their banana nut muffins. Midway through breakfast, she'd apologized for making him listen to her yet again. He just waved his fork in response, politely explaining that he'd already tuned her out.

"Please give a warm welcome to Dr. Desiree Fox," Dr. Park announced, and Noah squeezed her wrist as she stepped out from behind the curtain to a smattering of uninterested applause. She made her way to the podium, remembering the last time she'd given this presentation. It was to a group of pre-med students, and she'd been impressed by the number of questions they'd asked after she finished. This session full of health professionals that knew as much, if not more than she did, wouldn't be nearly as engaged.

By the time she finished speaking, she'd lost track of time. The applause from the audience was generous, and as she returned to the curtain, Noah's smile couldn't be contained. He opened his arms and she fell into them as always.

"That was marvelous," he offered, and she rested her head in his neck, greedily

wrapping her arms around her husband's waist. He smelled like a mixture of his soap and soil. Most of his time at home was spent landscaping with their young son, Aaron. She was happy he'd brought an of element home with him.

They walked in step with each other to the grand hall, ditching the rest of the session to get an early lunch before they had to separate again for the rest of the day. When they reached the makeshift food court, Noah went in the direction of the salad bar while Desiree looked around the large canisters of soup. As she weighed the pros and cons of chowder over minestrone, she felt a presence.

"Hi!" The tiny voice came from a woman behind Desiree, holding her hand out expectantly. Desiree shook it and offered a polite greeting.

"We really enjoyed your osteopathy presentation, Dr. Fox. D.O.'s don't get a lot of coverage at these conferences." Desiree peered behind the woman, looking for the "we" she referred to.

"I'm Laura, I have a group with me that would love to pick your brain, if you don't mind." Though enthusiastic, Laura was hesitating, and Desiree realized she was nervous.

"I'd be happy to. I'll be right over."

Laura waited patiently as Desiree collected her napkins and a drink, and led her to a table full of men and women chatting over their food. As they approached, the man at the head of the table looked up, met Desiree's eyes, and nodded slightly.

She hadn't been expecting to see Rich here, this time. The nostalgic feelings of home and her husband were replaced with a something different, something Desiree only felt when she traveled alone and met Rich in hotel rooms. In front of this table of students

in the middle of lunch, she could only offer a cordial smile and hope that Noah remained occupied with the salad.

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She should've been taking a nap before dinner, but Desiree sat on the bed staring at the wall. Rich casually walked around the hotel room, putting on his khakis and dress shirt, holding a light conversation about the first thing he would do when he landed at home (call his brother, or so Desiree gathered as she went in and out of listening). Her hair stuck to her forehead and neck and she tried to even out her breathing, which was coming in short, audible spurts. Her foot was falling asleep under the weight of her entire body and she knew her knees would soon follow suit, but she couldn't move. She relished in the glow that came after orgasm and before reality.

The reality was that Noah was at a cocktail reception on the ground floor, and she was on the twenty-fourth in her hotel room with another man. Level twenty-four was where she would freshen up. Then, she would make her way to level twenty-six, Noah's room, to wait for him before they both went to dinner. When their respective companies booked each of them their own rooms, they tried to give one up, but it wasn't worth the trouble when budgets, personal assistants, and hotel personnel were considered. They'd been sleeping in Noah's room since the waterfront view was better than the street view of Desiree's, but they kept the keys to both after checking in. Desiree knew that Noah wouldn't come by without contacting her first, so she used hers to catch up with Rich. The matter with the rooms worked out so well that she felt as though God was giving her permission.

Rich sat at the foot of the bed, putting on his socks. Desiree was still naked and

motionless in the middle of the bed. She and Rich had neatly separated from each other as soon as they were done as if they'd never touched in the first place. If it were Noah sitting there instead of Rich, they would have held each other for a moment or two afterwards, but she and Rich had no real intimacy. He was still talking about something, and Desiree was beginning to collect her consciousness. She needed to locate her clothes, and her purse, and get in the shower, and get Rich to leave in case she needed to welcome some new emotion, guilt or shame maybe, that came with these unexpected circumstances. The gratuitous chatter was only prolonging the onset.

“Did you guys go to Dr. Green’s session yesterday? It was early, but I heard it was fantastic.” Rich’s casual mention of Desiree and her husband’s shared existence didn’t usually trigger anything in her, but she worried that it might this time. She couldn’t anticipate out whether it should have been anger or shock. But there was nothing.

“We did. It was fantastic.” She began to unfold herself from the middle of the bed, scooting to the edge to get her feet on the ground. But she’d gone the wrong way, towards the window, and now had to walk her naked body past Rich to reach her discarded clothes that lay between the door and the mini fridge. She steeled her gaze on the peek of shirt she could see on the ground and walked past him, chest held high and shoulders back, each of the four steps purposeful as she maneuvered around his legs. He didn’t bat an eye or say a word as he buttoned the cuffs of his dress shirt. This was their routine, and it was usually easy and comfortable, but Desiree was felt unsure of herself this time. She wanted to be as careful as possible.

She stepped into the bathroom with her clothing, avoiding her reflection in the mirror as she turned on the hot water. When she’d been in a hotel room with Rich three

months ago in Baltimore at the East Coast Medical Practitioner's Conference, she'd caught sight of herself and immediately cried. Not because of what she'd done and had been doing for four years now, but at how easily she got away with it. Not once did Noah suspect anything, and there was no chance of finding out about Rich at all. Rich wasn't at every conference, but he and Desiree's shared organization memberships, professional networks, and alma mater made it common for them to run into each other in these temporary settings. Sex between them was spontaneous yet expected whenever they crossed paths. Like another hour on the agenda. Desiree was still surprised she hadn't accidentally mentioned it to Noah in their nightly debrief of the day's events. She was free of paranoia and remorse, and enjoyed the brief trysts. But this time, with her husband downstairs, she wasn't sure how she felt.

Clad in a robe, she leaned on the bathroom door. Rich was still in front of the TV watching the local news. His muscular arm was tossed over his chest, his hand massaging the small of his neck. He seemed to be finished gathering his things. He was efficient, the way she liked everything in her life to be. That might've been her favorite part of the whole thing. If anyone else had known about Desiree and Rich, the routine nature of it would make sense.

"I'm going to shower and then probably take a nap for a bit." She let her voice fade out, hoping to convey to Rich that now was the time to make his exit. She knew she was being colder than usual.

"Alright, I'll see you tomorrow?" he questioned. He stood up, collected his bag from the chair and switched the TV off before turning in Desiree's direction.

"I don't know; we may have a lot to do tomorrow." She shivered as he grabbed



her hand, gently massaging her palm with his thumb. “But I’ll let you know. It was nice to see you, Rich.”

“New jewelry?” He held her hand up and looked at the sparkling diamond on her finger.

“Actually, yes. It was an anniversary gift.” She watched as his eyes crinkled in amusement. Her face mirrored his. “Five years. Can you believe it?” This was ridiculous.

“It is a very nice ring. Congratulations to you both.” He gently kissed the stone and then her cheek. He looked at her closely, with the same knowing eyes he always possessed, and raised his eyebrows at her. She knew him well enough to know that he realized something was off, but she didn’t want to talk. She wouldn’t know what to say.

The shower was still running behind her. Steam was starting to slip past her frame into the room around them. She noticed the moisture forming on Rich’s neck before she felt it on her own.

“I have to get in the shower, really. I’ll see you later.”

Rich reached to pull her in for an embrace, but Desiree stepped to the side, leaving him awkwardly inside of the steaming bathroom. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, you didn’t.” She tried to avoid his gaze, but she had nowhere to look but at his face. “I just need you to go. Noah’s expecting me soon, and he may come here first.” She’d tried to avoid voicing that thought, since that was the one that made her stomach flip. She’d never been nervous before, but she knew that if Noah were to catch them like this then something would be over. Whether it would be her marriage or her relationship with Rich, Desiree wasn’t sure. She didn’t want to consider losing either.

“I understand. I’ll see you, Des.” He dropped her hand and went for the door,

smiling and shaking his head as he turned away.

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“What do you think, black or brown?” Noah held up two belts to Desiree, and she pointed to the brown belt in his right hand. He nodded in agreement, then returned to the closet to find the matching shoes.

Desiree lay diagonally across the hotel bed, scrolling aimlessly through her phone while Noah prepped his outfit for the next day. He was moderating a panel the next day, and though he and Desiree hated one of the doctors that would be participating, his longtime mentor would also be on the panel, contributing to his current stress.

“Do you think I even need a jacket?” he asked from inside the large, mostly empty closet. His voice echoed in the hotel room the same way it did when he yelled to her from the kitchen of their home to the living room. “It’s the final slot of the day, so I think everyone will be winding down at the point. What do you think?”

“I think you’re right. No jacket.” She looked up in just enough time to catch him eyeing her from around the closet door. “What are you looking at?”

“Oh nothing, just some strange woman in my bed.” He laughed, hung up the coat that had been in his hand, and closed the closet door. Desiree scooted to far side of the bed to make room for him. On his way, he cut off the ceiling light in the room, leaving only the lamp. A cool glow colored the room from the television, and the water of the harbor shone outside of the window. Putting her phone down, she waited for Noah to get comfortable on his back before she threw both her arm and leg over him, resting her head on his chest. He began to rub her back, soft and rhythmic, as he did every night.

She took a deep breath, listening for his heartbeat. She couldn’t hear it very well,

because of where her head lay, but she imagined the low beat that would be there. “I’m glad you didn’t want to go out tonight. I don’t think I had it in me.”

“If you didn’t, there’s no chance I would have made it. We still have tomorrow, though.” They’d been invited out by a few different groups, but they ended up declining all offers to stay in bed. She needed to wind down after her day, and Noah was always happy to spend a night in.

“We’ll have to make a point of it,” she added. “It’s not often that we end up at these together.”

“We will. We need to celebrate you, Dr. Fox! You blew my mind today. I always forget just how great you are when you present.” He turned to hold her with both arms. “I love listening to you practice, but there’s nothing like seeing you in a room full of people.”

Desiree felt herself blush, and was glad it was dark enough in the room that he wouldn’t notice. Even after three years of marriage, she still appreciated his compliments. Whenever he admitted his admiration of her, she found herself hiding her embarrassment. He assured her that she deserved it, and she was grateful. One of the many things she loved about Noah was his honesty. It was something she hoped Aaron would inherit.

“Did you really think it was good? Even with all the mic feedback?” She felt his laugh rumble through him more than she heard it.

“There was no feedback. Dr. Park got that all out of the way for you.”

“I’m glad you were here for this. Thank you for helping me out, really. It means a lot.” She slid one leg between his, bringing their lower bodies closer to each other. They were so used to laying like this that there was no need to adjust. Every time they wanted

to feel more of each other, it worked. “I forgot how nice it is to have you here when I’m working, too. You need to make it out to these more often.”

“I will. I think it’ll be easier for me to leave every once in a while now that Aaron’s in daycare. I can’t be a trophy if I’m not there to support the breadwinner.”

She playfully smacked his arm. “Tomorrow, I’m the trophy. I’ll put on my most gold-digging dress and sit in the middle of the front row. It’ll be very inappropriate.”

He laughed again, and his hand on her back slowed down until it was barely moving at all. She both felt and heard the change in his breathing, and knew he was asleep. Desiree considered getting up to turn off the lamp and close the curtains. But she decided not to bother. She was too comfortable in her husband’s arms to move for a little bit of light. She tried to sleep, too, but it only took a few minutes for her to accept that, rather than sleeping, she’d be up thinking about Rich, and how his arms were just as comfortable.

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The first time they’d had sex, it was after a long day at their pediatrics rotation. Rich and Desiree was assigned to the same cohort, and for some reason, they were the only two students that seemed to have any empathy. While the other students spent filled the breakroom with complaints about the screaming child who wouldn’t sit still for their shots, or the helicopter mom who wouldn’t leave the room when the doctor asked if their teen drank, smoke, or was sexually active, the pair of them would exchange annoyed glances. They exchanged stories, too, but it was only off the clock and in hushed voices to avoid breaching any doctor/patient confidentiality policies. They were also in a study group together, but the other four students that made up the group rarely attended, so

Rich and Desiree often had a quiet room on the third floor of the library to themselves. They began bringing Indian takeout and playing music aloud to help them over the practice question their instructors posted. It was a Tuesday night ritual. Though they weren't the kind of people who would usually be friends, school brought them into a liminal space that fostered a connection.

That day had been a bad one for Rich. He'd been paired with the Dr. Marshall, who was infamous for being a monster. He berated Rich a few times, loud enough for his gravelly voice to travel down the small corridor that connected the patient rooms. Desiree heard through the walls that Rich had sat a file in the wrong pile on Dr. Marshall's desk, followed by his prediction that Rich wouldn't make it if he "fucked something up again." Desiree knew the patients and receptionists could hear them too, but she was halfway through giving an 11-year-old a vision test, so she couldn't say anything.

Later, when Rich sat on the futon of her shabby studio apartment, they commiserated for a moment. Then they laughed about it, and decided that they deserved a night off from studying. They couldn't afford it, but they were both at their wits' end. Rich suggested they get high.

"Charles sells good weed." He mentioned one of their classmates as he scrolled through his phone. "He can get here in a few minutes if we make it sound like we'll buy a lot. It's good stuff."

"*It's good stuff.* You sound like a narc," she teased, picking up a few scattered books and clothes. "Besides, I can't. I can never wake on time in the mornings when I smoke at night."

"We could go to a bar? I don't think anyone will be out on a Wednesday, though."

“We could have sex?” Desiree didn’t know why she’d said it, but when it came out, she was fine with how it sounded. On the list of things she did to pass the time, sex fell right below reorganizing her closet.

“Desiree,” he scoffed, but never finished the sentence.

“I’m just throwing it out there. I need to go to sleep soon, and it’ll help me get tired.”

He was watching her now, and she knew he was considering it. She could have tried to be a bit more seductive, but she knew she didn’t need to. This was Rich, her kind-of-friend and classmate. They were close by association—the only two mature adults of the six of their cohort. Rich was nice, charming, funny, a bit sarcastic, and attractive, too. He was your standard good guy. But he wasn’t her type. She, on the other hand, was everyone’s type. She was ambitious, kind, and always calm. She jogged to stay fit, not to lose any weight she didn’t want. When she put effort into what she wore and how she did her hair, her friends teased that no one could look away from her. She’d been told she was special by a few men, but she was also nice enough to let them down easy.

Though she was serious, she assumed he’d say no. She was wearing scrubs and an old high school t-shirt. He was sitting in the midst of her filth. They’d never even talked about sex before, keeping their banter to things that wouldn’t cross any decency lines.

When he shrugged and said “ok,” Desiree still wasn’t convinced he was being serious. But then she was laying on the futon and he was carefully undressing her, and this was yet another thing in her life that had just worked out.

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Because she had never thought of Rich in this way before, she was surprised by

how the evening had turned out. Having no opinion of him, she assumed any intimacy between them would be forgettable. But it was memorable, both because of Rich's confidence and the way they were able to maneuver past any awkwardness, and avoid it afterwards. Their relationship didn't change as they finished school, and Desiree could count the number of times they'd had sex again on one hand. While they remained friends in school, they fell out of contact after they graduated and were placed in residencies 800 miles from each other. But when they ran into each other a year later at the Southeastern Physicians Conference (which Desiree, who didn't practice in the Southeast, only attended as a plus one) they talked briefly at the welcome reception, and again at a panel the next morning. He invited Desiree out for drinks that evening, and when she ended up in his room, she felt like they were in school again. They were both more refined versions of the people they'd known, so it was as if it made even more sense than it had before. Thanks to Desiree's reputation as the best young D.O. in her region, and Rich's research hospital's massive budget, they saw each other a few times a year. By their fifth conference, they didn't even bother with drinks. Desiree saw his name on in the program, and jokingly texted him *See you later?* and in within two minutes, he'd replied *What time?* Though each time was better than the last, she was happy to develop a routine. It was how they caught up with one another.

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The next year, she was dating Noah. Desiree had always been a generally happy person, but Noah amplified that. She had memories of him from school; she could only describe him as nice. But they ended up settling in the same city. And when a friend set her up with her dermatologist, Desiree was shocked to see an old classmate at the bar

waiting for her. They began to build a life together almost immediately: they moved in together five months later. During month seven, Desiree saw Rich again, this time in Michigan. Month twelve, Arizona. By month fifteen, she and Noah were engaged.

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There had only been one conference when she had turned down Rich's offer. They'd continued their meetings straight through her marriage, which Rich knew about. But she had a tough pregnancy, and only traveled once when she was 16 weeks along. When he came to her at the breakfast buffet, he asked if they would see each other later.

"No, I'm sorry," she started. With no hesitation, she added "I'm pregnant."

"Oh!"

She offered a smile in return, rubbing her belly the same way she had when she'd told her girlfriends a few weeks earlier.

"Congratulations to you two!" He gave her a short, but genuine hug, then let her go with a friendly pat on her arm. "I'm happy for you." With that, he turned away to find his table.

Nearly a year later, they were back to their old habits.

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Noah returned to their high table with a handful of colorful drinks, dispersing them amongst the group. The horde of doctors would have looked out of place in their slacks and smart dresses at this club if it weren't for the other groups of doctors who looked equally out of place around them. After the catered dinner and reception celebrating the last night of the conference, the attendees had spread themselves throughout the downtown area, stumbling in and out of bars and clubs in packs of well-



dressed young professionals.

Noah and the others at the table were perfectly drunk, and as Desiree took them in, she was happy. The warm intoxication of her friends and colleagues surrounded her. As far as work was concerned, it had been a good weekend. Desiree hadn't figured out her anxiety surrounding Rich yet, but she knew she didn't want to compromise their occasional relationship. Though she tried to put the thoughts aside to enjoy her final night, he kept slipping into her memory. Noah was real and in front of her, and Rich was real in her mind and memory.

"Another shot? Really?" Dr. Park was yelling as another colleague reached over his shoulder to grab one from the table before returning to the dance floor. Noah was standing behind Desiree, one arm around her shoulder and the other flirtatiously low on her stomach. If she'd had one less drink, she would have politely moved it up to keep up the proper appearances in front of mixed company, but she didn't care in that moment. He was holding a conversation with a gentleman to their right, and Desiree had no problem silently curving into him and gently swaying to the song she didn't know as the crowd around them ebbed and flowed, pushing them closer together. She felt Noah's deep laugh through her entire body, and his grip loosened and tightened as his volume increased and decreased. She closed her eyes and relished his touch and the sounds of him enjoying himself.

It felt like those rare weekends in medical school after an exam when everyone would let loose, dropping their serious personas to become the people they'd been before devoting their lives to medicine. Drinking felt best when it was both a reward and a return to themselves. Noah and Desiree were a playful duo. Their friends would often

hold them up as the couple that had it all: successful careers, a stately home, a beautiful son, and a loving marriage. Every aspect of their shared lives supported another to keep them fulfilled. Desiree was thankful for the way her life had turned out, and Noah's hand moving lower reminded her that not only did she love him unconditionally, but she still took pleasure in being with him the same way she did years ago.

Sweating from the sheer temperature of the place, she gently removed herself from her husband's grip to take a shot with one hand, followed immediately by just enough water to count as a sip. Two chiropractors she'd met at the reception were seated on the stools surrounding the table, holding an animated conversation loud enough to hear over the bass. The taller one, maybe Janet, said something Desiree couldn't make out and waved to someone. Rich was walking towards her. His shirt was almost identical to what she'd seen him in yesterday, the shirt she'd pictured him in as she fell asleep the night before. Her head was spinning.

"How are you?" His question was casual, without any underlying hints of mischief. He slid into the barstool next to hers and kept his eyes on her.

"I'm good, and you?" Her slur was so apparent that it made her giggle. She should have formally greeted him, charade as if they weren't so well acquainted. But he was already sitting across from her and carrying on like they were comfortable with each other. Desiree was certainly more comfortable than she should have been. Maybe her brief answers to his general questions fooled those closest to them.

"I'm having a *fantastic* time." Her head rolled to the side just a bit as she threw both arms in the air.

"Yes, I heard you." Rich looked around for a waiter as Desiree looked for Noah.

He was still carrying on with his conversation a few feet away. The music was more mellow than it had been just a minute before, and she watched the large music video projection on the wall. The chiropractors fell out of existence. The feel of Noah's hand still ghosted below her belly button.

"Are you drinking anything in particular?" Rich had her attention once more, signaling to a waiter.

"Hm, water." Desiree didn't bother to look at him as she responded, focusing so intently on the music videos that she noticed the delay between the video and the music in the club. When her vision began to go blurry from this, her eyes fell back to Noah, who was now looking back at her. The guilt and shame she'd been expecting never came, but she was nervous. What for, she didn't know. Rich kept a measured distance from her. She suspected he'd also seen Noah. Noah blinked three purposeful times—their covert signal for saying "I love you" at parties that she'd read about in a magazine years ago. She returned his message. The blinks temporarily cleared her head.

"Are you staying out late tonight?" Rich was eyeing the empty glasses on the table, still keeping his body turned away from Desiree.

"Not too late, no. We want to do some sightseeing before we leave tomorrow." *We* slipped out casually. Rich seemed unfazed.

Noah appeared on her other side, placing a hand on her thigh and bobbing his head to the music. "Are you ready to go, babe?" His eyes were still on the crowd.

"Soon, yeah." She placed her hand on top of his, and he turned to look at her. Only a moment later, he noticed Rich behind her.

"Hey, Rich man! Long time no see!" Desiree leaned back so they could shake

hands in front of her, and it was all she could do to not fall back into the mass of moving bodies behind them. Her eyes froze on their hands, hypnotizing her as they bobbed up and down. She'd never noticed how similar their hands were. The way her stomach turned surprised her, and made her want to scream. *So this is what it's like to have them both here.* She knew she was in the right place, standing with Noah, two people bound by love and law and talking to Rich as a pair. But she wouldn't have minded standing next to Rich, since he was who she was used to being drunk with after a day of panels and sessions.

“Noah, how have you been? Des was just telling me it's been five years. Congrats.”

Noah's usual drink limit had come and gone early in the night. He grabbed both of Desiree's arms and pressed her tightly to him before pulling her face in for a sloppy kiss on the cheek. “Yup, just last month. Five years down, a lifetime to go.” Desiree and Noah exchanged a flurry of sloppy high fives. Rich watched silently with a smile.

Desiree looked between the man she'd been in bed with the day before and the one she'd be in bed with tonight, both loud and friendly and attractive and here. Her ability to tell them apart was slipping.

“Let's drink to that! One more round,” one of them said.

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The large clock above the lobby mantle chimed to signal noon, and Noah didn't budge from his spot in one of the oversized chairs by the window. The light was shining into the hotel lobby, and Desiree watched as he strategically positioned his head out of the direct rays of sunlight so that they fell only across his body. The sunglasses inside

were a dead giveaway that he'd had far too much fun the night before. Desiree was actually a bit disappointed they didn't go on the 10 a.m. walking tour like they'd planned, but she wasn't surprised. She'd appreciated the sleep this morning more than she'd expected to.

She sipped Gatorade slowly as they waited for the airport shuttle. "I talked to your mom. She's bringing Aaron back after dinner tonight."

"Wonderful," Noah responded, checking the time and adjusting his glasses. He fell back into his position. That would be the extent of their exchange.

Desiree looked at him splayed across the chair, and felt a wave of admiration wash over her. He didn't often allow himself the freedom to drink and enjoy himself the way he had the night before. At home, Aaron consistently woke up just as the first light appeared outside and Noah singlehandedly spent those first few hours with him every morning. She was happy he had experienced the fun he deserved for working so hard all the time, and was doubly happy that they'd been together for the last few days.

A large green van appeared outside the door, and she called Noah's name while collecting their various bags of notes and free giveaways from the weekend. They moved with silent ease, Desiree grabbing their small book bags and the fruit they'd collected from the check-out desk and he their two larger suitcases, maneuvering around each other and out the door of the hotel to the van. She stood back as he handed the bags over to the attendant. Once loaded, he led them onto the van as others began to arrive. They settled in a row in the middle of the vehicle. He pulled down the window shade and leaned his head on the thick fabric.

"Hey, how about Rich last night? Wasn't that fun?" Noah's eyes were closed

behind his glasses, and the genuine excitement in his tone unnerved her.

“It was. Who knew he was here?”

“Yeah, he said he goes to these pretty often, but I never see him. Does he come to yours?”

Desiree skillfully kept her voice even as others began to board the van.

“Sometimes. We run into each other at the larger conventions, but not too often.” She wasn’t sure how deep Noah would dig, but she didn’t want him to ask any more questions. Not until she had a better idea of how this would play out.

“Wow, you’ll have to let me know when. That guy’s a lot of fun. Brilliant, too.”

Noah’s tone was full of admiration, which surprised Desiree. She’d always admired Rich, but Noah’s positivity helped her appreciate how well he fit into her life even more. “I will, I’m sure you’ll see him again. Try to find him on Facebook maybe?” Her body was buzzing with an energy she hadn’t felt all weekend. She stretched her legs to relieve some of it. It was an energy that usually meant things were going well.

“That would work. I wish we could have exchanged numbers.”

“I have it.” Desiree couldn’t stop the words from coming out as easily as they did. But Noah did nothing but smile and nod with his eyes still closed and his head against the window.

“I’ll have to reach out,” Noah continued. “He’s really a great time.”

“I bet he’d be happy to hear from you.” Desiree leaned onto his chest, settling into him as the van began to bump through the parking lot. He placed his arm around her, pulling her head into his neck. The buzzing was still there, but she was comfortable. She was going home to her family, her life that fulfilled her every day. She’d see Rich again

in a few months. That's how it always went. Somehow, these two halves of her life felt more complete now that they'd merged. They fit together better than she'd imagined they could.

## Groundless

Erin and her mother, Lisa, sat side by side in the pew, their hands rested on top of each other on her mother's thigh. On Lisa's other side, Erin's father, Lawrence, trembled slightly, shoulders hunched over and shaking under thick black wool. It was June, but he'd told Erin he didn't want to buy a new suit for his son's funeral. Erin's dress was made of a light fabric and covered her feet—she knew her mother wanted her to wear a pair of heels, so she figured it best if she covered her flat sandals. The entire church was hot, just the way Erin remembered it. She hadn't been to St. Christopher Lutheran Church in the three years since she'd graduated college. Even then, it'd been a hassle to get her there for Easter and Christmas, but she occasionally attended as a thank you for her parents allowing her to sleep in her childhood bedroom over winter and summer break without asking her why she went out almost every night she was home.

It hadn't changed at all since then, nor had it since she was a child. The stained glass windows showcasing the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were beautiful, but graphic. The colored light that shone on to the pew made her tired, as it always had. As a child, she always struggled to stay awake in church, and the bright blues, purples, and reds of Jesus's various tunics made her feel like she was dreaming. Unfortunately, her brother's funeral wasn't a dream at all.

Pastor Coleman droned on about a psalm, and Erin counted how many more pastors, ministers, and elders were lined up to speak. There were six, four men and two women. She recognized all of them from greeting them a few Sundays a month as a child. They would probably recognize her too if she hadn't recently dyed her hair an unnatural shade of green. Everyone, especially her mother, hated it.



“Did you mean for it to look like grass?” she’d asked when Erin arrived four days ago.

“No, but I like it anyway.” Erin had initially wanted a deep green that would only be visible in the direct sun over her natural black hair, but she got too excited at the hair store and also purchased bleach. Her hair looked like the fall grass she loved, as the season began to change and the leaves and foliage lost their color, and the grass paled as it died. Her hair had only been green for three weeks, but she was already excited to change her entire wardrobe to compliment the pastel shade. Her mother had made it clear that having green hair at a funeral was in poor taste.

“Green...was David’s...favorite color,” her father tearfully reminisced over dinner the second night she’d spent at home. Erin offered a “hmm” in response, leaving the interpretation up to him. She hadn’t known that, didn’t know why she would. She was sure he never knew her favorite color. It was black. She hoped her father didn’t think her hair was some kind of sign, or homage. This was an impulse decision she’d made on her own, as were most of her decisions. They were eating a pie from Mrs. Edwards, their neighbor since their parents had moved into their neighborhood over 30 years earlier. Erin wasn’t sure what to make of this—why were people making her parents food? David hadn’t lived at home in ten years, and she in three. Weren’t food donations usually for widows? Erin had no precedent for losing a brother, nor did her parent’s for losing a child, so everything felt foreign.

Pastor Coleman finished his lament and made space for Minister Livingston to come to the podium. Minister Livingston’s robes were long and white, with raised gold buttons on the purple shoulder pads and thick, gold ropes falling down the front of it. Of

everyone in the pulpit, he was the smallest, with no beer belly or height to denote any physical authority. He distinguished himself by wearing the most ornate robes—everyone else had donned black for the occasion, with a flap of color here or there. The congregation was quiet, with a few snuffles coming from a row here or there, but the minister, in all of his bright robes and heavy ropes, leaned into the mic to clear his throat anyway.

“Young brother David...was a good man,” he began, leaning over the mic as if it was too short for him. “He was a prosperous man. He was a man of his word.”

A few “hmmphs” went up around the sanctuary, and Erin remained silent.

“I know his family,” and with this, he turned his gaze to Lawrence and Lisa in the first pew, then looked at Erin for a beat longer, “can attest to that. If you called, he answered. I don’t know anyone in this church who can say anything bad about this young man.”

Erin counted two lies in his statement. Erin hadn’t called David in years, but when she had, he didn’t pick up. She could say a few bad things about him, four coming to mind immediately as she cast her eyes on the casket in front of her.

David’s face was printed on the poster next to it. She’d had the privilege of carrying the poster and the large easel it stood on all morning, trying to fit it into the limousine without stabbing anyone with one of the blunt legs. It was David’s way of hassling her one last time. The picture was from the previous Christmas, which Erin had skipped. He was in front of their parent’s tree, wearing a bright red sweater and a large smile. In the back of the picture was the mantle, covered in stockings and family photos with various combinations of the four of them from throughout the years. It really was a

sweet picture, with his red and green complimenting the brown skin, straight teeth, and dimples. His smiled so hard his eyes were almost closed. Some family member who had been tasked with putting together the program had put a tacky, cloudy border on the picture, making it look like it belonged on some chain email. Her parents hadn't asked Erin to create the program. She wasn't asked to do anything. Her father assured her that they'd outsourced the planning so that she wasn't troubled during an already upsetting time. Erin knew that her mother didn't want to share her grief with her daughter in that way. The table next to the poster, covered in flowers and an old red tablecloth, held an 8.5x11 print of his professional headshot. It was black and white, and it showed the David that Erin recognized. He was unsmiling, almost scowling. His eyes were hard, and the collar of his suit was a deep blue and probably cost more than her rent. Erin didn't like that picture, but she found it to be the most accurate representation of her brother.

“This young brother built himself a life that inspired all of us.”

Erin's mother squeezed her hand. She shuddered at the slick feel of her mother's sweat mixing with hers.

“He left our humble home and forged a path, but never forgot where he came from. Man,” the minister continued, slipping into the tone that made it clear he was about to give a sermon, “he always, always gave back. And not just financially either! Un uh, I'm not talking about money. I'm talking about love! Prayer! Time!”

People began to clap around her.

“And that! Is what we will miss the most.”

A labored “amen” rose from the back of the church. Erin turned to look to see where it come from, but as soon as she turned around, she saw 200 sad, sad people

looking to the pulpit. She turned back to the front.

“Yes, that is what we will miss the most. But the Lord doesn’t want us to mourn for too long, now. We need to uplift each other! Celebrate each other! Let this life, gone too soon, remind us of what is importance. Love each other! Pray for each other! Spend *time* with each other! Because it’s not promised, no it’s not.”

Lisa continued to clap, and silent tears came down her face. Erin looked away and back to the closest stain glass pane. On this pane, Pontius Pilate presided over the trial of Jesus. Though the pane was small, there was an impressive amount of detail: Jesus, in a white tunic, kneeled on the ground while Pontius, in white, purple, and red, scowled down at him with one arm raised and pointed to the side. *Pontius orders the crucifixion of Christ* the bottom of the pane read. When Erin was little, she thought it said Chris instead, and wondered why a man named Chris was being yelled at, not knowing what it meant to be crucified, either. She understood now, since David spent much of their childhood teaching her what that meant.

Minister Livingston was shouting something that Erin couldn’t hear over all of the clapping and shouting coming from behind her, and as people began to stand, she stood too and slid out of the pew. She hoped her mother, who was now standing and crying held up by her husband wouldn’t notice. Better yet, maybe she would think Erin was overwhelmed by emotion and needed to leave, which was true. Erin kept her head down as she walked towards the doors at the back of the sanctuary, but her hair drew attention no matter how much she tried to hide it. That, and the fact that everyone who had been hootin’ and hollerin’ a minute ago now worried about the sister of the dead rushing out of the room.

“Are you ok?” An unidentifiable, but friendly voice asked as she walked, but she kept her head bowed and sped up. She didn’t look up until she made it out of the door, where she was met by an usher who held out a wad of tissues.

“Do you need a minute, ma’am?” She looked at the face of the kind woman. She was dressed in all black as well, with white gloves and a white boutonniere. She looked at Erin expectantly.

“Yes, thank you.” Erin grabbed the tissue, hoping the usher wouldn’t notice that her face was dry, makeup still intact. She walked away from the usher to the benches on the side of the lobby. The sounds of the sanctuary were muffled out here, but she could tell that the noise had died down and the next person had begun to speak. She basked in the quiet, and felt nearly alone. The usher did look in her direction every few minutes, and while Erin was a bit annoyed, she wasn’t upset. The usher was doing her job, looking out for those that were overcome by emotion and needed some momentary support. Now Erin felt bad. This poor woman was here, worried about a mourner who wouldn’t accept her help. Erin hoped the ushers had at least been trained in handling the different forms grief comes in, if at all.

Erin knew she should return to the sanctuary, but the longer she sat in the cool, bright lobby, the less clammy she felt. It reminded her of the lobby of Parkside Prep, the school she and David had attended as children. It was a lot like this—high ceilings, marble walls, large, shiny white tiles on the floor, good acoustics. Between classes, it was filled with the chatter of the children of the upper crust. After school, when the weather was nice and the doors opened, the sounds of the athletes practicing mixed with those of choir practice. During classes, it was silent. That was when Erin spent the most time

there. She had always been in trouble for something.

In fourth grade, she'd been sent to the Assistant Head of the School for ruining a magic trick. During an assembly, she'd volunteered to assist Maurice the Mysterious. He'd taken one of her shoes, made it disappear behind a curtain, and reappear on a table. But Erin had seen his sleight of hand, and wanting to share her knowledge with her friends, pointed to the split in the curtain while still on stage. 119 other fourth graders gasped, pointed, and laughed at the magician, who gracefully continued his show. Erin knew from her teacher's look of embarrassment that she'd done something wrong as soon as she returned to her seat, and rather than return to her classroom after the assembly, she found herself waiting in the grand lobby to be called into the office. Within minutes, David, then in seventh grade, appeared in front of her with the 13-year-old version of the hard face the headshot showcased.

"That was stupid. You knew you were going to get in trouble," he spat at her.

"No I didn't! Why would I try to get in trouble?"

"Because that's what you always do." He looked past her and into the window of the office. "And if you didn't know that was wrong, then you really are stupid." These were the words that hurt her most. *Stupid*, she realized later, was a substitute for *different*, which was how her mother often described her, in a tone much like David's. Both words were equally hurtful when they came from those closest to her.

"The trick was easy; I was just showing the audience what he did." She hated when David insulted her like this, but it happened so often she almost expected it whenever she made even a minor mistake.

He cut his eyes at her, squinting and scrunching up his nose. It was a face he

never made when their parents were around. “You’re always doing something you have no business doing. Stop doing shit like that! It’s dumb, and I always have to stick up for you.”

“You *never* stick up for me, David,” she replied, ten years of anger spilling out of her mouth and bouncing off of the marble walls.

“I do, you just don’t know because you’re always doing the next dumb thing.” Rather than wait for her to respond, he left her in the hallway, looking up at the ceiling and trying not to cry.

But she cried now, alone, in the lobby of the church. She heard footsteps approaching and hardened her face to ward the usher off, but it was her mother. Her face was wet as she stood in front of Erin.

“What are you doing out here?” Her voice was deeper than usual, the result of six nights of crying.

Erin didn’t answer, just looked at her.

“You need to get back in there, now.”

“Why, mom? I can sit out here. No one noticed— “

“Right now, Erin.” Her voice trembled, but was still stern. If she had left the sanctuary with any sympathy, Erin knew that was now gone.

“I would rather sit right here, actually.” Erin’s voice trailed off. She clutched the wad of tissues, now so small they were no bigger than a plum.

Lisa reached out and grabbed Erin’s arm, squeezing it and pulling her to get out of the seat. Now in her sixties, she wasn’t as strong as she used to be, and Erin knew this move was coming. It was the same way her arm had been yanked whenever her mother

had to pull her away from a situation that she felt had escalated too quickly, or the way it had been yanked when her mother pulled her away from a group to yell at her in private. With a little effort, Erin was able to stay seated, but refrained from looking at her mother. She tried to yank again, and Erin looked away, embarrassed by her mother's weakness and obvious show of emotion. Her mother was attempting to reprimand her in full view of the usher, who Erin noticed was trying her best to look away from the commotion.

“You...need...to...come...back...inside” her mother said through gritted teeth. Her grip remained on Erin's arm, but she no longer pulled.

“No, I don't. I'm more comfortable in the lobby. I will come back when I'm ready.” Erin spoke to her mother, but watched the usher, who was now facing the closed door to the sanctuary. She really knew something about boundaries. Her mother let go and stared at her. Erin didn't have to look at her to know it was the same gaze that David used to place on her.

“Well, be ready soon.” Her mother walked away from her quickly, nearly running back to the sanctuary. The usher opened the door for her mother without looking at her, then closed it, and remained facing the door. Erin laughed at the usher, and her mother's antics, and her own tears. From every perspective, her mother's interaction with her had been ridiculous. To the usher, it probably looked to be fueled by grief, but Erin knew that was her mother's way—using force to intimidate those around her into doing what she said. When Erin was young, it often worked. As an adult, she no longer feared her mother, just like she no longer feared David. All of those years of intimidation were clearly instances of desperation. Her mother had almost no other way to persuade her, or anyone, which Erin only knew because her mother had never tried anything else.



Erin and her father sat next to each other at a table at the front of the hall, silently eating their baked chicken. Erin was amused by the setup- the church had obviously employed the same arrangement they did for wedding receptions. She and her parents were placed at the sweetheart table, looking out at all of the other who'd come to honor David. Her mother was making her rounds, stopping at each table to thank them for coming, briefly reminiscing, laughing and hugging when appropriate. Her mother was an obvious bride, basking in the love being shared. Her father was the unenthusiastic husband, and Erin was the impolite, disobedient child. Erin knew grief was different for everyone, but she almost admired her mother's acting.

Though she could hear the rattling of central air throughout the church, the sight of the sea of black clothing was making Erin hot. Though she'd taken the time to straighten her hair as best as she could, her sideburns were beginning to curl up. She now had green coils framing her face, and she didn't want to put her hair up because her black roots would be too visible. This was the only time she regretted her choice of color: if she'd gone with the original color she'd wanted, the darker green, the black hair at her scalp wouldn't be as noticeable. But the lighter green, while complimenting her complexion, needed more upkeep than she was expecting.

Only four people had commented on her hair to her face. Her Aunt Leslie said it was "different," but nodded in appreciation. Aunt Leslie was Erin's favorite. Though she was fairly old school, she was one of the few family members that would listen to and support her when she was younger, even if she didn't understand or agree. Erin often wished her aunt had children. They would be loving children, well-mannered but fun, and

would probably be nice to her. She wished she could have had some backup growing up. While she had a few cousins on her father's side who would visit during the holidays, for most of her childhood, David had been her only company at family gatherings. There, he would skillfully hide his contempt for her, only making a fool of her in private. But he was rarely warm, and often left her alone in the large houses of their parent's friends. On the many occasions they were placed at the kids table, he would sit as far away from her as possible. This was better than being forced next to him, which had been her everyday reality growing up. By the time they were teenagers, they only spent time together when they had to, but the school, weekend activities, and daily family dinners were constant when they were young. David was an expert at being merely cordial to Erin in front of others, and cold to her in private.

Her father must have made it through his chicken, because his knife began to scrape the plate. Every time she looked over, he was running the knife over the bare ceramic as if he were still cutting. Back and forth, his arm worked the knife over the plate, the fork slack in his other hand. His eyes were closed, and Erin thought he looked weary. It was as if the sadness had passed, and exhaustion was all that was left.

“Dad. Dad? Are you ok?”

He looked at her, arm now frozen. His eyes were red and glassy, and the bags below them that were always there were now a deep purple. “Yes,” he croaked. “I am...alright.”

She could barely hear him, and leaned over to get closer. “Do you want more food? Water?”

He stared at her for a minute, then cleared his throat and spoke up. “No, I'm

finished. I'm going to find your mother." He rose from his seat and looked around for a second before making his way to the left side of the room, where her mother was speaking to a child Erin didn't recognize.

As he walked away, Erin considered how old he looked. Her father had always been tall, the reason why Erin and David had both towered over their mother since they were preteens. But he looked smaller now. His suit jacket looked too big, and his posture was downcast. She wondered if this was a suit he still wore to work. Though he could retire any day now, he continued to go into his office every morning. He always talked about his love for law, and how he was made to be an attorney. His coworkers always described him as the upbeat partner, keeping spirits high whenever the day got too stressful. Even at home, he'd been the jovial parent. It was easier for her and David to get along when their father was holding court. But as Erin looked at him walk away, she couldn't see that anymore. She wondered if he'd been aging this way, or if the death of a child accelerated the process.

David and Lawrence could have been brothers. David had inherited his soft features: round face, large nose, big eyes, and permanent smile lines. He was lucky enough to get both of their father's deep dimples. He looked sweet, just like their father. But he'd inherited their mother's disposition, which hardened his features within seconds. Erin looked like a perfect combination of both of her parents, her father's big eyes with her mother's small nose and prominent cheek bones. Before it was green, her mother always commented on how pretty Erin's hair was, and how the curls reminded her of her father's when they were younger and he'd grown an afro. She and her mother shared a similar style, though Erin preferred the technicolor versions of her mother's neutral

staples. Somehow, though, she'd developed a personality all her own. Perhaps that was the reason David and her mother never seemed to understand her. They were versions of each other, and her father, when not the most spirited person in the room, was awfully quiet, and typically absent, preferring to be in his study, or in his bedroom, or walking alone. Erin, who needed to be surrounded by friends and noise all the time, was more of a nuisance than anything.

When she'd told her parents she wanted to go away for college, they were supportive. When she told them she wanted to major in communications, her father said "that would be a good fit." Her mother said "of course you do." She'd never explicitly told David, who at this point was already in his third year and rarely talked to her, but she was sure he wouldn't have a positive reaction to her choice. Two years into her program, she'd felt as if she found her real family: a group of students from all over who liked to talk and party just as much as she did, and weren't bothered by her tendency to talk louder than the appropriate volume. Whenever she was back home, she felt stifled, unused to the restrictive nature of the people she'd grown up with. At the table, she felt stifled again, aware that if anyone looked to the front of the room looking for her parents, they'd see her alone, staring back at them.

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Erin woke up in a full sized bed, her back tight and foot hanging in midair. Her old bedroom was now referred to as the *guest suite*, her childhood blue walls and canopy bed replaced with a pale brown and white farmhouse furniture. With all of the money that had gone into updating the décor, she couldn't believe that her mother would settle for such a low quality mattress. Even the silky hotel sheets couldn't hide the rusty springs

that poked and prodded.

It was 7:23pm, meaning that she had slept for most of the day. The day before had been more exhausting than anything. After the repass, extended family returned to her parent's home and stayed for hours. Erin had tried to slip away, but her mother's stare kept her seated in the front room, providing the requisite information when cousins asked about her. How's work going? *Good*. Where's your boyfriend? *We broke up*. I'm so sorry for your loss; you must feel terrible; how sad. *Thank you; yes, I do; yes, it is*. She would occasionally get up to bring someone tea or wine, and help her mother refill the chips and crackers she'd put out. After the gluttonous meal at the church, she didn't understand how or why folks were still sitting and eating. Erin hadn't lived there for years, but she wanted everyone out of her house.

Her father had newfound energy around 8:30 p.m., and her mother had never lost her momentum. By the time everyone left, it was after midnight. Erin was essentially stuck to her chair. The only reason she stayed downstairs until the last guest left was because she planned on pouring herself at least a triple glass of her tequila. She preferred tequila, but rum was all her mother kept in the house. She swayed with exhaustion into the kitchen, and poured enough to knock herself out.

The light coming into the window had woken her up at dawn. Rather than the striped curtains she'd had, her mother has sprung for sheer white panels that did nothing to darken the room. She stayed up for a bit, responding to text messages from friends that she'd missed during the day. "Stay strong, girl! See you when you get back 😊" was from her best friend. While Erin didn't hesitate to tell any of her college friends about how much she didn't like her brother, Flora was the only friend who actually heard the hurt

underneath the apathy. Erin couldn't wait to leave, either. Her boss had been incredibly understanding, and had given her almost two weeks off. She planned on going back to work early, but she still had two more nights in the guest suite.

Erin scrolled for a few minutes, before she registered the headache she had, no doubt from a day of fake emotional labor, no sleep, and rum. She decided on hair of the dog, and went back to the kitchen, poured more, and waited for it to kick in. Her parent's voices drifted down the hallway, and while she could have listened, she didn't care to. It didn't make sense for them to be up so early, anyway. Weren't people in their situation supposed to cycle between depression and sleep? Though she threw the rum back quicker than she had in years, she still couldn't fall asleep because of the light in the room. She removed the scarf from her head, her last defense against the curls that were spreading from the roots down her hair shaft, and covered her eyes with it, tying it behind her head. She awoke again at 11 a.m., and decided to take a shower and some painkillers for the headache that had yet to subside. She considered sitting in the backyard, or perhaps taking her dad's car and driving around. But when she got out of the shower, she heard voices coming from downstairs. There was more company, and rather than going downstairs to possibly have to entertain them, she put on a new pair of pajamas and got back in bed.

It was now after seven p.m., and she heard her mother's footsteps coming towards the door. She expected her to barge in, but instead, there were a few raps on the door before it opened just enough to let in a sliver of light from the hallway.

“Erin, honey, are you awake?”

“I am, come in.”

Her mother opened the door, turning on a small lamp on the dresser and standing in the doorway. She looked at the curtains, the rug, the headboard, at everything but Erin.

Erin moved her feet to free up space on the bed. “You can sit if you want. I’m actually just getting up.”

Her mother nodded, and walked over to the bed as if that was what she intended to do anyway. Her hair was pulled up into a neat bun, and she was wearing makeup, too. She knew her mother was known for being put together, but Erin assumed that at a time like this, she would have relaxed her usual habits. Even her loungewear looked neat. She took pride in nice things because she hadn’t always had them. She tried to teach Erin to appreciate them too, but it didn’t stick as well as it had for David.

“How are you feeling? Didn’t feel like getting out of bed today?”

“I was up for a little bit, but I didn’t have any plans. Staying in bed was the easiest option.”

“Hmph.” Her mother looked around the room again, crossing her arms. “So, what do you plan on doing tomorrow?”

Erin wanted to believe that she was concerned, or curious, but her tone made the judgement clear. “I’m not sure, I probably need to pack...” Both of their eyes landed on Erin’s barely opened suitcase across the room. “Or maybe clean? I’ll catch up on some work.”

“I thought you didn’t have to work?”

“I don’t, but I want to. I want to ease back into my work when I get back.”

“Ok,” her mother let out a deep breath. “So do you plan on leaving the room at all?”

Erin was taken back nine years, to when her mother would sit on her bed, on the rare occasions she was in it, to ask if she planned on spending any time at home with family. Wrapped up in all things high school, Erin would rarely be home before nine on a weekday, or at all on weekends. For a while, her mother tried to discipline her into spend some quality time at home, which Erin didn't understand. She figured her mother didn't want her in the house as much as she didn't want to be there.

“Sure, I'll leave the room. Do you want me to do something in particular?” She was still in the same position, laying on her side looking up at her mother. She could have challenged her, and rose up to sit on the bed rather than laying casually on the pillow, but she didn't.

“Not necessarily. It would be nice to see you. We still have guests coming in. Maybe you could eat a meal with us.”

Erin thought of the various pastas and desserts in the kitchen, all things she would enjoy in different company. “Of course I can eat a meal. I didn't know we had plans.” She didn't mean for her tone to slip into one of annoyance, but her voice had done it before she could stop it.

“Ok, if you don't want to be in the house, you don't have to.” Her mother stared at her, and she stared back.

“Are you kicking me out? Of your house? As an adult?”

“No, I'm pointing out that you've been up *here* all day. It's like you're not here at all. Why stay if you're not going to be a part of the activity?”

“The activities...of a funeral?” She waited for her mother's reaction to change, to show that that wasn't what she meant, but it didn't. “I attended the funeral, and hosted



people after. Is there some itinerary I'm not privy to?"

"You don't have to get an attitude, Erin. I just think you should be here with us. Sulking up here isn't fun for anyone."

"Funeral's *aren't* fun. And am I not allowed to rest? I'm not sulking."

"Whatever you're doing up here, it's upsetting your father. It's upsetting me."

At this, Erin pulled the covers back to allow herself to rise. "Do you fucking hear yourself? I didn't upset him, David did. David *dying* did."

Her mother quickly opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again. Her eyes widened, and then got hard in that David way they did. "Don't blame this on your brother." She spoke slowly and quietly. "That is unfair."

"What do you want me to say, Mom. That you're upset because I'm in bed? You would kick me out of the house, which I'm only visiting, for staying in bed? That's not rational, and I'm not the reason you're being irrational."

"You are wrong, Erin."

"No, I'm not. If you want me to talk to people, fine, but you don't get to come up here and accuse me of being the reason everyone's in a bad mood. Did you forget what even brought me home?"

At this, her mother pulled back her hand and slapped Erin across the cheek. Though it barely hurt, the sound was loud enough that her mother looked just as shaken as Erin felt when she'd realized what happened. Erin held her breath, waiting for her mother to apologize, or say something. Silently, she stood up and walked out of the room, leaving Erin sitting on the bed with the quiet sting of her mother's hand on her cheek.

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The next morning, Erin sat in the front room of the home. Her suitcase was next to her, and she was waiting for her parents to return home. They weren't there when she'd woken up, and she wanted to speak to them before she left. She was going home a day early, unable to stay in the house after her mother's outburst. She reminded herself that she just wanted to say goodbye. To say that she didn't feel welcome in her own home, and that she knew this was a stressful time, but that her mother had no reason to treat her the way she had. She would tell them it may be a while before she felt comfortable coming home again. Finally, she would say that she was there for them if they needed anything. She hoped they would agree that this was best. She wasn't ready to do any work to save a relationship.

Her father's car pulled into the driveway, and she attempted to relax her body language. She slouched a bit and made sure both feet were on the ground. Her phone lay on the table next to her. She considered picking it up and pretending to scroll, but she didn't want them to see her before she did them.

Her father came in first. He was a bit sweaty—she wondered if they had taken a walk in the afternoon heat, or had an argument. When he notices her, he slowed down and lowered his eyes.

“Your mother will be right in.” He looked at her for a second, then down again. “She wants to apologize to you, but she doesn't know how to.” He then noticed her bag next to her. “I'm not surprised you're leaving, but I'm sorry you're going so soon.”

“I'm sorry too, but I don't think I need to stay any longer.” She wanted to continue, but remembered that her mother needed to be here for this, too.

He walked to and sat on the couch across from her. It looked like he was bracing

himself, which made Erin double check to make sure she was relaxed. She didn't want her plan to go awry.

Her mother entered, sweaty and red-faced. "Hi, honey."

"Hi, mom." Erin felt her voice attempting to get higher, but she worked to keep it level and light, as if she wasn't speaking to the woman who had hit her 12 hours earlier.

"Are you leaving?"

"Yes, I think I should probably go."

Her mother began to pace around the room as if she were unsure where to look or stand. Erin didn't know why either of her parents were having trouble looking at her.

"I am really sorry about last night. I was upset, and handled that the wrong way." Her mother was looking at the fern on the windowsill. Her father was looking through the door towards the hallway.

Erin looked at her mother. She was surprised to hear this so quickly. It would have sufficed if her mother had resisted, but because she offered it so readily, she wanted to dig a little deeper. "What are you apologizing for?"

Her mother shuffled back and forth. Erin didn't like this—her mother sometimes made her uncomfortable, but it was because she was being overbearing, or aggressive. She lacked her usual intensity in this moment, and Erin didn't know what to make of it.

"I apologize for the way I spoke to you. And especially for...hitting you."

"Ok."

Her mother looked at her, then at her father. He was now watching them closely.

"I'm sorry, too. This is hard on all of us," he added, holding eye contact and speaking slowly.

“What are you sorry about?” Erin was genuinely interested. While the apology was nice, she didn’t know if her father had done anything wrong over the past few days.

“I should be supporting you through this. I know we’ve shut down, but you need us, too. It’s not fair for us to be so closed off, and then expect you to be there for us.” He nodded toward her mother, still standing, and Erin realized that it hadn’t been only her mother who wanted her around.

“While I appreciate the apology, I don’t think I need it. I actually think it’s ok if we take some space. These few days have been a lot, and I’m not used to being back here I guess. That’s why I think I should go.” She reached to pick up her bag, but her mother stopped her.

“No, Erin, I’m sorry about other things, too. I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you. And the way David treated you too.” Her voice began to break, but she took a breath to continue. “I know he wasn’t kind to you, and I’m sorry I didn’t help you.”

Erin looked to her father, but he now moved to make his way out of the room. “I didn’t, I, what do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m sorry I treated you how I did.” She took her husband’s spot on the couch, across from Erin. “You know I love you, right? I always have. But that doesn’t mean I was good to you. And we both know that.”

“Ok.” Erin didn’t know what to do. She wanted this to be a goodbye, not a confession. She didn’t want her mother to own up to her years of mistreatment, not right now.

“I want you to remember your brother as a good man, but I know that may be hard for you. And I’m afraid that’s my fault. I always saw him as being just like me, and

having a child that wasn't like me—I didn't know what to do.”

Erin, again, found herself waiting for her mother to continue. She wanted to hear everything before she responded. She knew different could mean dying her hair green or having not spending money on expensive clothes, but she also knew it could mean everything. Erin also realized that she didn't know everything about her mother's relationship with David. All she'd ever perceived was that they seemed to be on the same team, and she was the outsider.

“And I didn't realize that David picked up on the way I treated you. And your father did, too, and he tried to help me, help both of us, but it just didn't work. And I realize, now, how I've managed to ruin my relationship with my daughter.”

Erin was most surprised by how candid her mother was being. This was what she'd always wanted to hear, but she'd always thought this would be something her mother would confirm on her death bed. “Why are you saying this now, mom?”

She looked at Erin now, making her grow hot with discomfort. “Because when we found out David was gone, I immediately thought about what if you were gone, too. And that was a scary thought. A heartbreaking one. And I couldn't sit with that thought knowing that I hadn't treated you with the love and respect you deserve.” Though her voice had returned to normal, the tears flowing freely down her face gave away whatever she was feeling.

Erin sat still, looking at the bridge of her mother's nose, directly between her eyes. Her was her mother, apologizing, and all Erin wanted to do was leave. She could forgive her, maybe, she wasn't sure, but she couldn't do that while her mother cried to her, in the house that was full of nothing but unhappy memories. Her mother, who had

instilled nothing but nastiness in her son, and who made it hard for Erin to remember him as anything but mean, was now crying in the front room. Her mother, who had just last night yelled at her and slapped her, or had, the day before, tried to physically control her in a church. None of that even began to reflect the years of damage she had undoubtedly caused Erin.

“I’m sorry, for all of this.” She cried openly now, her face in her hands.

“Mom,” she began, making sure to speak as clearly as possible. “I want you to know that I hear you, and one day, I may forgive you. But right now, I think it’s best that I go.” Erin stood with her bag in her hand, looking for a minute more. Her father was nowhere to be found. Her brother had been buried. And her mother sobbed in front of her. Quietly, she turned away from her mother on the couch and left, as she’d been left the night before.

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Erin opened the email and saw a red banner across the top, alerting her to the external sender. The email address was her mothers, and the message was short. *Erin, I hope all is well. Talk to you soon.*

She left it open for a few minutes, leaning back in her desk chair. She wasn’t going to respond; she knew that wasn’t the purpose. It was a peace offering from her mother, a modern olive branch. A small message to let her know that the lines for communications were open. She would do similar things when Erin was a child, and David had been especially nasty to her.

When Erin was 14 and David was 17, he was left in charge for three days while their parents were out of town. By that time, he was Ivy League-bound and known for

being responsible, caring, and a leader among his peers. Though his acts of anger toward her had waned as they'd gotten older, he'd yet to extend the same kindness to Erin.

Their second day alone was a Thursday. She was in the living room watching TV after school. David came home with a girl. Erin recognized her as one of the girls that circled around his group of closest friends, but she didn't realize they had a different relationship. Not that she would, since she and her brother enjoyed entirely separate social lives, but every night at the dinner table she was updated on the latest of his social developments. When Robin walked through the foyer and up the steps, presumably to David's room, he didn't say a word to Erin. He merely gave her his usual look of disdain. They were only in the room for ten minutes before Robin returned downstairs next to Erin on the couch. It had begun to thunderstorm outside, so between that and the TV, she wasn't able to hear much of what happened.

"Hey, Erin! What are you watching?"

Erin was suspicious, since David usually made it known to all of his friends that she wasn't worth talking to. But Erin was also friendly, and liked getting to know people, so she took the bait. "Hi, Robin. I'm catching up Jeopardy. What are you up to?" She didn't want all of the details of whatever plans she had with her brother, but she wasn't sure what else to ask.

"I'm just hanging out. I was going to do work with David, but I don't want to anymore, so I'll just hang out with you."

"Is everything ok? He didn't do anything, did he?"

Robin blushed, and shook her head. "No, of course not. I just didn't want to sit in his room anymore." They sat in a comfortable silence for a while before Robin left a few

minutes later.

A few seconds later, David appeared at the bottom of the steps. He walked around for a bit, and Erin could sense something was off. His anger seemed hotter than usual. He paced around the house, from kitchen to dining room to foyer, before he stopped in the doorway to the living room.

“Get out, Erin.”

Being a teenager, and recently unafraid of her brother, she only looked at him before returning her gaze to the TV.

“Get *out*, Erin.” With this, he marched over to Erin grabbed her by the arm, and forced her up from the couch.

“Get off of me, David!” She attempted to remove herself from his grip, but three years of athletic training overtook her adolescent muscle. He pushed her out into the foyer, out of the vestibule, and out of the front door. Though she yelled the entire way, David said nothing. He simply pushed her out and closed the door. Through the thunder, she heard the lock of the bolt. She began to bang on the door, and looked around. It was so dark outside that she couldn’t make out the neighbors’ houses. She tried to walk around the perimeter of the house, but the grass proved too slippery for her shoes. Taking a seat on the porch, she began rubbing her arms to stay warm in her thin uniform. David didn’t open the door for almost an hour.

“What is wrong with you! I’m going to be sick, David!”

He only scoffed, and went upstairs to his room.

When her parents returned two days later, she was in fact sick. Erin went to her mother to tell her what happened, and for once, she believed her. She spoke to David,



who was grounded for his behavior. Erin was afraid that he might retaliate, but her mother made sure he didn't. Erin knew that because of a note that had been slipped under her door that read *Erin, I am sorry David did this to you*. She had nothing else to offer her, but these words were one of the few apologies she ever received from her. It didn't happen often, but she knew that when her mother wrote her outside of a text message, that was the way she knew to make amends.

Erin left the email open – she knew it didn't warrant a response, but she didn't want to close it just yet. This wasn't passive aggressive, or performative. This was her mother's apology for her actions both then and now. Erin wasn't ready to accept it just yet, but she could acknowledge the attempt and appreciate it. She stared at the computer screen, and waited for the urge to cry, an urge she hadn't felt in weeks, to pass.