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## Let Them Eat Cake

Courtney Yeager  
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# Let Them Eat Cake

Courtney Yeager

Honors Thesis

2012

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You have a slice of cake, and what it reminds you of  
is someplace that's safe, uncomplicated, without stress.  
A cake is a party, a birthday, a wedding. A cake is  
what is served on the happiest days of your life.

—Jeanne Ray

## Let Them Eat Cake

My mother has always said she belongs in the kitchen. Sure, she voted in presidential elections and wasn't surprised when I, as a seventh-grader, mentioned that Elizabeth Cady Stanton wanted all moms to find a real job. But whenever I glanced up at my childhood home, tucked neatly into the hillside towering over town, I envisioned my mother dicing zucchini or fingering the grout between counter tiles as she pored over hardback cookbooks, turning pages as delicately as she would crack an egg.

Even though I hadn't been inside my parents' house in months, I knew exactly where my mom was, right now, at seven-thirty on a Tuesday morning. She was padding into her oversized kitchen and dropping blueberries into pancake batter, which used to be my job before I was big enough to turn the spoon. I could picture her warming maple syrup—the real stuff—over the stove and substituting milk where a standard recipe called for water. For years I watched her, then assisted her, to the point that I'd adopted her love of cooking as my own. Though I'd never admit it out loud, I missed her on mornings such as this, when the fog was just starting to lift and the grass was gradually changing its shade as the dew evaporated. The mornings had been our time when I was younger. When I first burned cinnamon rolls, I'd been giving Mom details about my first kiss behind the middle school's dumpster, and she'd divulged every moment of her first date with Dad while she taught me that sliced apples and raisins are crucial to making the perfect French toast. But it's been nearly a year since I've cooked with my mother.

Down Taft Hill, under the overpass, and in the heart of Milford, Ohio, I was making pumpkin muffins in my own kitchen inside the bakery. Four months ago, when I leased storefront property on Center Street to open Let Them Eat Cake, I had installed yellow-and-white-striped floor-to-ceiling wallpaper from Arnie's Home & Bath and had flat-out refused to industrialize the room with stainless steel countertops. My motto was that going to work should feel like being at home, and since my roommate, Mortie, let Vitamin D milk curdle in the fridge and left half-eaten bags of Fruit Loops unfurled on the kitchen table, I preferred this kitchen instead. The only problem with establishing and maintaining such a kitchen—and the entire business, really—was how *expensive* it was. Though the bakery attracted a fair amount of customers, the economy wasn't what it used to be, as my sister kept reminding me.

I added a pinch of baking soda to the mixture in front of me. Aside from using measuring cups for sugar and flour, I eyeballed all of my ingredients. The pumpkin puree was the recipe's final step, and I sloshed all fifteen ounces from the can into the bowl. As I picked up the wooden spoon, I paused to consider the Cuisinart mixer on the prep counter. It hadn't been touched in a week. I went through phases of using and not using certain appliances in my kitchen. Something about whisking egg whites with a dinner fork or kneading dough with my hands could be therapeutic—the way you could throw your entire weight into something as simple as making bread.

I plopped heaping scoops of batter into flimsy muffin liners and pushed the sheet into the oven. They only took twenty minutes to bake. I scraped my index

finger along the inside of the bowl to taste the mix. The extra dash of nutmeg I'd thrown in really complemented the pumpkin. This, I would guess, was what autumn would taste like.

In the front room, there was a jangling sound as someone tried the locked door. The clock above the stove read a quarter to eight. Tess, my cashier, was never this early—was never early in general. Wiping my hands on my apron, I hurried to the seating area, painted the same Easter-egg yellow as the wallpaper in the kitchen and dotted with white tables and chairs reminiscent of old ice cream parlors—the ones that sold more root-beer floats than anything else.

I stopped when I saw my mother on the other side of the paned glass, clutching her purse to her small frame and smiling in that reserved way she'd never quite mastered so that her thin lips nearly disappeared into her mouth. It had been almost a month since we'd seen each other, and even then our meeting had been brief—a far-too-formal obligatory catch-up over identical cups of black coffee. But she always called first, and she'd never been to the bakery.

Grabbing the keys off the counter, I unlocked the door. “Mom,” I said, not masking my surprise.

“I had to stop by the post office, but it's not open yet,” she said, traces of her Southern accent detectable only in a few words. Somehow she'd never quite mastered the short *a*. “Is this all right?”

“It's fine,” I said. What was she *doing* here? She relaxed her shoulders, letting her purse slip down to the nook of her elbow. “I'm just getting ready to open, but you can come in.”

My mother, arguably the only woman in Milford done-up on a weekday, clacked across the threshold in her sling-back pumps, one of many pairs that exaggerated her height but still left her three inches shorter than me. “I just thought—” She paused. “Wow, this place looks great, Callie.” She traced her fingers along the worn silver frame encasing a snapshot of the banks of the Ohio River. “I mean truly. You did all this? By yourself?”

“Just Mortie and me.” As my best friend and roommate, Mortie was obligated to help me arrange the kitchen and paper the walls. But my family also should have been there, picking out paint colors and asking to have desserts named after them—the classics, too, like “Nora’s Key Lime Pie.” Instead, my older sister was the only one in my family who’d played a role. When I appealed to her and her lawyer husband for capital, they mailed me a blank check from Boston, instructing me to fill in whatever amount I needed to open the bakery. “I don’t want to know ‘til I see the bank statement,” Laurel said, her resounding voice staticky over the long-distance connection. I kept calling it a loan while she insisted it was a gift, and eventually we agreed that she’d never buy me another birthday present if the business flopped, and that was that.

As my mother glanced around, I couldn’t tell if she was more impressed by the bakery’s interior decorating or by the fact that it existed at all. “It’s really lovely,” she said. “Quaint.”

“You could’ve seen it any time.” I was just stating the obvious.

Mom looked down at the floor tiles—confrontation was not her strong point. “I wasn’t sure you’d want me here.”

As much as I missed my family, or, at the very least, missed having *a* family, of course I didn't want her here after what had happened last November. My mom had kept her distance over the past six months, grabbing coffee with me every few weeks to check in. Our conversations were brief—I hadn't even mentioned my decision to open the bakery. And I hadn't seen my father at all, apart from the Christmas Parade put on by Saint Veronica's. I'd recognized his tweed jacket from across the street and shuffled into the crowd before he could notice me. As far as I knew, my parents didn't learn of Let Them Eat Cake until *The Milford Chronicle* slapped an article featuring the bakery, photo inset, on its front page. I'd half-hoped to see them at my grand opening in January, but they didn't show.

During the Vassar Debacle, as my roommate had dubbed it, my father, who didn't expect to see his youngest daughter back from his alma mater without a business degree, was furious when I'd strolled into their foyer with a bulging duffle bag a week before Thanksgiving and announced my withdrawal from Vassar and determination to enroll in culinary school all in one breath.

"I won't hear of it, Callie," Dad had sputtered, inching closer and closer to my face. His white dress shirt emphasized the crimson color climbing up his neck. "I'm calling Dean Abbott right now." Then, to my mother, "Nora, get the number." She didn't move, but she didn't say anything either.

I had stayed silent as Dad ranted, keeping my eyes trained on the contents of my luggage that had spilled onto the hardwood. "You're not a stupid girl, Callie—you're really not. But you're acting like an idiot." His voice was echoing off the walls, forcing me to hear every word twice. "I had to pull so many strings to get you

into Vassar. And don't think for a second I'm paying one *penny* for you to go to some cooking school." He paused for a breath, recomposing himself. "*Imagine* what the school's trustees will say at Board meetings. I'm ashamed."

I had so many defenses in my arsenal. He thought I was lazy—that I spent time rolling joints or doing some other drug paraphernalia rather than studying for my business exams. It's not like I was stupid—I'm just not a "school" person. Dad didn't understand what it was like to get a "C-" on a test you'd truly studied for, or to have your economics professor force you to see a tutor. Dad wouldn't hear of me applying to the French Culinary Institute directly after high school, but I couldn't envision myself working in anything besides the food industry. Had I received my degree in business, the course of study Dad had not-so-subtly suggested, he expected me to assume his position as president of the bank he'd founded—a job that didn't appeal to me in the slightest.

As my father fumed, my mother—my jobless, stay-at-home-mom of a mother, a docile, Southern belle in every way—just watched. She watched me jam the overflowing clothing back into my bag and hoist it over my shoulder. And she watched her husband take two steps back from me as I opened the front door. And when I turned around on the porch, she watched me say "Fuck you" to my stunned father before hurling my stuff into the trunk of my Acura and driving away.

After four months of avoiding the bakery, here my mother was, in my shop, clashing with everything from my yellow walls to my cluttered bulletin board behind the register.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

She riffled through her bag until she found a sleek envelope with my name scrawled in loopy cursive across the front. “I wanted to come in-person to invite you to our anniversary party.”

I’d forgotten their thirtieth was coming up. As a child, the sixteenth day of April had been akin to a holiday. It was the one day each year that Mom didn’t cook anything and Dad took a personal day at the bank. They’d drive the fifty-nine miles up to Cleveland and see something off-Broadway, or they’d rent a ritzy penthouse suite for the day, doing those unmentionable things that I preferred not to think any older adult did, especially my parents.

Their anniversary dinner, however, had always been the same when I was little: Thai take-out in front of the latest Blockbuster, with Laurel and me on either side. They claimed it was the best part—being with the family they’d created—but we saw right through that. Though we knew our parents cared for us, they’d always seemed a little more in love with each other than they’d ever been with their two daughters.

“The party’s two Saturdays from now, on the day-of, at the house,” Mom said, passing off the card. “Laurel and Will are flying in with Jesse—”

“They’re *flying* from Boston?” I’d just spoken with Laurel yesterday, and she’d only gushed about Jesse’s first word (“cat”) and the new Paul Klee exhibit at the museum, which she was coordinating. There had been no mention of her impending visit.

“Your father and I really want them here to celebrate. It’s a big day for us, and we want *both* our daughters there. Please just think about coming, Cal. That’s all I’m asking.”

I crossed my flour-dusted arms across my chest. “See, *you’re* asking. What does Dad have to say?”

“Your father...” She twirled her wedding band like she always does when she’s nervous.

“Jesus. He doesn’t even know?” I hadn’t expected him to—not really. On the rare occasion that Mom defied Dad’s wishes, she certainly didn’t boast about it.

Mom pushed a strand of streaky brown hair off her face. “Callie,” she said, her eyes pleading, “your father and I love you—but we don’t understand. You could have gotten your grades up—”

“I was failing!” If I hadn’t voluntarily withdrawn from Vassar, I’m sure they would have kicked me out. On top of all my academic issues, I just didn’t want to *be* there anymore with those East coast clones in their Sperry’s and seersuckers—all the while claiming they were alternative non-conformists.

I moved past my mother to flip the door sign. It was a few minutes past eight. “I’ve got to open, Mom.”

“I’m not trying to make you angry, Cal. Here, why don’t—”

The bells sounded as Tess, a white-blonde, recent high school grad with dreams of becoming an electric violinist, rushed through the door, bobby pins protruding from her lips like fangs as she tried to tame her hair. Today, thank God, she had remembered to remove her eyebrow ring.

“I’m late, I’m sorry, I’m late,” Tess said, stepping behind the counter to transfer chilled quiches from the café’s fridge to the display case. She may not be the hardest worker, and she definitely wouldn’t qualify as punctual, but there was something endearing about Tess—her Chuck Taylors? Her Hi-Liter-green backpack?—that made me hire her within five minutes of her interview.

My mother stared at her with unmasked interest, the way she’d often studied my friends at weekend sleepovers and cast parties for school plays. The younger generations baffled her, from their affinity for gritty concert Ts to their social ineptitude beyond the digital world.

Tess, who seemed equally as put off by the Stepford wife before her, gave my mother the once-over before asking, “Did you want to order something, ma’am?”

My mom and I both hesitated, but it was she who spoke first. “No, thank you. I’m just leaving.” Then, to me, “Please think about it.” She did another scan around the bakery, appraising it for I’m not sure what. “You’ve hired someone. I’m glad.” Without glancing back, she left.

“Who’s she?” Tess asked as she double-checked the till in the register, muttering numbers under her breath to keep track.

“My mother.” Tess glanced up, most definitely losing count. “No, I don’t want to talk about it,” I added.

I picked up a short stack of mail, which I hadn’t had time to sift through yesterday. The free *Super Shopper Magazine* was at the top, teeming with coupons for half-priced car washes and buy-one-get-one cheeseburger deals at Wendy’s. Underneath was a letter from the Pontiac Valley Treasurer’s Office—this month’s

water bill, no doubt—and another one from the Northern Ohio Collection Agency. I tore open the letter and scanned through it quickly: “Dear Ms. McLaughlin...Our client’s records reflect that you owe an unpaid balance...your last payment in February...within thirty days...Sincerely, Donald Humphrey.”

I laid the page on the countertop, letting its contents sink in. I’d been reported to the collections agency? I’d only missed one month of rent—and I was planning to send in a check. Opening a business had proven to be nearly impossible, but I had done it—and people actually *liked* my food. I almost had enough to pay off what I owed. Of course, then there was April’s payment, which was already a day or so late. I thought back to all the business classes I’d taken, then all the ones I hadn’t taken. The bakery just wasn’t generating enough revenue—busy days offset the slow ones, making for a mediocre profit that apparently wasn’t cutting it. If the bank foreclosed the bakery, I wouldn’t have much left.

The timer in the kitchen sounded. “Shit.” I hurried through the door and grabbed the tea towel from the oven’s handle. Through the tiny window, the orange muffins looked dark. As I reached for the tray, my finger slipped through a hole in the cloth. “Damn it!” Reflexively, my hand shot back, pulling the tin with it. As it clattered to the floor, the sheet overturned, shooting little orange orbs all over the kitchen. I sucked on the tip of my throbbing finger and removed a tub of Country Crock from the fridge. Using a napkin, I dug out a dollop of margarine and applied it to the burn—a trick my mom had taught my four-year-old self after sticking my hand too far inside the toaster. I shut my eyes and took some deep breaths. The letter would have to wait. I needed to compartmentalize.

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As the sun climbed higher over Milford's valley, I could hear customers trickling in and out while I prepared various cookies and cakes, trying to get Donald Humphrey and his letter off my mind.

Keeping the menu interesting was a task in and of itself, but I adjusted the specials each day of the week. Most of my recipes I'd stolen from my mother, the kinds that had been passed down verbally rather than memorialized on a Crisco-stained notecard. All of the baking—the croissants, cinnamon rolls, everything—I did myself. I desperately needed an assistant but knew I couldn't afford one. Tess had volunteered, yet her offer came with the warning that she'd never used an oven before. "Well, never without help," she'd added. At any rate, it's more important that I have someone manning the register.

For the past month, I'd been perfecting my own version of the chocolate-chip cookie. Amateurs don't realize that cookies require more salt than recipes prescribe. Every time I'd made them, they'd sold well, but I knew I could do better taste-wise. I looked at the batch before me, crisped perfectly around the edges. Tentatively, I bit into one. The melted chocolate chips oozed on my tongue as I chewed slowly, evaluating. They were good, by any standards, but almost too salty this time. And perhaps I could add more chocolate chips if I decreased the sugar by a fourth of a cup.

"Callie?" Tess pushed through the swinging door.

"Busy out there?"

“Just the lunch rush. I’ve totally got it covered.” She picked up the platter of cookies. “There’s someone who wants to order a cake, though. Can you come out?”

“Sure.” I untied my apron.

Right outside the kitchen, a couple was holding hands and talking quietly. I recognized the woman as a relatively frequent customer—a proponent of dipping coffee cake into her actual coffee, which was exactly what I’d meant it for.

“Hi, I’m Callie McLaughlin.” I extended my hand.

“Sarina Pearson,” the woman said, “and this is my fiancé, Tom Frey.”

Sarina’s cropped, dull blonde hair coupled with the slight creases on her forehead suggested that she was in her early thirties, while Tom was at least ten years her senior. Their lopsided smiles matched in that way most couples tend to resemble each other over time.

I gestured towards a table, which was completely bare except for a set of salt-and-pepper shakers crafted to look like French baguettes. “So, you’re interested in a cake?” I asked, opening my yellow notepad to the first blank page.

“Well, we have sort of an odd request,” Tom said, folding his hands in front of him. “We’re getting married in two weeks, and we were wondering what your experience with wedding cakes is.”

I raised my eyebrows. Wedding cakes, with their tiered layers and high level of importance as far as wedding days went, were beyond my realm of self-learned expertise. But I could try it, I supposed—I’d try anything at this point. What was the going rate for wedding cakes these days? Two hundred? Three hundred?

“Well, I have to be honest with you,” I said. “I’ve never made one before, but I’m confident I could do it.”

“We wouldn’t be asking if we had another option,” Tom explained matter-of-factly, as if that shouldn’t offend me. “But we sort of decided ‘why wait?’ and that Betty’s Bakery place over in Rothdale makes you order three months in advance.”

I couldn’t imagine ever running a business that successful. “Well, I’d be happy to do it,” I said, full of determination. “Do you have any idea what you want?”

“Something big, right babe?” Tom asked.

Sarina nodded. “But elegant, though. Maybe like three layers and definitely chocolatey,” she said.

“Not all chocolate, though,” he said.

“I can’t believe I’m marrying someone who doesn’t like chocolate,” Sarina said, searching my face for what I assumed was female sympathy.

Tom traced his fingers up and down Sarina’s forearm. “You can’t help who you fall in love with,” he said. I was thankful no one expected me to respond to *that* comment. Maybe, on some subconscious level, this clichéd “head-over-heels” love was the reason why I’d never even considered doing wedding cakes. I half-wondered if it was too late for me to bow out.

After discussing details, we decided to follow their black-and-white color scheme. With any luck, I’d be balancing tiered layers of chocolate, caramel, and peanut butter cake, and covering the whole ordeal with white icing. And, though I wouldn’t deem myself artsy, I hoped to improve upon Sarina’s vision of the cake’s black, flowery decal, which she’d eagerly sketched on my notepad.

“It has to feed about a hundred guests,” Tom said. “Important people, too, so make it a good one.” He winked at me.

“Will do.” I doubted I even knew a hundred people in Milford and surely couldn’t name more than eight whom I’d consider inviting to my wedding. Hypothetical wedding, that is—running your own business didn’t exactly allot time for relationships. And becoming one of those people who constantly says “well, for *my* wedding” had better not be part of this job description.

“If you want to come in sometime next week, we could do a taste testing,” I offered. Wasn’t that what people did?

“Yeah? Monday works for me,” Tom said. “Can you—”

“Get away from the restaurant?” Sarina finished. “Probably. I’ll ask Mark tonight. Thanks so much for doing this, Callie.” Sarina shook my hand again before lacing her fingers through her fiancé’s. “Really, you’re saving our wedding.”

I thanked them, saying I’d call with questions, as I herded them to the door. From the window, I watched Tom open the passenger’s door for Sarina, releasing her hand only after she was safely inside. They were almost a younger version of my parents with their handholding, their completing each other’s sentences, their eye contact that conveyed everything without saying anything. I both wanted their relationship and was repelled by it. As a couple, they had each other to rely on. If, say, Sarina’s business were sinking, I’m sure Tom would have found a way to save it.

I turned away from the street. By this point, the lunch rush had died down—but there *had* been a rush. “How’d we do?” I asked Tess.

“Really good, boss.” She found calling me boss funny, given the proximity of our ages. “We’re almost out of bread, and those cupcakes only lasted like five minutes.”

“Excellent. Let’s try to keep this up.” But it wasn’t that simple. I needed a lasting solution for a business that, in its very design, wasn’t able to sustain itself. Daily sales in addition to this wedding cake, no matter how much I charged for it, weren’t going to cut it.

“They were such a cute couple,” Tess said, reminding me that beneath her winged eye makeup she still harbored the naiveté of a child.

Or perhaps I was the immature one, instinctively disliking the couple because I was afraid I’d end up too reliant on another person for happiness, just like them, or my parents—or worse, wouldn’t.

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“It sounds like a shotgun wedding,” Mortie said, liberally filling my glass with round three of Pinot Noir. We only delved into our well-stocked liquor cabinet on weekends, but we found no shame in toasting to our good health every weeknight—usually more than once.

I swirled the red liquid, watching the glycerin-like peaks form and streak down the curve of my glass. “No! She didn’t look pregnant at all.” I took a sip, letting the wine linger until my gums tingled.

“So this is just you being bitter towards happy people. Again.” He furrowed his thick eyebrows and grabbed a breadstick from the basket between us.

“You know,” I said, “a month ago you would’ve been on the same page as me.”

“A month ago I *had* to be on the same page as you.”

“I’m not bitter toward my happy *friends*. And I like James, you know.”

“Do you?” Mortie stood up to clear the carbonara remnants, as was our custom. If I cooked—which had become more likely in light of Mortie’s omelet fiasco of ’11—then he had to clean up.

“I mean I wouldn’t say he’s good enough for you, obviously. But he seems sweet. And cute—which is saying something since we never agree on guys.” They had met a few weeks ago at one of Kent State’s LGBT mixers, and James was on his way to becoming Mortie’s first real boyfriend.

“Glad you approve. I’m going out with him later tonight.”

“Are you?” I tried to sound enthusiastic, but what was *I* going to do tonight? He’d been seeing James a lot recently, and they weren’t even dating yet. As I watched Mortie rinse dishes, I already felt nostalgic for him. Two days ago, I’d browsed Netflix and added a handful of second-rate films to my queue. If nothing else, I’d cozy up in front of the TV with our shorthaired cat, Lolita. Really, though, I should do something sociable, like head over to Blue Brews, the only bar in our town of twelve thousand, for a couple of tall boys—or whatever young professionals were ordering these days. I’d need to meet new people if Mortie wasn’t going to be around as much.

I picked up the wine bottle, our second of the night, and contemplated pouring another cup before swigging directly from the container instead. While

Mortie loaded the dishwasher, I wandered into the adjoining family room to lounge on the raggedy couch, pulling a Vassar blanket up to my armpits. Our apartment was homey—in a cramped, first-time renters kind of way. The leather la-z-boy with the ripped arm mismatched the plaid couch, which further clashed with Mortie’s collection of kitschy souvenir spoons cluttering the mantle above the non-working fireplace. I loved it here.

After I’d told my parents of my withdrawal from Vassar, I’d driven straight to Mortie’s old apartment on Kent State’s campus. Frankly, I had nowhere else to go. Since eighth grade, Mortie had been my best friend—an unlikely bond that had developed when he dumped me following our four-month romance, which had gone as scandalously far as handholding. I didn’t recognize his true sexuality until high school, and Mortie himself didn’t admit it until even later. His parents and brothers—a close-knit family of orthodox Jews—weren’t so accepting of Mortie’s entirely unorthodox sexuality, and he’d had few interactions with his family after coming out last spring. When I showed up, completely desperate, on his Stars Wars welcome mat back in November, Mortie’s other roommates were already threatening him with eviction. Without his parents’ support, he’d been struggling to pay rent at Kent’s exorbitant prices. So, on the first of December, we moved into a tiny, two-bedroom apartment, just three streetlights past Town Hall and thirty minutes from Kent. The place was cheaper than Mortie’s previous room, but he was still struggling to pay his half with just his on-campus job.

From the couch, I listened to Mortie clinking bowls against plates in his nightly game of domestic Tetris, which the dishwasher almost always won. “Should I open more wine?” he called.

I surveyed the level of Pinot Noir. “Nah, I’m stopping soon.”

Mortie entered the family room, snatching the bottle from my grasp. “You’re getting a little tipsy for a Tuesday,” he said.

“That’s not true. I’m fine.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Long day.”

“Callie.”

I could feel the alcohol warming my face. “My parents. They’re having this thing. A big anniversary party.”

“Another Clark and Nora McLaughlin soirée—just what the townies need to tide them over ‘til the Fourth of July bash. Looking for a date?”

“Shut up!” I said, laughing. “I’m not going.”

“Of course you’re not going. I think I knew that before you did. What’s *really* wrong?”

And, because I was sure he wouldn’t let it go, I told him about Donald Humphrey.

“So you just didn’t pay last month’s rent?” he asked.

“And...I’m a little late on this month’s, too.”

“You didn’t even tell me you were behind! And you’re the responsible one.”

He seemed more confused than anything.

“I can’t do it all!” The smoke detector above my head was blinking; its batteries were about to die. “I have zero help besides Tess, and she can’t even cook. I can’t be the business manager and the baker—and I’ve only missed a month! Couldn’t they be a little lenient?”

“Cal, *you* got yourself into this. You wanted to start this company to get more experience before culinary school. We knew it was a gamble.”

“But I can do it! It’s off to a rough start, but I *know* I can.”

Mortie hooked my chin, forcing me to look at him. “You clearly have the talent. Nobody’s saying your food isn’t good—the economy’s just gone to shit.”

I rested my head on his shoulder, letting his day-old five o’clock shadow prickle my forehead. “I know, but I don’t have another plan, Mort. Everything’s riding on this. Maybe I *should* go back to Vassar.” I released a puff of air as I allowed those words to settle in the room.

“Nope, you’re not quitting this.”

I reeled back. “It’s not quitting! It’s going bankrupt.”

“What about your sister?”

“I know Laurel would give me the money, but I can’t ask her again.”

“And your parents?”

“*Really?*” I would sooner *go* bankrupt than appeal to Dad, even though—as the almighty president of Pontiac Valley Regional Banks—he could probably make the problem disappear. My downright pigheadedness was something I’d inherited from my father.

“Why did I even open the shop if culinary school’s what I want to do? Maybe I don’t even want to go anymore.”

“Stop talking like that. We’ll figure it out. I’ve been applying for jobs—”

“I don’t even know what to do with the damn letter,” I said. “I need a long-term solution—a loan’s only going to help me make it another month. And I can’t just call my mom for advice like other people do. My sister’s halfway across the country with her husband and baby—it’s just shitty, this not having a family anymore.”

“What the hell, Cal?” Mortie interrupted, sitting up straight. “Do I not listen to you complain every single night, even though I know you won’t take my advice? And when you backed into that snow bank, I didn’t even make you pay for my taillight. Seriously, you *fold* my boxers. Am I not your family? We’re in the same boat here.”

He was right, of course. Through it all, we’d been the one constant in each other’s lives. Sometimes Mortie’s sheer presence, the sense of coziness he just exuded, made everything else fall by the wayside. Having someone to come home to in the aftermath of the Vassar Debacle—that had made the difference over the past few months.

“See, you should be thanking me,” I said. “I bet your mother didn’t even fold your boxers.” I grinned before finishing the wine’s dregs.

“Look at us, a couple of kids. Barely paying our bills, yet somehow eating gouda cheese instead of American—”

“It glows in the dark!”

“Gouda’s six dollars a pound!” The money I set aside for good cheese was one of our recurring fights, which I suppose was indicative of our relationship.

“Will you hang around with me tonight?” I asked.

“I’m supposed to see James.”

“Please?” I wasn’t in the mood to be alone in our apartment, which went from being too small to uncomfortably spacious when only one person was here. If James were becoming a permanent part of our lives, Mortie would spend less and less time here. Not today, though. I needed him.

He sighed loudly and leaned his head against the wall. “There’s something about you, kid.”

After Mortie texted James, blaming the late-notice cancellation on me, of course, we watched old Saturday Night Live clips, arguing over who had more raw talent, Kristen Wiig or Andy Samberg, until we could see Ursa Major through our kitchen window. After a few unsubtle hints from Mortie, I dragged myself to the kitchen to make stovetop popcorn, melting in butterscotch chips just the way he liked. Popcorn was a feat Mom had never mastered, which I couldn’t understand. Vegetable oil in a pot—some things were that simple.

Back in the family room, I nestled against Mortie’s stomach, the way I used to with Laurel back when we were kids and she was still bigger than me. “You’re too good to me,” Mortie said before shoveling a fistful of popcorn into his mouth.

As I watched the screen, I let myself begin worrying about Donald Humphrey and chocolate-chip cookies and saying *fuck you* right to my dad’s face. But then I felt Mortie dropping popcorn kernels onto my head, maybe on purpose,

maybe not, and then I was sitting up, shaking out my tangle of hair and shoving him as he laughed and streaked his butterscotchy fingers across my forehead, and I just knew that some things would be okay.

## Listen

Georgia Tate pressed her new Bushnell binoculars flush against her eyeballs. She twirled the center focus with her arthritic fingers, making the stretch of Center Street under her window suddenly much clearer. Everything seemed in order. Dr. Morehouse was just opening his veterinary clinic, late as usual. And Georgia could see Meghan Price, that little know-it-all treasurer of Milford's Environmental Awareness League, going at some brave soul's hair with a pair of shears in Brawn and Beauty Shop's glass storefront. The Pilates place next door had sporadic hours, but Georgia's research proved it definitely wasn't open on Thursdays.

Setting the binoculars on the sill, Georgia snatched a pen from her bedside table and opened her cracked leather moleskin to where she'd left off. *Thurs., Ap. 14*, she wrote, using the shorthand she'd developed as a teenager. After consulting her analog watch, she added, *9:05ish a.m.* Georgia had been meaning to synch her watch with Channel Seven Nightly News' digital clock on the bottom of the TV screen. *Pilates closed*, she noted, followed by *synch watch tn.* in careful parentheses.

Georgia readjusted the binoculars to see even farther down the road. She didn't need the lenses, not really. It was her ears that were going, Dr. Bliss had informed her, but a hearing aid could help. Except the nearest ear, nose, and throat doctor was fifteen miles away, and Georgia didn't drive. So she thought, at the very least, she should preserve her eyes.

With her book open, Georgia studied the people beneath her window. The Littleton sisters were out early today, she thought as she watched the women with their matching beehives push their matching walkers across the street. A young

bicyclist, who was probably somewhere between fourteen and eighteen—Georgia could never tell—swerved around the women, nearly causing Elsie Littleton to lose her balance. Georgia watched as the boy propped his bike against the postal box on the corner of Center and McGuffey. Without looking back, he yanked open the drugstore’s door and disappeared inside. *Boy leaves bike unattended, Cent. + Mc.*, Georgia scribbled.

For the next hour, Georgia perched in her green velvet armchair, binoculars in one hand, pen in the other, scoping out Milford’s main drag. She only recorded noteworthy events—*Fischer boy unleashes dog, lost; Mya’s Stationery, no patrons; Dog found!*—and then, at 10:15, she stood up and walked across the pristinely white carpet to her old wardrobe. After a moment’s contemplation, Georgia piled corduroys, a paisley-print turtleneck, and a shawl made of pashmina into her arms, slowly readying for the day.

As Georgia made her way through the living room, she paused to sprinkle some seeds into Elton’s bowl, letting his hooked beak peck her knuckles. “I’ll let you out later,” she said.

“Play! Play!” Elton screeched. Nyasa Lovebirds, according to *The Extensive Bird Owner’s Guide, Volume II*, thrived on social interaction. Georgia didn’t know this detail when she’d picked him out at the pet store two months back. In fact, the bird’s scarlet- and gold-streaked feathers were what had convinced her, in the end, that she *needed* a bird. She needed something, that was for sure.

The living room was where Georgia truly *lived*, especially because she’d spent the better part of the past two months in her apartment above the new bakery.

Frames lined the room's cream-colored walls, sporadically hung and collecting dust, no doubt, particularly the top rims of the ones she couldn't reach. Forty years of journalism awards and news articles-cum-exposés worthy of remembering were yellowing beneath Windexed glass.

On the coffee table, which Georgia, incidentally, never used for coffee, sat a family portrait from her childhood—a shriveled black-and-white of Georgia in a long-forgotten photographer's studio with her parents and younger brother, all dead years ago. Mirroring that was a recent snapshot of Thomas, her brother's son and Georgia's only living relative, with his wife and their three kids. Every Christmas, Thomas mailed her one of those fancy photo greetings (return address: Boulder, CO). Then Georgia wrote him a hundred-dollar check, and that was the only contact they maintained.

After Georgia had received the call about her brother Franklin's drunk driving accident—his fault—back in '94, she immediately went to Franklin's split-level on Kincaid Avenue, where eleven-year old Thomas was sobbing uncontrollably between two police officers. His mother had passed away when he was a toddler, and in light of his father's accident, Thomas, with his bright, bright green eyes, was orphaned. Georgia thought she would have to take him—she *wanted* to take him, because she couldn't just sit around, signing next-of-kin forms and watching Thomas being tossed around by Child Protective Services. But then Thomas' grandparents, his mother's side, wanted to adopt him, and they flew in from Colorado, and then Georgia just *had* to let him go. Because what did she know about raising a child anyway? And two years later, when she went to Boulder for Christmas, Thomas

shoved the present she'd bought him hard against her gut and shouted, "My dad was a drunk, and you knew it! And you let him drive me around. And you let him drive *himself* around until he died!" Thomas was only thirteen then, but he understood, too well, how the world worked even when the people in it didn't. As he grew up, he'd had no reason to return to Ohio; for the first decade or so, Georgia made a point to send Thomas letters, but now she couldn't remember what she'd written, what a boy with no parents would ever bother to read.

Georgia pulled her fur-lined jacket from the coat rack and tied her lucky scarf around her neck. She was running a few minutes behind schedule, but she was sure no one would notice. "Bye, Elton," she said.

These days, Georgia took the back stairs cautiously, squeezing the icy railing as she watched her Easy Spirits descend to the blacktop. Trudging to the front of the building, she fluffed her salt-and-pepper bob in search of a volume her hair hadn't known since the late '70s.

The bakery was tackily named Let Them Eat Cake, which wasn't even an accurate historical reference; the peasants who despised Marie Antoinette had made up that quotation—slanderous, all of them. But the interior of the shop was quite charming, and Georgia ate brunch there every day except Sunday. There was a small "Help Wanted" sign in the corner of the window, which Georgia noted as new. As she put her weight into opening the glass door, bells tinkled above her head. That was a sound she wouldn't mind *not* hearing, which proved her hearing must not be that bad.

Tess Hailsham was loitering behind the counter, doing nothing, Georgia suspected. Although Georgia wasn't sure, she thought Tess might have a juvie record.

Tess glanced up from the spiral-bound book splayed in front of her. "Morning, Ms. Tate," she said. "How're you today?" She was surprisingly chipper for a teenager.

"Just fine." Georgia stepped up to the register and began sifting through her pockets. Cough drops, knitted gloves, an expired credit card, a half-used pack of tissues—she kept everything in there. After a moment, she pulled out a wadded-up ten-dollar bill.

"The usual?" Tess asked, picking the money up quick as a thief.

Georgia stared at the girl, who stared right back. "No," Georgia said. "I'd like a plain bagel today. Extra cream cheese. And tea—no, hot chocolate...with milk. None of that water nonsense." If Tess thought she had Georgia all figured out, she had another thing coming.

Tess pressed a few buttons on the register and muttered something Georgia didn't quite catch.

"You're mumbling," Georgia said, leaning her left ear closer. That was another thing she didn't like about Tess. The girl was either muttering indecipherably or speaking too fast. The younger generations were flawed in many ways, but Georgia found their poor enunciation skills the most disconcerting.

"Sorry. I said I'll have it out in a minute."

“Thank you.” As Georgia turned to choose a table, she paused, as usual, to glance at the newspaper article tacked to the bulletin board. *Milford: Start Eating Cake*, the headline read. It was one of the last pieces Georgia had written before the *Chronicle* offered her “early retirement” back in February. She had liked the bakery even before it opened, simply because the space’s previous renter was a piano instructor who encouraged children and adults alike to bang away on his baby grand well past normal business hours. The shop’s bread was its moneymaker, Georgia imagined, and it was after her first slice of toasted rye that she approached her editor with the idea of giving the place some free press.

“Ms. Tate?” Tess called. Georgia made a half-hearted motion to get up while Tess insisted she’d bring the tray right over. This was their routine.

As Tess slid the food in front of Georgia, the bakery’s owner banged through the kitchen door carrying a platter of cheesecake, which she deposited in the refrigerated display case. “Morning, Georgia,” Callie shouted over the buzz of patrons. “What are we working on today?”

Georgia liked Callie. There was something respectable about a girl who was trying to make a name for herself other than the bank guru’s daughter. “Oh, big story,” Georgia said, retrieving the moleskin from her pocket. “*Cleveland Magazine* has me doing a feature on the city’s top ten businessmen,” she explained, referencing her book. “It’s going to be pretty big for a freelance piece.”

Callie began refilling the tables’ napkin dispensers, a task more appropriate for Tess. “Well, I look forward to reading it,” Callie said, smiling.

Shit, Georgia thought. She should have picked a different magazine, something not so widely read by Milford residents. Georgia didn't want Callie—well most people in town, really—to know the *Chronicle* had forced her out. If people asked, she said she'd wanted more flexible deadlines or that she'd always dreamed of writing freelance. No one *dreams* of writing freelance. But everyone at the paper knew the truth. Lila Draper, the biggest newsroom gossip, had heard the managing editor tell Georgia that her most recent mistake was one too many. This was not news to Georgia. When she was reporting on the mayor's speech in Town Hall, she couldn't *hear* the man, for Christ's sake. Something went wrong with the sound system, so Mayor Katz' solution was to shout. To Georgia, his words were garbled by the click of cameras and the hum of the crowd. In her article, she'd erroneously reported that Katz was “pulling funding from local schools.” His PR person called to yell that the plan was to pull funding *for* local schools *from* tax dollars, and he proceeded to cite a few other minor inaccuracies. Georgia's editor said she should have asked for help if she couldn't decipher the words. But Georgia, after forty-five years in the field, thought she understood a thing or two more than this newbie. Journalists didn't ask for help. He thanked her for her work, offered her early retirement, and that was that. She didn't say goodbye to anyone.

Georgia bit into her bagel, eating one half at a time so it lasted longer. Looking around the bakery, there wasn't anyone Georgia didn't recognize. She'd lived in Milford her whole life, and even if she didn't know everyone's names, she could identify them as Augustus Blunt's granddaughter or Kim Manker's ex-husband from Pittsburgh. Today, the shop wasn't very busy. In her moleskin, she

wrote, *Dr. Morehouse takes early lunch break*. Georgia passed the remainder of the morning flipping through past journal entries and staring at passersby. At exactly noon, she left her tray on the table, begrudgingly thanked Tess, and returned upstairs.

This was the pattern most days had followed since Georgia's "retirement." After brunch, she watched the twelve o'clock news, read novels at random from her crammed bookcase, let Elton perch on her shoulder as she conducted inspections of Center Street, and so on. Every day.

Sometimes the telephone rang, causing Georgia to rush to the kitchen's receiver. Kate, one of Georgia's old copy editors, called about once a week, and Georgia looked forward to those conversations, despite their brief and flippant nature. Truthfully, though Georgia rarely admitted this to herself, her fellow employees at the *Chronicle* had been her family since she'd graduated from high school. Without a college degree, she'd never been promoted from "news reporter," and she'd never come close to marrying. When workdays ended, she went out for drinks with the photos team or babysat for the arts and entertainment editor. Once, Georgia had hosted Thanksgiving, which was a potluck for the ages that even the then-editor-in-chief had attended.

Now, Georgia glanced sidelong at the telephone, eerily silent in its cradle. For a moment, she considered calling Susie, the writer who'd worked in her neighboring cubicle for the past decade. But then Georgia thought better of it. The phone worked both ways.

That night, Georgia heated up a box of frozen spaghetti and settled into her green armchair with the biography of Virginia Woolf. Nothing interesting ever

happened outside past seven o'clock. In a perpetually sleepy town like Milford, the dentist went home when her kids' school day ended, and neither of Center Street's restaurants was visible from Georgia's window. That's why, when Georgia rubbed her drooping eyes after finishing chapter twelve, she was surprised to see a man hurrying along the sidewalk.

Georgia snatched up her binoculars. The figure was wearing dark colors and had his hood up. It wasn't raining. Judging from his swift speed, he was young—definitely young. He kept walking, nearly beyond the area viewable from Georgia's window. Just as she was about to drop the binoculars in defeat, the man slowed to a stop in front of Milford Pharmacy. He pulled a long can from his coat and aimed it at the façade. Paint spewed from the container in sharp blasts and intricate curlicues. Georgia absorbed each detail, committing them to memory. Everything was important. His shoes were black, maybe old Reeboks, and he was wearing an oversized black sweatshirt.

Georgia wasn't sure whether she should yell out the window or dial 9-1-1. So she sat, watching, as the man shamelessly graffitied the storefront with words like *asshole* and *fuck you* and *tyrant* all in lowercase, barely legible scrawl. Suddenly, he stopped, tossed the can with a loud *poing*, and retraced his steps down Center Street. He slunk away from the streetlights, favoring the protective shadow of the buildings. It wasn't until the boy crossed the street that Georgia noticed the insignia on his hoodie. There, in the upper right corner, was a barely legible "F" in cursive writing. Something else was stitched below, but Georgia didn't need to make it out. That

single letter, everyone knew, was the emblem for Fred's Auto Body. The man's face remained shrouded as he vanished from sight. Who *was* that boy?

With her heart thumping, Georgia laid down her book and changed into a frilly nightgown, eager to be safe in bed. After tugging the worn quilt over her breasts, she struggled to fall asleep. Behind her eyelids, she imagined the man's silhouette spray-painting the store and then crossing the street to break into the bakery and eventually making his way into Georgia's own bedroom. Her last thought before dozing off was whether he would knife her on the spot or ask for a lesson on birds.

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Friday morning wrapped the valley in fog, overcast by ominous clouds determined to depress the entire Northern Hemisphere. It was the sort of day on which exhausted mothers let their babies wail in distant cribs, and no one cared if the paperboy was a little later than usual. But Georgia Tate had been up before dawn, worrying about the spray-painter.

Fully dressed, she sat at the kitchen table, drumming her stubby nails against the wood and catching glimpses of Elton's neon green tail as he hopped around the living room. "I should call the police," Georgia said aloud.

"Police! Police!" Elton squawked. This was one of his favorite words, which Georgia used constantly to threaten the vigilantes she observed through her closed window. But this time, she was actually considering it.

"They probably won't believe an old bag like me." Imagine, Deputy Kaye making her take an eye test, saying, *Are you sure he was the one you saw?* And

Georgia wasn't sure if she would *be* sure because she hadn't really seen the man— she was following her hunch that he was probably young, based mostly on her belief that all teenagers and even some college-aged delinquents got off on the idea of defacing public property. There was no mention of the incident in yesterday's moleskin entries, which made her half-wonder if she'd dreamed the whole thing.

“Police!” Elton mimicked. “Police!” That was Elton's one major drawback— his vocabulary was extremely limited. Fruitlessly, he flapped his clipped wings.

Georgia paid him no attention. She'd have to get to the bottom of this herself. Then, once she was certain, the cops would take her statement and any evidence she collected. The *Chronicle* might ask her to write an investigative piece about the ordeal. Maybe she'd even turn them down.

Although Friday was a particularly lazy day for Georgia, her schedule was suddenly jam-packed. Fred's Auto Body was not on Georgia's block; the old garage was on the opposite side of Milford, a part of town she hadn't seen in months. Georgia had given up driving after her brother's accident, but as a reporter she hadn't minded walking all over town. Walking was how she'd stayed fit. A trek to the east side would take more than an hour, but Georgia didn't see another option. She'd have to skip brunch this morning.

Elton nipped her fingertips as Georgia shuttled him into the iron-barred cage. “You behave,” she said, patting him on the head.

“Play! Play!”

The walk to Fred's turned into more of a pilgrimage than Georgia had anticipated. Halfway there, the sky opened up to pelt her with rain, forcing her to

take cover under the porticos until it subsided. By the time Georgia arrived, she was exhausted and drenched to the point that her toes had turned pruny inside her cotton socks.

As Georgia squished into the office, a middle-aged man with a serious overbite looked up. “Georgia?” he asked, clearly unsure. “Georgia Tate?”

She nodded, trying to place his face.

“Mitch Barnell,” he offered, rising to shake her wet hand. Ah. Mitch had been her brother’s friend at Pontiac Tires, where they’d both worked tirelessly on the assembly line for those damned slave drivers. God, he had aged. How did Mitch manage to leave the factory but fail to escape the car business altogether?

“Mitch,” she said, forcing a smile. “Good to see you.”

“Still at the newspaper?” Mitch’s irises were a clear blue beneath his glasses. Georgia nodded because it was easier than explaining. Quite frankly, Georgia didn’t want to be shooting the bull with Mitch Barnell. She wanted to find the graffiti man or, at the very least, to change into dry clothes.

“Need a tow?” Mitch asked, scrutinizing her swamp-chic look.

“No.” During her walk, Georgia had been too concerned by pick-ups spraying puddle water to think far enough ahead to what she’d say. A single, careless woman in her sixties had no reason to be at Fred’s Auto Body. “I’m writing an article,” she said. That *could* be true, she thought, if she was still employed.

“About us?” Mitch didn’t look enthusiastic, which left Georgia wondering what had happened to Fred of Fred’s Auto Body. Had he ever existed at all?

“Sorry, no. It’s about young people finding jobs.” She could scarcely believe how easily the lies were coming. “I’ve been walking around asking businesses if they have employees I could interview.”

Mitch chuckled, revealing a row of perfect teeth save two on the left, which were an off-putting gray. “Everyone loves being in the papers,” he said. “We’ve got one boy. He’s workin’ on a set of brakes. Hang on.”

When Mitch returned, he had a pockmarked teenager at his heels. “Scotty, this is Georgia Tate,” Mitch explained, “a reporter. She’s writing about you young people finding jobs.”

The boy came around the counter with his Fred’s sweatshirt on, hood up—just like the figure last night. He was the criminal, all right, down to his black footwear. Nikes rather than Reeboks, but she’d been close. He was bigger than Georgia had realized—half a foot taller than her and clearly built beneath his shirt. Unkempt strands of russet hair jutted from his forehead, nearly concealing his sallow eyes, and freckles speckled the bridge of his nose.

“For the newspaper?” the boy echoed. Though his voice was deep, he couldn’t be older than eighteen.

“Yep, the *Chronicle*,” she said. “Would you be interested in an interview?” Georgia was sure this was illegal on several levels.

He looked down at his fingers and began digging at the grime under his nails. “What do I get out of it?”

This question surprised Georgia. In all her years as a journalist, no one had ever asked that. He was serious, too.

“Well, it’s a chance to share your voice with the community,” Georgia said. Scotty waited for her to continue. “And I’ll buy you lunch.”

Scotty glanced at Mitch, who nodded his head. “I guess I could do that,” Scotty said.

“Could we meet tomorrow?”

“I’ve got stuff going on.” He shoved his gritty hands into the sweatshirt’s front pocket. Based on Georgia’s knowledge of teenagers, which was, she’d admit, rather limited, Scotty didn’t want to seem overeager. But she could tell he wanted to do it. Mitch was right: people liked being in the papers.

“What about in the morning?”

He paused. “Yeah, fine.”

“Let’s say eleven? At that new bakery on Center?”

Once the plan was set, Georgia began her long walk home. She felt accomplished already. It had almost been too simple. Now Georgia just had to figure out what she would say.

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The next morning, Georgia entered the bakery at 10:15 per usual, giving herself plenty of time to prepare for Scotty’s arrival. A couple sipping lattes was discussing the vandalization of Milford Pharmacy, which suggested the incident would remain legendary in town for quite a while. Georgia smiled to herself, enjoying the rush of knowing a secret that others didn’t.

In Georgia’s moleskin, beneath her observations from that morning, she wrote, *Int. w/ Scotty \_\_\_\_\_ (?), 11 a.m.* Tess brought over Georgia’s order of black

tea, her favorite, as Georgia brainstormed a list of questions. *Have you always lived in Milford? How'd you end up at Fred's? Why did you graffiti the pharmacy on Thurs., Ap. 14?* The questions poured out of her so easily that she didn't notice Scotty until he was looming over her, blocking the sunlight from her eyes.

“Georgia?” He looked more presentable, less intimidating in his street clothes. Not as “punk,” or whatever kids were calling grunge these days. And his hair was freshly washed, which made a world of difference. Georgia believed there was a lot to be said for personal hygiene.

“Thanks again for meeting me.” Georgia gestured to the seat across from her. “Let's get something to eat.” Hopefully food would settle Georgia's nerves. She hadn't conducted an interview in a while.

Scotty lowered himself onto the white chair. Georgia waved Tess over to take their order, even though the bakery was counter service only. Tess paused en-route to their table, glancing back and forth between the two customers. “Hey, Scotty,” Tess said, smiling. “How you been?”

“Hey, Tess. Same old. Working,” he replied. Scotty spoke very clearly and slowly, like he couldn't be rushed to shout “Fire!” in an emergency. Georgia liked that.

Tess turned to Georgia. “We went to high school together,” she explained.

Georgia raised her eyebrows. “Wild.”

Once they put in their orders—one turkey sandwich on rye, hold the pickle, and an “I'll have what she's having”—Scotty lounged back in his chair, jutting out his leg. “I'm not a huge fan of her,” he said.

Georgia leaned in. “Me neither.” She poised her ballpoint over the page. “So I just have a list of questions, and then feel free to add anything you want once I’ve finished.” This was the spiel she had always given back in her reporter days. “Have you always lived in Milford?”

“Yeah, born and raised. My mom grew up in Cleveland, but she moved to my dad’s farmhouse over on Route 78 after they got married.” Scotty rubbed the edge of a napkin between his thumb and pointer finger. “They’ve never left, ‘cept the farmhouse isn’t really a farm anymore.” He was chattier than Georgia could have hoped for. Gripping her pen tightly, she jotted down key points as he spoke, trying to look professional.

“And is this your first job?”

“Well, yeah. I started working there part-time when I was a senior, and then Frank offered me a full position.”

*There is a Frank*, Georgia wrote. “Would you say you’re pretty happy there?”

Tess dropped off their sandwiches, not even bothering to yell Georgia’s name first.

“Happy isn’t the right word,” Scotty said, biting noisily into a potato chip. “I’d say satisfied. It pays the bills.”

Georgia set down her pen. “Did you get your own place after graduation?”

Scotty dug into his sandwich with a ravenous intensity most noticeable among teenage boys. “Nope, I still live at home.”

“But you have bills?”

He swallowed a mouthful. “Is that relevant to the article?”

“Maybe.” By this point, Georgia nearly believed in the article’s existence herself.

Scotty swiped hair from his eyes and began rubbing his kneecap through a rip in his pants. “Dad’s outta work. I’ve been helping out.”

He averted his gaze, but Georgia pressed on. “Do you have any siblings?” Now she was deviating from her questions completely.

“Two brothers. They’re much younger, though. They’ve got no idea what’s going on at home.”

“I bet they value you more than you know,” Georgia said. “I used to have a brother.” If Scotty asked, Georgia thought, she wouldn’t give all the details of her brother’s accident—just the basic facts: car, tree, death.

But Scotty didn’t ask. “My parents are real appreciative,” he continued, “but it’s a lot of pressure.” In one overzealous bite, he crammed the rest of the turkey sandwich into his mouth. Georgia nodded, intrigued by all of Scotty’s quirks—from the way he ate his food to the faded, banana-shaped scar above his collarbone. “We’re about to lose the house,” he said. “When I was younger we actually *used* the farm. Me and my brothers milked cows twice a day.” Scotty stared blankly, but he didn’t seem to be searching for pity. “Agriculture’s a dying business, you know?”

Georgia did know. In fact, every Midwesterner understood this concept, which explained why they’d been relocating to the cities and suburbs in droves for years.

“Have you considered college?” she prodded. “Even if it’s just night school?”

“No one in my family’s ever been to college,” he said. “Don’t see why I should be the first.”

A peal of laughter erupted from across the room, and they both watched Tess’ dyed silvery hair tumble down her back as she tossed her head. She must have been reacting to something Callie said, though Georgia couldn’t imagine the shop owner being particularly humorous.

Georgia turned back to the table, where Scotty was eyeing her closed moleskin. “You’ve stopped writing this down,” he said.

“Sorry,” she said, fumbling to rediscover the page. “I just got so wrapped up in your story. The economy’s been rough on a lot of families. It’s sad.”

He scrunched his brows. “It’s not *sad*. They’re *trying* to take care of us, but there aren’t jobs right now. It’s not like we’re *starving*—”

“No, of course not!” Georgia backtracked. “It’s just I can relate to losing my job.”

Scotty blinked. “You mean you’re not at the *Chronicle* anymore?”

The words were out before she realized what she was confessing. She hesitated. “Well, no.” Georgia looked at the spotted skin covering the backs of her hands, the saggy valleys and ridges of wrinkles that had been merely fine lines not too long ago. She couldn’t imagine how they’d become so warped, so destroyed by the routine of life. They’d been touched by so few people.

“So you’re not a reporter?” Scotty’s tone was flat, unreadable.

“Well, they say ‘once a journalist, always a journalist,’ right?” Georgia wanted to change the subject.

Scotty scooted back his chair. “So why did you want to meet with me?” His expression was a blend of anger and fear. “Who are you?”

Georgia considered moving her wrinkly old fingers to pat Scotty’s wide hands, teeming with collagen and the promise of many, many more years of life. She wanted that promise, that sheer elasticity, but she kept her hands folded on the table.

“Calm down,” she said, trying not to panic herself. “I’m truly interested in the topic. And I might be writing something for *Cleveland Magazine*.”

His facial muscles relaxed. This news seemed to pacify him, at least somewhat.

“Listen, why don’t we meet up again sometime next week?” she asked, with forced brightness. “We haven’t talked about your job yet.” Georgia would have to find time to brainstorm more questions between now and then. She didn’t even care that he was a graffiti artist by night. In her moleskin, she’d write questions like, *What’s your favorite food? Do you have any pets?* Then Georgia could tell him about Elton, and their conversation would take off from there. In fact, she probably didn’t need to prepare many questions—just a few conversation starters. He’d want to know about her life, of course, though Georgia wasn’t sure what she’d tell him. *That* was what she could ponder in the meantime.

“But why did you want to talk to *me*?” Scotty asked, louder now. He sat up straighter, towering over her at the table.

“Just stay awhile longer. I’ll get the bill.”

“I should go,” he said, so quickly that Georgia almost didn’t catch it.

“No, please stay!” Georgia was desperate now as he shrugged into his jacket. She changed her tactics. “I know what you did.”

“What?”

“On Thursday night. The pharmacy.”

Scotty opened his mouth, closed it again, and sat back down. “Are you *following me?*”

Georgia glanced at the counter, where Callie was manning the register and rearranging the display case as she anxiously awaited her next customer. The lunch rush was just beginning, but the bakery was empty enough that their conversation seemed to reverberate off the walls—even Georgia could hear it.

She turned back to Scotty. “I could see you spray-painting from my window.” He squinted as he registered what she knew. “So if we don’t talk about this more,” she continued, “I’ll go to the cops.”

Now it was Scotty’s turn to clasp his hands together and lean forward, making Georgia feel like a child on the verge of a scolding. Between gritted teeth, he said, “The pharmacy’s the reason we’re losing our house. They fired my dad.”

Georgia blinked, her malice waning. What had she expected? Punky artist in need of a canvas, something along the fuck-the-police lines, maybe? Nothing like this.

“That asshole fired him, said he was slacking on the job.” His pained expression reminded Georgia how hard being a teenager could be. “But my dad’s a good man!” He was shouting now. Georgia vaguely heard Callie call from across the room, asking if everything was all right.

“Scotty, if you want to talk,” Georgia said, softly now, “I think I could help—”

He bolted up so fast that he knocked his chair on its back. “No, I don’t want to *talk!* Talking doesn’t do shit. I’m done with this, you lunatic. Why do you *care* so much?”

Georgia recoiled as if the words had physically struck her. She began pinching the web of skin between her thumb and forefinger. Scotty smashed his palms facedown on the table, towering over her as he had before. “So you know what? Tell the cops. And I’ll tell them you led me here under false pretenses.” He looked Georgia square in the eyes. “You’re not even a fucking journalist.” He turned on his heel and left. And then the only sound Georgia could hear were those damn tinkling bells.

To avoid eye contact with anyone in the room, Georgia flipped her moleskin to a random page. For more than two months, she’d been logging everything in that stupid journal. *Feb. 20, green SUV towed.* She skipped ahead. *Mar. 24, 2 p.m., funeral procession. Morgan Ericson with new baby.* Georgia remembered everyone’s names, or their parents’, or she generically labeled them as “the music teacher” or “the Chihuahua lady.” Really, she didn’t know anything about them, had never held a conversation with the majority of people she wrote about. But what bothered Georgia most was her suspicion that few people knew *her* name. At best, she was “the kooky dresser,” or “the bakery woman,” or even, though Georgia prayed not, “that crazy lady on Center.” Did anyone in this town know her? Did anyone know anyone?

Tentatively, Georgia ripped out a page and set it on the table. *Ap. 9*. Then she ripped out another. The staticky sound of paper tearing was so satisfying. Before she knew it, she was detaching every page, one by one, *Feb. 22, Mar. 7, Feb. 26*, letting the parchment collect in one giant heap of too-white paper dirtied by too-black ink as the ripping noise filled and filled and filled her.

A hand touched Georgia's arm, and Callie moved into her line of vision. Georgia glanced around the room at all the curious patrons staring back, people she recognized but did not know.

"Here," Callie said, offering her one of the two mugs in her hands.

Georgia took it from her. She swirled the tea bag by its tag: black tea, her favorite. Suddenly, she was ashamed of the paper pile on the table.

Callie sat down in the chair Scotty had occupied minutes before and used the papers as a coaster. She didn't try to decipher what Georgia had written, and she didn't say anything. She just sat there, stirring a thin red straw around and around in her coffee.

On Georgia's lap, the moleskin had been reduced to two flaps of leather with nothing left in between. She sipped her tea and observed the destruction, unsure whether to clean up the mess or stare at it, just for a little while longer.

## Anniversaries

Exactly thirty years ago, Clark McLaughlin repeated after his priest as he took thee, Nora Parks, to be his wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse—and, as was the couple’s wont, they were hosting a party to commemorate it.

Clark stood in front of his bathroom sink, his sharp nose centimeters from the mirror as he examined the state of his eyebrows. Gender-specific grooming habits had always baffled Clark, but he’d abided by them nonetheless. For years he’d been stealing his wife’s fingernail scissors to trim the stray hairs snaking out from his brow line. Nora’s tweezers were stashed in the same top drawer as the scissors, but Clark never so much as touched those. Plucking was for women.

Tonight, Clark wanted to look his best—for the seventy-five or so guests they were expecting, but also for his wife. Using water, he smoothed down his cowlick one last time, only to have it crop right back up above his left ear. Soon enough this wouldn’t be a problem; with each birthday, Clark’s hair became more thin than thick, more white than blonde. To his annoyance, Nora only became more attractive with age—not a wrinkle on her, though he wouldn’t mind if there was.

In an effort to surprise her husband, Nora had taken up temporary residence in one of the spare bedrooms to dress herself for the party. “I don’t want you seeing me before I’m completely ready,” she’d said, grinning mischievously. Hunting down the perfect outfit had required two separate trips to Cleveland, but she had nailed it—a navy number with a modest neckline that halted just above the knee, made of satin

that left her feeling sexy, more attuned to her body, when the material brushed her skin.

Nora had spent the better part of the last hour and a half loosely curling strand after strand of her short brown hair and painting her nails with two coats of light pink polish. She put on the diamond studs Clark had given her for their tenth anniversary, which complemented the sapphire necklace she only wore on special occasions. Before leaving the guest room, Nora slipped into her new heels—a last-minute lucky find whose color precisely matched her dress—and gave herself a once over in the mirror. For fifty-five, she didn't look half-bad.

From inside their bedroom, Clark heard his wife's shoes clicking against the hallway's hardwood—a sound he found oddly comforting.

“Clark?” Nora called, her voice muffled through the door. “Can I come in?”

“You're the one being secretive here, honey.”

As Nora walked through the door, Clark's gaze went right to her face. From the curls framing her cheeks to her mauve lips to her collarbone, Nora was every bit the wife Clark didn't feel he deserved.

“How do I look?” A Southern accent rendered her elegant, yet she was soft-spoken, unsure.

Clark bent to kiss her on the forehead before moving to her mouth, not caring whether he mussed her lipstick. “Nora, you have never been lovelier.”

She grinned. “I'm going to go see if Laurel needs a hand.” Their eldest daughter, who had flown in from Boston with her husband and new baby, had offered to help set up for the party. Though Clark had hired a caterer for the event,

that wouldn't necessarily prevent Nora from weaseling her way into the kitchen. If Callie were here, she'd be the one in charge of the food—hell, she would have done all the cooking herself. Clark wondered whether she'd come tonight, whether she'd bring a date. Nora said she'd invited Callie, which had pleased him, but he didn't expect her to show. Neither he nor his daughter had apologized for what happened last November when she returned from Vassar. It took a while for Clark to come to terms with the fact that he wouldn't be passing his business down to either of his daughters, but he had eventually mellowed on the subject. His stubbornness, however, had remained steadfast.

“You'd better get dressed,” Nora said, surveying his undershirt and boxer briefs. “Guests'll be here within the hour.”

Mesmerized by her presence, Clark watched Nora leave, cursing himself for suggesting a party, for willingly sharing his wife with co-workers and prying neighbors on their anniversary. Yet, of all their years together, this was quite the milestone to be celebrated, especially since he had thought—had been convinced—that they wouldn't make it to their twentieth.

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Before the McLaughlins moved to Ohio, they had lived in a tiny rent-controlled apartment in Jackson, Mississippi, an eight-minute drive from Nora's parents' house. They had met while Clark was working on his master's thesis at one of Ole' Miss' coffee shops, which Nora wandered into one sticky morning. Clark didn't notice her until she began banging on the service bell at the empty counter. Her hair brushed her waist, flowing from side to side as she looked for a barista

through the cracked door marked “Employees Only.” On a whim, Clark, who was friends with said employee, went around the counter and took her order. When he failed to work the coffee machine, he confessed that the jig was up, flashing his palms in mock surrender, and asked if she’d go to dinner with him on Saturday anyway.

Eleven months later—after Clark finished his management master’s and Nora graduated magna cum laude in English—they married in front of a small crowd at Saint Peter’s Cathedral, where Clark had been a lector for the past two years. Saint Peter’s was also the site of Nora’s conversion to Christianity, an almost prerequisite to marrying into a long line of Irish Catholics.

They spent a year in Jackson before Clark announced that he wanted to return to his home state. Nora agreed, eager to please her husband, and within the month they were buying furniture to fill their Milford condominium. Clark founded Pontiac Valley Bank soon after. “Regional” was only added to the bank’s name when the company gained momentum, and their Taft Hill behemoth of a house—larger than Nora and Clark could have imagined during their modest upbringings—followed. From its six bedrooms to the ground floor’s lofted ceilings, the home was exquisite and just waiting to be filled with children scribbling crayons across white walls.

During the “bad year,” as Clark called it, Laurel was an impossible, sassy thirteen-year old, while Callie was ten and still very much the innocent child. The August days were long and unbearably warm—the humid-hot that leaves shorts-clad drivers sliding in their sweat on leather seats. Temperature didn’t faze the girls, though; after breakfast until the streetlights came on, they were in their tree house

plotting world domination or timing how long they could hold their breath underwater in the McLaughlin's in-ground pool. Clark was sure they weren't inside when Nora entered his study that Sunday, hands clasped in front of her.

"Clark?" she said, her small voice echoing off the wood paneling. He glanced up from his pages, expecting her to ask what he wanted for dinner or whether he would help Laurel with algebra. But she wasn't asking questions.

"Nora?"

"I think I'm pregnant."

For a moment, all was silent except the rush of cold air blasting from the vents, the only part of the study kept under control as the situation sped up, began spiraling. Clark said that it was a surprise, but oh, this was wonderful news—just what the family needed. And Nora, taking her husband's cue, smiled and agreed, saying she hoped for a girl, and perhaps they'd name her Charlotte.

Once the formalities had ended, Nora settled onto Clark's lap. "I'm sorry. I don't know how this happened."

"This is going to be great for us." Clark lifted the cleft of his wife's chin, forcing her to meet his eyes.

"But we'll be starting over. We'll have eighteen more years of this instead of just eight." They both understood she was kidding, on some level.

"Nora, you're a great mom."

"I'll call the doctor in the morning," she said. He kissed her mouth, her cheek. They were going to have a baby.

Dr. Nazarian confirmed what the drugstore's test had shown Nora, adding that she was about seven weeks along. Clark decided they should wait to tell the girls.

Nora became more enthusiastic once it was official. After dinner one evening, Clark entered their bedroom to find Nora in bed leaning back on her elbows with her nightgown bunched up against her chest. She dangled her wedding ring on a string over her still-flat stomach as Clark cocked his head, wondering what his wife could possibly be doing. "It's a girl!" she said suddenly. "It's another girl." She beamed. "This test has never failed." Clark, whose very nature prevented him from believing old wives' tales, touched both hands to Nora's stomach and told her to start brainstorming paint colors for the baby's room.

On the morning her daughters started back to school, Nora retrieved her mother's worn copy of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* from the attic. While Nora was pregnant with Laurel, her mom had express-mailed this edition from Mississippi to Ohio. And even though Nora felt prepared for Callie the second time around, she had reread the book cover-to-cover, just to make sure. By this third child Nora felt, perhaps superstitiously, that she had to read it. So every morning for the rest of August, after Nora had tucked the antique breakfast dishes safely back into their cabinet, she sat on the front porch swing reading a chapter or two.

In order to make Nora's September check-up, Clark, who had never missed an appointment during their previous pregnancies, took an early lunch. Dr. Nazarian performed an ultrasound and a standard blood test, routines that Nora found familiar.

But this time, a week later, Dr. Nazarian's secretary phoned their home. "Mrs. McLaughlin, can you come in tomorrow to discuss your test results?"

Clark was convinced that this was just new protocol. "A lot's happened since Callie was born."

When Dr. Nazarian collected the couple from the waiting room the next morning, she looked solemn. "Something's come up in your genetic screening," she said, consulting her clipboard. A confused look passed between Clark and Nora. "Your blood results show that the fetus has an extra copy of the eighteenth chromosome." A long pause hung in the air. "It's a disorder known as Trisomy 18. Edward's Syndrome."

"So, in English," Clark said, "what does that mean?"

"It becomes more common as a woman ages," Dr. Nazarian said softly, looking intently at Nora. "I'm so sorry, Nora. There's a fifty-percent chance the baby will be a stillborn—even higher if it's a boy. Of the live births, most do not make it to childhood."

Nora worked through the words, sounding so foreign that they could have been told to anyone, in any language, somewhere far away from here.

"But there's still a chance, right?" Clark asked. "That the baby will live?"

Dr. Nazarian paused, focusing on Nora again when she finally spoke. "A small chance, yes. But only ten percent survive their first year, and that's with severely debilitating mental and physical defects. Heart problems, mental retardation, kidney failure—anything's possible, really. Each case is different."

"So she'd need constant care," Nora whispered. "For the rest of her life."

Dr. Nazarian glanced down at her notes, more out of habit than necessity.  
“Only a very small percentage of Trisomy 18 patients survive into adulthood.”

Nora was afraid to see Clark’s reaction. Instead, she focused on Dr. Nazarian’s stethoscope, hanging loosely from her neck. Over the years, how many heartbeats had that stethoscope heard? Not heard?

Dr. Nazarian told them to take some time, make some decisions. Clark dropped Nora off at home before returning to the bank, as Nora had asked him to, and she kissed his smooth cheek before exiting the car. Then Nora went straight to her bedroom and pulled *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* from her nightstand. She made it through five chapters before hearing Laurel’s call from downstairs, announcing her and her sister’s return from school. Nora went through the motions. She drove Laurel to soccer practice and helped Callie make a solar system mobile for science class, all the while questioning whether she’d be able to feel the kick of a baby with mangled limbs.

Later that evening, Callie was helping her mother make dinner—baked macaroni and cheese, Callie’s favorite—when Clark arrived home from a distracted day in the office. “Something smells great, ladies.” He always called them that—his little ladies.

“It was my idea to add the bacon,” Callie said, concentrating on the crispy strips she was crumbling.

“So if it’s bad,” Clark began, poking her fleshy ribs, “it’s all on you.”

Callie laughed. “You’re distracting me!”

“Clark,” Nora interrupted, “can we talk for a minute? Outside?”

The air was crisp with the promise of autumn, though the uniformly green leaves were resisting. Nora purposely left the porch lights off, hoping darkness would eclipse the daylight and shroud her completely before they stepped inside. Clark led the way to the patio table. It should have been stashed in the shed after Labor Day weekend, but no one had remembered.

Before Nora could speak, Clark started in. “Listen, I think we should get a second opinion.”

“Genetic tests are accurate. They’re not going to tell us our baby’s dying unless they’re sure,” Nora spat out, catching Clark off-guard.

“I know,” he said, gentler than before, “but we need to figure out our options. I don’t want us worrying throughout this entire pregnancy.”

“Throughout the pregnancy?” she said, furrowing her brows. “Clark, I don’t want to have the baby.”

“What?” Clark, who never struggled to find his words, was completely dumbfounded. All afternoon he’d been assessing the risks and compiling a mental list of questions to ask Dr. Nazarian.

“Even if the baby survives, which is a long shot, she’s going to have problems—problems that would drastically change all of our lives.” She folded her arms, as if resting her case. “It’s not fair to us *or* the girls. We’ve got to be realistic here.”

“Well, realistically speaking, I’m Catholic. *We* are Catholic.” His voice was escalating, reverberating off the brick house. “We can’t have an abortion.”

Nora noticed the crow's feet sprouting around Clark's eyes, his first physical divergence from the man she had married. "I'm not some teenager wanting a quick fix for a mistake, Clark." She rarely spoke with so much gusto. "I've thought about this, and I don't think I can handle it—loving a child so much who we know isn't going to make it. Her life, however short, would be excruciating. For her and for us."

"But the doctor said there's a *chance*—"

"She has to! Of course there's a small chance—tiny. But think about it, Clark. I'm forty-two. Taking care of a child this sick is a full-time job—one you can't just retire from." Nora was crying now, but Clark made no move to comfort her. In fact, he leaned back in his chair, recoiling from his wife. He felt the outline of the cross necklace pressed against his chest, tucked safely under his shirt. Somehow, he knew, he would find a way to convince her.

That night was the first of many that the McLaughlins slept in different rooms. After mother and father tucked their unsuspecting, healthy daughters into bed, the couple went their separate ways to think about their unhealthy child, whose fate remained undecided.

Nora knew that if she were to terminate the pregnancy, she would have to decide within the first trimester. On the following Sunday, when the family filed into their usual second-row pew at Saint Veronica's Church, Nora eased herself onto the kneelers to pray, harder than she'd ever prayed for anything, for the strength to follow through with her plans. She recognized the irony of making this plea to the deity of a religion that condemns abortion, but the second Nora felt Catholic guilt

impinging on her prayers, she rebuked God completely and swore to herself that she'd never really been religious anyway.

In the same pew, her husband prayed for different things. Donning his best navy suit, Clark asked God to show Nora that keeping the baby was their only option. The decrees of Catholicism were very cut-and-dry. He wasn't willing to test them.

Laurel and Callie sat between their parents, studying them like parasites under a microscope. In all their years of suffering through a weekly hour of church, meaning an hour less of play, the sisters had never seen two people concentrating harder. When Callie opened the hymnal and slammed it shut with all her might, only the nun in front of them jumped.

Three days later, Nora watched her husband's Audi emerge from the garage and wind down the driveway. She packed salami sandwiches into lunchboxes for Laurel and Callie and sent them to the bus stop. Then Nora put on her pearl earrings, climbed into her SUV, and steered down the hillside's weaving streets. Outside of Dr. Nazarian's office, Nora inserted six quarters into a parking meter, moved away, and then came back to slip two more coins into the slot. She'd forgotten to ask how long this would take.

In the exam room, the stirrups were like ice under Nora's bare feet. As Dr. Nazarian described the procedure, Nora wondered if it was possible to develop frostbite from touching frozen metal. How many hours would it take? Did people die from frostbite? For the next fifteen minutes, Nora let the cold course through her blood, from her ankles to her panicked lungs to where her spinal cord meets the tail

end of her brain stem—all completely numb. She wanted to lay there for hours, high off the lemony smell of disinfectant and cocooned in those safe, orderly four walls with the latex gloves boxed by size and disposable ear speculums stacked neatly near the sink. But then Dr. Nazarian was saying she was free to go, go home to her family.

At six-fifteen on the nose, Clark arrived at home to find Laurel watching television in the family room. “No homework today?” he asked, kissing the top of her ponytail.

“Mom’s sick.”

Clark knew, instinctively, what that meant. He took the stairs two at a time. Nora was under the sheets with Callie, who watched her from the other side of the bed—Clark’s side, where he hadn’t slept in six days.

“Callie, go to your room,” Clark said calmly.

“Oh, just let her stay,” Nora said, cringing in pain. In the past week, Nora had opposed her husband more times than she had during their entire marriage. And, although Callie usually obeyed her mother rather than her father, the unfamiliar look on Clark’s face prompted her to leave. She kissed her mother’s pallid cheek and stood up, smartly closing the door on her way out.

Forty minutes away from ingesting her next Percocet, Nora wasn’t feeling up to a fight. But Clark was ready.

“What have you done?” His tone was low and quiet, almost alien to her.

“I had to,” she said flatly. “It wouldn’t have been fair to her.”

Clark sidled up to the bed. “Nora, do you hear yourself? You just killed our child.” His words didn’t sound cruel; rather, he was working through the facts, struggling to accept the impossible as truth—a truth his wife had fostered. “You didn’t even tell me.”

Nora, so fragile, yet already broken, winced as she rolled over to face the bureau. “You wouldn’t have let me go through with it,” she said, her voice throaty.

Clark considered her small frame, inside of which there had been a baby a few hours ago. A very sick baby, but a baby nonetheless. How could he have married someone who was willing to cast aside their child? What was he supposed to do, knowing her, knowing this? He blinked at Nora, unsure how to comfort her, even how to love her right now—when the unborn died, did the Lord waive the baptism rule? Could they still get into heaven?

He moved back, distancing himself from his wife and her hollow womb. “I’m afraid God won’t forgive you. I don’t think I can forgive you.” This, Clark would learn, could never be unsaid.

Nora wanted him to shout at her. That was something she could handle: a rush of fleeting emotions was forgivable, but not these carefully calculated sentences, these thoughts he’d mulled over. As was her passive tendency, a trait Nora’s mother had cultivated, Nora closed her eyes and let tears well up and slip down her temples—all without making a sound. Clark, who stood a safe six feet from Nora, didn’t see her crying and turned to leave the room.

That night, Callie took it upon herself to help her distracted father make dinner, reminding him that turning the stove to “high” made grilled cheeses burn, not

just cook faster. Then he “looked over” his children’s homework like Nora always did, uncertain what he was looking for—punctuation? Legible handwriting?—and put them to bed. As he retreated to the spare room, he paused by Nora’s door. There was no noise, no light, no life coming from inside. When he shut his eyes a few minutes later, he tried to imagine their sick newborn with a cleft lip or straw-sized breathing tubes poking down her throat—a child who would need, as Nora had put it, constant care. But he could only picture Laurel and Callie dyeing Easter eggs with a little girl whose head was perhaps too small and whose smile was a little slack—but who was still their sister.

This was how the McLaughlin house operated for some time. Nora, feigning illness for weeks after the pain subsided, rarely left her bedroom. At the very least, Clark allowed her the privacy she craved. He avoided her because he couldn’t reconcile his emotions: he wavered between feeling remorse for the baby’s death, angry with Nora for making the decision without him, and angry with himself for letting her recover, both physically and emotionally, alone in their bedroom with the shades drawn.

If Clark wasn’t working reduced hours at Pontiac Valley, he was folding laundry, serving as a personal taxi, or, for a week or so, contemplating hiring a full-time nanny. When he suggested that Nora try therapy, she rolled over to stare out the window, the sun’s glare leaving dancing black spots when she finally blinked.

Eventually, Laurel planted the idea in her sister’s head that their mother *must* have cancer—everyone was getting it. So, to placate her girls, Nora started emerging from her self-imposed prison for meals. She would sit in the dining room, marveling

at the fact that she had no desire to save them all from her husband's go-to dinner: frozen chicken pot pies. When Callie launched into a story about her class' porcupine, Nora pushed herself to ask questions. If Clark spoke to his wife, though, she provided short, one-sentence responses and suddenly became interested in the bits of burnt crust left orphaned on her plate. More than a month had passed since her procedure, and during that time, Nora and Clark had become strangers in their own home. It was after yet another evening like this that Clark had a meeting with his realtor.

The woman's name was Beth. Not short for Elizabeth, she explained. Just Beth. In the harsh light blazing through the slatted windows of Clark's office, Beth's stark makeup line, which separated her chin from her long neck, had distracted Clark when they first met. Tall, with black hair and perhaps a few years older than he, Beth was the number-one realtor in Elyria Township, where Clark intended to open his next bank branch. Even after a few working lunches together, Clark had never viewed her as anyone other than the woman helping him find a property.

On that particular afternoon, they were discussing the pros and cons of an all-brick building off the freeway, which had previously housed a class action law firm. Clark was sitting next to Beth, her bare legs crossed at her ankles, as they sifted through images of the property's rooms.

"And I thought this space would be the perfect size for the safe," she said, outlining a snapshot of a studio-sized room. Each time she moved, Clark got another whiff of her scent: some moments he detected lilac, which grew like weeds in the McLaughlins' garden, and other times it was a trace of laundry detergent, as if he'd

stuck his nose in a load just washed with Tide and fresh from the dryer. The fragrances were different, yet the same: with the turn of each page, Beth exuded cleanliness.

“What about the price?” Clark asked, lifting his head. “Could you get it down?”

“I could try.” Beth put a hand to her mouth, absently tugging her lower lip as she studied the list of figures. “I *do* drive a hard bargain.” She grinned and tilted her head, moving her gaze from the paper to his face.

“Guess you’re the one to have on my side,” Clark said.

“Indeed.” Her laughter sounded near his ear, a light, unfamiliar noise.

Beth reached over his legs, fishing a Pontiac Valley Banks pen from the cup on his desk. Lilacs. Laundry detergent. As Beth reeled back, Clark brushed his lips against hers.

She pulled away, searching his eyes. He wondered if she found him haggard or perpetually apathetic, as most men look in middle age. Clark kissed her again. Despite, or perhaps because of her assessment, Beth kissed him back.

Soon he was unbuttoning her pinstriped blouse, sliding it from her shoulders, and leading her across the Persian rug. Sitting down on the rigid sofa, he pulled Beth on top of him, greedily kissing her mouth, the concave of her neck, her gaunt jawline. She had harsh features and a taut stomach and small breasts that didn’t match her height. In front of him was a body he did not recognize. Clark pulled up her skirt and she unbuttoned his pants, keeping his eyes shut the entire time while she pressed his wrists against the leather and began taking control. And he *let* her

take control as he sat there, having loveless sex with a woman because he couldn't remember how to love his wife.

When it was over, the woman who was not Nora rolled off of him. He rose to retrieve Beth's top from the desk while she stood up, folding her arms to cover a slight sag in her breasts.

"I'm sorry, you have to go," Clark said, his voice shaking. "I'm married."

She smiled as she slowly dressed. "I know that."

"My wife just lost our baby," he said quietly.

Beth stopped buttoning. "Oh."

"My wife just lost our baby," he repeated, slower this time. Nora had *lost* their baby. Not waiting for Beth to gather her things, Clark lifted his keys from the hook near the door and left.

He drove through Milford quickly, barely heeding stop signs. When Clark burst into their room, Nora was perched against the headboard reading a thick hardback. Her roots were tinted with grease, a side effect of her recently erratic bathing habits.

"Clark!" she said, alarmed by both his midday arrival and his disheveled appearance. "What are you doing home?"

Clark sat down on his side of the bed, leaving a foot of space between them. This was the nearest they'd been to each other in weeks. "Nora," he whispered, "something's happened."

She sat up straighter, concern passing over her face. “What is it?” He paused, trying to prolong the moment before he caused her pain—so much more pain.

“You’re scaring me.”

“I slept with another woman.”

Nora’s composure faltered as she processed his words—just a slight dimming of the eyes and a downturn at the pocket where her lips met. “You...what?”

“I’m sorry.” That sentiment, hollowed by its overuse, hung in the air. There were no words to convey his regret.

“Who was she?”

“A realtor for the bank.” Clark realized, fully and for the first time, that Beth threatened to negate the eighteen years he’d been devoted to Nora. “But she means nothing to me,” he rushed on. “It was a one-time thing—it ends there. I’m completely in love with you. I just couldn’t *look* at you. I couldn’t be around you. But I understand now that we lost her—we would have lost her anyway.”

“So you did it to get back at me,” Nora said slowly. Perhaps if she hadn’t cried so much over the past few weeks, she’d have something left in her to cry now.

“No! I just don’t know how to deal with the fact that I’m *angry* with you.”

“I won’t apologize for ending the pregnancy, Clark. Damn what God says.”

“But it’s not just that. You shut down completely. You never leave your room. The girls, at least, don’t deserve that.”

Nora bowed her head. “Of course they don’t. This is hard for me.” She paused, tracing a small hole in the quilt with her fingernail. “When I see them, they’re a constant reminder of the baby.”

He reached for her flimsy, lifeless hands, but she resisted. “I’m so sorry, Nora.” Clark pleaded. “For all of it.”

“It only took fifteen minutes, Clark. Did you know that?”

He didn’t know that because he hadn’t been there, during or after. Clark took a breath, feeling his pulse pound through his head. “I’ll understand if you want me to leave, Nora. I could get a place in town, take the girls on the weekends.” In truth, he couldn’t envision returning home day after day to rooms devoid of his daughters’ daily tiffs, or Nora’s dark, honey-colored hair, which precisely matched the sand in the seascape scheme he’d chosen for their downstairs bathroom. But, if this was Clark’s penance, he’d serve it.

Nora looked completely drained. “What if you’ve ruined us? I know I pushed you away, but God damn it, Clark. I needed you. This was our *baby*.”

“I should have been there. Please, let’s not do this anymore. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He tried to touch her again, and this time she let him. “What do we do?”

“I don’t know.”

Tentatively, Clark embraced Nora, who filled herself with his cedar scent as she molded her body against his chest because she wasn’t sure what else to do. Neither of them had a plan, but this—this physical closeness, their learned vulnerability after years together—this was what they knew.

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On the night of his thirtieth anniversary, Clark fastened his dress shirt, pausing to tuck in his old gold cross before doing up the last few buttons. Slowly, methodically, he tied his necktie the way his father had taught him on the eve of high

school prom. Then Clark hoisted a freshly dry-cleaned suit jacket over his wide shoulders and gave his reflection a nod in the mirror. At the last second, he remembered to grab the palm-sized beige box he'd stuffed into a pant leg in his bureau. It was nearly eight o'clock.

As Clark came downstairs, he could hear Laurel cooing at her son in the dining room, just as Nora had done to her so many years ago.

"Jesse! Jesse! Say cat. Ca-tuh. Look at mommy!" The pudgy boy, who was still alarmingly bald for a one-year old, smiled when he saw his grandfather enter the room.

"We-ell," Clark said, swooping Jesse into his arms, "someone's happy to see me."

"I swear he said it," Laurel insisted, looking at her mother. "Will doesn't believe me either." She rose from the floor with a crease in her maroon dress, which Clark would bet had been there all along, completely overlooked by its owner.

The doorbell rang, and guests began trickling in wearing suits, A-line skirts, and summer frocks, though the latter were rather premature. Clark stayed at Nora's elbow the entire evening—it was *their* anniversary, after all—as they accepted friends' congratulations, directed people to the gift table, and stuffed themselves with hors d'oeuvres well into the night.

Somewhere between watching a photo slide show courtesy of Laurel and cutting the vanilla cake hand-in-hand as they'd done on their wedding day, Clark managed to pull his wife aside. He led her to the landing above the stairs, from which they could see the partygoers below.

“I had no idea so many people would come,” Nora said. “I hope there’s enough food.”

“Oh, stop worrying. You’ve done everything just right.” He curled an arm around her shoulders and took a breath of her perfume, a brand she’d been using since college. Whenever Clark noticed other women wearing it, he felt as though Nora had been wronged, like they were trying to be someone they could never hope to be. Some things would always belong to his wife.

Clark pulled the tan box from his jacket pocket and let it teeter on his palm. “This,” he began, “is for you. For sticking by me through everything.”

“I thought we weren’t doing gifts this year!” She could pretend all she wanted; Clark knew she loved presents.

He shrugged, offering a sly smile. She squeaked the lid from its base to reveal a thin, white gold necklace with a suspended string of black pearls. The three stones increased in size from top to bottom.

“Oh, Clark.” She recognized the pendant’s significance as she fingered the stones, smooth as the inside of a conch shell.

“For our little ladies,” he said. “All three of them.”

He looked into her brown eyes, the ones she hated because they were commonplace, the dominant color—“nothing special.” But the shade had become more exceptional as it manifested in their daughters’ eyes, so when Clark looked at his children, he saw his wife rather than himself—Laurel and Callie were the absolute best of his better half.

“In thirty years,” Nora began, “you’ve learned exactly what I wanted.” She asked him to swap out the necklace she was wearing for the pearls. While Clark fumbled with the clasp, Nora surveyed the swarm of people moseying through the front hall. “I can’t believe she didn’t come tonight. She didn’t even call.”

“I thought she might have, especially because Laurel’s here.”

“Remember when we used to get take-out and watch movies with the girls every year?”

“That really was the best part.”

“Bring her home, Clark,” she said, so softly he couldn’t be sure that’s what she’d said. “She needs us.”

“I know.” He felt around for his wife’s hand, rubbing the coarse metal of a wedding ring that had weathered over the decades.

At the foot of the stairs, Laurel, flanked by hoards of guests on either side, waved frantically to her parents. “Cake!” she called, motioning for them to come down. Clark rested his hand on Nora’s back and, together, they descended the stairs to reenter the madness.

## Forever and Always

Sarina Pearson couldn't remember the last time she'd had an orgasm. Sweat cooled and dried on her skin as she lay next to her fiancé in bed. The number of times she'd had sex with Tom in their six months together was disproportionate to the amount of orgasms she'd had. *Disproportionate*. That was something her thirteen-year old daughter would say, along with words such as *coitus*, *fellatio*, and the like. Arielle read books about everything.

Despite the sunlight peeking through the blinds, Tom had fallen back asleep. He snored lightly near Sarina's ear, his heavy arm draped across her ribs. Tom was always exhausted after sex, and he was certainly never up for round two. He was, well, selfish—that was the word that best described their lovemaking. Foreplay was limited to the occasional fondling and the sort of neck nibbling that fell just shy of leaving marks. But Sarina's frustration wasn't all Tom's fault. When he was pawing at her in bed, her thoughts often wandered to her next shift at the restaurant or, formerly, how she was going to afford her son's prescriptions. Morning sex was particularly difficult with the day's stresses looming before her. Especially today. Today was a big day—the one before *the* big day.

From the hallway, a loud scratching noise ripped across the surface of the bedroom door. *Damn*, Sarina thought. She slid out from Tom's arm as the sound grew louder. Sarina knew what was coming next.

“Mom! Mom, Mom, Mom!” Johnny yelled. This was her five-year old son's favorite way to wake her. By the time Sarina pulled on her robe and opened the door,

Tom was stirring in bed and Otis, the kids' black lab, was howling on the ground floor.

“Okay, Johnny, I’m up. I’m here,” she said.

“Breakfast!” Johnny said, folding his arms over his Tonka Truck pajamas. As Sarina reached down to wipe crusty residue from his eye pockets, he dodged out of reach. “I want pancakes and sausage and waffles—”

“With chocolate chips in them?” Tom interrupted.

“No chocolate for breakfast!” Johnny said, employing a scolding tone he’d undoubtedly learned from his mother. “Right, Mom?”

“Right.”

“Good, I hate chocolate anyway,” Tom said. He winked at Sarina before tugging a Pink Floyd T-shirt over his head and down around his paunchy stomach. Sarina glanced from fiancé to son and back again, grateful they got along so well. “Okay, buddy. We’ll be down in a minute,” Tom said, setting Johnny off running. His tiny bare feet sounded twice their size as they slapped noisily down the stairs.

On weekends, Sarina usually tried to calm her son before he could wake up Tom. Sarina’s mother, who called from Indianapolis twice a week, emphasized the importance of keeping the children under control. “Not many bachelors are willing to take on a woman with two kids,” she said. Though Sarina was certain Tom loved her children, she wasn’t taking any chances until they were at the altar.

Johnny’s ADHD, which had become more severe when his father left eleven months ago, was one of Sarina’s many daily headaches. A single blue Adderall took

twenty minutes to set in, so hiding the pill in half a toasted PB&J was her first priority every morning. He hadn't yet learned to swallow meds straight.

"Sorry about that," Sarina said, kneeling on the bed to rub Tom's shoulders as he scrolled through his Blackberry.

"I'm used to it," he replied. "Which is good since we'll be married this time tomorrow." He turned around to kiss her cheek. "Have you written your vows yet?" This was something Tom had been firm about. *From the heart*, he'd said, which made Sarina want to remind him that he'd also exchanged personal vows with his previous two wives, and look how that had worked out for them. But she didn't.

"Not quite," she said. Not at all, really. What could Sarina have to say that was better than the priest's standard spiel? No, it was best to leave wedding vows to the professionals.

"I've had mine finished for a week!" Tom went to the closet, tugged a pair of dress pants from a hanger, and draped the crisply ironed fabric across their unmade bed. "Just wait till you hear how much I love you. I can't believe how good I made it sound."

Sarina offered a small smile. "I'll get it done." She shimmied out of her robe and fished through her dresser drawer, the one Tom had cleared out for her less than a month ago. "Are you going into the office today?"

"Yes. The mayor still works on Saturday, Sarina."

"I know that," she said, "but don't you have a lot to do today, too? I'm booked."

“It’s an election year.” Tom, by anyone’s standards, was a workaholic. “I’m hopping into the shower,” he said, shutting himself into the bathroom.

Tom was one of Mayor Katz’s top PR people, but Sarina was sure he built himself up to be more important than he actually was. Whatever his job consisted of, he’d sure saved a lot of money over the past twenty years. His house, a spiral-staircased Victorian, was located in one of the only wealthy subdivisions in Milford. Tom repeatedly insisted that he wasn’t rich, but to the Pearsons, who’d always been a “paycheck-to-paycheck” family, he seemed to offer the world. His proposal, about a month ago now, couldn’t have come at a better time. Sarina had been quietly brainstorming ways to pay three months’ worth of mortgage—a mortgage for a home she couldn’t afford on her waitressing salary alone—when Tom slipped a ring on her finger right before their main course at Aglamesis’, declaring he wouldn’t take no for an answer. And he was right, she couldn’t say no. Four days prior, Sarina had pulled a foreclosure notice from her mailbox. On top of everything else, her kids were going to lose the only home they’d ever known. But Tom’s proposal enabled her to keep the eviction to herself, and within a week of the engagement, the Pearsons had moved themselves and their aging dog to Tom’s upscale neighborhood. Johnny and Arielle didn’t mind the move as much once they saw the new trampoline out back and the fully stocked fridge.

As Sarina finished buttoning her blouse, she heard a slow shuffle in the hall. “Arielle!” Her daughter backtracked, pushing the door open wider. “You ready for today?”

“I’ve planned everything out,” Arielle said. Sarina motioned for her to come in, but she continued hovering uncertainly between the hall and the bedroom in her droopy leggings and “Class of 2017” sweatshirt. “We’ll stop in to check on the cake first since it’s closest. But our dress fitting’s at eleven, so we won’t have much time.” Arielle, who never dressed up if she could help it, had become positively ecstatic about her maid-of-honor gown. She consulted her watch with the crocodile-skin band, a gift her father had sent for her most recent birthday. *What all the rockstars are wearing*, he’d written on the card. “I just gave Johnny his meds,” Arielle said. She was mature beyond her years, always taking charge and assuming the role as mother to Johnny when Sarina wasn’t around. “We’ll drop him off at the sitter’s on the way, okay?”

Sarina nodded but said nothing, the sheer energy of her daughter exhausting her already.

Arielle began yanking her dark waves into a messy ponytail. “You told Maggie that Johnny’s coming, right?” The hair elastic between her teeth garbled her words.

“It’s all set.”

“How’s this outfit? I wasn’t sure—”

“You look great, Arie.” Lately Sarina had started actively trying to compliment her daughter, whose self-esteem had been plummeting since she’d crossed the threshold into the cruel, apocalyptic world of middle school. Her classmates made fun of the way she dressed and her braces and her chubby cheeks and probably a slew of other things Arielle hadn’t even told her mother.

“Thanks.” Arielle smiled, a sight Sarina hadn’t realized she missed so much. Before Charles had gone to Phoenix, and even in the few months between his departure from their lives and Tom’s arrival, Arielle and her mother had considered themselves best friends. But Arielle had become more and more distant.

Charles had barely kept in contact with his children. One Sunday last May, he’d risen early, whistling and frying up omelets made-to-order, and when his family returned from ten o’clock mass, he was gone. Some of his clothes were missing, his toothbrush, a few snapshots from the fridge (what, to remember them by?), but Sarina didn’t waste time worrying that he’d been knifed or drowned because this wasn’t the first time he’d disappeared. Being a family man was too much for him—that was always the card he played. Sometimes he needed a break. Couldn’t he have a fucking break? Three days later, he called to ramble about some record label out near some desert that just *needed* him, and wasn’t this the opportunity he’d been waiting for, ever since they were in high school, ever since The Skinned Animals broke up? And didn’t Sarina want him to take this chance—the fresh start he’d always craved?

They’d signed divorce papers through snail mail. Charles hadn’t paid a lick of child support, and Sarina, of course, was too proud to ask for it. Plus, she was afraid he’d invented the job just to get away, and if that were the case, she’d rather not know. After he’d gone, she felt relieved that the marriage had finally disintegrated—it was a long-time coming.

Arielle had taken her father’s abandonment (and it *was* abandonment) much harder than Johnny. Granted, her grades were still impeccable, and Sarina couldn’t

have handled Johnny without her help, but Arielle rarely mentioned Charles. Her appointments with the school psychologist (which her mother had insisted upon) eventually resulted in a call to Sarina during the lunch rush at Mawhiney's. "Your daughter needs more help than I can give her," the therapist had said. "May I refer you to an outside source?" *No, you may not*, Sarina thought. Professional counseling cost money—a lot of money that she didn't have, even if the restaurant *did* offer health benefits (which it didn't). Being depressed was a luxury that, ironically, the lower middle class couldn't afford.

After Sarina finished dressing, she went downstairs to ladle pancake batter over a skillet and nuke Jimmy Dean's sausage patties as her daughter, son, and fiancé chattered loudly across the table in the kitchen she would soon call her own.

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After the bakery on Center had opened, it quickly became Sarina's favorite place to catch some much-needed alone time before her lunch shifts. She'd worked at Mawhiney's for almost nine years now, and Let Them Eat Cake offered the best baked goods within walking distance.

Doorbells announced Sarina and Arielle's entrance, and a few people nursing coffee mugs glanced up from their respective tables.

"Ms. Pearson!" the young, blonde girl behind the counter said. "Callie's not quite finished yet."

"That's okay," Sarina said. "We're on a tight schedule today. We just wanted to check the progress."

A few seconds later, Arielle and Sarina were being ushered into a spotlessly clean kitchen—aside from the central counter. Dribbles of cake batter speckled the tabletop around the unfinished, three-tiered wedding cake. Callie, dusted with flour, was furiously mixing a vat of what appeared to be white icing.

“Sarina, hi!”

“It smells amazing in here,” Arielle said, mesmerized by the row of steaming ovens.

“This is my daughter, Arielle,” Sarina said.

“I’m Callie. Hey, do you want to help me for a sec?” Arielle nodded and moved closer to the messy table. “Here, keep stirring this—kind of slowly. The goal is not to let it get too hard before I have a chance to ice the cake.”

Arielle straightened her back, readying for the task. “Got it.”

Callie turned to Sarina. “So I’m almost finished here. We’ve got caramel on the bottom, then chocolate, and the peanut butter’s on top.”

Sarina squeezed her lips between her fingers as she walked around the table, studying the cake from every angle. So far, only the top two layers were frosted, and Callie had completed the black, flowery decal on the uppermost tier. The detail was exquisite. Callie’s artistic abilities shocked Sarina—not everyone who could cook managed to pull through with presentation. “It’s stunning,” Sarina said.

Callie looked relieved. “You can both try it! At least the caramel. I made a mini cake with the leftover batter.” From the oversized refrigerator, Callie removed a small pan and cut two slices. The flavor, too, was better than what Sarina had expected. Caramel had been *her* choice.

“Try it with the frosting,” Callie told Arielle, scooping a spoonful of creamy icing from the bowl. “Payment for all your hard work.”

“You have such a cool job,” Arielle exclaimed, her eyes big, as she took the spoon to dollop its contents over the rest of her portion.

Callie smiled and moved the bowl of frosting to decorate the bottom layer. Sarina picked at her own sliver with her fingers as she studied Callie. With a steady grace, Callie smeared white on the cake, smoothing over imperfections as quickly as she made them. Sarina wadded up her napkin, doubting this girl appreciated her seemingly easy life. The baker was painfully young, with green eyes that were still bright, for the moment—untainted—and an infinite amount of real, live freedom. Not too involved with anyone, judging by her lack of a ring (people’s left hands were the second thing Sarina looked at, after the eyes), and she definitely, definitely didn’t have any children. Sarina didn’t even *like* to cook, but she would have chosen a cozy career as a baker over her current situation. Except for the kids part—she couldn’t imagine not having Arielle and Johnny around.

“Do you want to take a plate home for your fiancé?” Callie asked.

“No, that’s okay. We actually have to run to a dress fitting,” Sarina said.

Against the counter, Arielle was checking that damned watch again. “Yeah, but thank you so much!”

“You come back anytime, okay?”

Sarina’s daughter was all smiles, a smudge of icing on her cheek. Arielle did this sometimes—latched onto people hard—which made Sarina wonder what she’d

been doing wrong lately, what measures she needed to take for her daughter to do the same to her again.

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Wedding ceremonies were all about the dress, according to Tom. After Sarina had accepted his proposal, he'd handed her his Platinum MasterCard with instructions to buy whichever one she wanted. Sarina, who knew as much about fashion designers as her five-year old son, had found a size-eight, scoop-neck gown on sale for \$400 at David's Bridal, and that was that. For her first wedding, she'd worn a plain, knee-length dress, which the JCPenney's tag described as "ecru" in color. Charles hadn't wanted anything fancy, so they'd made a pit stop at the Justice of the Peace's office before heading to South Carolina for a weekend of roach motels and seaweed-infested beaches. Sarina didn't see the point of spending heaps of money on a dress she'd wear once, but nearly a hundred guests had confirmed their attendance, including Mayor Katz, and Tom envisioned their nuptials being *the* event of the spring. Comparatively, Sarina's contribution to the guest list was small.

A few minutes to eleven, Sarina and Arielle entered the bustling bridal superstore. "Good thing we have an appointment," Arielle said, shrinking towards her mother to put distance between herself and the throng of Saturday shoppers. Ultimately, though, their punctuality was futile; the petite, grandmotherly woman behind the register said there was a fifteen-minute wait—at least.

Arielle began scouting the sales floor for seats, eventually finding a tacky red pleather sofa. Sarina squeezed in next to her, glad for this time to catch up with her daughter. Last Sarina had checked, Arielle didn't have any crushes at school, but

now, who knew? The wedding had consumed Sarina's past four weeks, and a month was like a year to a seventh grader.

"You excited to be my maid of honor?"

Arielle bobbed her head, making her ponytail flop up and down. "Do you think I'll do a good job though? I'm nervous for the speech part."

"Think of it as more of a toast. Have you thought about what you're going to say?"

"Of course, the wedding's tomorrow!"

"Okay! I know. Obviously you've done it." This was the girl who submitted book reports a week in advance.

"Mom," Arielle began, in that low tone Sarina dreaded, "you haven't written your vows yet, have you." This wasn't a question.

"Well—"

"Mom, you have to!" She sounded more offended than Tom had. For once, Sarina regretted having treated her eldest child as an adult, her chief confidant over the past few years. Arielle was always scolding her mother—never the other way around.

"There's so much pressure with the vows," Sarina said. "The whole thing's ridiculous."

"Well, yeah, marriage is stupid in general. But if this is what Tom wants, can't you just give it to him? I'll help you, if you want."

"How about I write it and let you hear beforehand? Does that sound good?"

"I guess." Arielle stubbed the toe of her sneaker into the carpet.

“Anything else new?”

“Not really.” She paused. “Dad called me yesterday.”

“What? You didn’t tell me? You always tell me.”

“I’m telling you right now. He said he might come for a visit, maybe in June.”

Charles was constantly making lofty promises like this, but he hadn’t returned to see his children once. And he’d never suggested they fly out to visit him (not that Sarina would have permitted it, but still). When he did call, he regaled their children with stories of big-name music stars or eccentrically named groups like Quasimodo and the Eunuchs or Inhale Mary, all of which were up-and-coming (mark his words).

“Do you think he’ll really come?” Arielle asked, running her fingers absentmindedly over the tulle hem of a dress. “I told him that June 3 is the last day of school, so he could come after that.”

“Have you mentioned this to your brother yet?”

Arielle shook her head.

“It would be really nice if your father came,” Sarina said gently, “but I wouldn’t get your hopes up, okay?”

“I *know*, but it’s different this time,” she said defensively. “He’s already looked up plane tickets and stuff.”

“I’m sure he has, but this is what your father does. I just don’t want you to be disappointed.”

Arielle bit her lip, her signature move when she got upset. Then a college-aged salesgirl with a black curtain of hair approached them. Her nametag read *Chloe*, and underneath, *Ask me anything!* The first question that sprung to Sarina's mind was *How many orgasms have you had in the past six months?* But then Arielle (who'd been pacified by the mere reminder of her dress, Sarina presumed) was doing the talking, and Chloe-College was leading them to the plush lounge with the gigantic dressing rooms.

"Let's put you two right next to each other," the girl said, gesturing to mirror-covered doors numbered eight and nine. Arielle eagerly stripped off her sweatshirt as Chloe ambled to the back room.

Since Tom and Sarina had both been around the block before, they'd minimized their bridal party. Only Arielle and Johnny, Tom's best "man," would stand next to them at the altar. "The guests will love it," Tom had said. Tom's "guests," it seemed to Sarina, may have been his primary motivation for proposing in the first place. He was a public figure, and from what Sarina understood about politics, men always looked better with women at their sides. But maybe that wasn't fair. Sometimes Tom brought home takeout from her favorite Chinese place, even though he hated Asian fusion, and he treated her children as his own. He regularly volunteered to pick Johnny up from the sitter's and take him to the car wash. Going through the car wash had become one of Johnny's favorite activities lately, and sometimes Tom left the passenger window open a crack just to hear Johnny shriek with laughter.

Arielle had been allowed to pick her own dress—color, cut, everything—and Johnny’s tiny tux would be accented accordingly. Last time they’d been to the bridal shop, the gown on the window mannequin caught Arielle’s eye from the street. Without browsing the racks, she’d waltzed right up to an employee and requested the tea-length purple chiffon dress in her size. “You’ll have to measure me,” she’d instructed, taking charge of the entire situation while Sarina watched from behind, floored by how independent (even Charles-like) her little girl was becoming.

When Chloe returned with their dresses, covered in protective fabric bags, Arielle insisted that her mother go first. Inside fitting room nine, a naked Sarina gazed at her reflection—her box-dyed blonde hair, the shallow crow’s feet that had snuck up around her eyes—and hoped that the hairdresser, who was adding makeup to her responsibilities tomorrow for an extra thirty bucks, could somehow pull Sarina’s appearance together.

“Are you ready?” Arielle called.

“Almost.” The cream-colored dress (she and Arielle had agreed that white was a little far-fetched) had a low neckline, revealing slightly more of her chest than she’d normally feel comfortable with. For being thirty-three and having given birth twice, though, her cleavage didn’t look half-bad.

When Sarina emerged from the room, her daughter gave her a twice-over. “Well, zip me!” Sarina said. Arielle did, and the two stood side by side, facing the endless stretch of mirrors. Unsure what to do with herself, Sarina squeezed her waist and twirled a lot, mimicking the young woman with a small army of bridesmaids a few rooms over. The dress wasn’t perfect—fabric bunched around her rear, and it

might be a few centimeters too short with her heels—but she wasn't shooting for perfection.

“I hope I look this pretty on my wedding day,” Arielle said.

Sarina met her daughter's gaze in the mirror. “Trust me—you're going to look prettier.”

“My turn!” Arielle said.

Sarina fingered the pearl detail on the dress' bodice, wondering whether Tom would like it. Their relationship had been short by anyone's standards, but Tom was well into his forties and Sarina had never truly been alone, unless you counted the two months between Dex Nestor and Charles in the eleventh grade (which she didn't). It was Tom who'd taken care of the wedding plans, from the church right down to the reception's fishbowl centerpieces (filled with *real* freshwater koi! Arielle did not approve.). He wanted everything to be perfect this time. Having *three* failed marriages, Sarina imagined, would surely sully his inner-office reputation.

“Mom? I need help with the zipper.”

“Come here.”

Arielle cracked the door enough to lean her head outside. “Can you come in?”

The silky material Arielle was wearing was much purpler than Sarina remembered—like a teenager had picked it out. Arielle turned her back to her mother. So far, she'd managed to pull the clasp a few inches above her tailbone. Pinching the two sides together with one hand, Sarina tugged at the miniature metal zipper, easily sliding it halfway up her back before losing steam just below Arielle's

cloud-shaped birthmark. She tried again, using all her strength, but the zipper stayed put.

“I can’t get it to go up anymore.” She felt Arielle’s waist contract as she sucked in her stomach.

“Try it now.”

Sarina did, to no avail. “I think it might need to be taken out,” Sarina said, choosing her words carefully.

Arielle spun around. “It doesn’t fit?”

“It’ll be a quick fix! Here—” Sarina popped her head out of the dressing room and scanned the area for an employee. Chloe, of course, was nowhere to be found, was probably sniffing around for commission. “Excuse me?” Sarina called out. A name-tagged woman about her own age rushed around the corner, smiling brightly. Everyone in this store was so damn *happy*.

“Yes, miss?”

“My daughter needs her dress altered by tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” the woman echoed, looking confused. “It usually takes at least a couple of days, even for minor adjustments.”

“But it just needs to be taken out half an inch or so,” Sarina said. “We’re desperate. She’s my maid of honor.”

“Do you know who was helping you?”

“Chloe.”

“I’ll send her over.”

Inside the room, Arielle had snaked her arms up her back as she continued trying to close the dress.

“Honey, you’re going to have to come out and let the girl see.”

“No, it has to fit! We just bought it last month!” Arielle was trembling now. “Aren’t you going to help me?” But Sarina wasn’t sure what else she could do. Arielle dropped her arms, eyes wide open and a smear of blood on her lips where she’d bitten so hard she’d cracked through the skin. “Get it off of me.” He voice was saturated with desperation. “Please get it off of me!”

Sarina pulled the zipper and Arielle forced the dress over her teenage hips and then she was standing, wearing only her size-B bra from K-mart and a pair of blue striped underwear, and crying. She collapsed on the bench, letting her mother pull her ponytailed, little girl head onto her lap just as she’d done when Arielle sprained her ankle in third-grade gym class or didn’t win the crown during Pretty Pretty Princess. Now, Arielle’s tears pooled around her mouth, mixed with blood, and dissolved onto the satin fabric of Sarina’s second wedding dress, which didn’t really matter because it was off-white anyway.

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Later that evening, Johnny was climbing over the pews of St. Augustine’s Church, squealing as his sister chased him, wielding a *Gather* songbook in her right hand. Rather than yelling, Sarina studied them, savoring what she suspected was one of the last moments they would be playing together. The teenaged Arielle apparently liked dresses, and she text-messaged and—Sarina was sure now—she hid things from her mother. But for today, at least, she had reverted to being a child.

The murmuring crowd near the pulpit drew her attention. This was their rehearsal, followed by the rehearsal dinner, and Sarina wouldn't be surprised if half of tomorrow's guest list were in the room right now. On Sarina's side, she'd only brought her children—this was supposed to be an intimate affair, after all. But her fiancé had invited one person in the office who'd told another and so on, to the extent that Sarina suspected that right at this very moment, when she caught Tom's eye across the cathedral, he had only been searching for the absent mayor.

Father Fletcher, whose young face looked too pudgy, too unaltered by life for him to actually be a priest, stepped up to the microphone. "We should probably get started, folks. If everyone could please sit down." Chaos ensued as grown adults scurried like children to claim the best seats.

"Mom, I'm nervous," Arielle said.

"Don't be. This is just practice!"

"I'm not nervous, Mom," Johnny interrupted. "I'm going to be the best best man ever."

"Don't I know it," Sarina said, grabbing his hand and leading him to the front. People *awwed* as they passed by, and Johnny ate it up, waving at all these stuffy people he'd never seen before.

"You ready, babe?" Tom asked. She nodded and handed off Johnny. "And my little man!" Johnny's face lit up. "Can we do this?"

"Yeah!" Johnny high-fived Tom's low five.

Sarina kept her head down as she walked to the vestibule. Near the church's entrance, Arielle was standing awkwardly in her gleaming pair of half-inch white

heels. After a few bad notes of the wedding march, she started down the marble aisle. At the bridal shop, Sarina had pleaded with Chloe-College to prioritize the purple gown's alterations, and she'd nothing short of promised that the dress would be ready for pick-up by 9 a.m. For the most part, all was well.

When it was Sarina's turn to march to the altar, she did so without giving a thought to grace or speed or keeping her head held high enough to hide her slight (hardly noticeable) double chin. This was just walking, for her. She was more nervous for her children. But they performed beautifully, and with little instruction from Father Fletcher. Even Johnny, who was directly in his mother's line of sight, didn't fidget too much.

"And now," the priest began, opening his arms, "we do the vows."

"We've written our own," Tom said.

"Lovely. Typically the bride addresses the groom first." He looked expectantly at Sarina.

"Wait—now?" That didn't seem right. Wouldn't that make their marriage technically official?

Father Fletcher leaned closer. "We like to run through it once, just in case." Across from her, Tom took a folded sheet from his breast pocket.

"I—well," Sarina stalled, peeking at the dozens of eyes watching her family. "I just—"

Tom squinted and took a step nearer to Sarina. "You did write them?" he said, so quietly that only those in the pulpit could hear.

"I, um—"

Johnny squinted at his mother, as though willing her to speak.

“Honey?” Tom said, loudly now. He turned to face the rows of people and flashed that politician’s smile. “She’s just a waitress,” he said. “Let’s cut her some slack.”

It was as though he had slapped her, hard enough to leave a mark, a scar, for years after. Sarina’s mouth opened as some onlookers—strangers—laughed loudly, others more reservedly, out of politeness for the man who’d be feeding them dinner two nights in a row.

When Tom took her hands again, resuming their façade of happiness without so much as an apologetic flash in his eyes, she let him. Then Sarina watched her son, in all his innocence, tug on Tom’s suit jacket and ask, “Is it time for the rings now?”

And Tom explained that he was sorry, buddy, it wasn’t, and then he nipped Johnny under his chin, visibly flipping a switch to improve her son’s whole mood, his very being.

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It was after eleven when they finally rolled up to Tom’s house. At dinner, she’d been too busy making small talk to steal a second with Tom. But when he’d said that at the altar, she’d wanted to scream, *Damn you*—right in front of the priest, standing in a Catholic church with an entire congregation of people watching. But she hadn’t, and as they fumbled into the foyer of his dark house, Sarina realized she was exhausted. It was her wedding eve, and she didn’t want to fight with the man she’d be marrying, indefinitely, tomorrow morning.

“All right, kids, straight up to bed,” Tom said. “We’ve got an early day.”

Arielle bounded up the stairs while Johnny lingered as usual, enamored with Tom. “Will you tuck me in?”

“You run on up and get your PJs on. We’ll see.” But she and Johnny both knew Tom would—he’d put him to bed almost every day since they’d moved in.

“I thought the kids did great tonight,” Tom said, stooping to kiss her forehead, “and we’re almost there.”

She was trying to be attentive, but the rectangular mirror behind Tom was distracting. Sometimes she checked her makeup one last time in this mirror before hustling to work—to her job as a *waitress*—and she’d long ago deemed it less than forgiving. Her reflection showed lines like carved-out crescent moons around her mouth, and her hips jutted out so far over her waistband that there was no way the mirror hadn’t been distorted. The woman staring back at her couldn’t be an accurate likeness, except she could be and probably was.

Tom had been rambling, and she caught the tail end. “I’m going upstairs. You coming?”

“In a few,” she said.

He hesitated on the landing. “I’m not mad at you, you know.”

“Okay.” Sarina blinked. The idea that he had a reason to be angry was almost laughable. “I’m just going to fine-tune my vows.”

He chuckled. “Whatever you say. Just try not to blow it tomorrow, okay?” He kissed her forehead. “Love you,” he said. She stared after Tom, noticing a thick stripe of sweat across the back of his red button-up.

In the kitchen, Sarina pulled a fifth of gin from the freezer and mixed herself a strong Tom Collins. She wrote feverishly at the kitchen table as she sipped her drink, crossing out words and caretting in new sentences, determined to be truthful when reciting this in front of the priest. The page was covered in ink and swooping x-marks by the time Sarina, pleasantly tipsy now, held up her work. *This*, she thought, *was perfect*. She crept up to Arielle's room. Her door was shut, but a sliver of light illuminated the skinny space above the floor.

Sarina knocked lightly before entering to find Arielle curled up in front of the bay window, thick paperback in hand. She looked startled by her mother's arrival, as though Sarina had just ripped her from a fictional world that was both more handsome and less painful than the current world in which she resided.

“Will you listen to my vows?”

By way of response, Arielle straightened up, making space for her mother on the puffy cushions. Sarina settled in and smoothed the fraying notebook paper against her knees. “Tom Frey,” she recited, “you are exactly the man I was looking for. When we first met, I hoped that it would come to this—us sharing a home and sharing a life. It happened so quickly, but in some ways it didn't happen fast enough. I promise to care for you because you care for me and you care for my children. I can't do this without you. As I write this, you're upstairs tucking my son into bed and probably reading him *The Bernstein Bears* because you've realized, already, that it's his favorite. You really want to be a part of this *family*, which is the trait I've learned to value most in a husband. And so, I promise to be a faithful wife—forever and always.”

Arielle, who had been watching her mother attentively, took the paper and squinted at the words. “What about love?”

Sarina blinked down at the page. What *about* love? “It’s a wedding, Arie. Love’s one of those words that’s going to be overused anyway.”

“Mom? You know you don’t have to marry him, right?”

These were the wise words of Sarina’s thirteen-year old daughter, a girl who knew everything about everything but somehow nothing—sometimes.

“But I do,” Sarina said. “I really do.” She felt Arielle’s fingers, clammy, entwine with her own, because Sarina was the mother, Arielle was thirteen-years old, and—Sarina knew—that was all a child should be expected to do. When things went wrong, you held people. You let yourself be held. Talking didn’t always fix problems. It was that skin-to-skin, that lips-to-forehead, the comfort that someone was there.

With her other hand, Arielle picked up the copy of *A Tale of Two Cities*—a book that Sarina herself hadn’t read until she was an upperclassman in high school. Her daughter turned to a chapter early in the text. A tassled bookmark dropped to the floor. “Will you read to me for a little while?”

Sarina took the novel and, saving the page with her pointer finger, flipped to the front cover. The edition was old, severely weathered in its binding, but the washed-out storming of the Bastille image was still discernable.

“From chapter three?” With both their backs pressed against the cool window glass, shoulders touching, Sarina began. “A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.”

Arielle laid her head against her mother's arm to follow along with the text. "A solemn consideration," she continued, "when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it."

To the sound of Sarina's voice, Arielle eventually fell asleep, nestled comfortably against her mother in this house they would try, desperately, to make into their home.

## A Very Good Place to Start

It was becoming very clear to me: old women were not fond of change. For all Georgia Tate's years as a journalist, she was still adverse to nearly every form of new technology. According to Georgia, she only used a computer in the office and hadn't driven a car since the early '90s. Technically speaking, her last driver's license had been issued *before I was born*. The most technologically advanced product in her apartment above my bakery was a color TV, and even that had antennae. This was true—I'd seen it when I'd driven her out to Newton to buy hearing aids. And now she was flat-out refusing to learn the ins and outs of the cash register.

"Callie," Georgia said, "this system doesn't make sense. You can't abbreviate both blueberry muffins and blueberry pie with 'Blue.'"

"They're listed under different categories." My patience was wearing thin. We'd been reviewing this for at least thirty minutes. "If you look at the headings, they're grouped by muffins and pies."

"You expect me to remember all that? Why can't you just write the whole thing out?"

Hiring Georgia part-time had seemed like a good idea, in theory. She was my most loyal customer, though perhaps she'd go elsewhere if my shop weren't so conveniently located. Recently, *The Milford Chronicle* had forced her into retirement—the town had been positively buzzing about it—and that was when she began upping her meals at the bakery, sometimes coming in twice a day. It was when

she quit bringing stuff to read and write in favor of stalking the passersby that I finally offered her the job. Ideally I'd wanted someone to assist me with the baking, but that definitely wasn't Georgia. "You don't want me working here," she'd said. "I'd burn water if the laws of physics let me." But I could tell she'd been grateful. Georgia didn't need the money; she needed something to do.

The morning crowd was picking up—the man with the bowler cap, Mrs. Sawyers and her twins with the double stroller that, miraculously, fit through the door. Bowler man and Mrs. Sawyers studied menus and peered into the display case, mulling over the selection.

"I need to finish the lunch specials," I told Georgia, "but ask Tess if you have any questions, okay?"

"I don't need her help."

"I'll just send her out." Forcing my two employees to get along would be as big of a challenge as any. "And remember, I can see all the orders on a *connected* computer screen. You don't have to shout each one." Yesterday, this had been a difficult concept.

"I know, I know," Georgia tied a black apron over her patchwork sweater, which added some much-needed spunk to the bakery's image, I thought.

I retreated to the back room, where Tess kneeled by the refrigerator, restocking eggs. "Would you mind giving Georgia a hand?"

"Sure." She finished stacking the last few cartons and left through the swinging door. A few days ago, Tess had asked if *she* could train as my baking apprentice. Smart girl: she knew I couldn't afford a third employee. I couldn't even

afford Georgia, really, but business had been picking up over the last week or so. I had yet to give Tess a definite answer. Training a girl who'd never cooked before would be twice as difficult as training Georgia had been. One thing at a time.

I took a long breath in the kitchen, my safe haven from everything—demanding customers, ringing cell phones, even that nasty bill collector Donald Humphrey. The sound of oven timers soothed me, and I didn't mind converting grams to cups for certain recipes. In fact, I sort of enjoyed it.

Today, the new lunch item was pizzetta. I'd made the dough earlier—whole wheat to give the bread a punch of sweet. With floured hands, I tossed the dough and banged it into small disks. My flux of customers was making it increasingly hard to gauge how much food to prepare, but I decided to bake fifteen mini pizzas. I could always make more, and Mortie never complained when I brought home leftovers.

Mortie was on a tighter budget than I was these days. His job in Kent State's mailroom wasn't cutting it, and when he'd begged to borrow money for our rent—once in March and another time just last week—I'd given it to him, of course. Donald Humphrey wouldn't have been too pleased, since technically I owed him first, but I couldn't leave Mortie hanging. And I'd earned enough money to pay off my March rent *and* its accompanying late fee—now I just had to figure out April, though May was only days away, too. It never seemed to end. As for Mortie, he'd started applying for jobs—*real people* jobs—now that his graduation date was looming. He'd repay me when he could.

I grabbed a huge jar of pizza sauce from the pantry and used both hands to twist off the lid. The earthy scent of oregano wafted from the thick red paste.

Whenever I used ready-made ingredients, I felt like a fraud. To be fair, I'd taste-tested a few different brands in normal-sized cans before deciding to order Pastorelli's in bulk. Customers couldn't honestly expect me to make *everything* from scratch.

Tess had remarked that the kitchen needed a radio, but I'd been firm on that subject. Peace and quiet was the best way to cook. After painting sauce over the crusts, I sprinkled on sun-dried tomatoes and chopped up yellowing cloves of garlic rather finely, not caring that my hands, right down to my pores, would continue reeking of the stuff all day. I crumbled feta over the top and arranged leaves of spinach—two apiece—on the pies. Olive oil, extra-virgin, was always the final touch. It really made the crust gleam and the peaks of the feta golden, rather than burn.

It was still too early for lunch, so I stacked the four pizza trays on a rack attached to the conveyor oven. The nutella cupcakes were next, and I was reaching for my recipe book as Georgia came in. "Someone out here's asking for you, boss."

I froze. "Donald Humphrey?" He'd come to the bakery once so far, and Tess had covered for me, saying I was out meeting a potential backer. In retrospect, perhaps that wasn't the best excuse.

Georgia, of course, hadn't yet heard of Donald Humphrey. She frowned. "No, it's a woman."

I removed my soiled apron and followed Georgia. Out in the café, people were actually waiting *in line*. Now the tables were filling up and Tess bustled around, grabbing a cinnamon crumb muffin with one hand while trying not to spill

the coffee cup in the other. People were just loud enough so I couldn't decipher the blues lyrics pulsing through the speakers. Maybe I'd have to get a new sign: *Line Forms Here*. They were tacky, so I wouldn't, but it was nice to have the use for one.

"That lady off to the side," Georgia said, nodding toward a heavy woman toting a Coach purse with the rainbow-colored "C"s.

"Hi, I'm Callie, the owner." I offered my hand, which she shook vigorously.

"Listen, I know you're busy, but are you planning to serve any of that peanut butter cake today?"

I'd never sold peanut butter cake. I must have looked confused because she added, "I was at the Frey wedding. Tom and his new wife, you know? My son and I just loved that cake, and I was hoping to buy another—well, not a wedding cake, obviously. But do you make them in cupcakes, too?" The woman bobbed her head to the side, trying to glimpse the kitchen.

Guests knew I'd catered the cake? "I—well I'm not making peanut butter right now, but it's on the menu for tomorrow," I said, improvising.

"Oh, fabulous. I'll stop back in." She waved to a huddle of ladies in line on her way out.

Next to me, Georgia was squinting at the monitor in concentration, her finger hovering above the touch screen. "And will you be paying with card or cash?" She took bills from the customer and handed him the receipt.

I smiled and turned to Tess, who was smearing cream cheese across the insides of a bagel. "When it dies down a little bit, come back to the kitchen," I said. "I'll teach you how to make cupcakes."

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Julie Andrews was born to play the role of Fräulein Maria. Sometimes, when I came home from work, tired from being on my feet all day, I popped *The Sound of Music* into the DVD player and sunk into a three-hour comatose state. Usually I'd play only my favorite scenes or flip it on as white noise while making dinner. I didn't even need to *watch* it anymore—I'd seen it so many times. If I had to choose a soundtrack for my life, this would have been it. Not because the lyrics particularly pertained to my life, but because when I was walking around, going through the motions, these were the songs I tended to hear playing in my head. For me, they were somehow associated with being alive.

Tonight, I did a load of laundry while watching the von Trapps sing about anything and everything. Lolita, who was technically Mortie's cat but evidently liked women more, was curled up near my headboard. I was folding clothes, humming along with "Do-Re-Mi," when Mortie rushed into my room, cheeks flushed and grinning madly. "I got a job interview!"

"What?" I jumped up and pushed onto my tippy toes for a hug. "Congrats! I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks! I'm one of ten finalists, so the odds aren't that great—"

"Oh, stop it. You're putting bad vibes into the universe." I settled cross-legged onto my mattress. "What's the job?"

Mortie stayed standing. "Well, that's the thing." He paused. "I debated whether I should tell you."

My thoughts reeled: White Castles' drive-thru, Macy's shoe salesman. Mortie *had* to pay his portion of the rent this month; he couldn't afford to be choosy. "Who else are you going to tell?" I asked. He knew I had a point. Maybe he'd already mentioned it to his recently official boyfriend, Scotty, but other than him, I was it.

"It's a really good entry-level job as a bank assistant," he said, conceding and joining me on the bed. "I'd start right after graduation." Mortie was obsessed with the financial industry, which was ironic since he failed at managing his own money. But when you have to put yourself through school, anything goes.

"See, the job's perfect for you," I said.

"It's with your dad's bank."

My body reacted before my brain could, and I jerked away from him.

"Cal, don't be mad." He smiled slightly: a peace offering.

"Well, there's more than one branch," I said, rationalizing for him.

"I know...but it's with the branch on Bauer where his office is. The job's actually assistant to the vice president, Patrick Steiner."

I whacked Mortie's arm hard enough to make him wince. Patrick Steiner was my dad's right-hand man. If Mortie got the job, he'd be seeing more of my father than did most people, especially his own children. "You know all the shit my dad's pulled. He won't even *talk* to me." I assumed Mortie had heard enough about my father to never want to meet him, let alone slave over credit reports for the guy. Dad wasn't all bad, but I'd definitely only described one side of him to Mortie.

Mortie folded his hands behind his head. "I really need this job."

“Oh, you *need* this job? You’d be a coffee runner! You wouldn’t even be using your skills.” I stooped to grab more laundry, appalled that this was even up for debate. “There will be other jobs.”

“I’ve applied to at least a dozen. Pontiac’s the only place that’s gotten back to me.” I didn’t answer, just matched up the sleeves of a cardigan as I folded it neatly. “You’re really not going to forgive me if I do this, are you?” Mortie continued.

I dropped a graying sock back into the hamper and looked him straight in the eyes. “He’s my father.”

“I *know*.” He snatched Lolita from my pillow. The mangy excuse for a cat didn’t even hiss at him. Mortie slammed my door as he left, shaking the floor—the very foundation—of our apartment.

I pressed “play” on the remote, letting the characters’ chatter drift in and out as background music. Clark McLaughlin—with his moral code and silent treatments and damn expectations—was not the ideal father. I couldn’t imagine him as a boss. He probably monitored people’s lunch breaks down to the minute and became Scrooge-like during the Christmas season. Actually, I knew for a fact he loved issuing holiday bonuses, but still.

Mortie was fit for the job—I was sure of that—but that didn’t mean my dad would find him qualified enough. If given ten choices, Dad wasn’t going to pick him, a twenty-one year old with the graduation date on his resume reading “2012 (expected).” Or, perhaps Dad *would* pick him—that might be worse. Mortie had always been on my side of the Vassar Debacle, but there was a chance he’d switch teams if he actually liked my father. Either way, tensions would rise in our four-

room apartment, and I'd refuse to cook, and he'd refuse to clean, and within a week, even Lolita might abandon me. It was best that Mortie turn down the interview now.

I carried a hefty stack of clothes to the dresser and organized them, one by one. Skirts went in the bottom left drawer, underwear and socks in the top. On the TV screen, Maria was sprinting whimsically along the grass as Friedrich and Kurt grabbed her hands. This was the film that had inspired my love of musicals, way back before I sang in front of anyone—except for my family. When Laurel and I were younger, we used to perform nightly for our parents, who dutifully stifled their laughter and swore we were the next Britney Spears—except there was one of her and two of us, a constant point of contention. But two years down the road, neither of us wanted to be her anyway.

I stacked my pajamas in the center drawer slowly, distracted by the screen. Children shouldn't be exposed to the von Trapps at a young age. What crap. Parents and their children don't sing together every ten or so minutes, in harmony or otherwise. And even if the grassy knolls evidently aplenty in Austria had existed stateside, families didn't spread their arms like birds in transit and welcome the wind on their faces. Yet, this was my favorite movie.

As the credits rolled, I noticed the photograph tucked into the corner of my mirror. Tom and Sarina's wedding cake was the first I'd ever made—a milestone that warranted snapping a picture before delivery. Their color scheme was black and white, and I'd spent the better part of a day drawing and redrawing the ornate flower design Sarina had envisioned. I can't remember the last time I'd been so proud of something. No one had helped me. It was my own creation from start to finish, and

judging by the woman in the bakery this afternoon, the cake had met with success at the wedding.

I heard something shatter in the kitchen—probably one of the plates in the only matching set we have—and Mortie saying, “Shit. *Shit.*” He was always breaking things, knocking knick-knacks off of table corners or stuffing fragile wine glasses too haphazardly into the dishwasher. He was the opposite of domestic. I couldn’t imagine what Mortie would do after graduation. He’d go stir crazy with no tests to study for and no other responsibilities.

With a shallow sigh, I rooted around for my cell phone, eventually finding it trapped between the sheets and down comforter. Speed dial for my parents’ house was “3,” which I touched tentatively before pressing down. Dad, who compulsively checked Caller ID, probably wouldn’t answer when he recognized my number. After four rings, Mom picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Callie! It’s good to hear from you.” Though I know my mother meant what she said, her surprised intonation wasn’t genuine. My parents had spent at least two of those rings marveling at the fact that I was calling at all.

I wanted this conversation to be brief. If I let my mother get too chatty, she’d be on six different tangents and have me under interrogation before I had a chance to make my proposal. “Listen, I only have a few minutes, but my roommate, Mortie? You remember him, right? From high school?”

“Yes, your *roommate.*”

“Well, he’s got a job interview with Pontiac Banks.”

“That’s wonderful. Does your father know him?”

“I don’t think so, but I want them to meet. Mortie applied for the position of Patrick’s assistant.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize Patrick was looking for someone. That’s just great, Cal. Your father would see him a lot.”

“I know Neal does all the hiring, but I thought it couldn’t hurt for him to meet Dad.” I paused to consider my next words. “What if you both came to the bakery?” Neutral ground was ideal. Plus, if my mother saw the state of our apartment, I doubt she’d cross the threshold.

“That would be lovely!” Her enthusiasm was genuine and reminded me how much I missed her. If all went well, maybe we’d start cooking together again, just once a week or so. She’d offer me good intentioned but horrible financial advice while we made peach crepes, and she would somehow find a way to save everything, food-related or otherwise, that I’d nearly ruined because she would remember that that was her job.

“How about Friday?” I asked. “Let’s say eight. I’ll make dessert or something.”

“I’ll talk it over with your father.” Her voice dropped down to a murmur.

“We don’t need to tell him you two are living together, though.”

“Mom, it’s not like that.”

“Honey, I don’t care. I always thought he was handsome.”

When I told Mortie the next morning, he planted a sloppy kiss on my forehead. “Oh, I love you, Callie! I just love you.”

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On Friday, I kept myself busy all day. I began by teaching Georgia—who’d mastered the cash register and printer within an impressive two days—the right way to open the display case. By pulling the glass just so, there was no way it could veer off track. Tess’ cooking lessons—day three of her training—consumed the majority of the afternoon, and today it involved a double batch of croissants. Tess, a five-foot-seven waif weighing all of one-hundred-and-ten pounds—max—looked horrified when I measured out seven heaping cups of white, all-purpose flour. “I had no idea,” she said. I could practically see her mentally calculating the calories of one croissant.

“You can’t dwell on what goes into foods,” I cautioned her. “Just taste the final product.”

By closing time at five, we’d sold all the sundae cups of pistachio pudding as well as the orange poppy seed scones. Tess, it turned out, really was a natural. Maybe by next week I’d be able to shave a few hours off my schedule.

“I think I’m getting the hang of this,” Tess said as she wiped the front counter.

“You have the baker’s instinct.”

“Yeah, I’m enjoying it. It’s something you don’t have to be smart for.”

I studied her, this girl who was so close to me in age that I wanted her as my friend rather than my employee. “That’s not true,” I said. “It’s just a different type of smart.”

Tess took her purse from her cubby and crossed it over her chest. “I like that.”

After she left, I flipped the door’s sign to “Closed” and retired to the kitchen. I had less than three hours before my parents arrived. This morning, I’d unlocked the bakery around six and set to work peeling carrots and chopping pecans. By the time Georgia arrived, a predictable twenty minutes before her shift, I had three square-shaped cakes of various sizes cooling near the oven.

“The smell of that woke me up,” Georgia had said in her before-ten-a.m. tone. “What the hell are you making?”

“Carrot cake.” It was a recipe I’d never used before, not even with my mother—which was exactly what I was after. Now that I’d made one successful wedding cake, I thought I’d attempt another. Since I’d missed my parents’ anniversary party, this was the perfect excuse to try again. A “Happy Belated Anniversary” cake, “Love, Your Darling Daughter Who Actively Avoided It.” But they were making an effort by coming tonight, so I thought I could meet them halfway.

“Well,” Georgia said, “it smells like you’re doing it right.”

I’d saved the decorating for after work. The assembly, icing, and decals took nearly two hours to complete. When Mortie let himself in through the back door promptly at seven-thirty, I was loading the dishwasher with dirty pans and spatulas crusted with rose- and lilac-colored frosting.

“You look spiffy,” I said. Mortie had dressed to impress, surely following some instructional pamphlet of job-hunting tips that Kent’s Career Center had dispersed like candy.

“Thanks, I try. How’d the cake go?”

“Well, it’s done, at least. You owe me big time for this.”

“It’s not even for me!”

“I mean for this whole night.” It was mutually understood that he wasn’t actually indebted to me. There were few things we wouldn’t do for each other. In high school, Mortie had pulled the fire alarm during fifth bell just so I could avoid taking an American history test I hadn’t prepared for. I think he got an in-school-suspension for that, too.

“Yeah, we’ll see,” Mortie said. “I can’t tell if being your friend is going to help or hurt my chances.” His tone was light, but the thought had crossed my mind.

I hung my apron on its hook. The mostly black outfit I’d had on all day was the same one I’d wear tonight. If I really gave a damn about my father’s opinion, I would have brought a change of clothes—a well-pressed button-down or a sundress and sweater, both of which my father was accustomed to seeing me wear. But I was already the one who was surrendering after a six-month battle, or at least that’s how he saw it, I’m sure.

I took a wet rag from the faucet and went to the front of the shop. Mortie followed, hopping onto the counter in his nice pants and everything. In my head, I’d already planned the seating arrangement. All my little white tables were designed for two people, so I pushed a couple together near the window. Ideally, Dad would be

facing the bakery with Mortie directly in front of him. I wanted Dad to see what I'd made with just four walls and an oven. I'd had nothing to do with the brandywine crabapples lining the street or anything else viewable through the window, but the bakery and everything in it were mine.

"Where do you want me?" Mortie asked. I motioned to his designated chair, which he promptly sank into.

From the cabinet, I counted out four dessert plates and took the same number of forks from the silverware drawer. I passed them to Mortie, trusting him to set the table. "Forks go on the left."

"Does it really matter?" He slid the utensil in a wide arc around his dish.

"Trust me, it does." I was glad to have Mortie meet my parents—to have him finally understand what I'd been complaining about. And I felt safer with him there, as though he could protect me from my dad's wrath if anything went wrong. If Dad mentioned Vassar, which was almost a guarantee, Mortie would be there afterwards to pull me back together and reassure me that I *wasn't* a failure—that I was only trying to carve out my own success and screw anyone who suggested otherwise.

Taking the damp dishtowel, I began wiping all the tabletops. "We're not going to be using those tables, Cal," Mortie said.

I blinked down at the rag. Then I heard a knock at the door and there, lit by the dim glow of the streetlamp, were my parents. Mom had visited fairly recently—maybe three weeks or so back. But I hadn't really seen Dad, apart from the Christmas parade, since I'd borrowed Mortie's big SUV and returned home to pack up my little girl's room into unlabeled boxes full of ticket stubs and dated Halloween

costumes and CDs as old as Hanson's "Middle of Nowhere." Dad didn't leave his study to say hello or goodbye or even to yell out the door asking what in God's name that hunk of junk was doing in his driveway. It was only Mom who lingered on the porch as I drove down Taft Hill in Mortie's roaring Jeep Cherokee.

Nothing about Dad looked different. Day or night, formal or casual, he pretty much wore the same shirt-and-tie ensemble in varying colors. Though his hair wasn't grey yet, it was officially on the way. Standing behind my mother on the stoop, he threw her entire frame into shadow.

As I approached the door, I didn't know how to greet them. Mom entered first. "Hello, dear," she said, opening her arms for a hug. We hadn't done this in awhile, but our bodies fit together just as easily as they had back then, as if no time had passed and no events had unfolded.

"Come in, come in," I said. Mom scooted over to make room for Dad.

"Callie." He patted my shoulder as he passed. After six months, that was it.

Mortie stood up. "And this," I began, "is Mordecai Levit." He'd kill me later for using his full name.

"You can call me Mortie." He shook hands with my father.

"Clark McLaughlin. And this is my wife, Nora."

"Yes, we've met before. You look fantastic, Mrs. McLaughlin." God, Mortie was really hamming it up. My father would see right through that.

I poured everyone coffee, and as we sat around the table, each in our proper chairs, it struck me how normal this setup would look to someone walking by: just a

family planning a summer vacation or parents meeting their daughter's first serious boyfriend. To outsiders, we could have been anyone, but we—we knew.

Mom had only seen the bakery once, and everything she hadn't said then was now spilling out to fill the silence. "I love the décor. This place has such a nice ambiance." I nodded occasionally, consciously training my eyes on her without fully attending to her words. My dad, I could tell, was watching me. How had my mother convinced him to come?

Mortie was waiting for the obligatory family small talk to pass before inserting a plug about himself. But he had a permanent, eerie smile plastered on his face, feigning interest.

"So what time do you get here every day?" Mom asked.

"Around six, usually."

"So early," Dad said.

Mortie nodded. "This one's quite the workaholic. It's worth it, though. You wouldn't believe the stuff she makes." I smiled at him: a silent thank you.

"And how's business doing?" Dad said.

"It's going pretty well. I've got some new ideas I've been working on."

"Because"—he took a sip of his coffee—"I've been hearing things at the bank."

I didn't move. "Hearing what things?" I'd purposely taken out my business loans elsewhere so my father wouldn't have access to them.

"Just that you're behind on a few payments. Small businesses have had it really tough lately," he said, almost apologetically. I felt like he was taunting me—

bringing up my monetary problems that were within his power to remedy—even though I was sure that wasn't his intention.

“Well, the bakery's doing fine,” I shot back. “Really well. I just hired a second employee, and I might even start catering.” My voice was rising, but I didn't care. Was that why Dad had come—just to ensure the bakery's failure and prove himself right? Well, I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. “Here, I'll show you.” I scratched my chair across the tile and stalked to the kitchen.

Behind me, Mortie was saying, in a higher tone than usual, “Mrs. McLaughlin, where are you from originally?” I knew my mother would answer enthusiastically, trying to preserve the peace.

Once I was alone, I tried taking some deep breaths. Just being in the still kitchen made me calmer already. Inside the fridge, the cake had set well. I'd used food coloring to dye the rum buttercream frosting light pink, and I'd scrounged up a package of edible silver balls that, once upon a time, I thought I'd use for cupcakes. Then I'd lined the base of each layer with a lavender-colored fondant. Fondant was new to me, but it was simpler than I thought. The lilies were the last flourish. I wasn't a flower expert, but after lunch I'd run out to Kahn's Botanicals and had chosen a bouquet with purple accents. The lilies' stigmas were a sunny yellow, which complemented the cake well as I poked a few buds into the icing.

The “Congratulations” I'd carefully scripted with a thin tube of pink icing had barely fit on the top tier. In retrospect, I should have written “Congrats,” or better yet, nothing at all. There was no way I could have fit “Happy Anniversary” like I'd originally wanted, and now I was grateful for the shortcoming. What had I

been thinking, baking this cake for my parents? A three-tiered cake couldn't erase six months of not talking, or barely talking, or talking about each other to someone else only in terms of resentment—and I didn't think it should, either. I'd done my part in inviting them over here, and when I returned home later, I'd still have Mortie and the bakery and two assistants I was coming to regard as friends. If my father wanted to apologize, he could; otherwise, it wasn't as though I'd be leaving the bakery tonight with anything less than I'd had this morning.

I carried the heavy tray out of the kitchen. Mom gasped when she saw me balancing the foot-and-a-half-tall cake, but Dad stared blankly.

I slid the platter between him and Mortie. "Callie," Mortie breathed.

"Honey, it's exquisite." Mom ducked her head to examine the fondant ribbons. "You made this right here?"

I nodded, afraid to look at Dad. I didn't want to detect his anger about my withdrawal from college or his disappointment that making cakes, no matter *how* good, was the most I'd ever do with my life. More than anything, I was afraid I'd look and see only apathy. When he didn't approve—fine. That was different than not caring.

Mom grabbed Dad's hand, and he glanced over at her in that long, hard way I'd grown accustomed to seeing as a child. They were the only two people at the table, in the bakery, in this entire goddamned valley that made my head hurt with its pollen count and ragweed and people.

"What's the occasion?" Dad asked. I had to look at him. Somehow, this was the same man who had once taken me to bring-your-daughter-to-work day and

Indians games at Cleveland Stadium, where we always ate foot-long hotdogs as long as I promised not to tell Mom.

“I made it for Mortie’s birthday.” Next to me, Mortie raised his eyebrows as everyone focused on him.

“Who knew, right?” he said, smirking so imperceptibly that only I’d be able to notice. It was the secret language we’d developed over the years—this ability to say anything without actually speaking.

“Happy birthday,” Mom gushed.

“Well,” Dad said, nodding toward the cake, “it looks like congratulations are in order.”

“Happy birthday wouldn’t fit,” I said.

Mom picked up the flat cake knife to offer it to Mortie.

“What, no candles?” Mortie said, giving me a stern look. He was really having fun with this. As Mortie divided the top tier into fourths, I held up plates one at a time, helping him neatly deposit one slice onto each.

Mom dug right in, concentrating on the frosting first, and Mortie poked at it with more reserve. I stared down at my own plate, waiting to hear their reactions.

“You know, Callie,” Dad said. All eyes turned to look at him. “This is really good.” When he glanced up at me, his expression hadn’t changed. There wasn’t anything more or less in his eyes or mouth. I nodded slightly, and then he returned to his plate. A comfortable quiet settled over the table where I sat, eating with my family.

After a few moments, Mom interrupted the silence. “So, Mortie,” she began.

But Dad held up his hand.

“We’ll get to business,” he said. “Let’s just eat.”

And so we did. We kept eating for a little while longer.

THE END