

A Pattern of Behavior

2nd edition

by



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For [REDACTED] and,



The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identifications with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products are intended or should be inferred.

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September [REDACTED]:

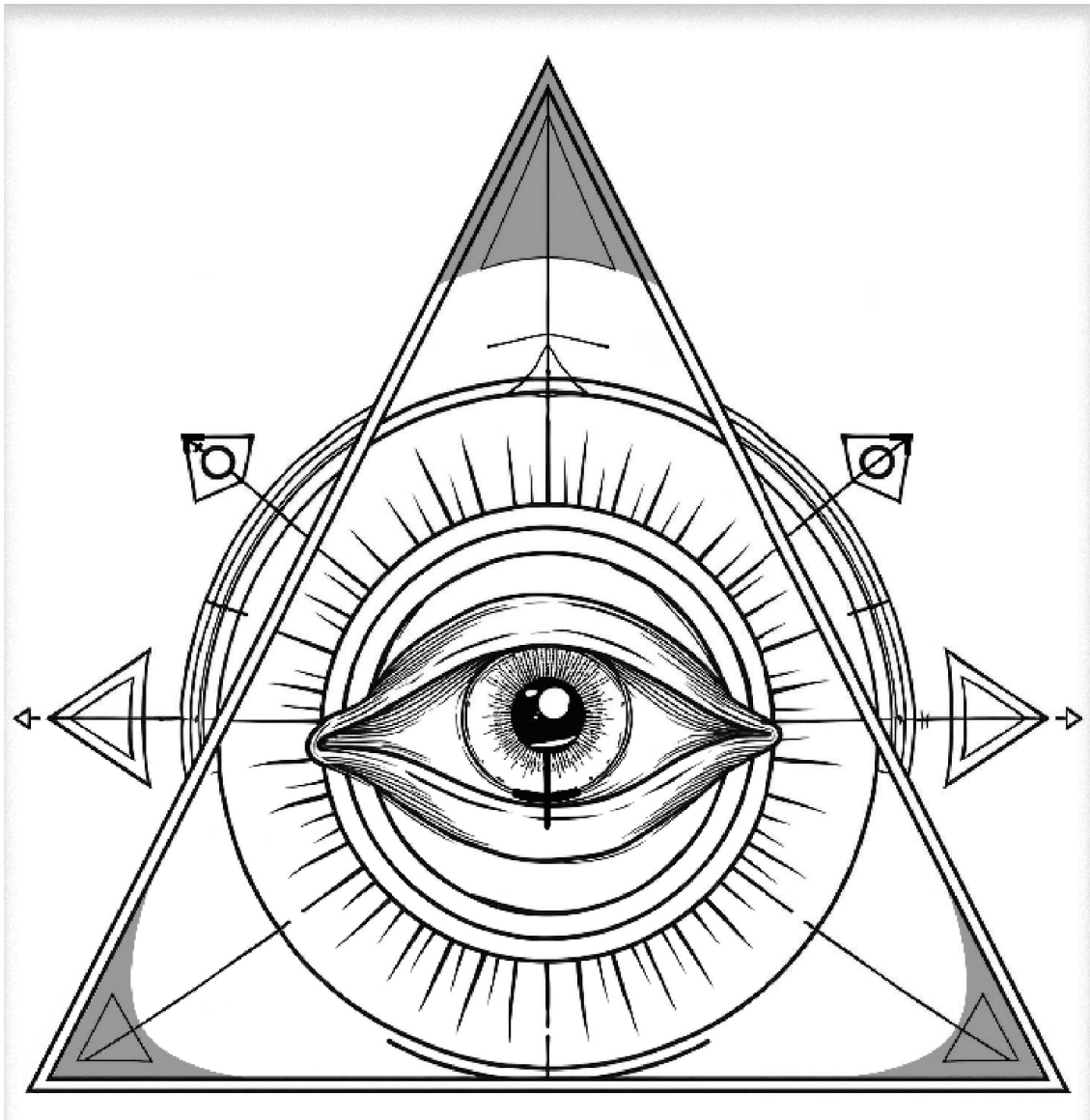
“You know what? I know I’m a crazy person, I know this, but I’m not going to do anything about it. You knew what you were marrying. You can just deal.”

- [REDACTED]

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Forward



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This book was drawn from a lot of sources. Most, if not all, are fictional. My initial inspiration came from a poem I read while doing research for another novel. In 1951, Asher Richard's "Die Mutter Baronin" was published in *The Scalpel*, volume 257, Issue 6650, pages 339-341. It's in German but if you squint, you can read between the lines, and I think I see what the author meant. I couldn't get the rights for it, so I've just decided to mention it here. I'd originally planned on pulling a few lines to start the book.

The other source comes from the account of "Philomena Kən'tent." Back in the 80's when periodicals were still a thing. **Dark Stories of Mania**, volume 3, was published in 1986 and featured the first part of Ms. Kən'tent's story "No Plot Discarded." The magazine was known for printing reader sourced short stories of sci-fi and horror. Editors of the publication, Donna Meadow and Roy Rosenberg reported record sales and their readers wanted more. Luckily for them, Kən'tent would supply them with over 40 pages of material over the next three years. She'd written them in the form of journal entries- this was before "found footage" had saturated the horror film genre.

When the publishers decided to produce a hardback anthology with a decade's worth of stories, Kən'tent's was one of the first pieces considered. As with every other story included, they wanted to do a short autobiography for Kən'tent. It didn't take long for the editors to realize *Philomena Kən'tent* was just a pen name. They never found the author behind the pseudonym.

When it was finally published, the work had taken on several titles as the story evolved. Some were suggested by readers while a few suggestions came from the editorial staff. Meadow and Rosenberg finally decided to call the complete work:

"Forgiving Demons Intersects on Annihilation of Cosmos Beta."

The original version of this book had a lengthy dedication to some very specific people. I think that was wrong. I think it painted the story as a revenge piece against the ██████████. ██████████ I've grown since then and, even if they were real, that's not a weight I'd want them to carry- like I was confessing this, airing my trauma and exposing theirs for their own benefit when really it was anything but. I won't assume to know what anyone else went through, even if I went through it with them. I've come



to accept that sometimes memories shouldn't come back. I'd never want to supplant someone else's narrative. That would be a very antithetical thing to do with this story- if not a little comically ironic.

I also spent some time reminiscing about who I'd shared the raw version of the story with and their subpar reactions- their lack of understanding. I think that also misses the mark, but it is closer. This was never a cry for help, revenge, or exposing any demographic and their shortcomings. It isn't even a warning for the rest of the world that it could happen to anyone.

So, why? Why write this book? Why write it twice? Why spend so much time and energy revisiting and reliving everything that happened? If it isn't for revenge or to call anyone out, then why?

I just wanted to be heard.

For me, the worst part of it all was not being acknowledged. Very few people understand what happened and even fewer people understand why it mattered or just how bad it was. It's one thing to survive what [REDACTED] went through, but to have it questioned and invalidated by the people who were supposed to protect you- that's enough to dissolve anyone's sense of self and identity. I [REDACTED] was.

This isn't for anyone, it's for everyone, it's for *you*, it's for me,

But it is most definitely, not for **you**.



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██████████ 0

840am - Our House

That morning ██████████. This was a long time coming, but it was something I couldn't see playing out. Reality was being held up on stilts. ██████████: I was a stranger operating my body from a distance. In control but not looking at the events unfolding through my eye sockets but peering through them 2 feet back- little holes punched out through my consciousness. They were wide enough that I could just barely see through. Maybe it was tunnel vision. Maybe it was a focused vision benefiting from a narrow field of view. Maybe it was the pre-transition fear of the unknown.

The plan was to leave that morning and never come back. I was taking you both with me. To do that, I needed a smooth exit- an opening for us to escape. Your father had proven two nights prior that he would go any length to prevent my ██████████ exit. Mason had a ██████████'s appointment that morning. So, I was going to bring you with us and not come back. However, your father wasn't going to let you out of his sight easily. He felt he was close to regaining control over the entire house. He had made the mistake of thinking he'd *completely* broken me.

He loomed over as you sat crying on the first step of the stairs. Your father



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reacted the second I turned the corner to come down. He threw up his hands, palms up and elbows wide, and backed away. You bolted away in a blur. You were shaking and crying, but you didn't want him to see. Every time he saw you cry, it just got worse. His normal refrain was:

*"Why are you crying? This is your fault for making me angry. Maybe I shouldn't lose my temper, but **you** made me mad in the first place!"*

Your father pulled me aside. "I need time with her alone. I think I've almost got her admitting what she did, and all her lies. Since you won't break her down and *make her cry*- so she'll confess, I'll do it," he said with calm righteousness.

"I think I should take her, give everyone a break- it's been a rough few days."

He stormed off, but not before getting in my face, pinning me to the pantry door, and making *his* threat. *The* threat. It was the last one I'd ever let him make to either of you in my presence.

The threat rattled the foundation of the house.

He ran up the stairs, slamming his feet harder into each step as he ascended. ■ room was about 10 paces from the top of the stairs, but he still made the point of stomping his feet as he marched. The lights flickered. Normally when he slammed the door, it made us all flinch- this time it was the start of a countdown. It marked the beginning of that narrow window I needed. We had to escape before he could make good on what he had promised to do to us.

Your eyes were wide with terror, so you put your head against the wall next to your desk in the ad hoc homeschool room. You sat on your hands and quietly slowed your audible crying. Your desperate and quiet plea filled me with heavy guilt and anger and fear.

"Please. Please don't leave me alone with him. I think- I think this time he-" you started.

"FUCK!" your father shrieked. I could vaguely tell where he was - what room he was in above us. Your father was definitely in the closet. There was another loud noise- this one deadened and muffled by layers of clothes, carpet, and drywall between us. It was the sound of an insulated container with hard foam layers with cutouts.



It sounded like he was struggling to open it.

The scream from your father rattled the walls, finding harmony in the textured paint and making diffusing with the hundreds of other screams, threats, and *promises* of harm nestled in the sheetrock. That last scream brought a chill and a change in the season.

I knew I had to take this threat seriously. I didn't want to accept it. I wanted to believe that I was crazy, or at the very least, the root issue- because if it was me, if it was my fault, I knew I could fix it. I could fix *me*. I couldn't fix your father. *He had nearly killed me for trying.*

Seconds after the final foot stomps and door slam and that deafening screech, I said shaking down to my feet, "Okay guys, it's time to go."

Mason, you asked if you could bring something from your room for the appointment. My brave façade faltered a little when I said, "I'm sorry, but there isn't time. We need to go." It wasn't *what* I said that bothered you, Mason. It was how I said it- a quick, firm whisper.

"Why are you whispering? What-"

My look of concern must have stopped him. Upstairs had gotten quiet. He'd opened it.

"It's just time to go, now- please just get in the garage, guys." You and your sister went in front of me into the garage. A moment behind you two, I pushed down the shaking as hard as I could. I knew it was time- *it had been time*. Waiting until this happened was too late as it was. We should have left a long time ago, but the first attorney I'd talked to about your father said casually, like we were discussing the weather, "Well- let me know *when* he hits you. Sounds like it's just a matter of time, but you... well, no one is going to believe a word you say until he gets physical." Well, things had changed.

I backed the car out as calmly as I could, terrified your father was going to fling open the door and make good on his threat. I wanted to fly out of there, you two secured in your seats, maybe finally safe or at least on your way to being free. More than that, I didn't want to scare you guys.

I texted my Aunt Amelia at a stoplight on our way to the ██████'s office. I could only manage "We left."

She texted back, "You just saved your children."

"Hey," I held back a shudder in my voice, "Aunt Amelia wants to know



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what kind of snacks you guys like... it's for a Facebook thing." And you rattled off a few items, which I texted to Amelia.

We pulled up to your appointment, and I checked you in at the desk. I don't think you had any idea what had just happened, and I wanted to keep it that way. Once you were in the back, I turned off my location sharing, got your sister in the car, and called Amelia. I stood between the car and the entry door to the therapist's office- I wanted to see your sister and for you to see me when you came out of your appointment. Fay asked me why I had her wait in the car while I made a call.

"Because it's work stuff, honey- very boring."

You, Fay, didn't buy it for a second. I called my advocate at the outreach program and told them we had left. I called the local police department, who had already been briefed by my case manager, and let them know as well. I gave them Amelia's address and number. I then called Amelia back. It was short. I kept asking her if I was doing the right thing- that I was scared and didn't know what was going to happen. She just kept telling me everything was going to be okay. She repeated, over and over as it was the only thing that seemed to still my nerves, "you just saved your kids and yourself. He was going to-"

And you, Fay, got out of the car. I think you could tell I was shaking.

You were too smart and perceptive for anything I'd told you to stick. I forced a smile as you came up to me. I hugged you and you squeezed me harder.

"Why did Aunt Amelia want to know about our favorite snacks? What's going on?"

"I - we're stopping by her house after this appointment." My phone buzzed with an incoming text. Your father.

Why do you turn off your location when you're mad at me? You know how mad that makes me! Why are you being such a bitch?

It was like getting a text from a dead relative- he had that perfected tone of authority and wounded. It permeated the message solidly, even 10 miles away and with just a text. For a moment, my lungs felt like ice. Our backup car was still at the house. It seemed cruel to not leave her a means of getting around, but in the moment, I regretted leaving the keys.

Only five minutes to go until your brother came out. If your father figured



out something was up and ripped through the streets towards my last pinged location, he likely wouldn't get here in time to see us heading towards Amelia.

He'd be at least ten minutes behind us, my rational brain said.

The fear seeped its way through my body and rapidly supplanted its own logic, *what if?*

I put my phone back in my pocket and hugged you again.

"Are... are we leaving because of daddy?" You raised your voice, as if it were a question, but I think you knew the answer.

"Oh, honey... that's... this isn't your fault. I made this decision, okay?"

You wrapped your little arms around me and squeezed- they were so strong, even then. I wanted to let you push all the cold air out of my lungs. We held on for a moment. You relaxed your embrace just a little. You cried. These were a new kind of tears for you- the kind from relief.

"Thank you... I- I thought he was going to *really* hurt me this time."

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01: Non-Linear

██████████ -4,826

Your father and I loved road trips. I enjoyed driving and your father liked to tell me how to drive.

It was on our first long road trip together that we played “the exit game” for the first time.

I liked the solace of long open stretches of nothing. I could think. There were few distractions and driving out there left me bandwidth to think.

My dad, “grampy” to you guys, felt the same way. Road trips were a sort of sacred thing, like they are for many people. I think it was the closest thing to religion I ever embraced. I wondered where all the people who worked at those massive stations lived. There were never any discernable signs of housing or infrastructure to get there.

Your father got bored quickly- especially when I was driving. He didn’t like this path for the same reason I did; an open nothingness stretching so far, it felt like you could see a hint of the Earth’s curve. Where I embraced the room to think he later admitted it scared him to have it quiet enough to hear his own thoughts. So, he made up a game.

“I have to go to the bathroom, but it isn’t critical- we don’t need to stop for at least half an hour, so in twenty minutes let’s start looking,” your father said, cutting the drone of wind and tire over asphalt.

“Okay, I think there’s a few places, maybe twenty five minutes from here in one of the small towns.”

“If it gets critical before then, I’ll let you know.”

Seconds later, an exit with a gas station zipped into my rearview mirror.

“Oh- so we’re not stopping there?” your father asked.

“I thought you said you could wait like thirty minutes?”

“That’s not what I meant. You know I have to go!”

“I-I’m, sorry I -but didn’t you say it wasn’t critical?”

“Oh wow, so I have to be in pain before it’s worth stopping for you.

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Thanks, hun.” He paused. Your father took a slow deep inhale- sucking in the tension like a long drag on a joint, and in the next exhale he said, “Sometimes, you can be a real bitch- you know that?”

I continued driving, bewildered. A few seconds later he guffawed, “You’re too serious! I was just joking. But yeah, now that *you’ve* made me think about how I have to go, it *is* critical and *you* just passed the one exit for miles with anything.”

“I see another exit coming up with an overpass. We could double back?”

“Oh, so you can blame me for getting in later? No. I’ll just be in pain until we get there, so you’ll be happy.”

██████████ -110

730pm – Our House

Fay, do you remember how involved you were with dance just before you turned nine? Was that because of us, or did you love it? Your attendance seemed entirely dependent on your father’s mood.

We had fought recently about me wanting to go on a girls’ trip. One of the first reasons he was against me going was a dance event your studio was hosting. It was possible that I wouldn’t be home for it and your father had an issue with that. The fight wasn’t about whether you should go to the event- at the time we agreed you should. However, your father felt it was shortsighted and selfish of me to expect him to back the car out of the garage *and* drive at night. Hindsight smacks me with a series of red flags every time I think about this. Your father had no physical or mental issues that would prevent him from backing the car out, but I did it for him, anyway. If left to his own devices, he threatened he might damage the car backing out and maybe it would be on purpose to teach me a lesson. It just wasn’t worth the fight- that’s how he got into my head most of the time.

I didn’t go on the trip, and you were both told to pretend it had never been planned. He specifically told you, Fay, *to keep it a secret*.

Day one of the event ended just before sundown. Your father took you to



and from the studio (after I got the car out of the garage for him). He said they would just shrug off your brother's absence by telling anyone who asked that he was at a friend's house.

As expected, the first day went well, and you had a great time. Day two was going to be auditions for different prizes- one of them being free tuition for future dance clinics. You were being eyed as a standout and likely to be selected for several awards.

You got home.

We ate.

You started up the stairs for bed.

Your father summoned you before your foot touched the third stair.

He sat in the corner of the sectional, legs stretched in front of her, arms supported by pillows- part chaise, part throne. Your brother sat watching TV, unaware there was a "family meeting" unfolding just outside his peripheral.

"Fay," your father started, "how do you feel about going tomorrow?"

"I want to go!" you beamed. "I had fun- I can't wait to go back!"

Your father drew in a slow, deep breath from his position on the couch. I knew he didn't want you to go, but I didn't understand why. I offered to take you, since I was home, but your father forbade me from leaving the house. The one exception being a single excursion to a hiking supply store. That was especially cruel, considering that my trip had been about day hikes with friends.

He shot me a look that made it clear he wasn't going to let me talk.

"Okay-you can go, off you go," he said with a flick of his wrist. Then, as you headed up the stairs, he added, "if you're sure, that's what's best." The weight of those words slowed time and I think all of our stomachs felt gravity waver.

My heart dropped past my stomach -landing somewhere around my feet, which went numb.

Your confidence only slightly chipped, you replied, "I really want to go."

Your father pulled out his phone, whipping his arm up and then down as if his phone were a heavy gavel. His face amplified the eye roll as he

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scoffed. The air left the room before you took a step back down the stairs. We both knew you hadn't answered him correctly. It wouldn't be enough for you to just change your mind and agree with him. You would have to convince him that he was right.

Maybe I should have put a stop to it, but I was so far gone I didn't trust my ears or interpretation. So, I quickly opened the recording app on my phone and set it face down casually on the coffee table. I don't remember exactly what event prompted recording but, this wasn't my first one. I could navigate and start recording without looking at my screen much. I hoped to make it look like I was placing my phone on the table to give my full attention. Your father didn't notice either way- he was busy.

Your father was on the couch. You were at attention. Every warning klaxon in my brain was screaming -telling me to get you and your brother out of there as my phone digitally committed your father's words to a tiny solid-state drive.

This is a transcription of that recording. It starts with your father saying:

“Picture what's right for Fay. Is it staying home and resting to make sure that you're ready to go to your [other] camp [in a week] or is it going and having a blast at the convention thing *or* is it staying home and having fun playing some games, watching some shows, playing with clay, or your new model magic, or... going there and dancing?”

He trailed off, waiting for you to respond. You took a breath in like you were going to respond when your father cut you off. “So, what does your instinct tell you? What does your gut tell you is the right choice for you?”

“To go-” you replied, right on top of his last syllable.

“To go?” your father responded. His tone clarified that wasn't the right answer.

“To go because... umm, because I want to get that scholarship and I want to do that audition- “

“Okay-“ Your father tried to interject.

“I did it at that convention- “

“Yeah bu- “

“-and I can do it again- it's less kids-”



“Okay, it is less kids and there’s a good chance that you still won’t get [any awards]... but that’s okay.”

Another silence- your father waiting for you to respond. You didn’t, at least not how he wanted.

“Okay, but honey, if you want to do it and you’re ready and gun-ho and ‘yess’- “

“Mm hmm” you hummed, affirming your position.

“Then do it. I will text Ms. [REDACTED] right now, but there is *no* goin’ back. Once I send her a text saying, ‘okay Fay wants to do tomorrow, how do I pay for it?’ There is *no* going back.”

You faintly whispered “okay.”

“You can tell me to stop at any tiiiime...” He was holding his phone in front of him. He shifted his position to upright, perpendicular to where you were standing, still at fierce attention. He held his phone close and purposefully in front of him, elbows suspended on and not into his legs like usual. His movement was not normal. To punctuate this, he turned his head, torso still forward at her phone, and glared at you. His expression drooped, his chin tilted, eyes lifted, and ears perked. He continued to type on his phone without looking. That always scared you, even when you weren’t grilled like this. I later found out that he never even turned on his screen. That’s why he held his phone like that. He was pantomiming, probably thinking he was clever for easily was fooling the 8-year-old.

You took a deep, slow, and stifled inhale with an inflection of tears being held back.

That’s when Mason hinted that he knew what was going on. He made a pigeon sound, and your father broke his lock on you and guffawed. I didn’t understand it, but that was a very brave thing. Maybe it was subconscious, but the cooing was your way of trying to diffuse the tension and shift the focus onto you. Since you were little, I’ve admired how you two have always looked out for each other.

Mason, you got out three strong “coos” then a fourth one a little quieter and a final, heart wrenching fifth coo that sounded defeated and questioning. You were looking at your sister trying to cheer her up. She was clenching her jaw, showing her teeth, and digging her nails into the couch fabric.

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Your father turned to you, Fay, and asked, “are you okay?” His tone hinted at amused. Maybe he was still rolling his guffaw at Mason into a concerned inquiry, but I think it was a lapse in character. For a fraction of a second, the audience had a small glimpse of the actor. He saw an opening in your resilience Fay, and he found it amusing.

“Why do you look like you’re going to cry?” His voice shot up an octave at the end- like he was trying not to laugh- like your confusion and tears were funny.

You relaxed your jaw just enough to squeak out, “because I don’t know what the right decision is for- I don’t know what you- this is just so hard!”

“Okay honey, there’s no wrong decision- it’s just what you want to do more.”

You sniffled and wiped your tears.

“Oh okay, oh okay!” He put his phone down and pronouncedly put his hands up in a surrender as if *you* were being crazy and over dramatic. “I stopped texting, okay? I know that sometimes this can send you into a ‘oh what are the decisions’ n’ stuff.” He snorted, stifling a laugh. “Okay, it’s called decision paralysis, k?”

You nodded your head.

“The best way to get over that? Is to- okay, I’m gonna ask you a question and I just want you to respond instantly. K? Don’t think about it, k? I’m gonna give you some precursor questions... and then I will ask you the *big one* on this. So, I don’t want you to think about it. I just want you to answer. Okay? So that’s what we’re gonna go with. Favorite color?”

██████████

“Name.”

██████

“Favorite food.”

██████████

“Favorite show.”

██████████████████

“Go to ██████████ tomorrow.”



You don't respond, so he continued, "Okay, we're gonna do some more. Favorite thing to play on the computer?"

██████████

"Favorite subject at [home] school."

██████████

"Go to ██████████, yes or no."

Again, you don't respond. You looked at your father, then me, then back at him. Your face was white.

"Okay, we'll try some more. Uhhh-favorite type of dance?"

You answered, but he cut you off. "No thinking!" I think he meant it as a throwaway line to diffuse some tension, but the weight and mass of that command saturated the next few months and reframed the last decade.

You hesitated again but got out an answer, "Jazz."

"K .. uhhh, favorite song."

"Uh umm" you stumbled on your words. Your father then mocked you. He exaggerated your confusion and twitched his head in frustration and impatience. Your brother sweetly cooed at you again.

"I -uh... I'm sorry, I don't know what you want me to... I don't know."

I think he let you drag out your response so he could belittle you and make you question your judgement.

"Oh um, okay," he responded, "there's no thinking here! You can't think!" he teased at you. "So, it's whatever pops in your head. Favorite fruit."

"Apple,"

"Favorite brother."

"██████████" *I really miss you calling him that.*

"Favorite dog."

"No- *both* of them," that response had some *defiance* in it- like he couldn't make you choose.

"Oh no-you almost said 'none!'" and he laughed at you. You shook your

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head; you knew what you were going to say, and you said it.

“Uhh okay, favorite toy.”

██████████

“K, go-to-dance-tomorrow,” he blurted.

“Go.”

“... did you say ‘no’?”

Weakly, looking down at your feet, you replied, “I said ‘go.’”

“Ah well,” and your father turned to me and said, clear as day, “*that’s* not working.” He turned his focus back to you. “Okay, just off the top of your head, *no thinking*, close your eyes.”

You closed your eyes.

“Stay home tomorrow?” he asked.

“No.” you said plainly. No waver of uncertainty. The more immediate your response, the clearer it was that you wanted to go and that your father was not getting the answer he wanted.

“Go to [event] tomorrow?” he followed up, right on top of your response.

“Okay!”

“Ha! It’s not ‘okay!’ It’s yes or no! That doesn’t count,” your father cackled. Mason made a raspberry sound.

This needed to stop. It was obvious you wanted to go, and this was a small opening for your father to concede. I finally chimed in with “that’s good enough, she said-” He cut me off and waved his arm across and down my field of view, conducting an orchestra to quiet down.

“Shh... OKAY! Well... then I’m going to text [the director] and you’ll go- oh, no? Are you okay?”

You weren’t crying, but you looked upset and confused. I think some part of you knew that was the wrong answer and your response disappointed your father- he hadn’t cracked you. He later confessed, on multiple occasions, that he was infuriated by his inability to “break Fay” without a lot of effort. He knew how to make you cry eventually and if he didn’t get the answers he wanted, that’s what he would do.



“Okay, honey, honey,” I jumped at the chance again, “Do you want to go tomorrow?”

You sniffled and said, “I do-“

It was my turn to cut you off. I’m sorry, kid. The moment you started forming that sentence, desperate to get ahead of your father, I said “Okay, then-“

“OKAY-“ you father jumped in but I continued.

“-then there it is, okay? That’s the end of this. Okay? It’s going to be fun and you’re going to have a great time, sweetp-“ I started.

“Aww... *honey*, do you want to stay home tomorrow?” Your father shifted his tone to a saccharin laced falsetto.

“I want to do both.”

“Well, then, how about we stay home Sunday?” I asked. The last day of the event was tomorrow, Saturday.

There’s some indecipherable banter at this point in the recording, but I think I can pick out your brother offering you very sweet words of encouragement about performing at the audition.

“Yeah, but honey, *honestly*, I also want you to be honest before we go much further- and this might kinda- how do you *actually* feel in terms of being sick?”

My head shot to your father, who had the most subtle smirk on his face. This was his trump card; telling you that you were sick and working both of you up so much you *actually felt* sick, or at least pretended to avoid the consequences of your father being wrong. I’ve done it a few times- hell, I even starting taking hormones when I knew I wasn’t sick because it was better than what happened if your father was wrong.

I looked over at you. Your shoulders drooped and your perfect dancer posture faltered. That was it.

It’s worth pointing out that up to this you hadn’t coughed *once*. You hadn’t cleared your throat, asked for water, needed to blow your nose, or scratched or rubbed your eyes- and that was after an intense day of learning dances for an audition tomorrow.

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Not.

One.

Cough.

There was a moment of silence, then your father started up again. His voice had taken a slower, thicker quality, the warden had manifested. "This might be the bigger question. How do you feel in terms of being sick?"

"I'm feeling like I'm fi- "

"Like, how does your throat feel? How tired do you feel? How does your head feel?" he cut you off.

You responded instantly and beautifully to each question without pause, "I'm not that tired. My head is fine. My stomach is fine. I just have a couple knots in my back, and I'm a little nervous-"

"Okay..." your father hissed.

"- for tomorrow, and-"

"What about *that* cough and your throat? And your nose? If it's not very good... the smarter thing would be for you to stay home."

"My nose is a tiny bit runny," you conceded. You were honest. In any other household, people would have either dismissed it as normal or provided you with a small dose of OTC allergy medication. Not in our house. Your father had found his foothold.

"Okay- what about your throat?"

"It's fine- it's just a tiny bit... tickly?" I think you were trying to find the right answer that would both meet your father's demand to *always* be right and allow you to get to your audition. You tried to explain further, but he cut you off again.

"Okay, what about the cough?" he asked. You said something, I think you were going to ask *what cough?* but your father didn't give you the chance. As he's subjecting you to this line of interrogation, your brother coughed *the moment* he said the word.

"Because my biggest concern is that you're going to go, and you're gonna push yourself, and you're going to get *really* sick ... 'k?"

You began parroting back what your father was telling you. Now your



throat, in a matter of seconds, had escalated from *tiny bit tickly* to *45% tickly*.

Your father turned to me and asked, “what do you think, babe?” I’d like to say that there were extenuating circumstances in my response- I was shellshocked from the previous few weeks. Your father had warped my sense of reality. I tried to assert a boundary, a sliver of independence in what was an irreparable co-dependent parasitic marriage, and I had lost, violently. I was still paying the price for my transgression and healing. I didn’t understand what was happening- what he was doing to you. All I knew at that moment was I wanted this conversation to end.

“I... I don’t know,” was all I could say.

Your father smirked, turned back to you, and said, “All right, honey, how about we stay home?”

“I... I want to see [my friend].”

“Well, you’ll see her... sometime.” *Just not tomorrow.*

Then the recording has some banter about how seeing your friends isn’t a good enough reason to go. The parallel and precedent of that statement is just now hitting me. Your mother was telling you; *friends aren’t a good enough reason to leave the house- to leave me. You can’t leave. I won’t let you.*

“... but I really do want to do the auditions and try outs.”

“Well, I *think* it’s for scholarships,” he asserted.

It was.

“Okay, but, honey, I don’t want you to go just *because* there’s an audition. Because that’s seriously, ten minutes. Going to something for *ten minutes* when you have to be there all day, is kinda silly also. Okay? I know I’m trying *not* to make this more confusing. I’m just trying to figure out what you *really* want to do. Okay? Alright? And [dance event] will be next year too, okay?”

A few seconds passed before he continued, “So, honey- I’m just gonna kinda pull at it. I- I’ve tried my best. It has to be up to you... However, when *you* said maybe you shouldn’t go, you didn’t cry.”

You shuffled your feet and didn’t respond. Your father became visibly agitated and then said, defensively, as if you were accusing her of

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something, "I'm correct in that, right? I am. Okay."

Again, you said nothing, so he continued, "When I was gonna send the text to Ms. [REDACTED], you started crying."

You responded, but your voice was so faint and sad that even after listening to this dozens of times, I still can't make it out.

He continued.

"Okay, this *has* to be your final decision, cuz you guys need to go to bed. *I* need to go to bed. So we've been debating this for over ten minutes now. I've tried *everything* I can possibly think of to get to the bottom of it and *you're* still 50/50? And if you're still 50/50 I'm just gonna say you're gonna stay home. If it is going to be *my* decision, it isn't, you're going to stay home- because I don't wanna spend money on something *you're* 'iffy' about. If it's something you fully wanna do, then I have no problem spending money on that. If it's something you're kinda iffy about- you're neither here nor there- kinda 'meh' – *stay home*. Don't waste *your* time and *my* money for something your 'meh' about – actually that's probably a really good... life... lesson. Don't spend time or money on something you're 'eh' about."

"Oh... okay," you were barely audible.

"And if you're just gonna be kinda 'eh' about going- just stay home and that'll make sure you're rested and don't get sick. "

You muttered something in response. I don't know what it was.

Your mother threw up her arms, and you flinched. "Okay, you know what? I'm just done- I can't. Stephanie, back me up here. I need you to make her- I- use your same brain."

I took a deep sigh and plainly asked, "Okay, honey, do you feel physically well enough to go tomorrow?"

You shook your head "no" slowly.

"Okay, then you don't go- and that's the end of this."

You and your brother went upstairs. Before your feet touched the landing at the top, your father whispered to me, "I had to discourage her *three* times to convince her."

You came back downstairs, and your father gave you his home-made



cough syrup. The same tonic he made for your brother a few days before. You gagged at the taste and said it burned your throat and made it feel scratchy. You also said it tasted like soap.

~~Later that night~~, around 10pm, you came out of your room. Before you could say a word, your father took a deep, loud sigh of annoyance, whispered under her breath, "oh my fucking god," then raised his voice to a yell and said "What? Fey?! What?"

"My throat is kinda scratchy still. Can I get some water?"

I didn't wait for the okay. I jumped up and got you water, much to your father's frustration. I got you tucked back into bed and went back downstairs. Your father didn't look away from the TV. He was invested in his video game when he said, "I really hate it when she's so fucking dramatic. She's fine."

That night and the following day, you didn't cough *once* or even sneeze. Your only complaint was a small scratchy feeling in your throat that only [REDACTED] follow a [REDACTED] medicine.

I spoke with the director after everything was over. She noted that the weekend of this dance camp was a turning point for you. She said you just weren't the same and that it was like you'd checked out.

[REDACTED] -53

10am - Our House

June 23rd had come and gone.

That morning had been difficult, but that stress had become the norm. Sometimes it felt safer to have your father screaming at us- at least that way I knew exactly what his vector was. The anticipation of another tantrum was almost worse than the actual tantrum. Occasionally it was. Either way, the peaks and valleys had a rhythm -extreme anger followed by self-victimizing lows matched with threats of self-harm. These were frequent and predictable. I think we could all see it coming. There are still traces of it when you or your brother feel you're in trouble, even with me. I can own that, my part in what happened, or rather I can own

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my lack of action because of my fear. Maybe in that way your father and I weren't so different? I let my fear shut me down in several ways, whereas your father forced everyone to drink it down and thank him for it. Maybe not so similar.

Your [REDACTED] birthday was just a week away and your father had decided it was time for "the great toy purge." I couldn't argue with the logic of it- before an influx of toys, it made sense to donate the ones no one in the house played with anymore. Mason had just turned 7 a few weeks prior and no toy purge had been done, so it was overdue.

Mason, buddy- you *hated* cleaning. You hardly ever threw a tantrum, but when you did, it was almost always about having to clean or organize your room. There were some *big* meltdowns. In any other situation or slightly different circumstances, I think it would have been something we eventually joked about. What we'd never joke about is how your father turned you "invisible" and ignored you for hours if you ever yelled back at him.

That day, however, it went like this:

"Mason, buddy, you gotta clean up your room. Kind of a fire hazard, big guy," I said.

"Noooooo!" you wailed at the top of your lungs. You flopped onto the floor and kicked your heels and slammed your fists into the ground. That house didn't have the best insulation between the upstairs and downstairs, so a lot of movement echoed.

Your father would be frequently "set off" by your screaming and your foot stomping with all its ricocheting noises.

Fay, you were frustrated with your brother because he was phoning in his part of the playroom cleanup. He'd meander about, lazily scoop up a single toy, drag his feet over to his room, and deposit said toy in the middle of his room. That day, the goal was just to sort toys you wanted to keep from those you wanted to donate. You snapped at your brother about how he wasn't helping enough, and you were doing all the work and how it wasn't fair.

That last part caught your father's ear, "*it's not fair.*"

It was your brother's response that really did it- and Buddy, this is *not* your fault. You were a newly seven-year-old kid. Your outburst should have been met with calm indifference to root out why you were upset or



kindness to soothe you both.

Your father raised himself from the couch. I got up too, but your father beat me to the stairs. At the top landing he found you telling your sister to “shut up!” Fay was already in tears. The tears stopped the second you saw his face -a gnarled archer’s bow pulled back and stretched as far as it would go, making a silent, tooth-trimmed scream.

“Okay!” he yelled. He *shrieked*. His voice broke so hard you could hear the phlegm in his throat shake loose. “Okay, you know *what?!?*” he resumed, “I’m just going to clean the playroom with a *fucking trash bag* and we’ll just see how much *you* have after!”

Anytime anyone calls you unkind, Fay, I want you to remember moments like this one. Your father’s breath had become a heaving effort, straining to catch ■■■ breath after a wild screech at your brother. You, meekly said, “Daddy, it’s okay I-“

“YOU! Shut the *FUCK UP*, Fay!” and you shook. Your father darted for your brother and got in his face and made a low clicking sound through his teeth. He snatched the stuffed Pikachu from his hands and shoved it into the trash bag he’d brandished seconds earlier.

“No, daddy! No, daddy please!” It broke my heart. The fear in your voice was two-fold, and I stood at the base of the stairs, helpless. Therapy and research had clued me in to what we were dealing with, and the gravity of the situation was overwhelming. I don’t think that justifies my lack of action, though.

“Get to cleaning NOW or I’m going to throw all of your toys away!” he frantically gathered up *all* your stuffed Pokémon into the trash bag he clutched in his left hand.

“No, daddy, no- please! Please, not my Pokémon!” Mason was sobbing uncontrollably. This wasn’t just about losing his toys, I think it was just as much a learned response. Your father’s temper had just started. If he got upset enough, he’d threaten to leave again, turn you invisible and mute, or worse.

I’m sure you don’t remember, but about six months prior to this, your father packed a bag in front of you, saying, “I know you don’t love me anymore, Mason, so I’m leaving. This is *your fucking fault*.” Then shifted his gaze to me and, from a blank face, finished with, “I hope you’re happy, you win.”

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You were on the ground, a mess of tears and stifled breathing. Your father had all your Pokémon in the trash bag and lording over you with *hate* in his eyes.

“Daddy, please, you’re scaring me!”

He flung your bag of toys to the ground in a sweeping motion up and over his shoulder, stomped his feet, and *shrieked*. It was splitting. You and your sister covered your ears.

That shook me out of it.

“I think that’s enough. This isn’t helping- let’s all just take a minute.” Your father huffed at me and was about to protest. I turned to you and your brother, who moved directly behind me, obscuring the view of your father. “Everything is okay.”

Your father stormed off downstairs. The three of us stood there. I pantomimed with palms stretched out and down, like I was gently pushing down a soft pillow. I mouthed *it’s okay, guys- it’s okay*. We hugged for a moment. Without saying a word to each other, we cleaned up the playroom. It took all of ten minutes. Mason calmed down quickly once I told him we would just leave the bag of Pokémon alone so they’re out of the way while we picked up.

“We can get them out once everything else is put away, they’re not going anywhere,” I told you.

Back then you guys still did rest time, where you were stuck in your rooms for an hour and encouraged to nap. After we finished organizing, I got you two in your rooms. I hated going down the stairs after something like this. Your father was invariably waiting for me to come downstairs so he could unload and reframe. This time was no different.

I don’t remember much- I know I kept quiet. All I have in my notes is that we talked about what happened, and a shorthand scribble of his dialogue that read,

*I don’t understand what I did wrong- I’m not being mean.
They’re being unfair to me! I’m allowed to be upset! I don’t
understand why everyone is being mean to me.*

323pm – Our House

That afternoon your father said to me, “I did you a favor and folded my laundry.” I’ll leave you to unpack that statement. Do you remember that



the washer and dryer were in that closet in the playroom?

Your father had recovered from his episode and decided the remaining laundry was going to be a group event. You guys were being over the top sweet to him, reminding him how much you loved him and giving him extra hugs. I think you were trying to apologize without bringing up what happened. In fact, no one mentioned the state of the loft ever again- we left before anyone had the chance, but while we were there, it's like it didn't exist after that.

We emptied the contents of the dryer into the middle of the playroom, and I loaded the washer. With clothing spread about the floor, your father and I got to sorting and folding. You and your brother were helping as best you could.

You did a gymnast tumble from a crouch. When you came out of it into a seated pose, you stretched left and right and then said calmly and casually, "my side kinda hurts- right here," and pointed to the bottom of your left rib cage.

Your father dropped the laundry in a way that ensured we all saw and said, "Oh shit! Where?"

You responded, confused, and pointed again to your lower left rib cage.

Your father's eyes widened. The overall tone he had was fear, but there was a subtle tone of something else. He turned briefly to me- I knew exactly what he was thinking. I knew you were fine, but he was already getting worked up. Your father shot me a look of "Oh my god!" I tried my hardest to transmit a "don't-say-anything" but it either didn't make sense or he didn't care.

[When we talked about it later, he said it looked to him like *I* was freaking out. When I explained what I was thinking, he corrected *my* thoughts. "No, that's not the look you had. I know you- you were freaking out even if you can't admit it. Don't you lie to me."]

He swung his head back to you and followed up with, "oh fuck... oh no wait, wrong side, whew, you're okay. That was close! Don't give me a heart attack like that, Fay. I thought you had appendicitis, and we'd have to rush you to the hospital for surgery!"

You tracked each word he spoke with your own increasing fear. As she watched the fear in you grow, his visibly diminished, like a see-saw teetering. You cried.

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“What?” you asked in between shallow breaths.

I jumped in before your father could say anything. I didn’t want this to spin out of control. “No, honey, nothing to worry about. You don’t have that and we’re not even going to go over the symptoms right now. We can talk about it later. Your abs are just sore from dance class yesterday. That’s all.”

The anxiety see-saw was tilting back towards your father, and he couldn’t handle it. So, right on top of what I had said, he dismantled my statement with, “yup, because if it was appendicitis, we’d have *maybe* an hour to get you to the hospital or you would die! The other side doesn’t hurt, does it? You’ll let me know if it does?”

“I think that’s enough- she’s fine,” I replied.

It was too late. That was no coming back from that offset balance. The see-saw was where your father wanted it. Any diminished panic or worry you had was brief. You said, “well... my other side kinda hurts.”

Immediately, your father shot me a smirking grade-schooler *I told you so* look. He must have known you were fine, but I think this was about proving that he could control everyone. I was trying to remain calm.

I said, “You’re okay honey, can you reach up real tall like you’re trying to touch the ceiling?”

You did it without hesitation or complaint. No pain.

“Okay, there you go. Let’s check your temperature, but I think we’re good here.” There was a thermometer in just about every room in the house, along with diffusers, baby monitors, and safety plugs in all the outlets at your father’s demand. Your temperature was normal, low enough that even your father couldn’t argue. He crossed his arms. I think he became frustrated as you calmed down.

Your father guffawed, cackled, and then said, “Oh my god! Fay, stop being so dramatic!” It was like the entire conversation, getting you worked up and making you cry was funny to him.

843pm – Our House

You came out of your room crying about an hour after I’d tucked you in.



"I – I think I might have appendicitis," you said, trying bravely not to cry.

Your father rushed the stairs, pushing me aside. I recovered my balance and followed. Without asking you anything, he towered over you and willed you back into your room and barred your doorway- arms touching each side of the frame. I couldn't get to you.

"You're not being fair to me! I can't go to sleep because you keep making up these fake fucking problems! That isn't a real problem. Stop over-reacting!" he yelled. With that, he threw up his hands and went back downstairs. I could hear the video game he had been playing resume.

With your father out of sight and out of the way, you collapsed onto my shoulder and cried.

I remember telling you that you don't have appendicitis, but I get why you'd be worried. It's like he wanted to get you wound up and worried about nothing so he could condemn your "frivolous" anxiety, just like, I suspect, his mother did to him. I think manifesting his anxiety in you and your brother and then belittling it was his way of conquering his crippling anxiety- at least temporarily.

"I just want to go to a hotel and not be here anymore! If I was gone, daddy wouldn't be mad about my problems!" Those were immeasurably heavy words for an 8-year-old, made heavier because that's how I felt when your father berated me.

"Let me tell you, I'd rather have you and a million problems than exist in a world without you! I am happy to help you with anything anytime, honey, okay? It might seem like a big deal, but we can handle it, whatever it is, okay? Now, in this case, it isn't appendicitis. I think it's just some anxiety. Let me take your temperature again." I hoped showing you a normal temperature would help soothe your fear.

I took it- normal.

"See! Normal. So how about you get some sleep? I'll order us breakfast in the morning, okay?"

You asked if we could order from a local place that you and your brother both loved.

"Of course- and I'm pretty sure if you did have appendicitis, that wouldn't sound good. Are you ready for sleep?"

You asked for a hug, and I happily complied. Your hug communicated

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how emotionally spent you were- it was more hanging on to me than embracing. You pulled the covers back up; I kissed your forehead and turned off the lights before quietly closing your bedroom door. Your brother had slept through all of it. I paused outside your room for a moment or two. I could hear your father button mashing his way haphazardly through a boss fight. That allowed me a second to collect myself. I closed my eyes and took a slow, long, and worried breath and then headed downstairs.

Your father hardly looked away from the screen when I sat down on the couch. He started in on me. I think this was the first time he started doing that- not breaking his gaze from the game, sometimes with a tear streak faced, as his torrential voice lashed out.

“You don’t seem angry about her coming out, why aren’t you mad?” he whisper-yelled at me through his clenched teeth without shifting his gaze from the tv.

I knew this was coming. When I didn’t enable his post-cps witch hunt a few ago, your father had become increasingly agitated with me. I didn’t share his level of or anger over whatever you and your brother had done to “wrong him.” I didn’t want another conversation I couldn’t win- even if I agreed with him, precedence commanded that I’d be wrong.

All I said in response was, “I just want everyone to feel better.”

Maintaining that locked stare at his game, without even slowing down the active quest on screen in the slightest, his said with tears and anger, “You sound like some god damn validating therapist, and it seems fake as hell!”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know how to respond to that. He never looked away from the screen. He hardly moved, at least visibly, but his entire presence shifted- like someone pulled a string that tilted the blinds over a window.

He demanded to see my phone. It was locked by fingerprint and pin code. Do you guys remember when phones had finger print readers? Back then storing a debit or credit card on the phone was still a novelty. The feature required a biometric lock for the phone, or it wouldn’t store the card information. That seemed fair enough to me. Your father, I thought, knew this, as he’d made fun of me for using it every time- even when he’d forgotten his card and the worn-out chip on mine didn’t work.

I handed him my phone without hesitation. When he couldn’t unlock



it, his presence shifted again. It was like the blinds were drawn tighter-like there was some great awareness or conclusion he'd just come to. Narrowing the blinds meant narrowing his focus, like a hawk about to dive.

"That's suspicious as fuck!" He wasn't yelling, but there was a raised tone of authority in his voice. "You're cheating on me- that explains everything. You're fucking your therapist, aren't you?" He paused his game and turned to me for the first time in this conversation. It was like watching a mannequin come to life. We were deep in the uncanny valley-something was very wrong. "That's why you don't tell me [REDACTED] [REDACTED]- you're lying about it. You're [REDACTED]."

The absurdity of his statement jumped over any humor and went straight into obscurity. He was wrong, but I *was* lying. Our sessions were about how to handle what was going on and how to get out. My therapist pointed me to several resources that I'd recently contacted. Sensing even a speck of validity in his accusations, his eyes grew, like that bird saw its opportunity to kill and asserted its talons forward.

"It's locked because of the pay thing. Here, let me- I'll unlock it. I can add you to the fingerprint reader and you know my pin."

"No," he declined. "You've probably just hidden all of the evidence, anyway. I know you don't love me anymore."

[REDACTED] +390

8:20pm - Our House

"Why do you always do that?!" you asked, frustrated, scared, and visibly upset with me. I wondered if you felt safe enough to take that tone with your father in the way you do so casually with me. You sat in your new bed, wearing a too-large-for-you "mom shirt" as pajamas. It's a small measurement, but it was becoming incrementally less "too large" every time you wore it. I think that's what preceded redoing your rooms-growth. A few days prior, the judge had finally signed the paperwork for the divorce decree. It was over and after paying your father a sum of money, I'd be free of him. The sum was less than I thought it was going to

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be, but still a good chunk of change. It was worth it. To be done with him it was worth every cent.

“Do what, honey?” I asked as my thoughts receded and I came back to the room.

“Every time I mention dad, you seem- I dunno you just shutdown and seem sad or angry.”

“It’s because I don’t care about your dad’s opinion, kiddo.” You gawped at me, so I clarified. “I only care as far as it affects you- as a general rule, honey, I don’t care what your dad likes, dislikes, or anything he has to say about me. If something bothers you, let’s talk about it- but if you’re just reporting info on your dad, I don’t want to hear it.”

You cried and bounced and pulled your sheets over your face.

“What is it, kiddo?”

You raked the sheets down across your face and dug them into your chest like you were holding back a cave in. Soft eyes with a piercing center looked back at me. Tears welling and sputtering like your breath. You inhaled and your breathing hesitated, clacking your jaw up and down with a chattering force. For a split second, I worried you were going to chip a tooth. I put my thumb gently under your left cheek and cupped your head with my hand, sweeping a tear and the hair from your face in a single motion.

“I don’t understand! I don’t understand why you two can’t be happy to see each other. Why won’t you even look at him or talk to him in person? It makes me so angry!”

“That’s fair honey, but your dad and I aren’t together and I don’t think we’ll ever be happy to see each other and- “

“Why won’t you even be in the same room? When I graduate high school I want you and *daddy* to sit next to each other when-”

My face must have shifted. You stopped mid-sentence, even before I could cut you off with my response. I filled the silence with a somber, “that’s never going to happen.”

“But *why*? You don’t say a word when he’s around. You just nod or point when he’s around. Why won’t you talk? Why? He talks to you!”

“Sweet pea, it’s a really complicated thing, and it’s just above your



paygrade.”

“Why?” you asked while crossing your arms.

“Because you don’t remember.”

██████████ +18

621pm – Amelia’s House

I was emailing back and forth with my attorney, frantically from our car parked in Amelia’s driveway. We’d been there for about two weeks. You and your brother were sharing a room, and I slept on the couch in the den. I thought the end of our stay at Amelia’s was near. It had been hard, especially for you guys, but I look back on our time at that house and think that’s when *we* became a family- or maybe part of a family. You two were seeing for the first time how a healthy marriage and family operated. As cramped as we were, that house was full of love and safety. I don’t think the three of us had experienced that.

My attorney was very concerned. I wasn’t okay with you being around your father. He’d just been released from the mental health hospital. He was refusing to cooperate with CPS (this being the third time someone had reported your father to that agency). We had the ██████████ order. The hearing had been scheduled for that morning, but the backlog from recent flood damage at the courthouse hadn’t been cleared and our case wasn’t a top priority, so it was postponed. The restraining order would have expired that day and with no formal agreement in place, things would have gotten ugly. In a last-minute attempt to placate the situation, I agreed to allow supervised visits with your father. We agreed, and I had to take you two to see her the next day, before taking you to ██████████ for a dance convention that weekend.

When I told Amelia, I held back my tears. I was angry and felt defeated. After *everything* your father had done, why did I have to do this? It was much harder when I told you, Fay. I weighed my options on how and when to tell you. I don’t know if it was the right way to do it, but I waited until it was time to go. I didn’t want you to have time to dwell on it. Maybe that was the wrong call.

“Honey, come here- I need to talk to you,” I said the next day as you

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packed for the weekend. Amelia took your brother into your shared room, and I talked to you in her room. "Okay, before we head to the hotel for your dance convention, you and your brother are going to see your dad."

Your face fell, and you shook your head.

"No," you said calmly before the panic set in.

"Honey, it's okay- "

"No! Please don't make me go back!" and you started sobbing. You shook and tears covered your face. You made a run for the far corner of Amelia and Jack's room, but your knees wobbled and you stumbled. You didn't fall. You caught yourself before I could even reach out for you. "Please don't make me go- I don't want to see him."

Maybe I shouldn't have validated your fear, but all I could say was, "I'm sorry, honey. I have to take you, but someone will be there to keep you safe, okay? And you have your phone. You can call or text me or tell the lady there if *anything* makes you feel unsafe, okay?"

Amelia was waiting out in the hall- Mason wanted to know what was going on. Amelia wrapped you in her arms and let you cry while I went to tell your brother.

"Daddy?" Mason beamed. "I get to see Daddy?" He made his way out of your shared room, almost levitating as he bounced with excitement. "Sissy!" he called to you from behind me. "Sissy! We get to see Daddy!" He noticed your tears and asked, "What- what's wrong?"

You hesitated, took a breath, and said, "Nothing, ██████." You smiled at him and wiped the tears from your eyes. "I'm just excited too. Are you packed? Is there anything you want to take to see *dad*?"

I had to pull myself away. I pretended I needed to respond to a text. Fay, you did what you'd been doing for a while- protecting your brother.



02: -279

██████████ - *Our House*, -279

There's energy trapped in static objects. Listening with the right ears you can pick up on the pop of glass when it shatters- fragments pushed out by gas escaping the ruptured skin. Metal wrapped about a cloth interior makes for a moment of latent violence trapped in the potential for explosion stowed away indefinitely; tension frozen through the unyielding demands and influence of automotive engineering. A cage whose purpose bifurcated unconsciously when we buckled in that day.

Our energy was doubly encapsulated by our own frames and now a bulk of steel and glass. His rage rattled against aluminum, bone, and a beige cloth interior wrapped in red metal. The potential explosion of glass, frozen between layers of intent and adhesive, resonated with his own horrors trapped beneath layers of skin, blood, and tendons. Without the miracle of the modern internal combustion engine, it's unlikely the weight of his chaos would have ever allowed anything to move. His terror had enough mass, finally, to keep me at bay- or rather keep me so occupied with not letting us all drown that I didn't have the surplus of energy to make it to shore where I could shrug. His fear craved pain and made threats of swallowing our minds whole- a promise to consume, if left unchecked, our entire universe. I knew if I ever made it to shore, his dread would collapse inward, and he knowingly promised to engulf the kids in that implosion.

I kept treading water, hoping, like a coward, that the tide would take me to shore or wash him away, absolving me of the burden of choice.

A car blowing an intersection would work too.

The moment of impact wasn't violent- it was a release. For all its engineering, the cage's containment capacity buckled and split under the shock of human negligence. The intersection's lights were out- not flashing red- just out. No power. My window shattered. The lateral force of a quarter ton of metal traveling at 46 miles per hour meeting and overriding our forward vector of nearly equal weight but at 3 miles per hour locked our vehicles together just long enough for us to spin 200 degrees- my seat accepting the role of center of gravity.

The sound of a gong, an unknowably large church bell calling the end of

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service. A sensation of muted and dulled snapping, a weed being pulled out of the ground- a tug of remnant roots stretched and popping – left to die underground. My shoulders exhausted; his terror had found an exit.

At least I could b r e a t h e.



332pm

From the Traffic Collision Report:

Vehicle 1, bearing [state license plate number] driven by P1 was SB on [redacted] approaching the intersection with [redacted] Drive.

The lights at this intersection had been completely disabled and lacked power due to a collision between a single vehicle and the traffic control box. See [report number]. It should be noted that a disabled traffic light at an intersection functions the same as a 4-way stop at that intersection.

Vehicle 2, bearing [state license plate number] driven by [redacted], was EB on [redacted] Drive and stopped for the open intersection at Armstrong Rd. Vehicle 2 was attempting to turn left to head NB on [redacted] Rd. All of the NB traffic had stopped and cars in the 2 of the 3 southbound lanes on [redacted] had stopped [SB [redacted] Rd left turn lane was unoccupied] because of the light being out and the intersection being an open intersection.

Vehicle 2 proceeded to begin their left turn and Vehicle 1 continued through the open intersection using the left turn lane without stopping or even slowing down and the front of Vehicle 1 struck the driver's side door of Vehicle 2, spinning it more than 180 degrees.

The driver of Vehicle 1 was transported to [nearby hospital] where he was checked for chest pain.

The driver of Vehicle 2 suffered a shoulder injury on her left side and possibly an ankle injury on her right side from the impact. The juvenile female in a high back car seat behind the driver in the second row of seats suffered an injury to her face as well as her left shoulder/chest.

All three injured parties were being treated at [local hospital] at the time of this report and are expected to survive.

Both vehicles had to be towed due to extreme damage.

Nothing further at this time.

Diagram/supplemental notes:

Diagram depicts the 4 way intersection and the officer already on site for previous crash who served as the witness for the second collision.

The stoplights at the intersection were without power at the time of this

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crash. Intersection should have been treated like a 4-way stop.

They [other vehicles] are not shown to avoid confusion. Vehicle 2 had stopped and was proceeding with caution. Vehicle 1 failed to stop at the intersection.

End of report, filed [REDACTED]

++

I don't know if **you**'ll ever read this, but if **you** do- I want **you** to know that the kids' therapist told me *everything* when our divorce was final and the *amicus-ad-litem* had been discharged. Their therapist told me what **you** said- the words **you** were using to describe me to the kids, words like *gaslighting* and *emotional abuse*. She told me **you** used those words to tell the kids what a monster I am and that when the kids asked, "why doesn't mom talk about you like this?" **you** replied, "because she knows I'm right and I didn't do anything wrong. Think about it! Why wouldn't she say anything to defend herself? It's because she's a liar."

Mason supposedly once told **you** he loves me and that he thinks I'm a good person. According to his sister, **your** response was, "You don't know your mother, and this just means she's still manipulating *you*. I feel sorry for *you*."

I said nothing about **you** to them. **You** aren't worth it. My opinion and experiences with **you** were above their pay grade and not something I wanted to burden them with. I put my trust in my attorney and, mistakenly, the kids' attorney. I think the worst thing I ever said to them was, "I'll never be in the same room with your father again." I never once told them how abusive **you** were to all of us. I never once played any of the hours of audio or showed them the nearly 100 pages of notes on **your** behavior. I never once told them what the various therapists, family members, or multiple CPS agents said about **you**.

Because they're children- not pawns.

I also never let **you** know what the kids said about **you**. I knew about the magic rituals **you** forced them to do, all the things **you** said to them about me. I never mentioned to **you** how much the kids hated your **boyfriend's** son, or after school care, or how **you** woke them up in the middle of



the night during thunderstorms to tell *them* to calm down, or how **you** shrieked at them whenever it got back to **you** that I had friends. I knew if I told **you** that it wasn't okay to talk about me like that to them or to stop, **you'd** take it out on them.

So, I kept quiet.

But I think the worst thing **you** ever told them was that the car accident was *my* fault. Their therapist laid it out for me- that **you** explicitly told them it was *entirely* my fault.

You told them "Think about it, *my* babies- she was driving. She was fine the next day. She recovered faster than all of us. It's because *she did it on purpose to control us* and knew how to get hit, so she'd be fine. I think she'd been planning it for months. The car hit [REDACTED] on *her* side, but she didn't break anything? That doesn't make sense [REDACTED] [REDACTED] knew how to move the car."

You told our daughter, "*Your* mother basically hit you with a car! *She* broke your clavicle and chipped your teeth! It wasn't the other driver! It was your mother's fault! The fact that you still don't see it just shows how much she warped your mind and has been gaslighting all of us."

††

I'm sure you guys remember this. Fay stayed calm despite being banged up with a broken clavicle and a few chipped teeth. She healed quickly and without incident. The minimal physical therapy was so the attorney's office could collect more.

I was fine. Other than some bruising that was gone in a few days, I was unscathed.

Mason- you were in a 4-point child seat. I think you may have had a minor bruise on your chest from the harness. You were probably the most shaken. Seeing your sister like that was scary. I know you were worried about me too, but I kept telling you I'd had much worse. My biggest concern was over you guys and your father. I knew I was okay.

I still don't understand your father's injury. Maybe he explained it to you. He was bruised and supposedly hurt his hand. I don't know if it ever showed up on any imaging studies. I remember his hand being bruised, but I think that faded quicker than Fay's facial swelling.

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You and me, Fay, slept downstairs for a few nights. You were a tough kid. You never complained and hardly asked for help. You insisted on getting up from the couch on your own, even though it hurt like hell. I remember your sharp inhalation and wince whenever the raw nerve endings in your left clavicle grazed the displaced fracture. It was a good break, decent displacement, but nothing that wouldn't heal on its own.

I took you to see a pediatric ortho-specialist at the children's hospital the day after the accident.

"I'm glad it was me that got hurt and not you... because *you* can take care of me and us," you said. Thinking about it still gets me. You continued, "If you got hurt like this, like me, I wouldn't be able to take care of you and there wouldn't be anyone to take care of you, and that would be worse." And you smiled through your swollen and distended face with chipped teeth.

The orthopedic specialist shrugged at your x-ray and reassured us that in about 6 weeks, you'd be good as ever. He gave you a better shoulder strap and sent us on our way. I think we were there maybe 20 minutes?

The swelling in your face was gone in less than a week and by week 3, your sling kept "slipping off" when you and your brother were playing upstairs. It was around that three-week mark that you, me, and Mason all got comfortable in the car. When we drove somewhere, there was laughter again from the backseat. Not a bad recovery window. When your father was in the car, it was a different story.

I think your ■ never recovered on purpose. Right up until we fled the house for our own safety, leaving your father behind, more than a year after the accident, he said he was still terrified and would yell, tense up, and panic every time we got in the car. I think it was all for show. The "trauma" of the accident was the wild card he'd play whenever he wanted something and wasn't getting it immediately. I think he is still using that tactic, years later. I think it was a show for you guys. I think he wanted you to be afraid. If he could scare you two, I would be much easier to control. As much as the accident was his *wild* card, playing up your fears to control me was his *trump* card.



[REDACTED] +74

Left-Overs

A wound that won't close- vestigial raw flesh exalted by the opportunity to re-close. Not the closure, but the act of closing. Desperately seeking something to rip it open new. Being closed, being whole, is boring- the pain of healing a reminder of what it means to have a pulse. Is being whole, being complete, stagnant? Is that giving up? How can you be sure your soul exists if you've never seen it?

The micro tears of the ink gun tease the nerves. It's a sacred and holy pain because it isn't waiting for the hand of the divine to pass judgement- this is my pain. I get to choose how and where and what marks are left- not you.

As much as I enabled the metal terror in your throat, you cultivated a monster in me. It thrived on consuming torment, and you were in no shortage, delighted in sharing your surplus until your unending inventory grew exhausted- not depleted of material but spent from the twisted joy, quivering in ecstasy from each direct drag. My monster, eternally hungry, ate your fear for you. Together, we gave you the illusion of completion, projected on a canvas with light and shadows and smoke while we violently consumed and waited for the next helping.

You told me this was love.

You told me this was normal.

You told me this was the best I could ever do because that monster, the one you sired and perfected, made me unlovable and a freak.

So, I hid, obediently.

We, the monster, got smart. We, overtime, grew to understand that we'd always be hungry when consuming your fear- no shortage of volume but a gross lack of substance.

No calories in your fear, just hot air.

I can feel it whispering in my teeth. I am in control now.

We are coming to terms in ways you never could.

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03: Distance

██████████ -4,338

When I was in college, about a year before I met your father, I had some pretty good friends- my two best friends, to be specific. We hiked just about every weekend in the nearby mountains. Melissa lived up there. Julie and I would drive up together after work and school almost every Friday. We'd stay Friday night, get up early to hike Saturday, and consume massive amounts of pizza and ice cream post hike while watching horror movies.

Julie was seeing someone, and Melissa was married to Jason when your father and I made the trip and I introduced the group to him. We all stayed at Melissa's place Saturday night. It wasn't a party, but it felt like an occasion. Jason and Melissa had recently moved into their new place. The house's architecture was a little unusual, but it worked. Your father hated hiking, and he made that clear. So, the get together was just pizza and board games. Despite boasting that he knew "lots" of people in the mountains that he frequently visited, your father lamented the drive and "requested" we turn around the entire way up, saying that he never went up here and hated driving on the mountain roads.

The evening was tame. If memory serves, your father kept to his phone most of the time and pulled me away when he could. Our plan- in fact, the entire reason for going up Saturday afternoon was to go into town the next morning. We wanted to get breakfast at the waffle shop in the touristy village nearby. This place was famous for making Belgian waffle sandwiches with Nutella and ice cream layers.

"I want to go home- now," your father said, that Sunday morning as we were getting ready.

"But- the waffle place- what's wrong?"

"You know what's wrong! My allergies are terrible up here. I can't breathe," he said to me. I fumbled with the asthma inhaler in my tiny pocket I hadn't used at all during our stay. He had mentioned that it was allergy season for him, and that nature hated her- especially trees. There were lots of trees surrounding Jason and Melissa's house. However, the night before he didn't say a word about, nor did he appear to have,

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allergy symptoms. I know allergies can flare at different times for everyone. That morning, your father was presenting some symptoms, but it was more like he was pantomiming symptoms rather than having them. He was using what felt like an over-the-top nasal voice. It was almost cartoonish.

“I know Melissa has some Zyrtec and Claritin- I’ll go get some from her- Zyrtec, right?”

“No, no, it’s fine. *You* want to go to this waffle place that probably isn’t even that good- so we’ll go.” I didn’t know not-going was even on the table.

“Wait- I,” this wasn’t new behavior. It may have been the first time he was this cavalier about it, though. Your [REDACTED] and I had only been dating a few months, but I had seen how quickly Zyrtec could clear [REDACTED] symptoms- usually about twenty to thirty minutes. We would be leaving for breakfast in about 45 minutes.

“I said we can go. Spending time with them and waffles are more important than me. It’s fine.”

I went to the living room and talked to Julie. Her girlfriend, Vanessa, suggested I just take him at his word, and we go. That was very counterintuitive to me- but Vanessa made some good points in the brief conversation.

Back in the room, your father was glaring at his phone while sitting on the bed. He hardly looked up at me when I walked in. When he did, his gaze was dead and hollow. The edges of his mouth were being tugged downward ever so slightly. His eyebrows followed the same pattern of movement. The eyes underneath, though, were sharp. He was projecting two voices. The first one being “I’m really mad at you,” and the other one, on top of the first like a thin layer, was “but I don’t care.” It felt like a contradiction in a facial expression.

Before I could speak he said, “Oh- so you told them all how terrible I am? Now they all hate me, thanks,”

I’d borrowed some Claritin from Melissa. Dumbfounded, I extended my right palm with the antihistamine in it towards him and said, “No... I was just asking about getting something for your allergies. This is all they have.”

“You know Claritin doesn’t do shit for me. You really don’t care, do you?”

AlexaewMxlir Maewrx[REDACTED]fyxMaewrx[REDACTED]rsxcix QecfimrwmhifyxMjipxpmoiwsqixlm-



It never occurred to me that maybe it was your father's responsibility to bring his own medication knowing we were headed for a tree heavy area.

I pushed through, and we went to breakfast. [REDACTED] this place was magic. At first glance, it seemed like another greasy spoon. Floral wallpaper with an unmistakable yellow tint. They had old school gas lamps retrofitted with flickering light bulbs hanging from the ceiling and featured a two sided, roughly laminated, one page menu typed out in comic sans. Comic. Sans. The rooms were small, and the place was always packed. We had a fifteen-minute wait, which for a Sunday morning at 930am was amazing. A few times prior, Julie, Melissa, and I had waited upwards of an hour. Your father didn't "do" waiting.

He hardly talked to anyone, not even me. Every time I tried, he puffed his nose or tsked his teeth at me. I was agitated. I wanted to leave, but I was hungry, and all my friends were there. Your father didn't order anything. He just sat there mostly. When he interacted with anyone, usually Jason, he put on his "customer service persona" which meant trouble. It was an over-the-top personality that seemed polite but, in reality, was mocking whoever was on the receiving end and a warning to anyone in ear shot.

After that weekend, my trips up there slowly eroded. Some of it was natural. Julie and Vanessa broke up, Jason and Melissa did too. Your father said he knew something was wrong with Melissa and he never liked her.

Julie, Melissa, and I rekindled our friendship through Facebook when 2020 hit. Melissa was working for a survey company in Southern California. Julie had married her partner and they'd moved to an obscure college town in a rainy part of the Pacific Northwest. Pretty early in our reconnecting, we'd joked about having a girls' weekend. Julie and her wife had a cabin on a small lake that served as a vacation home. It was going to be too warm for me, but there was some momentum and

traction to our planning. We all had the time and means to get up there. Your father had previously said, "I think you guys should- they're the only people I'd be okay you spending a weekend away with- I'm all for your girls' weekend."

██████████: -92

6pm - Our House

I think people have a general idea of when their marriage, and by extension family as they knew it, broke down. Maybe it was something as simple as a missed anniversary, something as damning as finding indisputable evidence of an affair, or a fight over credit cards. I think something like the end of a marriage, especially one as unhealthy as ours was, is inevitable. It's *going* to happen- the only hint of control either spouse has is what causes it and, by extent, some control over when. For us, it was May 11th, 2012, at 6pm. A few keystrokes set everything into motion.

My therapist had recommended a few concepts and books about stress and anxiety symptoms I was having. Reconnecting with friends was a universal theme. I reached out to Melissa and Julie and our girls' weekend formed shortly thereafter.

I hadn't read much but when your father agreed to let me go on my trip, and seemed to encourage, my concerns about *where* my symptoms were coming from faded. Our marriage couldn't be that bad if he was okay with me going, right? It's also worth repeating that, according to your father's friends, we had the perfect relationship. *We never fought*. When we did, it was because I did something "stupid" I was quick to correct it after it had been pointed out for me.

We threw some dates back and forth with each other; we landed on



September 9th through the 12th. That would give us about 4 months of planning. Melissa and I wanted to avoid going in the summer, being cold weather people, but Julie, being a few steps short of needing a heat rock, wanted to get together before the cold season started. We all started tracking airfare. I went downstairs to tell your father. He seemed uninterested and kept playing his video game. The evening went on as usual.

 -91

8:30am – Our House

I was working upstairs with the door open for some airflow. It was still decent weather in early May, but I had two workstations firing in that office- one for each job. There was a small futon in the room that I sometimes used to doze on when I knew I was going to be working late, had been working late, or needed a minute to shift gears between jobs. I loved my jobs. Around that time, I was working between 50-60 hours a week on average. Sometimes that meant twelve-hour days and other weeks it meant working all weekend. I still made time to take you, Fay, to and from dance, help make dinner, make your lunches, do the dishes, laundry, vacuum, and run interference. I was told that my job(s) didn't count as work because I enjoyed them.

Your father was homeschooling you guys. Class was only Monday through Thursday and typically over before noon each day. He often said that because he was running homeschool for two students at different grade levels, he shouldn't have to do any chores that involved you two. Your grandmother, my mother, was a grade schoolteacher, which I still think is one of the toughest jobs, so I knew how much work went into it. That's why we paid for monthly subscriptions to a few different curricula, activity templates, and workbook printout websites. It made life easier for everyone; they did the lesson planning for him based on assignments and tests you did online. I'd usually wake your father up around 8am after I got you guys breakfast and situated with your schoolwork. Often, he'd announce he was "just done" for the day at about 2pm if class went long and lock himself in the master bedroom until dinner.

It was about 8:30am that day when your father announced his presence

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in the office by shoving open the door open the rest of the way. Work was fun, but I was deep in thought, sketching out ideas on my notepad, so I was startled when he said,

“I just got us an amazing family vacation deal! It’s *nonrefundable* though.”

This was news to me; we hadn’t talked about it at all.

“You know that big water park resort we saw on the way to the last [REDACTED]? Well, they’ve got a promotion, and I had to buy it today- like right now- before they sold out! Why aren’t you excited? You never like my ideas!”

I didn’t have time to process or react. I didn’t understand it, but that was one of your father’s go-to moves. He’d come in with high energy, excited about something and not give a lot of details. When I asked for more information or seemed confused, he’d tell me how much of a letdown I was for not being excited. He’d get upset. Then I’d spend half an hour trying to convince him I was excited, and that it was a good idea.

“When is it?” I asked, trying to feign excitement. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to go. His booking something like that, without even a prior mention, confused me. I was a little blindsided.

“September 10th and 11th.”

I looked at him blankly. I knew he had said words, but they lacked cohesion- an amorphous cloud hanging between his vocal cords and my brain.

“I know, I know- your girls’ weekend. Isn’t a family trip more important? I mean, you haven’t booked it yet, you can just go another time. This is non-refundable and the kids are really excited.” A few months later, your father canceled it with a full refund the day before the reservation, online and without having to talk to anyone.

This was less than twenty-four hours after I’d given her a tentative date for my friends’ weekend.

10:30AM – Our House

Later that morning, you, Fay, were struggling with math- place value in particular. The curriculum service had sent these place holder blocks to prepare for the unit. I used to joke that you had my brain. The more



complicated a problem, the more intuitive it seemed, but the simple things just seemed to elude us. You also weren't a tactile learner, at least not at homeschool, so I don't think those blocks were much help.

I heard him yelling at you from my office upstairs, "Go ask your mother! You've got her stupid brain; she can help you figure this shit out."

By the time you got upstairs to the office, you were crying. You sat on the futon for a minute. I asked you what was wrong.

"Daddy is just really mad at me! I'm scared he's... he said if I don't pass this section, he's going to make me do third grade over because I'm too stupid!" This wasn't the first time he'd sent you or your brother up to me, but this is around the time my in-depth notes start, so I have specific recollection. In fact, this entry is only my fourth one after I started writing everything down. I started about a week prior to this entry.

I helped you with the worksheet. It seemed to make sense to you. A few times you said something like, "Oh- is that all? I can do that," as you finished the worksheet. You gathered up your blocks and headed back downstairs. There was a visceral fog of anxiety that washed away everything but survival mode as you walked down the stairs and back into the classroom area. It hovered a few steps below the top landing of the stairs. It was like going underwater. I can imagine how difficult it was to focus with the threat of doing an entire grade over looming. I think that's why you couldn't get past that test. You failed it again.

Mason, I'm sure you were way too young to remember, but you offered both encouraging words and help to your sister. You'd sailed through the 1st grade equivalent place holder section in math. It was rare for your father to ever snap at you. It caught everyone off guard when she reacted to your offer.

"NO!" he shrieked, "NO! Don't you dare! This is *her* work, Mason!"

I got downstairs- not fast enough to make any noise or give away my concern, but quickly enough that I saw the look in your eyes, Buddy, before you wiped off the start of tears with your forearm. He wasn't mad at you. Your sister, though, was wide eyed and crying again. It's bizarre. I'm sitting in about the same spot your sister would have been in when this happened. This room seemed so much bigger then- or maybe standing in the arched doorway between this room and the kitchen, you both seemed so small with your father yelling.

Fay, you quietly went back to just staring at your worksheet. It had

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so many pencil and eraser marks it was almost unusable. Your father hunched over at her desk. He didn't notice your tears, or that I was in the kitchen.

"Hey, how about sandwiches with some veggie straws?" I took a risk and just started making lunch for you two. It was normal for me to make lunch, but I usually waited until I was told to do so. If I just jumped in and started making food, it wasn't uncommon for your father to shove me out of the way while shouting, "I can do it!"

You guys ate and went upstairs for rest time. You'd both outgrown naps, by a few years, but your father insisted on having a break from you for at least an hour. You two going up for an hour of rest gave your father time to return to baseline and, for that, I actively encouraged it. That said, you were easy kids. You hardly fought and could entertain yourselves at a young age. I think your father wanted an extra hour of video game time. I envied you. Having an hour of quiet alone time to rest sounded amazing.

The rest hour came and went. You were allowed out of your rooms.

"Okay, Mason, you can just play games on your computer or in your room because *you* did good on your schoolwork today." Your father was sitting in her black, armless office chair. He turned in it to look at your sister.

"Now, Fay- you *need* to get this right. *We* could have been done hours ago, but instead you decided to make this difficult. I don't know why this is so hard for you. Your brother got it."

I had the office door open all the way. I heard it all clearly. Your brother was playing in his room with the door closed. It was silent for about ten minutes. Then a shriek. Then the unmistakable double slam of both fists pounding a desk. I don't know if your father came up to you or if you went to her for help, but there was a shriek and a smack.

"We've been doing this all-fucking *day*- all day!" I was on the stairs and barreling down before he started saying "fucking." I bolted down the stairs, making no attempt to muffle my steps or hide my urgency this time. I turned the corner of the kitchen just in time to hear him continue screaming, "ALL FUCKING DAY! WHAT. THE. FUCK. IS. WRONG. WITH. *YOU?*"

He held your worksheet in his left hand- violently crumpled. He pinned you with fear to your seat. Your little hands gripped the side of the chair. You were shaking. You were sobbing. I don't think you were breathing.



Your father was inches from your face, mouth wide, eyes on fire, with teeth clenched and exposed. His right arm was perfectly straight, save for her wrist at a 45-degree angle backwards that ended in a shaking curl of knuckles. The stored kinetic energy in that right hand was horrifying. He swung it back like a pendulum when he saw me. You saw me kiddo and lunged for the kitchen doorway. When you'd made two steps, I was already in the center of the room. I put a relaxed palm up at her and folded my right arm behind me to hold your hand. You were shaking so hard. You held your position behind me.

"Okay, I think that's enough." I spoke calmly, but my legs were convulsing. I thought they were going to give at any second. This was the first time I'd ever stepped in like this. I didn't know what I was doing. I tried to lock eyes with your mother, but she was rapidly shifting her eyes to the top corners of the walls, tracing the upper lines of the room. "The yelling isn't helping. I get that this is infuriating, but it isn't helping." I made a slight but definitive growing pause between each syllable- like a heartbeat gradually slowing down.

Your father immediately backed away from you- eyes wide with anger, now directed at me. He retreated, shuffling backwards, both feet firmly sliding back across the tile. He pushed his right foot along the wall next to the front door. He twisted his upper body and hunched. That right arm, just seconds before curling and ending in a fist, was now scraping up the corner of the wall independently moving- hand wide like a spider across a web. His left hand had dropped your worksheet and was tracing the same line as his right hand. It looked like he was trying to climb the wall.

"SHE NEEDS TO LEAVE! I CAN'T FUCKING LOOK AT HER!" this was more than a shriek. This was a deep howl. This was fear. He was looking right through me and at you, kiddo. Whatever he saw in that moment scared her. Maybe it's that he'd scared you so badly that I needed to step in- or maybe he wasn't looking at you- maybe he was seeing herself.

You ran out of the room, crying hysterically, "I didn't mean to be bad!"

Before you made it to the stairs, your father calmly dropped his shoulder, face cemented in a twisted expression of rage and fear- teeth clenched in such a way that it looked like a grin. He straightened and let his hands drop from the wall, looked down and then said, "You're right. I'm a fucking failure of a father -I need to leave." I hadn't said anything. He was pointed in my direction, but that comment was for you kids.

His right hand, still moving independently of his body, found the handle

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to the front door and cracked it open. The initial twist of his hand was angry and pulled the door open a few inches instantly. The violence of the twist carried the door open wide enough for her to walk out.

“I’m just going to walk into traffic- then if I’m dead you’ll win, and everyone will be happy.” That comment was just for me but loud enough for everyone. He slammed the solid wood and glass trimmed front door. The house reverberated. I wanted to lock it behind him.

I went upstairs to your room. You were sobbing- hard enough that I thought you might vomit, choking on air.

You stuttered before getting out, “I heard what daddy said- I heard him.” You fought back a dry heave and then continued, “Can you send him a text? I want to say I’m sorry!”

I didn’t know what to say. This was uncharted territory for all of us. Your father had stormed out like that, but this was the first time he’d made a clear and audible threat blatantly enough for you two to hear. I don’t think I’ll ever know if you heard the threat part of that exit statement- but the first half was enough.

I checked on you, Mason. You were shaken and a little teary, but your door had been closed for all this exchange. I was headed back to your sister’s room. She closed the door. Your father was home and making loud footfalls as he was coming up the stairs.

I stood in silence as he walked up and then passed me. Your rooms were to the right of the stairs and the master bedroom was to the left. He didn’t look in my direction. I stood there, holding my breath, following his movement with my eyes only. I was too afraid to make any movement. His hair hung in front of her face, obscuring the wide eyes and tiny pupils. His hands hung at her side with a heavy sense of gravity. He quietly closed the door.

I checked on your sister again, assuring her she didn’t do anything wrong. It was the first time I told her your father’s behavior wasn’t okay or fair to either of you. Fay didn’t have the faculty to say anything. She just nodded.

I slowly opened the door to find your father lying on the bed, flat on his back, eyes looking both through the ceiling and at nothing. The moment I closed the door, he sat up, pivoting at his hips with a straight back in one quick, jerky movement and started crying into his hands, like I’d activated a switch for an animatronic.



"I don't want to be here anymore. Fay can't do her work because she's been yelled at and is scared of me!! I'm a fucking failure!"

I talked him down, like I had before. It wasn't anything special. The conclusion was that I wasn't doing enough to support him. I promised to help with the school stuff more. I'd done this enough times to know the best way to end it was to wrestle the blame onto me. That felt safe. After a few rounds of me assuring him that everything was okay and that I'd be better in the future, he came back to reality. It was like nothing had happened.

Your father and I went downstairs first. He planted himself on the couch and booted up his video game. I went back upstairs to get you two. I think you played upstairs the rest of the day while I finished up work.

After a few hours of silence downstairs, aside from the video game, I checked on your father. He was fine. No sign of distress. No sign of crying. No sign of having just threatened to walk into traffic with a departure vector to back it. He looked at me like I was insane for my weary approach.

"So, we're ordering Thai food tonight, right?" I was elated. He didn't seem mad anymore. My apology and promise to be better worked, and now I was being rewarded. We were allowed to order dinner from his favorite restaurant.

Twenty-four hours earlier I had mentioned, for the first time with any sincerity, a specific date for me going away for two days. 16 hours after that, your father booked a trip for that same specific date. 4 hours after that, he threatened you and threatened to walk into traffic.

 -145

3pm - Our House

We were all seeing a therapist after the car accident. I think that put a lot of things into motion as well- both the car accident and therapy. Yes, my therapist thought something was off in the marriage, but it was your father's therapy that really moved things along. I didn't understand how until after the divorce was over.

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Amanda was a therapist I saw at first but stopped because things kept “coming up” for your father nearly every time I tried to see her in person. She specialized in EMDR. She’d recommended it to me, but your father wouldn’t allow it as it can be an intense process.

“What if you go through it and you’re not in a good mood after? I can’t have that.”

Your father fired his first therapist, [REDACTED], switched to Amanda and jumped into EMDR in his third session.

On May 21st, your father had a noon appointment with Amanda. He drove himself after I backed the car out of the garage for him. I knew Amanda would sometimes run late with someone if they got into a good session, so when 1:15 rolled around, I didn’t think anything of it.

I waited until 1:30 to text him, “Is everything okay?” We were sharing our locations with each other through our cell phones. I could see he was still at or near the counseling center that Amanda, Mona (my new therapist), and yours worked out of together. The office was 5 miles southeast from the house.

I got a reply from your father 37 minutes later (1:57). He had been at his appointment for an extra hour with no update. It didn’t bother me. I was working and you and your brother were playing. I had started to notice that the house felt lighter when he was out.

Your father never texted me to let me know he was on his way home or how late he’d be. I got a little worried an hour and a half after the session was originally supposed to end, but I could see he was still there, so I didn’t bother him again.

It turned into a three-hour therapy session that was supposed to last 50 minutes. I didn’t question it, but while his iPhone was showing him at the therapy office; I got a notice on my phone that your father’s Apple ID was used to sign into a device about 15 miles north of there. It wasn’t uncommon then for phones to connect to a wi-fi network and then show the location of the provider’s cell phone tower or hub a few miles out. Still, it struck me as odd that the notification came in at 1:55pm, right before your father finally responded.

He got home at 3:58pm. Your father walked right by me without a glance, announced he was tired, went upstairs and showered immediately, and texted me what he wanted to order for dinner. I didn’t ask about it and there was no discussion about anything other than his session was



intense and physically exhausting.

██████████ -137

10:00am – Our House

We were all physically fine after the car accident in a matter of weeks but, 6 months after the car accident I was still going to physical therapy. I enjoyed going and our attorneys insisted we go until released by the physical therapist.

As we approached ██████, my time for physical therapy was ending and we were trying to squeeze as much as we could into the last few sessions. It was a slow morning at the PT office. There had been a little rain with light thunderstorms earlier and the sky was still fairly overcast. The temperature hung around 76 degrees, with no perceptible wind in any direction, and it was humid. It felt like another storm was coming.

That day, the therapy felt more like weight training- bordering on interval workouts. The PT assistant used muscle scrapers on me. I put my phone and wallet on the chair next to her table. I asked if I could just leave them there instead of carrying them around from station to station. She recommended it since we were going to be doing a lot of balance work, followed by rowing.

I had a semi-smart watch- I think they were called “hybrid” watches. They connected to your phone but normally didn’t display anything. Instead, they’d buzz a certain number of times, and the watch hands would momentarily move to a predetermined position on the face. The number of buzzes and hand positions correlated to what kind of activity was on your phone. One buzz for a text and the arms went to 1pm while an oscillating buzz with hands spinning meant a phone call. It was still the early days of smart devices- they were known to be fragile. Not something you’d want on your wrist while working out.

I left it on the chair with my phone and bag.

I didn’t realize we had run past my appointment time until 5 minutes after it was supposed to end. The PT said at the beginning of our session that she’d had a lot of cancelations. With no one coming in for another appointment, we completely lost track of time. When I saw what time it was, I ended the session as soon as quickly I could. My heart stopped when I remembered where my phone was. With my watch *and* phone on

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the chair, I didn't know if anyone was trying to get a hold of me.

It was 11:10am.

During the first five minutes, your father called five times and sent me two text messages. In the next five minutes, he called an additional 5 times and sent me six more texts. The last text read, "If you're not dead or lying wounded in the street, I'm going to fucking kill you."

It occurred to me that maybe he was joking. I made my way towards the exit and asked the receptionist if anyone had called looking for me. No one had. The receptionist's eyes narrowed, and she tilted her head slightly to her left. I think that question struck her as odd.

I looked over the missed calls and saw that I also had a few voicemails, at least two, but no more than four. I didn't listen to them. I dialed your father as I got into the car. He answered as I backed up.

"Hello," a flat voice answered.

"Hey- I'm sorry, we ran a little late. I'm on my way. Do we need anything from the store?"

"Just get here. We'll *discuss* this when you get home. I am *very* upset with you." He hung up.

I drove home without music- I think I was punishing myself? Had the session ended on time at 11am precisely, I would have been home between 11:15am and 11:20am. That day, I arrived home at 11:27am. I opened the garage and went inside expecting- well, I'm not sure what, but I knew I was in trouble.

You two were playing outside in the backyard. It was unusual for your father to allow that, given the slight chance of thunderstorms. Your father was inside, playing or texting on his phone with his back to the open window and on the other side, you two were playing with a backyard activity set.

Your father didn't get up from the couch. He glanced up at me, shot me a loaded stare, and called you two in for "rest time." Rest time normally wasn't until after you guys had lunch and school was done for the day. Maybe today's lessons were especially easy? You two obediently went in, and said "hey mom," casually as you went up. He waiting until you both had closed your doors.

"HOW could you make me think you were dead? You *never* think about



anyone else! What if the kids were hurt and I needed to get ahold of you?! You're so selfish! I had to *lie* to the kids when they asked when you'd be home because I had no *fucking* idea if you were even coming home!"

I just stood there. I didn't know what to feel. He was angry. I normally keep my phone on me- I bought that watch so I wouldn't miss any texts from him if my phone was on silent or not on me or at the bottom of my bag.

"I- I'm sorry, was my location sharing not -"

"Oh, I'm an idiot! Gee, thanks! You're right, I'm being crazy! Wow, you fucking bitch, I was in a pretty good mood and you just ruined it- ruined for everyone for the whole day- good job! Fuck you. FUCK YOU!"

When I didn't respond, he frantically added, stumbling over his words, "and of course I looked! I couldn't tell if you were lying there dead in the parking lot, though! God dammit, you really think I'm that stupid? Don't you dare fucking turn this around on me! How do I know *you* weren't fucking someone? Huh?"

I began apologizing, but it felt like I was lying. I thought of his therapy session that ran *hours* late not even two weeks ago. I was only *five minutes* late when he started repeatedly calling and it only took me another five to respond. It took him nearly forty minutes just to respond, and by then he was an hour late. I wanted to ask about that- not to "be right" but because I wanted to understand why it was different. I know that sounds facetious, but history had me convinced your father was right in yelling and berating me and that I was in the wrong but I didn't understand why. I was dizzy but kept going with my apology- just speaking words of "sorry" and "I won't do it again." *Anything to make it stop.*

After I'd pleaded enough or said the right words, he ceased, satisfied that I believed I was in the wrong. I think I even told him it was okay to yell at me like that, because he was worried and I didn't respond quickly enough.

His last note on the topic was, "The next time you want to stay late to talk about how fucking cool you are- you'd better fucking not. Do it again and we'll see if we're here when you get back."

This was the first time I'd ever been late coming home without notice and the first time I'd ever failed to respond within five minutes. We'd been together for nearly ten years.

May 30th, 2021: 106 Days Before

8:42am - Our House

gnb9R

Here I am back to doing laundry, dishes, floors, playing alarm clock, and getting everyone breakfast.

Working two jobs and going to school.

Like it never happened, except for the occasional reminders - "I hope to get a good night sleep, you're not going to pull any shit again, are you?" or "I'm going shopping and buying these things and I don't even feel bad" and "I'm going to watch this, if you don't like it you can leave." If I say anything about this or even seem bothered, it's "oh my god I'm just joking with you - psh - fine! I won't kid anymore; you need to have a sense of humor about yourself like me."

I'm beginning to really question myself. Am I crazy? Am I that out of touch with what I'm saying, how I'm saying it, and how I'm hearing what she says?

Denied being of service like a punishment ("don't do things for me! You don't deserve it!"), then made to feel guilty for not being of service and the relation that comes with suddenly being allowed to provide service again. "I guess you can do this for me. You made me so sad by not getting me this the other day:"

The wind kicked out of me. Just like that, I'm expected to be over it.

"I talked to my therapist- and you're the asshole. Are we done fighting now?"

Affirmation.

I try to explain that I didn't hear myself saying anything in a mean tone. "Well, you didn't hear you, I did. You've always had issues with tone. And you held a grudge over the weekend about something you should've just let go that was really your fault. But you didn't, and you *punished* me for my anxiety. I can't trust you with it anymore and that's really sad and I'm hurt."

"It's because my anxiety is worse than yours! It's because I love you more than you love me, apparently! That's why! Did you ever think of that? You're so selfish and such an insensitive bitch!"

Justified.

I don't know what to say, so I take it. The only way to calm her down is to agree and apologize.

"I don't want to do this! I don't want to be with you! I want to take the kids and go!"



Threats.

I was 10 minutes late to get home, 10 minutes late to respond to her concerned texts and calls. Weeks ago, she was hours late without telling me why.

Tears- but not from me. "I'm sorry for being so worried about you!! I'll never worry about you again! I didn't know where you were and I thought you were dead or cheating on me!"

And then "I don't know what you were hoping my reaction would be? What did you expect? You need to fucking think before you say shit."

"Oh you're right! I'm a piece of shit hypocrite. Thanks for reminding me! You know what? You're right, you'd be so much better off without me! Fuck off for holding a grudge for days!"

Explosion.

She poked and pushed and pushed until I finally gave in a few days later.

I didn't think I said anything wrong. I just wanted to understand why ask- I wasn't sure I was wrong, but I knew she would tell me in her own unique way exactly why and I didn't want to go through it.

Someone please tell me she's right. Please tell me I'm being insensitive or too sensitive or selfish. If it's true, I have a defect and I don't understand tone, I can't trust my memory- only hers and that's easier than-
"I'm not gaslighting you - of all your issues right now, this tone one is the least of the concerns. You've always been this way. I wouldn't bother your therapist with it. Let's not fight anymore."

I told her about how concerned I am about not hearing things (either my tone or something she said) and she guffawed.

Suffocating.

This is going to blow over and I'll forget. I'm supposed to let it go and I know eventually I will.
Maybe in the future I will read this and do something, but for now I don't know what to do.
I feel like I'm losing my mind. I feel like I'm-

"I had a dream you let me touch you. That was nice."



Back to normal.

I don't know what to get out of this- even writing this. I just need to think that someone out there can commiserate.

Am I that bad? She was snappy with me and I felt hurt by it... but I was the one being mean. I was hearing it wrong. Was she not being mean? Or she was and it was okay to be mean to me? I deserved it. I thought her tone was condescending and what's he was saying was rude (calling me stupid for an absent-minded mistake putting things away in the pantry and then being flustered and making a few more mistakes) and it seemed unfair and I couldn't hide the reaction of hurt/flustered/confused on my face- but I have it backwards? She ran out of the room screaming, "why are you being so mean to me? What did I do? I should be mad at you!!"

Panic.

She says I want it all the time, but I don't remember it that way. Lying in bed, she clearly wants sex as she rubs up against me and says, "oh wow, okay, so right now?" as I lay still. She almost forces me on top and I can't help but think I'm not sure I wanted this? I know that's my fault. I could say no, but it's not worth another fight, so I give in.

Sex.



██████████ -103

11:30am - Our House

If putting a date to the girl's weekend is what set things in motion, then ██████████, was the point of no return. This is the section I've avoided writing- because it's where I made the most mistakes. Big ones. I'm not asking for forgiveness; I think we're past that. I hope reading everything until this point sheds some light on what happened and why I reacted the way I did. I'm not proud of it, but things were said and lines were drawn that I can't take back. In the grand scheme of things, *what* was said probably doesn't matter, but thinking about it stings even today. I guess that's the point. I learned so much from the weeks and years that followed this day, both about myself and your mother.

Between us three girls, Julie wasn't working at the time and we were going to visit her, so it fell mostly on Melissa and me to coordinate our flights. We researched each other's flights, hoping to catch a connecting flight in Vegas so we could fly up together. Finally, at the end of June, we settled on a weekend: ██████████. I would leave in the afternoon on Thursday and come back on the red eye Sunday morning. The hope was that I'd get home before you two were awake.

This worked out to three nights and three days. Melissa and I would fly into Portland within a few hours of each other. I would get in first and watch for her arrival and gate info. I'd text Julie and let her know when Melissa's flight landed- she was going to wait in the cell phone lot outside the chaos of the main terminal.

I kept your father up to date on the flight purchase process. We would take advantage of the post holiday slump and buy tickets after ██████████. I'd found the perfect flight and price. I was ready to buy it. Melissa had found her flight as well. I texted your father from the office upstairs.

"Wait until everyone else has bought their tickets before you do, just in case."

I didn't think anything of that statement at the time- it made sense to me. Even though the flight was fully refundable within 24 hours, why put the



money out if something happened and *Melissa* wasn't able to go?

I had a blood donation that morning- one of the few things I was allowed to go do but only because it helped prevent issues with my hormone treatment. It was a [REDACTED] donation event at a local church just three miles away. I paused for a moment as I backed out of the garage to text *Melissa*- I had authorization to buy my ticket after she did. By the time I was done with my donation, she'd purchased her flight and sent me her itinerary. I told your father over text before I drove home.

"That was fast," he replied.

I intensely stared at my flight- credit card info loaded – my hand hovered over the mouse. I wanted to make triple sure- so I texted your father again that I was about to purchase.

"Go for it!" was his response.

So I did.

I then made a purchase for myself, without asking. I bought a new hiking bag with a built-in hydration pod. I had one when your father and I first met, but your father had asked me through it out shortly after the last time I saw *Melissa* over some waffles with your father. Your father and I shared the same Amazon login so we could both stay up to date on packages and delivery dates.

The email and confirmation notice of my purchase came through while I was performing my evening dish duties for the day. Your father rested on the couch after finishing his classroom duties at 11:00am that day. He walked over to the kitchen where I was drying plates and putting away forks.

He flashed his phone screen at me and then looked at me with a forced smile.

"You're just so excited, aren't you?" His tone warbled between feigned enthusiasm and bitterness. It was like two personalities were bickering over who should drive; the grinning-through-clinched-teeth-customer-service employee or something else much darker- something to this day I can't describe.

I tried so hard not to smile. I wanted to play it cool, but inside I was ecstatic, looking back it was the closest I got to euphoria for years to come. Shortly after I purchased my ticket, it hit me that I hadn't seen a

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friend, not a work friend but a real friend, in over 9 years. I hardly talked to my family. Recently, your father made a stance on my brother and I stopped talking to him. I'd been told that the road trip/house hunting excursion with my dad, your "Grandpee," was the last time I was going to see him. He told me it was because of his political swing and history of being uninvolved or allegedly uninterested in his only grandchildren. Your father made it sound like my father would never reach out again or visit unless I started it, and that sort of relationship wasn't worth it.

Nine years since I'd spent time with someone that wasn't a family member on your mother's side, or a work event.

██████████ -1,204

A few years prior, while we were in Albuquerque, my grandmother on my father's side passed away.

I'd gotten close to my dad's sister, an aunt I hadn't really known growing up, ██████████. My grandmother was staying with her as opposed to hospice. My aunt and I texted and talked daily during that time. When my grandmother passed away, I was one of the first people she called.

Funeral arrangements were already in place, so it was just a matter of getting the entire family together. I helped plan my dad's flight and room. I was going to be gone for two nights and three days- a day to get there, a day to visit, and then a day to get back. My aunt lived in central ██████████. We lived in New Mexico. Even with well-planned flights, it was going to be nearly a turnaround trip.

Three days before I was supposed to leave, your father blurted out at dinner with you guys, "I have a bad feeling about you going. What if you're driving and hit ice and die? How am I supposed to get your body back and where do I bury you? That's all I've been thinking about since you started talking to ██████████."

That evening, his anxiety was palpable. He sat on the couch playing a video game. He didn't look at me. "If you die, I can't take care of the kids. I'm a useless piece of shit-nobody with no useful skills. We'd either starve to death or have to move back in with my mom, and I don't know which would be worse."



"I'm not going to die- "

"How can you be sure? I have a really bad feeling, and I'm usually right about these things."

I didn't say anything. I could feel the visit, a chance to see my dad and his family slipping away.

Your father's face turned solemn. He paused his game, turned to look at me from his corner spot of the sectional and said, "I *know* you've felt that too."

Had I? The thought flashed in my head for a moment, but it passed quicker than it formed- and not me dying but getting injured. At that- it wasn't about getting injured, but just how inconvenient it would be and that it would delay getting home by a day or two. To me, that seemed like an acceptable scenario. Seeing as your father had gone to his grandfather's funeral (on the side of his family he never really got to know- your Great Aunt Amelia's side). Your brother was not even two years old when he went. Oh- and you puked all over me while he was gone, Fay! It was actually pretty funny. I had just opened a new pint of Ben and Jerry's moment's before you produced a thick veneer of vomit on the bathroom floor of about a quarter inch in depth? Your father was on his bereavement excursion at the time.

"If you weren't going to be gone for so long, I don't think *either of us* would have a problem with it."

That thought was ridiculous. I think my face sank into my chest.

"I'm an empath. You can't hide how you feel. I know how you feel even if you don't. If you have *any* bad feelings, you shouldn't go. I *know* you have, even if you don't."

I ended up not going. Instead, I worked from home that weekend, the entire weekend, pretending to be in Kentucky working from my hotel. There was plenty of work to do, but none of it was urgent.

"We're hiding your mother this weekend. She's not allowed out of the house."

Over that weekend, you, Mason, got hit with croup.

Again.

"Aren't you glad your mother didn't go anywhere," he said to you, Mason.

You got croup so often we had our own extra-large bottle of the anti-inflammatory steroid on hand so we didn't have to keep rushing you to urgent care. For most of our time in Albuquerque and in California, you got croup every six weeks. Your father got good at predicting when you were going to get it. He even started making a homemade cough syrup to give to you before your symptoms presented themselves. Your father said he could just sense it. He was *never* wrong. You always got it when she said you would. Sometimes he even made that cough syrup for you before you had any symptoms.

Growing up, I used that prescription steroid often, thanks to my asthma. I didn't want you to take it for years like me. When you told me how it made you feel, I knew exactly what you were talking about. It wasn't fun. Tired of the cycle, I talked to your doctor about what could cause it- especially at your age. Children your age weren't supposed to get croup. She suggested maybe it was a spasmodic croup- something upsetting your stomach as the underlying cause. It seemed like a long shot. We started you on an antacid. You were only on it for about seven weeks.

And that was the end of your croup.

Until Montana.

██████████ -103

5pm - Our House

"You're just so excited, aren't you?" your father said looking over my flight info and the hiking bag I'd ordered for myself.

I eventually caved and said, "well- a little- yes, okay I am- sorry." I don't know why I apologized.

"Well, I'm really jealous of you. It sounds like fun- I want to go." His tone was friendly. After my unprompted apology, his tone of "not angry" was disarming. The slight trace of resentment was better than the anger I was worried about.

"When should we talk to the kids about me going?" I asked.



“No- let’s not bother them until it’s a sure thing,” your father replied.

That’s how it started. A few hours after I’d booked my flight, he was already questioning the validity of it. His hint of jealousy grew into resentment and eventually rage.

Fay, you and your father were going out to the local Mexican restaurant to make up for a [REDACTED] he’d talked you out of. Your father didn’t want to go to said event. I offered to take you, but I was told that would be inappropriate and to drop it.

I had booked my flight at 10:30 that morning after getting that very clear endorsement from your father, having met all the pre-requisites. At 5pm his endorsement, or maybe just feigned complacency, had vanished.

You and your father were upstairs getting ready to go. He had decided you two should dress up a little to make an occasion out of the make-up dinner. It seemed like a good idea. Your father came downstairs and let me know he was ready and that I should back the car out of the garage for him. I did so.

When I came back in, your father cornered me in the living room and said, “I want you to go on your trip, but just know I’m not happy about it and it’s going to be really hard on me and the kids. Once again, you get everything you want at *my* expense!”

I gawped at him. Six hours earlier it was “go for it!” and now this.

“What?” was all I could manage.

“You only thought about yourself,” he replied calmly like a judge reading a sentencing from the jury. “All you thought was ‘my friends want to go on this trip, I have the time off, I can afford it, so I’ll do it, and to hell with how my husband feels about it.’ You’re the typical entitled white-Karen-bitch! I thought you were different.” His voice never got above a harsh whisper, but I felt the impact of his words as if he were screaming. I think his delivery made it worse- made me feel trapped; by keeping his voice down, I was the only one who knew what he would normally have been screaming. All the effect but only short range, like hand-to-hand combat. If I had reacted to him, while he never made more than a whisper, I’d seem crazy and by not saying anything, he’d take it as submission.

Was he bypassing logic? Didn’t he give me the okay that morning? Hadn’t we been discussing potential dates for over six weeks? I was shaking with frustration as much as I was with fear. I had to call him out on this.

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Something wasn't right.

"But..." I steadied my breath, "you said 'go for it' this morning. We talked about it."

"That's not fair. I didn't think you'd actually be going- that you'd actually leave me- us." His tone was firm but remarkably calm. Underneath that calm there was something a snickering, like at an inside joke.

"So, it was a test?" I asked. There was no hiding the disdain in my voice.

We both heard you open your bedroom door. The discussion came to an abrupt halt. Your father had one more thing to say before you finished your descent downstairs.

"Listen," he said to me just above a whisper, "don't be mad at me, let's not fight. I didn't do anything wrong; I'm just telling you how I feel. I'm allowed to have feelings about this. I'm not saying you can't go- I'm just saying you shouldn't and it's a bad idea, and you didn't think it through."

He timed it perfectly. The second he finished his last syllable was the same moment your foot left the stairs. I think he knew I wouldn't say anything in front of you or your brother. He switched it off, and you two went out to dinner.

You had a good time at dinner, abnormally good. Was your father already plotting, maybe unconsciously, about how he'd get you to see *his side* of the fight that hadn't even started? I didn't know what love bombing was at the time, nor its cyclical nature. The end and start of it is just our perception. Proactive. Reactive.

You and your brother were always his trump card.

I put you and your brother down for the evening about an hour after you came back from dinner. Going downstairs to where your father had planted himself this evening wasn't a source of dread. This time, I felt charged. I had logic on my side. I had evidence of him agreeing to it and a record of him giving me the okay.

It did not go well.

One big loop.

"You said I could go! You okayed it!"

"I didn't think you'd actually go, and you didn't give me time to think



about it. You sprang it on me!”

“So, it was a test? You were testing me?”

“I didn’t say that! You’re not listening! I’m not saying you’re not going; I’m just saying it isn’t a good idea and you shouldn’t go.”

This was the first time I wasn’t towing the line. It must have scared him. I’m jumping ahead a little, but I think I understand why your father accused me of gaslighting him. When I stopped being so obedient, or at least easy to manipulate, he must have felt like he was losing his mind. He’d hoisted that responsibility on to me. I think putting it on me made perfect sense to him.

I was the only one acting differently, *therefore*, I was the one causing the problem.

We reached a stalemate at around 1am. The only thing we agreed on was that we’d talk to you two in the morning. We agreed that if you both seemed okay with it, I’d go. I was confident you and your brother would be somewhere between indifferent and uninterested.

Had your father coached you at dinner? Had he laid the groundwork for this incoming conversation with you and your brother before he and I even agreed to have it? Is that where his confidence came from? His last words on the issue that evening as I hugged my side of the bed and the sheets made a canyon between us were,

“How the hell do you expect them to understand ‘Mom’s leaving you- she has to get away from you in order to have fun.’ How do you expect them to understand that? “

In retrospect, it was wrong of both of us to put that on you.

I regret it.

 -102

930am – Our House

I think by the time you two read this, you’ll have some understanding of

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what I mean when I say that morning felt like a moving day, or the last day of school. It's the same room- dimensionally unchanged- but with everything off the walls, all the furniture removed, rooms that were soft and quiet have an echo now. Like a voice telling you to get out.

Your father announced a family meeting.

We'd had the same sectional couch for years. It had been given to us by your mom's friend's stepmom. It was a simple brown sectional whose fabric was so well worn it felt more like burlap than cotton. The couch was a big brown 'L' that had been with us since you, Fay, were three years old. Your father plopped down dead center behind the coffee table. You two were perfectly centered across the coffee table from her, sitting on the floor- a small little triangle.

I stood to the left of your father.

"Okay," your father began, "there's something your mother and I would like to talk to you two about. Now- it's okay to be upset or confused as long as you're speaking *your* truth. Okay, everyone understand? This is a safe place and *no onnnee*," he tugged and dragged that word into a few syllables. It was just long enough to give me a stern look. He made sure you guys saw him giving it to me. "no one can tell you how to feel," he finished.

"Okay- I think you should be the one to tell them what you're doing." He swung his head towards me.

"So you guys probably don't remember my friends-"

"No, no, none of that! You can't make it sound like that! You need to be honest. Just get to it."

"... I am considering going on a trip. I'd be gone for a few days, but that's all..."

Silence for a few moments- it felt like you guys had forgotten your lines and you looked at your father for direction or a cue. After a few moments Mason said, "As long as you take one of my Pokémon and take lots of pictures and send them to sissy's phone, so I know you're both safe, I'll be okay. I think you will have a happy time with your friends."

That wasn't the answer your father wanted, so he turned his gaze up to *very intense* leveled it solely on Fay. You looked at your father like you



were trying to decode something- like the script you had was smeared. When you didn't get it, you slowly turned to me and with an air of confusion and asked, "is it for work or something?"

I started to reply but –

"Your mother is going away to have fun without you. She's saying she can't have fun here with *us*. She's leaving you so she can go have fun with her friends- away from you on the other side of the country."

-your father interrupted me. You must not have given the reaction still. He formed four words coherently, but something about his voice had the quality of snapping fingers in a long and empty library hall.

He said, "it's-okay-to-cry" with her gaze squared on you, Fay.

That did it.

"Mom, please don't go! I don't want you to go! What if you get hurt and I'm not there with you?"

Something immediately felt off in that reaction from you. Your father would later tell me that *of course* something felt wrong- I wasn't getting what I wanted so naturally that felt off. That wasn't it.

This conversation felt like a setup. It had the dry quality of something rehearsed.

Your father smirked. It was almost imperceptible, but I caught just the edge of his mouth as he turned away from me and back towards you two. I wonder if I was meant to catch the shadow of the smirk. Either way, I was fuming, but I kept my mouth shut. I think my left leg shook.

You were both dismissed and when you both had made it upstairs, he said coolly, "I just wanted you to know what it's like when you're not here and how it's going to be. But you GO- have FUN – I'll make it okay like I always do!"

Just like you kids two minutes prior, I didn't know what my line was. Befuddled, enraged, and scared, I couldn't find any words. My anger was pulling my dialogue in one direction, confusion in another, and my fear looked away down a dark path. It was a stalemate of concepts and emotions, so I said nothing.

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Your father rolled his eyes and tsk'd at me. He asked, "what are you thinking?"

I took a moment to pull in a few solid words and managed to say, "I think I have a lot of work to do. I'm really upset. I want to cool down, so I'm going to get to it."

He exploded. "FUCK YOU!" he screamed and took off towards the kitchen, not waiting on a reply. I followed, but I wasn't following out of obedience.

"You know what?" I raised my voice, not quite a yell.

His mouth fell open as I yelled, "Fuck you too!" His shock turned to an intense disdain- like his favorite pet had growled at him after hours of poking it in the mouth. "I am *done* playing this game with you! *I'm not doing this anymore!*"

12 years kids, ten of those being married- I made it 12 years without ever once yelling back. Not a bad run. His look of shock made sense. For the entirety of our relationship, I had *never* stood up to him. I always caved immediately because it wasn't worth the fit. He had crossed a line by using you as overt pawns.

"What the *fuck* does that mean?" your father came back at me. He was in the kitchen, gripping the edge of the counter. He was putting his weight onto his hands with a press and a reverse twist- an animal coiling into a striking stance.

"You paraded the kids' emotions in front of me, like a goddamn show, to manipulate the situation. You do it *all* the time. And I'm done! I'm done *with you.*"

Getting himself into that stance must have helped him find his footing. He responded without hesitation- a statement preloaded.

"You're just throwing a baby fit because, *for once*, you didn't get your way!"

Get what I want? I'm not allowed to go to the fucking grocery store without written permission. I wanted to scream it at him.

I wanted to scream and laugh and cry.

I wanted to say it, but I didn't. I felt another wave of anger wash over me. I knew it was time to back out of the conversation. Being that angry wasn't going to any good. I felt stuck as it was. Letting my anger get the



best of me any more than I had would only make it worse.

"Where are you going?!" he screamed at my back as I started for the stairs.

"I am too upset. I don't want to talk. I've already lost my cool. I hear Fay crying and I'm going to check on her."

"No. You're. Not."

"Yes." And without waiting for permission, I started up the stairs.

My left foot had just touched the first carpeted stair when he said, "Fine! You know, this is what YOU wanted! All of this, this domestic life, well, you got it!"

That was the second wave of dizziness I'd felt that morning. I didn't recognize the first until this more succinct one hit me- maybe because I was off balance, foot on the first stair. I'd felt it when your father said, "it's okay to cry," to you. The unreal quality and absurdity of that statement was jarring, but there was something else about his words that made me unsteady- it was the same unbalanced sensation that hit me with this phrase. His words felt out of place. Not quite rehearsed, but like a grade schooler who'd heard a phrase from a show his parents were watching. No visuals, just an out of context phrase that registered as "cool," so he tucked it away, hoping for the perfect moment to use it.

At some point, your father changed his mind and shoved me on the stairs as he rushed past me.

 -98

4pm - Dance Studio A

He didn't know it, but I had been talking to your father's mother a few weeks prior to that fight. Your Gran promised not to tell your father I had been calling her. I had suspected something was wrong for about a month. Our situation was checking *every* box in a few books. She promised confidence- it didn't hurt that they weren't on speaking terms. I think that was one of my first major missteps- trusting that your Gran wouldn't use *everything* I said against me to get back into her father's life and good graces. I don't think she did it until we left, but when I heard she was coming to town to "fix this," my heart dropped. I knew she'd tell

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your father everything, and I'd given her some very damning information about my suspicions and concerns. Maybe that's why things went the way they did.

I'd taken Fay to her dance practice. While waiting in the car, I called her.

"I think something is going on. Something isn't right," I explained.

"Aw, is he being mean to you? Tell him to knock it off! Oh! Did he cheat on you? Is he hitting you?" your grandmother *teased*- not taking my call seriously. I explained more- about the yelling, the trip, what I had said. Her assumptions about hitting or cheating were factual in tone and said with light hearted inevitability.

"You know, I think your husband can just be a real jerk sometimes." She shifted topics and said, "Why did you guys make me stay at a hotel the last time I was out there? I was so hurt you didn't want me to stay with you. It was him, wasn't it? You can just say it, my own son didn't want me to stay with his family."

As mad as I was at your father, I wasn't going to get in the middle of this. The truth is, your Gran smelled. Horrible. She smoked, wore this gaudy body spray to cover up the smell, and her hygiene was terrible. *Every time* she stayed with us, or we stayed with her, Mason came down with croup. It happened too often to be a coincidence. Thankfully, your father insisted we travel with his homemade cough syrup.

I gave your Gran a copout response and dodged the question.

"Well, whatever is going on with him, *I* didn't raise him like that- it *must* be from his father's side. Don't you go blaming me! *It isn't my fault*. He is so much like them, you know? Especially like his father in so many ways. It must be genetic because they didn't spend a lot of time together when he was growing up- what else would explain it?

"Anyway, you two will be fine. You've been together for ten years now? It's just something that happens when you've been married for ten years! This one guy I worked with had the same thing happen to him. He said his wife just went crazy, but after a few months they got through it, and they've never had any problems since. You guys just need to get through this little fight, and everything'll be fine forever!

"And if that doesn't work, I know how he can get- like that time he flipped me off, so I made him sleep in the car?" She finally took a moment to



breathe but then continued, "Yeah, so if that doesn't work, you can just send him to me, and I'll knock some sense into him- just like I did after Fay was born."



aw, [redacted] today.
I think it was [redacted].
[redacted] wasn't you,

wasn't who you tell [redacted] I am. different.
Someone

[redacted] he smiled at [redacted]
was
pretty and confident.

free

It's been 4 years.

I am just starting to see me.

without [redacted] there
?won't get your mind together now?



04: Sanctuary

At first, I thought we'd be at Amelia's for a few weeks at the absolute most. In one of your father's episodes, he'd said "I think- I think I should go to my mom's for a while. If I freak out like that again, I'm going away." I thought he meant that.

I was wrong.

Your father dug his knuckles into that house, and the court backed him up. We were at Amelia's and safe. Your father was at *our* house. He'd returned from his stay at inpatient care at the city's mental health hospital. Your father also wasn't working. So, without a means to find his own place, he got to stay; I continued to pay rent on it, and he was allowed to use and max out the credit cards while you and your brother shared a room, and I slept on the couch in Amelia and Jack's den. I'd also set up my work and freelance computers next to their computer. Sometimes all three would run and I'd get under the desk to physically move the display cable from one computer to the next, depending on the work at hand.

However, compared to living with [REDACTED] [REDACTED], it was paradise. I hope you and your brother remember Amelia and Jack's marriage and can model your own relationships after that. You two got to see a healthy and functional marriage up close for the first time. You saw Jack go on multiple trips with his friends. Amelia did not get mad or jealous or petty. Amelia had friends she went out with regularly. Finn, their youngest, was still living at home and you saw him come and go with his friends. Their oldest and middle children would also visit from time to time. Though a strong family, they each had lives outside one another. Maybe that's part of what made them so strong.

We ended up staying there for seven months. That sounds like such a long time, but it went quickly. It felt like family- it felt safe, like coming home to your parents' house after your first semester away at college. It was the best example of what I wanted our house to feel like and what I've strived for ever since.

We became a family. You might not remember by the time you read this, but even though Amelia was your father's aunt, he felt more like family to

me than my own sometimes. That was another lesson I wanted you guys to learn; you can decide who your family is. I think a lot of people say that to mean you can *cut* people out, but it's also true that you can *add* people to it.

 -28

11am – Our House

“Come on, Buddy!” you cheerfully instructed your brother. “We have to get the *mean dinosaur* to the Ant’s House so it’ll be on its best behavior.” I later asked you about it and you insisted you meant the insect.

You both were done with school for the day and playing upstairs. Fay, you’d grown out of the imaginary world, but your brother was happy to play board games if you’d then indulge in his imagination land after. I was working in the office with my door open. It was miraculous that I didn’t have any meetings scheduled that Monday. It was nice to have the airflow and be able to hear you two playing some make-believe dinosaur narrative.

We had watched Jurassic Park more than a few times. I think, Fay, you’d grown past the stage of suspended disbelief. However, trying to figure out how the special effects worked kept your interest more than the movie itself ever did. You and I had watched hours of behind-the-scenes documentaries and specials on both the movie and the rides at the theme parks. We’d even watched a few “lights-on” YouTube videos of different rides at Disneyland. The draw for us was in the technical accomplishments. Your brother loved dinosaurs and saw them as magic.

I think that’s why the game you two played that Monday morning stood out so much.

“Wait! Won’t it try to stop us from going out?”

“Oh yeah! We need to use this tranquilizer dart, or we’ll never get it there. I will grab my net too!” your brother chimed in.



The two of you then stuffed the imaginary dinosaur into an imaginary cage for transport and locked it.

It seemed like it was strenuous work.

██████████, ~ +72

I don't remember what had preceded this evening at Amelia and Jack's house, but Grace and Brian were over. I'm tempted to say it was a few weeks before Christmas- after Jack's parents had left. Grace and Brian being around made the evening an event. Even with no blood relation, I felt at home and safe with all of them gathered around- I think you guys did too, maybe even more than me?

Whatever the occasion, Jack, Amelia, Grace, Finn, Brian, and I were sitting around the kitchen table after I tucked you guys in for the night. It was a little difficult getting you two into bed, you specifically, Fay. You'd become attached to Grace quickly, even though she was only over a handful of times during our stay and maybe only twice by December.

Once we were all sure you both were asleep- and there'd been a few false starts- we poured a few drinks. I'd never really been much of a drinker and I'm still not, but it felt okay to have one at Amelia's. I don't know why. I don't drink at home or when I'm out with friends. Your ██████████ and I don't at all. It was just that finite period and that specific place. Maybe it says something about how safe and grateful I felt at that home.

It didn't take long for us all to get a little loud with laughter. Grace and Jack were probably the loudest- quoting movies, badly, as they drank and almost laughed themselves, and the rest of us in the room to the floor. Except for Finn, Amelia's youngest, 21. Finn sat in the corner of the kitchen table, leaning his chair back on two legs and staring intently at his beer. The laughter hit a certain decibel, and Finn shushed everyone.

"Hey guys, c'mon you're gonna wake them up!" he warned while motioning towards the hallway leading to your room.

I shrugged and assured everyone that once you guys were out, that was usually it. The hush lasted a few moments, and within ten minutes we were back at that specific laughing decibel. Finn chuckled quietly to

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himself, more of a guffaw, and continued quietly observing. It's not that he was stoic at all. He laughed and was engaged in the conversation, but he had a restraint and awareness of the two sleeping kids down the hall, one of whom was prone to night terrors he'd personally witnessed.

No one heard the door open, and no one heard Mason coming down the hall. He materialized in the archway leading to the kitchen.

You rubbed your eyes with your right hand while your left hand held a stuffy dragged obediently behind you. Everyone stopped. You yawned and before anyone could ask what was going on; you stated your complaint -barely awake.

"Hey guys- you're being kinda loud. Could you keep it down? We're trying to sleep..." it was such an innocent and sincere request I think everyone at the table blushed with embarrassment. We had broken the unspoken rule. I shifted my weight forward and through my feet, just about to stand and help you get back into bed. You spun your head to the right and said in a harsh, direct voice, void of any sleepiness, "FINN!"

You marched back off to your room. Everyone turned to Finn, the quietest of the group. He threw his arms up in disbelief. He opened his mouth a few times to defend himself but never said a word- already taking your request to heart.

As you made your way down the hall, I followed. I didn't say a word. You got yourself into bed, flailing your arms around chaotically, that somehow ended with your stuffies perfectly placed and the sheets exactly how you wanted them. You fell asleep instantly.

When I got back into the kitchen, everyone was still silent, holding their breath. I just nodded to confirm that everything was okay, and that you were safely asleep or close enough.

Grace choked back laughter and said, "Yeah, shut the fuck up, Finn!"

I am amazed that our eruption of laughter didn't re-wake up both of you.

For Christmas that year, while we were still living at Amelia's, we took a picture of the recreated scene and had it framed for Finn. When we eventually got home, I had it printed on an extra-large canvas and hung it in our kitchen. It's there right now as I'm working on this book.

Everyone loves telling that story, especially Finn. I don't think I ever told you two, but just before Finn left for college the next year, he had that



framed picture on his nightstand.

[REDACTED] +2

10am

An officer was waiting for us as we approached Amelia's house, having just walked down to the nearby store. We'd been there for 24 hours. Amelia took you two inside while I spoke to him. Your father had called the police department in Aunt Amelia's town, saying he didn't know where I'd taken you or if you were safe. When we approached the house, the officer was looking around the windows and trying the doors.

The officer told me what your father said. He had told the police I'd taken you two away to punish him or make him look bad, and that I was behaving erratically, and then stole all the money out of our bank account. He shifted from concerned to annoyed when I recounted the events leading up to us leaving and arriving at Amelia's.

"You already called the police? And they've already talked to him? You only took half of the account?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, I'll make a note of that- thanks," he said as he climbed into his cruiser. His windows were down and before he started the engine, I offered my cell phone number and to come inside and talk to you both. He declined.

"He called so many times and demanded someone do something. He threatened until someone at dispatch gave him my phone number- left a half dozen voicemails in like half an hour. He wanted us to go in and take the kids and bring them to him, saying they were in danger. I blew a whole day on this shit- sorry- this just- yeah. He wasted police time. Have a good day."

I don't know if it was your father's intention or how he really perceived it, but he was making a kidnapping case, or at least tried. It didn't get very far.

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You, Fay, were concerned when I walked into Amelia's house.

"What did he want? Did something happen?"

"No, no, he just had some questions and wanted to make sure you and your brother are safe. That's all."

"So, he's not going to make me go back- right? I can stay here with you and Aunt Amelia?"

8:21pm

Do you remember you used to sleepwalk occasionally, Fay? It usually happened when something stressful was over. As of writing this in January 2013, they've been less frequent. I don't remember the last time you had a walking episode. They were common when we lived with your father. You'd normally have one the night after a big dance performance. Sometimes they happened if you really had to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

The walking night terrors were something new and frightening.

That night, after I'd tucked you and your brother into bed, Amelia and I were talking in the study about what I was going to do next. I heard the door to your room open, but figured you were just going to the bathroom.

Amelia's house was set up in a rectangle. There was a hallway that had four doors leading to Finn's room, the guestroom, the bathroom (on the left side of the hallway) and the master bedroom. Your bedroom door was almost directly across from the bathroom door. If you followed the hall down to the master bedroom but made a left instead of going into that room, you'd end up in the kitchen with its dining table, chairs, and entrance to the backyard. Directly connected and on the opposite side of the bedroom hallway was the study. It had a desk, a few chairs, and a sofa with a full size pull out inflatable bed. That's where I slept. A small partition separated the study from the living room- the largest area in the house. There was the TV, multiple very comfortable sofas, a fireplace, and the front door. Immediately on the other side of the front door was the hallway with the bedrooms, completing the rectangular structure of the house.



You found Finn first. He was in the kitchen- had he not heard your feet stomping in a dash from down the hall, you probably would have run into him.

"Where's my mom?!" you cried. "Where is she? I can't find her. Someone help me!"

Finn went the short way around the rectangle, you in tow, into the kitchen. He just made a short military sounding whistle- to get my attention.

Your eyes got wide, and you darted for me. You almost knocked me off my feet and if I hadn't been bracing myself against the chair in the study, you probably would have toppled me.

I wrapped my arms around you while you cried, "I couldn't find you! I was stuck! *He* was going to find me! Don't let *it* touch me!"

"Honey, what's going on? I'm right here and you're okay," I said as I held you close and rubbed your back. "Hey, hey honey, look at me, will you?" I sat in the chair so I was just about eye level with you.

Your eyes were wild. Unfocused. It was like rapid eye movement, but your eyes were open.

"Oh honey, I think you're sleepwalking." I really said that out loud for my benefit, to reassure myself- like saying it would make it real, tangible, and less scary. It also let Amelia and Finn know you were okay. This was different than your usual sleepwalking, but close enough that I could help you get through it.

You sat in my lap crying into my shoulder as you repeated, "*it* was going to get me, don't let it get me! I was stuck and I couldn't find you. Don't let *him* touch me! If *he* touches me-" You tightened your little grip on my arms, twisting my shirt.

"Everything's okay now, kiddo." I listened and reminded you that you're safe from whatever it was. "But- why don't you tell me about it?" I asked.

"I- I don't know... my brain was going to fall out of my head. I couldn't keep it there because *it* was chasing me. *He* wanted my brain."

"Who, sweet pea?"

At first you just cried- let out a small wail that felt like a whimper. You paused, your eye fluttering slowed, and then your eyes focused on me, then the chair, and finally the surrounding walls of the study. It took you a

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moment to figure out where you were.

“There you are, kiddo- welcome back.”

“What- how did I get here?” your face turned red and sheepish. Amused embarrassment. You didn’t seem to have any recollection of the dream that got you mobile.

“Sleep walking, honey. You haven’t done that in a while. How’re you feeling?”

“I’m really sleepy and I have to pee- like *really* bad.”

“Ha, okay. Well then, how about you take care of that and then I’ll tuck you into bed? Sound okay?”

You walked, a bit wobbly, to the bathroom through the kitchen, completely unaware of Finn and Amelia sitting at the kitchen table. Amelia was almost in tears. I think she knew what this episode was.

I got you back into bed. You melted into the sheets as you held your favorite stuffy. You fell asleep instantly, like you hadn’t really woken up. I wanted to ask you questions about what you said, but I wasn’t going to wake you. I knew you probably wouldn’t remember the sleepwalking anyway and even if you did, you probably wouldn’t have any recollection of the specifics.

“What was she worried about?” Amelia asked me as I joined her and Finn.

“I don’t know- she didn’t say,” I replied. The moment was heavy. We just sat there in silence, letting the dread we shared recede into nothingness.

I had a therapy session scheduled with Amanda the next day. The timing was good- it was just my regular scheduled every other week appointment, but it served as a debrief of what had happened. I relayed the story of your sleepwalking incident to her.

“That’s a night terror,” she corrected me. “And ones like that only happen when a child feels safe enough to process something big- like a traumatic event. It wasn’t safe to feel before, so now her subconscious is going to vomit it all up.”



[REDACTED] +343

8:49am

DOCUMENT (6)

My stomach lurched while I sat reading on the couch on an overcast Sunday afternoon. The wind shifted and a twig scraping the screen door to the back porch startled me. As I sat up, my ears rang.

My balance was off.

Something was wrong. Something was coming, something bad.

I shuffled my way to the steps.

The walls flanking the stairs were warm to the touch and the nebulous pulse at my fingertips as I slid them across the surface could have been my own or something stirring behind the drywall. The scraping of my fingers along the rippled texture of the paint was harsh. My feet pressed into the carpeted stairs in a vicious and cruel snap and crunch despite my attempts to move with as little sound as possible, betraying my location. It gained momentum after each reverberation- a deafening mesh of subtle noises, violently smashing into each other to form, somewhere buried in the chaos, a voice.

The voice. It was coming back.

The panic hadn't completely taken my legs. I made it to my room and closed the door, involuntarily reinforcing it with my shoulder as I clicked it into a locked position. I shut all the curtains and turned off all the lights. A storm was rolling over the house and what little sunlight would normally leak in had been taken by the clouds. The room was dark and still- save for the droning of my large overhead fan. At the edge of my bed, I collapsed to the floor and, without knowing, dug my nails into the short pile tan-peppered beige carpet.

Contrary to popular belief, monsters, real ones, hunt during the day. Like most predators, they need light to find you. Maybe that's why I always felt so safe at night and in here with double blackout curtains and blinds closed tightly behind them. I told visitors it was a matter of heat abatement, but it was to keep the light out. It couldn't see me in the dark and maybe if I got used to the void, I could see it before he got to me.

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The first clicking sound came from the window to my left. Had it not been for the intentional pacing and rhythmic succession of the scrapes, the noise could have easily been a bird skittering across the top of the patio. The ambiguity was overwhelming behind my blacked-out monolith windows. The dark fiber of the curtains, perfectly motionless and heavy in the face of my ceiling fan, pressed into my eyes and swallowed my vision. An oppressive oblivion.

Click. Scrape. It was on the window, ticking away at the screen mesh.

Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click- to the rhythmic first half of *a shave and a haircut*. I shut my eyes and dug my nails into the carpet.

“Go away!” I thought I screamed. I thought it was a war cry- a cautionary sound to the thing tapping outside my window, standing on the top of the patio, its eyes looking blankly at its own reflection. Were his eyes still sunken- black circles surrounding those grotesquely large pearlescent gray eyes? I only managed a whimper behind clenched teeth. My jaw was hurting, and I could feel where my teeth had ground- an unmistakable smell of enamel being pressed into dust and terror.

In the whirling murmur of the fan, I heard its response.

The wind shifted outside, and the house creaked- but the creaking came from the stairs. The wind fell silent and reality held its breath. The stairs creaked again, but this time from weight placed directly on them. I stifled the urge to exhale, *like someone had strapped ice blocks to my feet*. Pressure with nowhere to go- too paralyzed to breathe.

A shadow flickered across the space between the bottom edge of the door and the beige carpet.

The first click on my door was visceral. I could feel it behind my eyes. Like an insect burrowing its way into my brain from my sinuses, I felt the click and scrape.

Click. Scrape.

“Don’t touch me!” This time I yelled. Chills raked over me in pulsing waves, starting from my forehead and down my spine. The palms of my hands ached with a sharp pain. I’d made fists without the ability to strike and they laid helplessly on my lap, shaking. I noticed my forearms were wet. I took a sharp inhale and found that my mouth, nose, and eyes were soaked -hot tears from an absolute, an encompassing, a paralyzing fear.



“PLEASE DON’T TOUCH ME!” I felt the words fill up the room and dig into the agitated sheetrock. The message lost its coherency, buried, and nested in the space between the walls.

Dizzy again, but no more sounds save for the ceiling fan. There was a rhythm to it- a cadence of up and down, in and out.

Whir – swoosh – whir – swoosh – whir – swoosh.

In the absence of any other sound, this too inevitably transmuted.

Inhale – ha – inhale – ha! – inhale – HA – INHALE – HA... HA... HA...

“GO AWAY!” I managed a second deep and phlegm curdled scream.

His laughing stopped. A sliver of light peaked in from behind my curtains. The feeling of doom receded. My first cry, buried in the space between rooms, dissolved. My breathing returned to a conscious, intentional and patterned one. My fists released and my fingers cracked. I relaxed and let my hands fall to the floor, palm upwards.

The fan kept going, although its pattern of intention too was diminishing.

Still, one more message before the cadence fell into oblivion.

Whir –

swoosh –

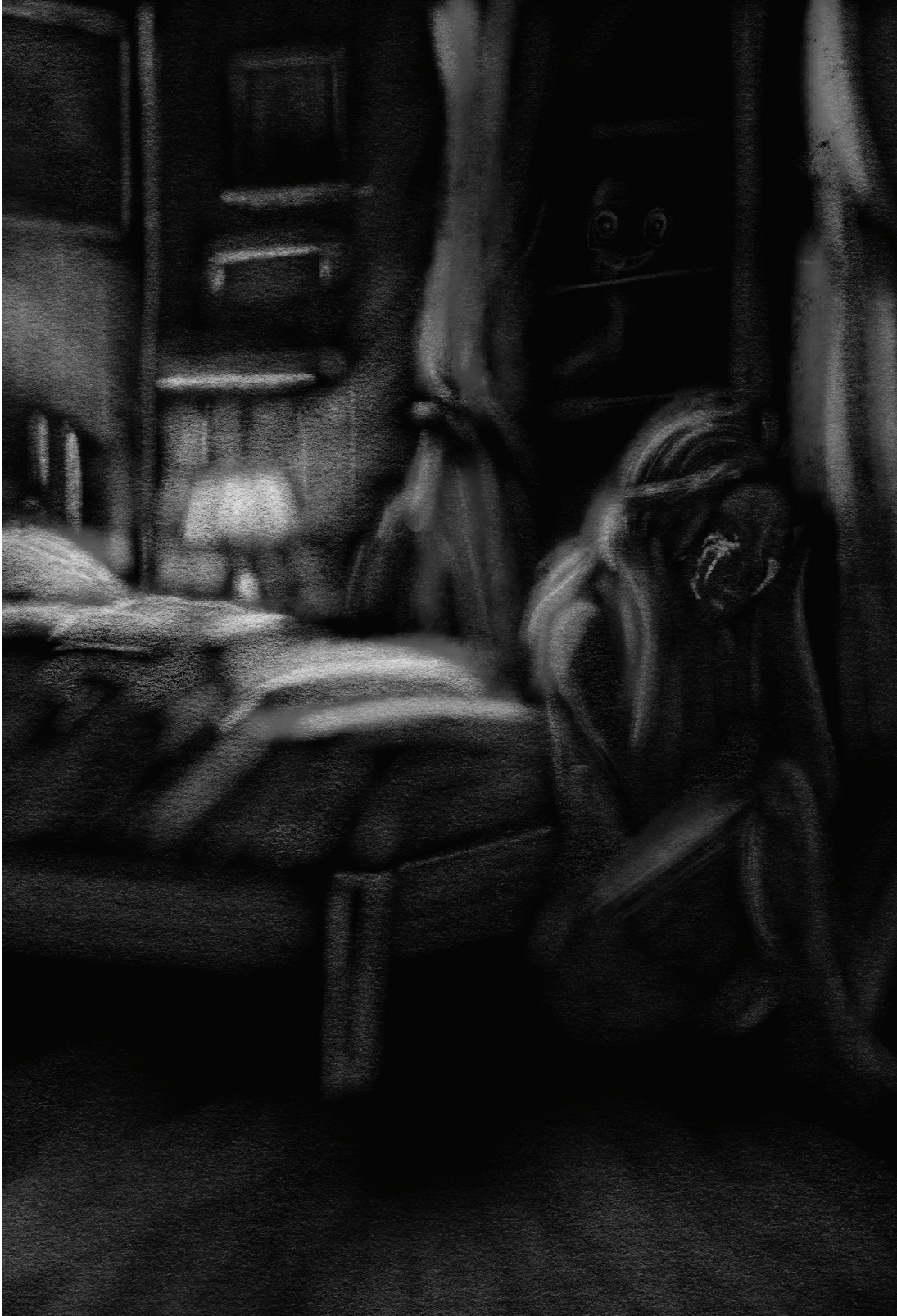
whir –

swoosh –

whir –

swoosh

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05: CPS

██████████ -3,299

7:40am - ██████████

It was the morning after we'd brought you home, to our crappy, tiny 1-bedroom apartment. Like most newborns, you weren't that interested in sleep.

The nights in the hospital were horrible. If you'd asked me a few years ago, I would have said it was because the hospital and staff were just awful and mean to your father. However, now I'm not sure. After two days in the hospital, I finally got the okay to "give up" and just bottle feed you. Once I could feed you, it was *smoother* sailing. That was the day we went home. The staff snuck a few extra pre-made formula bottles into our bag as we left.

I don't remember much about that afternoon. I know your Gran stopped by for a few minutes and then left. I didn't want her to leave. Your father and I were exhausted, and your father had a very slight, but concerning, gawp on his face. We were so tired; I thought I must look haggard, too. I've always done okay with just a little sleep. Your father, however, *needed* nine to ten hours to function. That didn't work with a newborn.

I took the first night watch with you home. Your father had tucked himself into the other side of the bed against the wall. We had the boxes of pre-made formula by the bed for easy access when you needed food. I really can't remember, but I know I got some sleep. I don't remember you being fussy. You weren't sleeping for longer than two hours, but it was better than nothing and, from what I've heard, amazing for a newborn. Maybe it was twenty minutes awake followed by twenty minutes asleep for a few hours, but we managed.

We had a bottle of some pain killer they'd prescribed for me; I don't remember exactly but it was in the Fiorinal family. It was strong. The directions said *one* white oblong pill was to be taken with a full glass of water with at least 8 hours between doses. We were both concerned about his sleep, so he decided to try one before crawling into bed.

But, your father did not sleep. That, I remember clearly. The formula bottles weren't being disturbed in the fragments of sleep I was getting though, so if he was getting up with you, it wasn't to feed you.

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Morning wasn't great, but at least for you and me, Fay, it was something we woke up to instead of staying up until- even if it was just preceded by 30 minutes of sleep. I can't say the same about your father. He said he didn't sleep at all and hadn't since our first day in the hospital. I believed him. I still do. His face was cured into a fear-soaked visage. His eyes looked taller than wide by a factor of two and as if they were receding into his skull. He walked between the living room and bedroom, paced really, his hands grasping at the opposite elbow. His gaze jumped erratically between the floor, directly in front of him, and a hundred miles in the distance.

"I- I can't sleep."

I asked him if he wanted to try another pain pill.

"I took *three* an hour ago! Something's wrong, I can't sleep!" One pill should have put him into a decent sleep - I couldn't believe he was standing after three. Your father said he had a very strong tolerance to pain medication. He used to boast to me we couldn't keep ██████ in any place we lived because he'd "eat them like candy." I didn't know about that until after we were married and in our first apartment- maybe a day or two after the lease was signed.

"Okay, I've got Fay. She and I will hang out in the living room. Let's close the door so you can get to sleep." He reluctantly agreed. I knew myself well enough to understand that I was going to need sleep soon and by getting your father to sleep now, maybe I could later.

Not ten minutes later, your father scampered out of the room, clenching his elbows even harder.

"It isn't working! I can't do this! I can't be a father if I can't sleep and I can't sleep, so I can't be a father!"

I never admitted it to him, but I had the same thoughts. I wasn't sure if he could do it. The transformation from *expecting* parents to parents was so much harder than I thought. You needed me for *everything*. It was an overwhelming blend of fear and pride and excitement and terror. I figured it was normal- something every parent goes through the first few weeks like a rite of passage.

"I'm not going to do this!" your father screamed at me. You started crying while I was holding you. "See?! See what I did! This was a mistake!"

"Okay, okay, maybe we call your mom?"



“No, no- I’m not doing this! *We’re* just going to take this whole bottle and never wake up and *undo her, too.*”

I had picked up my phone and called the hospital. A nurse picked up just before he finished the threat of downing the entire bottle. I didn’t know who else to call. I explained what was going on and a very patient nurse listened. After I had explained the situation, she calmly inquired, “has he said anything about hurting himself or the baby?”

“Yes.”

“Then you need to go to the ER- now.”

Your Gran came over quickly and your father and I got in the car. We found the ER packed, like most were those days, especially when attached to a big regional hospital. We were returning to the same one we’d left the day before. We waited for hours. Your father laid on a bed in the make-shift-spill-over-triage-room. It was just a long hallway lined with beds. Your father hardly spoke. He didn’t sleep. He just stared at the ceiling. When he spoke, it was just above a murmur.

“I can’t do this. I can’t be a dad. Why did you make me do this?”

I had read about postpartum depression for new mothers. I didn’t expect this.

Looking back, and even then, I had the thought, maybe subconsciously, that your father was grasping for attention. It’s a horrible thought and one I’m not proud of, but one of the few things that could trump a newborn was an allegedly suicidal parent. He had made threats like this before, but this one felt different- heavier. All his past threats combined their weight and made the situation feel very dangerous with a newborn.

We arrived at the ER around 10am. They finally saw him around 4pm. The nurse escorted us to a private room that looked like an old surgery theater- or at least a room with a function messy enough to warrant a drain on the floor and what looked like a shower head on a line hanging above the center of the room. The nurse had an air of suspicious disbelief about her, like she thought that maybe your dad was pantomiming postpartum. Your father made all the right moves and said all the right things to suggest this was serious, but there was a rehearsed quality like you’d see on a low budget TV show. Was this a decent amount of hyperbole to “sell” the audience on the act- projecting so the back row could get a good feel of what the character was experiencing? I got the impression that the nurse was both annoyed and concerned when she

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sat your father down and said, "Now, sir, are you worried you might hurt yourself or your baby?"

"Yes," your father said without pause, almost cutting off the question.

"Okay, so which one is it? You worried about hurting you or the baby?"

Your father shuddered and dropped his head into his hands, pushing his elbows into his legs.

"Both," he whispered, paused, and then said louder, "both." The nurse flashed a brief image of genuine sympathy. Your father started to shake and cry and said, "I'm worried about both of us."

"Okay darlin, okay." The nurse handed me a sticky note with an address. I didn't see her write it down. She must have written it before coming into the room with us.

"You need to take him here. Do *not* take him home first. This place can handle this sort of thing better than we can," and she motioned around the room. Her right arm extended towards the door, both pointing out the excessive overspill of unseen patients and that it was time to go. "I'll let them know y'all are coming."

Neither of us said a thing. I helped your father into the car and entered the address the nurse had given me into the car's navigation. I drove. Your father placidly looked out the window in silence. Maybe the fatigue finally got to him, maybe he'd finally hit his limit, or maybe he could relax at last, but your father fell asleep in the car- before we even left the hospital parking lot. He started talking in his sleep- nothing coherent. It wasn't unusual for him to talk in his sleep, but it was rare for him to sleep in the car, let alone start sleep talking immediately.

When I parked the car, it was nearly sunset. When I unbuckled myself, your father flinched hard, snorted, and woke up.

"Where are we? What's going on?" your father said- with that same rehearsed over-projecting quality.

"This is where the nurse told us to go. I think they can help." I couldn't look at him again. I'd made the mistake of looking directly at him when he woke up. His face was a supply of pity and a reservoir of no limit. It hurt somewhere between my stomach and chest to see that.

He almost seemed normal but then said like a robot, "okay- if you think that's best."



The facility had been told we were on our way. They took us back and started asking questions for intake. Your father was statuesque in the triage chair. He broke down in tears when the staff (there were three people covering your father's intake) handed him a thick metal clipboard with a "consent to treatment" form on it.

Before he signed it, the staff member in charge repeated the nurse's question.

"Are you worried that if you go home, you might hurt yourself or your baby?"

Your father didn't answer right away. He looked over at me. His eyes carried so much grief with them, but the rest of his face was something else. It was another dizzying moment- like the ones I'd feel in Montana nearly a decade later. Your father's eyes and face seemed to be from two different versions of himself. The part that wasn't sad was furious. His eyes, however, hardened right before he answered as he stared at me. He looked back at the nurse and said without emotion, "Yes- both." And your father signed the form.

"Okay, I think you're doing the right thing," the nurse said. The rest of the team left the room. Someone new opened the door and escorted your father out. I followed them down a short hallway lined with patients' rooms. The nurse turned and stopped, only allowing me to go halfway down the hallway, and said, "this is as far as you can go."

An icicle went through my throat.

Your father didn't say anything, instead his face had completely transformed into furious disappointment. He curled his bottom lip up with his chin. Your father turned. No one seemed to notice me standing there for what felt like hours. It paralyzed me with no idea what to do.

My dad came up. Your Gran went home. Your grandpa drove us to their house. We were going to stay with them for at least the rest of the weekend. And then your father called.

I didn't recognize the number, but I wasn't surprised it was your father.

"What did *you* do?" he screamed at me in a hushed voice. "I can't believe you had me locked up here! Do you know what they did to me? I told the doctor I didn't belong here, and it was a mistake and to let me out!"

The onsite physician saw something in him and needed to keep him

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involuntarily. He was going to be held for three days while they evaluated how much of a threat to himself or others he might be.

“I didn’t want this! Why didn’t you just let me sleep? This is all your fault! I can’t believe you got me locked up in [REDACTED]”

That was a term I hadn’t heard in a long time, “[REDACTED].” It was what your father and Gran called mental health facilities with inpatient treatment. *Everyone* on your father’s side for the current and past two generations had needed that level of psychiatric care at least once.

“Well, except me, of course,” your Gran would always boast.

“When I get out of here- we’re done! Do you understand me? You *made* me sign those papers. I’m getting my *own* place and I’m taking *my* daughter and we’re leaving you! I can’t believe you did this to me. Did you just want a divorce?”

The next day, I told your Gran about your father’s phone call. She seemed amused. After everything her response was “Ha! How is he gonna get his own place? With what money? No sir, he’s stuck with you.” I think she was trying to diffuse the situation and reassure me that your father was not leaving me. It didn’t help.

They let your father out after his involuntary hold ended. Your father would stay with your Gran for a few days. You and I were to go home and let your father rest. “I know how to fix this- I know what to do when he gets like this,” your Gran assured me as we left for our one bedroom apartment.

Your father came home with us the following Monday. Seconds after we got home, your father got his first call from CPS. We had to take you into a nearby office where they’d evaluate you and your father. I got permission to be there.

“I can’t believe I have to do this. I didn’t do anything wrong! *This is your fault.* I wish you could just deal with it for me. This is going to be on my record forever...” and he trailed off for just a moment and then furiously he added, “they’re going to lock me up and keep me from her just like you did! I hope you’re happy.”

The second time they called, your father handed the phone to me. They were calling to schedule the appointment. I asked for a little more detail about what was going on. The coordinator’s voice was flat but sincere. “We got a report from the regional hospital and the mental health facility



that there were threats of self-harm and to hurt a newborn. We take that seriously regardless of intent or tone. All that matters is that two mandated reporters called it in as being said by your husband.”

Back then, I wanted to argue. My previous job had me consulting for attorneys at a small company. I’d learned to speak lawyer. I wanted to fight back and petition and explain the circumstances, already shouldering the blame without question and the obligation to fix it. There was no argument, though. Your father had said those words.

I tried to assure your father that this wasn’t going to be a big deal in the long run. It’ll just blow over and we never have to talk or think about it again.

“It must be nice to be you!” he snapped. “Of course, you’re calm! This isn’t happening to you! Don’t fucking tell me how to feel. I’m still mad at you. I don’t know if I’ll ever get over this.”

During the interview, your father hardly said a word. He’d mentioned to me on the way up to the office that he might be too embarrassed to get out of the car. The CPS agent had a look at you, then briefly spoke to your father. That was the first time he said the whole thing was because he was allergic to a filler material in the pain pills. This was the first time I’d heard about *this* allergy. It was a strange contradiction to his boasting about pain pills earlier.

“I’m allergic to it, and it causes panic attacks. I didn’t know they used those in the pills. No one told me anything.” He reached over the table and squeezed my hand. While the agent was looking at us both, your father looked at me with sad pride and a hint of tears welling under each eye. “She- she didn’t understand what was going on with me. I know she tried and really did the best she could, but that wasn’t what I needed and, I’m so sorry, but no one listened to me. Not even my wife.” The agent looked down at her clipboard for a moment and jotted something down.

Your father flashed a look of abject disgust at me before turning back to the agent and resuming his tearful visage.

The case was closed a few days later.

██████████ +3

10am – Our House

It didn't take long after we left the house for the judge to issue that mental health warrant for your father. You and your brother stayed with Amelia, while I met with officers a few streets over from our house to hand them the warrant. I don't think your father knew I was there when they took him away. He got into the squad car and your Gran followed in her rental car.

One officer stayed back to check in with me. He reported that your father went willingly and admitted to being worried about self-harm but would never hurt the children. Before he left, the officer handed me a key.

Your father had changed the locks.

"If there's anything you need out of that house, get it now. They have to come with us, but they don't keep them unless there's *really* something wrong. Plan on him being back in less than two hours. Do you have somewhere you can stay?"

The house was dark to say the least. The inside was cave-like. They had shut all the blinds against the window in every room.

There was trash everywhere, and the living room smelled like gaudy body spray and cigarettes. The living room was clearly your Gran's ad hoc bedroom. A blanket covered every cushion and was peppered with an assortment of pillows. There were pizza boxes and evidence of multiple delivery Chinese meals stacked in a corner.

They piled the trash and recycling bins in the kitchen well past counter height. Dishes had flooded the sink and flanked with gnats. The fridge was just about empty. They had coated the coffee maker in grounds and over poured water. They had shut the kitchen blinds just as tightly as the others in the living room.

Most of the cabinets in the kitchen were open. Someone had taken nearly every bottle of vitamins, supplements, and essential oils down and carelessly scattered them on the counters. There were maybe one or two items left all the way in the back. Among the items strewn about the counter, there was a half empty bottle of clear castor oil with a yellow cap and an oil-stained label, a multivitamin I'd forgotten about months ago,



and a nearly empty bottle with permanently clumped together Vitamin C orange flavored gummies. It looked like they had torn out everything with violent force.

The upstairs playroom had multiple piles and bags of dog shit.

They set up a command center in the formal dining area right next to your home school desks. Starting at the center of your father's desk in the corner, an array of thumb-tacked sticky notes, printer paper, and ripped out pieces of notebook paper fanned outwards.

Most of the notes were illegible, but there were a few I could read. He had the name of the outreach program I had been working with. I wonder if he was reaching out to them for help or if he figured out what victim advocate group I'd contacted. He had names of attorneys and phone numbers, some scribbled out, and a few with a time and date on them.

"FILE FOR FULL CUSTODY IMMEDIATELY!!" read a handwritten sticky note lining his open planner.

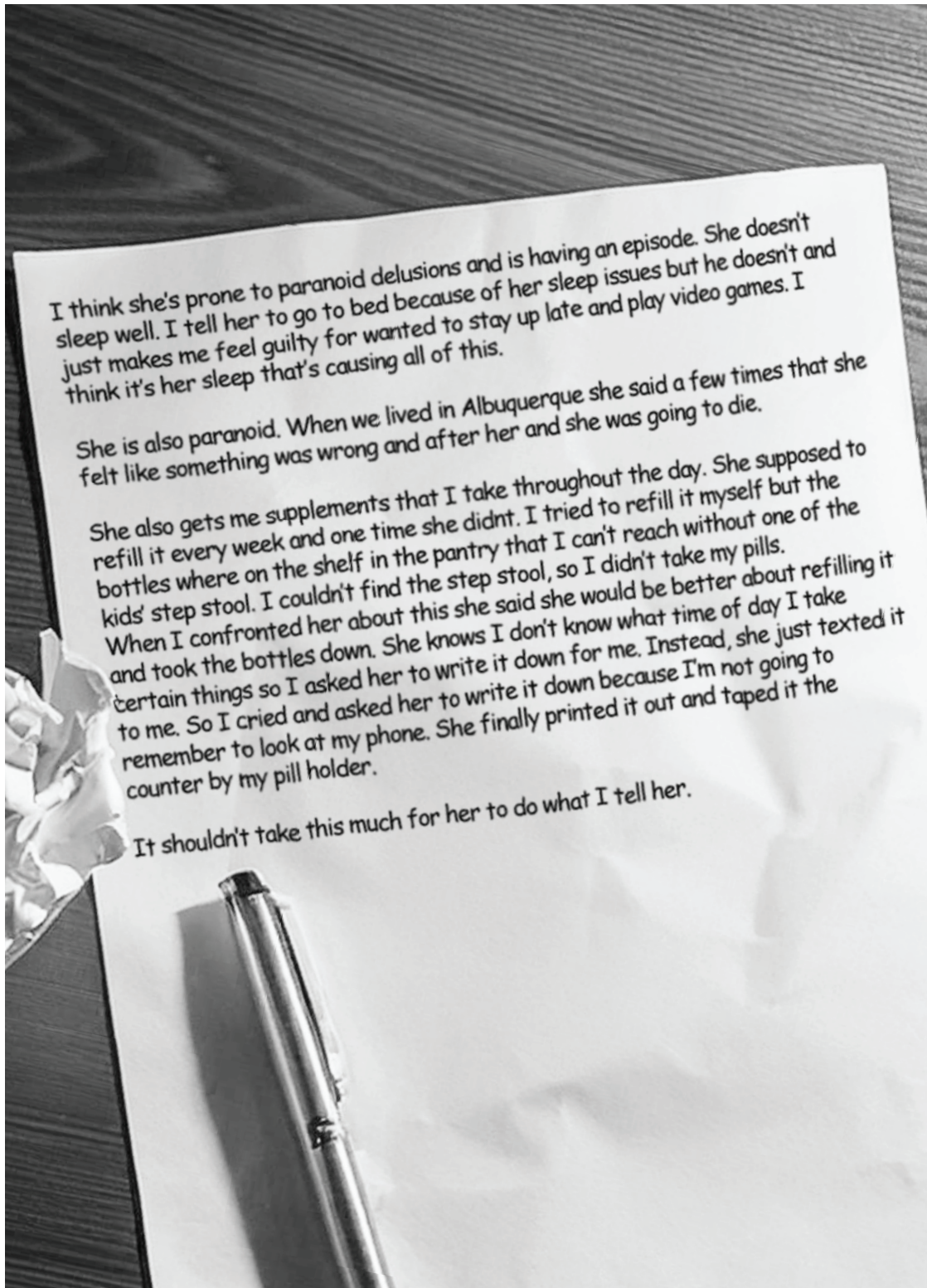
"Kidnapping?" was on another sticky on the same page.

I didn't get the impression they left in a hurry, but your father's laptop was still on. He had a word document open. I printed a few copies. As I pulled them from the printer, I noticed what looked to be earlier drafts on the floor nearby. I didn't read it. I needed to get a few things for all of us- medicine's specifically- and get out.

I did a few more sweeps around the house, making sure I hadn't forgotten anything. I kept checking my watch- I'd only been there fifteen minutes. How long did I have? I took a few pictures of the state of the house.

While taking a picture of the living room where your Gran had been sleeping, I noticed another pile of papers under a coffee mug- more drafts of what turned out to be a manifesto of sorts. I understood why he was writing it- I had to make a few statements for the judge regarding the mental health warrant and an affidavit to file for divorce.

He was doing something else in his manifesto. He was positioning me as paranoid and having some sort of grandeur event. It wasn't very long, maybe a page and a half, and had all the tact of a middle schooler. Typos included, it read:



I think she's prone to paranoid delusions and is having an episode. She doesn't sleep well. I tell her to go to bed because of her sleep issues but he doesn't and just makes me feel guilty for wanted to stay up late and play video games. I think it's her sleep that's causing all of this.

She is also paranoid. When we lived in Albuquerque she said a few times that she felt like something was wrong and after her and she was going to die.

She also gets me supplements that I take throughout the day. She supposed to refill it every week and one time she didn't. I tried to refill it myself but the bottles were on the shelf in the pantry that I can't reach without one of the kids' step stool. I couldn't find the step stool, so I didn't take my pills. When I confronted her about this she said she would be better about refilling it and took the bottles down. She knows I don't know what time of day I take certain things so I asked her to write it down for me. Instead, she just texted it to me. So I cried and asked her to write it down because I'm not going to remember to look at my phone. She finally printed it out and taped it the counter by my pill holder.

It shouldn't take this much for her to do what I tell her.



[REDACTED] +5

11am

Instead of being released in a few hours, they admitted your father to the mental health hospital. I only knew for certain because I'd received a notice from our insurance that the hospital was in network and treatment was approved. According to the officers that had taken him in, if he wasn't out in a few hours, he'd likely be there four or five days.

Even though the camera at the front door of our house had been disabled, the one in the backyard was still working. I got notices every time there was movement. Most often, it was the dogs. However, a good number of times, it was your Gran smoking on the back patio. I wonder if she knew the microphone worked just as well as the video feed did? I heard everything. I heard a lot of bizarre things.

Amelia and I were watching tv in her living room. My phone rang. It was the mental health hospital. The admin covering your father's case was calling to see if I was interested in a "reconciling family meeting." She told me that your father was very sorry and wanted to work with everyone to fix this problem so we could go back to being a family.

I declined.

9pm

You and your brother were asleep in your shared room at Amelia's. With everyone else asleep, even Uncle Jack, Amelia and I were free to indulge in our affinity for science fiction shows. We enjoyed that time together so much that it's still a weekly occurrence even though we've moved out.

I think we were watching the latest iteration of "The [REDACTED] [REDACTED]" on Netflix when the same number that called from the hospital rang on my phone. It struck me as odd- it seemed too late for an admin call. I thought something had happened to your mother.

He was calling.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Don't hang up! Don't hang up! You have to call my admin back and tell her you want a meeting- that *you* messed up and changed your mind. You have to!"

I didn't say anything.

"I get it, okay? I understand why you did it, and I forgive you. You made your point, but I didn't do anything wrong- *you* messed up... but I forgive you. We're going to get through this, *if* you just listen to me and do exactly what I say. We're going to be okay. I love you. Now, tell me you love me."

My silence continued.

"You have to tell the children that I'm getting out of here soon."

I hung up the phone.

Your father was released from the hospital the next day. He was served with both divorce papers and a restraining order the moment he got back to the house.

██████████ -77

Noon

I lied to your father on July 28th. I was supposed to have an in-person appointment with *my* therapist.

Your father and I shared our locations with each other, something we'd done since the car accident. The world outside was scary. So, your father made a smaller world. One contained within walls and planted on a concrete slab. It was less scary for him. He needed to control everything to manage his anxiety. He couldn't control the outside world, so if he just pretended it wasn't there, his grip was absolute. In the event I had to go out into the big scary world, leaving the warm glow of your father's *esca*, having a tether on me was easy to rationalize.

My destination wasn't something your father would question. I looked



to be where I was supposed to be. The location sharing system was only accurate to a few hundred feet. In areas of low or unstable cell phone service, it was even worse, and it wasn't uncommon for my icon to move erratically within that boundary. It helped that your father didn't know exactly which part of the building my therapist was in. I wonder what he would have done if the location tracking had been more accurate, and he noticed I wasn't where I was supposed to be?

I was on the opposite side.

I saw *your* therapist.

You were both seeing her. your therapist reached out to me and asked I make the appointment a few days prior. My therapist and yours worked out of the same office. They knew each other. So, when things escalated, your therapist wanted to check in. She knew about my trip and what had happened to your brother. You'd also not gone to day two of the dance seminar at your studio- a discussion I'd recorded. You were made to believe you were sick or coerced into pretending you were as the result of your father's relentless interrogation.

I remember shaking as I got closer. That sensation was so visceral, I feel it now, writing this. If moods, anxiety, and states of mind were colors, the hue of this memory is that same murky, pre-dawn purple assigned to the morning we left, the days after Fay was born, and the faint (but growing fainter) stabbing sensation I get whenever I have a message from your father. I hate to admit he still had such an effect on me- even [REDACTED]

I pulled up to the office and parked in the first spot, next to the curb-enclosed planter with a sapling propped up by sticks and held there with red tape. I texted your [REDACTED] that I had arrived. At least I wasn't lying about that part- but that didn't help my shaking. The impulses that sanctioned my ability to exit the car were at ends with my nerves. The curb I'd parked next to might as well been a cliff. Stepping out and going into that office meant no going back. I knew gravity would take hold of me and achieve terminal velocity, and there's not much you can do to fight gravity. It's inevitable.

The front office manager was confused. She knew me and who I normally saw. When she looked at the schedule and saw I was there to see *your* therapist, she handed me a clipboard with "new patient" intake forms. Her arm halted mid extension across the threshold of the open privacy glass. Her eyes flicked across the screen, maybe over a note attached to

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the appointment, and her face winced. She looked back at me, retracted the clipboard, and just said, “okay, I’ll let her know you’re here.”

I was empty. I had no content in my brain as I sat there. I tried to think of what I was going to say or what she wanted to talk about. I knew it had something to do with the trip and what had happened, but what I was going to say, I had zero content.

Your therapist came up to the front and escorted me back to her room on the opposite side of the building from my therapist’s office. She didn’t say anything. I think my face, like my mind, was void of both expression and blood. I sat on the perfunctory fake leather couch and tried to get comfortable, but not too comfortable. I felt the need to sit at an informal attention.

She sat in her high wingback chair and pulled her clipboard from the side. I caught just a glance of the open page- nothing discernable from my view, but it was clear she had notes or questions, or both, ready to go ahead of time. She clicked her pen, placed her hand on the paper and asked calmly, “so what’s going on?”

My inhale stuttered, I rolled my palms over my knees, and stifled tears as I replied, “I don’t know.”

“You didn’t go on your trip. Fay said something happened to her brother. She said it didn’t make sense. What happened?”

I knew she knew. She needed to hear me say it. I hesitated- again; I felt the tug of gravity. It was like trying to will, with only your mind, the roller coaster from plummeting down the rail after reaching the peak of the hill. While I knew she was aware of the basics, I didn’t know what she was looking for specifically.

I took another deep breath and pulled out my phone with shaking hands. I pulled up my notes, having only written 16 of what would be 40 plus pages and read them- occasionally taking a slow stuttered inhale.

I felt better after I read it to her- I think in part because, as much of a professional as she was, she cracked. Her face flipped from stunned, to disbelief, to anger, to eventually the start of tears. I’d vomited it all up. For the first time, someone else heard my notes. Her response was validating and calmed my nerves. Assuming all of it was true, I wasn’t crazy. Your father’s pattern of behavior was an issue.

When I’d finished, and she’d put down her pen, her hand was shaking. An



increase in guilt replaced my decrease in dread. I think I knew what was going to happen.

“You said,” she inhaled with a forced steady pace through her nose, exhaled, and then continued, “you said you recorded the conversation about Fay not going to day two of her dance event?”

I hadn’t written much down. Since I’d recorded it, my notes on the event were short.

She did not go to day two of the event.

No symptoms or signs of being sick that or the following day.

Audio recorded.

“Yes, I did.” I replied.

“Do you have it on you?”

I played it for her.

Your therapist cried- not much, but a few tears came out. I think those tears meant she had made the connection between the audio recording she’d just heard and what had happened the night of [REDACTED]. As she wiped them away with her left hand, attempting to finish her notes with her right, she simply said, “Okay, thank you.” Before the session was over, she flipped her notebook back a few pages and circled something. She’d seen what your own amicus would never admit to seeing.

She stood up. I followed. She placed her clipboard with an array of those notes neatly packed onto the page- most of it indecipherable. I did, however, catch one entry, circled multiple times. It read:

D = MBP ? FDIA

[REDACTED] -74

4pm

It was a Thursday. You, your brother, and I were downstairs. I don’t remember where your father was, but I think he’d retired to the bedroom

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for the day until I was done with my sous chef duties. We were watching TV- probably *The Amazing World of Gumball*. It was something we could only watch without your father. He didn't like it and even though the rest of us did, it was banned in his presence- even if he was just downstairs. The show was not permitted if he was within earshot.

My phone was, and still is, almost always in quiet-mode by default. I had a wrist band that queued me into important notifications. Sometimes it would register an incoming call a second or two before it showed on my phone. I think if it weren't for that feature, I would have missed the call that afternoon.

It was the era of unwanted robo-calls about a fictional extended car warranty, so I hardly ever answered the phone if the number wasn't in my contacts. ██████ had just rolled out a feature that tried to link numbers of known businesses, so we could often rule out a bad call.

I didn't recognize the number, and neither did my phone, but it was from Montana and a nearby area code.

"Hi, this is agent Hermione with the Montana Department of Child Safety. Is this Stephanie?"

My pulse was gone- not just stopped or frozen, but gone. I had no more blood left in my body except for where it had all pooled around my ears. They rang, and the floor warbled beneath my feet as I stood up. I didn't want you guys to hear the conversation, so I made my way to the garage.

"I- yes, it is. What's this about?"

"We received a report about some issues with Dad?" I think she was trying to ease me into the situation. By posing the statement as a question meant she'd be able to gauge how cooperative I'd be.

"I can't talk now. Can I call you tomorrow morning?"

She hesitated and then said, "That's fine but, ma'am, I want you to be aware that I need to interview the children within 5 days of getting the report and that includes weekends- even though we don't work then. I got it yesterday, and it's already Thursday. I have to interview them by Monday, or I'm required to escalate your case."

I didn't know what that meant. I knew the report was about your father, but I knew I needed to be as cooperative as possible. I started trying to figure out how to make her request happen. That meant getting you two



somewhere you could talk without your father knowing. It was next to impossible to get out of the house with you both. You each had your own activities, but they never coincided with each other and one of you stayed home. I also knew that whatever venue we chose, you guys would likely tell your mom- at least some detail. I intended to call the agent the next morning with the plan to meet at Amelia's house on Monday morning. It seemed the easiest, but still overwhelmingly complicated, path. There was no way your father would have let me take you to Amelia's- even if you guys begged. One of his go to responses to any request was, "I know you *think* you want to go out but really you want a lazy day."

One of those lazy days a few weeks ago lead to tears at bedtime from you, Fay. They ran across your face- subtle but noticeable. I asked you what was wrong, and you said, "I really wanted to go to Aunt Amelia's but I know daddy didn't want us to go and I didn't want to make him mad. I don't want to make him mad again."

"Okay," I finally replied to the agent. "Is this a good number? I take my daughter to dance practice at 9am tomorrow. Can I call you once she's in class?"

"Yes, this number works, and I'll be expecting your call no later than 915 tomorrow morning."

 -73

9:06am

It was raining unusually hard for that time of the year. It was cold rain- not the usual warmth that loomed over the metroplex threatening a tornado. We'd never had one here- plenty of warnings, but never anything more than the hint of a spout forming 20 miles south of us. The rain pelted the curbs and concrete walking paths leading up to the dance studio. The drops were heavy enough to end in a pop when they hit the large metal awning that spanned the large ceiling, tall window, and door. No matter where I've been, the smell of rain on concrete has been the same. There was some comfort in that, but in my distracted state I will admit I momentarily wondered if I was somewhere else- where none of this had happened. I wasn't married and didn't have to call this state's equivalent

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of CPS.

I got you into dance class. I sat in my car and stared at my phone. My fingers didn't want to move. I kept tears behind my eyes despite their attempts to escape. I felt split in half. I was betraying your father- or that's how it felt. I felt greedy and dismissive. I remember thinking, "so, this is how it happens." I forced my hands to cooperate just before ten after the hour. I think any longer would have been an issue, and I wanted to stay on this agency's good side.

"Good morning, ma'am. Thank you for calling me back."

She made it sound like there was an option for anything other than compliance.

"So, we've got a report that says dad might be having anger issues and yelling and not handling his anxiety or stress well?"

Again, a statement of fact posited as a question. There was no arguing the report existed, otherwise she wouldn't have called. The words *handling well* hit me in the throat, recalling what I've only told a handful of people privately. If I denied it, this could just go away, but I didn't know if that was right either. Stuck. I knew *something* was wrong at home, but I didn't understand what or how severe it was. The spasm of guilt momentarily halted any words from getting out, but it proved to be an inadequate barrier. This was going to get out.

"Yes." I paused. When the agent didn't say anything, I reflexively offered, "there's something going on with him- I don't know what. I don't understand it, but something isn't right and figuring it out is above my pay grade. I think we need help."

"Thank you." It felt like a benign pat on the head. My voice was uneven. I doubt this was the first time she was dealing with a confused and worried spouse.

"Have you given any thought to when and where I'm going to interview the children?"

"Yes, my aunt's house. The kids have been asking to visit. I just don't know how I'm going to get them there- would 10am on Monday work?"

I gave her Aunt Amelia's address and phone number and agreed on 10am. She said that if I had questions that she'd be available as early as 730am on Monday.



I wanted more than anything at that moment to dissolve into the leather seat of the car. There had been several no going back moments up to here, but each incident before felt like a save point I could eventually get back to if needed. This one was different. This felt cold and solid and tangible. This was outside our social sphere. Even talking to your therapist about this wasn't outside the norm. This involved an agency, and it brought on their protocol over which no one had control.

The rest of the day and the weekend proved not too difficult to stay consistent and not create a cause for alarm. For what it's worth, I was still relatively shell shocked from what had happened at the end of [REDACTED], less than two weeks prior, so being distracted or pre-occupied fit well within my expected pattern of behavior.

That Friday, my head was in a tug of war with guilt on one side and responsibility on the other. Guilt argued that I was overreacting, and that I, like your father often told me, just didn't understand the intricacies of his anxiety. Responsibility meanwhile kept looping a single thought over and over: this was going to be your father's *second* investigation by CPS. Didn't that mean something?

9pm

"I added some things to the Amazon cart. I want you to look at them before I buy them," your father said.

In the cart were two books; "Magic for Beginners; Master the Coveted Art of Spells and Rituals to Uncover Your Latent Wizard Powers," and "Practical Magic for Beginners: Spells for the New Mystic."

I didn't understand. I didn't know how to respond. Your father had a penchant for unnecessary spending- but this was something new. Your father instantly recognized my confusion and scoffed at me.

"I don't expect you to understand. You come from a lineage of colonizers," he placed his hand over his heart and with an air of authority and royalty continued, "I come from a long line of witches and wizards that wouldn't burn at the stake. *You* people tried, but *our* magic protected them."

A load screen interrupted his video game time and his talk about lineage. He shifted mental gears, turned to me and, with no other context or explanation said as a dry matter of fact, "Fay's being really fucking annoying, and I want to punch her in the face. I won't because I'm trying

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to be nice.” Reflecting on my notes, he was saying this sort of thing often. When the load screen faded away, he went back into his lecture about how I was too insensitive and closed minded to understand his inherited magical gifts.

When the books arrived a few days later, he explained this, as a matter of fact- that he, and by extension you guys, had the blood of powerful wizards and were magical. He spoke about, and got teary, while talking about the persecution of *wizards* in colonial Salem- his direct ancestors, he claimed, that were removed from most history books. He then told you both that as he learned magic, he was going to teach you.

My guilt had no comeback and became silent from that point forward.

██████████ -70

8am

I texted the agent from the garage at 8am. Your father was still asleep. I’d played that morning out several times in my head, with the goal of getting you guys to Amelia’s without alarm. I thought about just leaving. I thought maybe I should just pack you guys up, head to Amelia’s and never come back. I knew that if it got back to your father that you’d spoken to *anyone* outside the vetted circle, he’d ask enough questions until he figured out who was visiting with us at Amelia’s. Given what he’d done to your brother a few weeks before, I was terrified of what he might do over this.

It also seemed wrong to coordinate this behind his back. Your father had me set in some very deep *f.o.g.*

The agent called me, and we discussed a change of plans. I shared my concerns about getting you over to Amelia’s. We came up with a new plan.

I asked her to call your father directly.

The agent agreed to not mention that she and I had spoken. She wouldn’t lie if asked, but she wouldn’t bring it up. She planned to call your father as if this were the start of her investigation, let him know there was a report, and that he had to interview the children before the day was over.



I hung up. Moments later, I heard your father's phone ring from the room.

9am

The house became furious with movement. Floors mopped, essential oils diffused, stove tops wiped down. You and your brother put away toys as best you could, but I think a lot of things were just shoved in closets.

I hadn't swept the back patio in weeks. After getting things "good enough" inside, I went out to clean. You and your brother had finished organizing your things and were now dusting. By the time Fay had gotten to clearing off the dining room table, I was just about done mowing- covered in grass and sweat and dirt. I was took off my dusty sandals and put them next to the back door.

I spotted Fay spraying and wiping the table. I put my hand on the door and opened it just in time to hear your father gasp, "What? What did you just say?"

"What happened?" I asked.

"Say it again," your father said slowly. I hadn't heard any of it, but your father was very concerned. His discomfort was wrapped in a thin layer of collusion, like it gave him the tiny fragment of information he needed to figure out the entire situation.

"Are they going to separate us?" you, Fay, repeated, wide eyed.

Your father didn't say anything. For a moment, he just stared at you and turned to look at me. His face twisted like a caricature of a Vulcan- eyebrow raised almost comically. He flicked his eyes to and from your direction, Fay, as if to say, "She's crazy, that explains it! I *told* you."

It's worth noting that you'd been diagnosed with [REDACTED]. People with this condition have a hard time reading emotions and/or reacting appropriately to them. Leading up to the diagnosis, your father would frequently tell you that you had Asperger's. When he first started labeling you, I thought he was joking- referencing and humorously admiring your resilience- albeit inappropriately. However, he quickly told me you must have gotten the condition from me because he was very serious and it explained all of your patterns of behavior, specifically about your inability to understand that your father was just kidding when he yelled at you over math or glared at you until you cried.

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[Your therapist later wrote a formal statement to the court outlining that you absolutely *didn't* have [REDACTED]. In it, she explained the difficulty you had with reading and responding to others' emotions was consistent with children who had been abused by people with personality disorder traits.]

Your father told you, Mason, to go upstairs and keep an eye out the front window. You were on the lookout. I don't think you were old enough to understand what was going on and why the mood was so pensive. You jumped up and down excitedly, saying, "She's here! She's here!"

I looked at your father. His eyes went foggy and distant for just a moment. In that second, I remember *feeling* what sounded like whoosh and the toggle of a rocker switch. Your father's focus returned to the room and brandished a wide smile. His eyes, however, remained the same. It was like a machine starting up, the way a humanoid on a dark ride runs through all its movements just before the attraction opens. In his transition from the room towards the door, his gaze swept past me- through me- in time to see his vacant stare click on to "customer service."

He greeted Agent Hermione with absurd enthusiasm, feigned ignorance, and adjusted the register of his voice in such a range that it was louder, higher pitched, and commanding enough that no one had a hope of speaking out of turn.

Fortunately for your father, no one would have the chance to do so. The agent took three steps into our immaculate home with neatly shelved homeschool desks and an abundance of well used, but not too used, toys, stuffed animals, and books. I think she made up her mind on the spot that this was not a house of concern. Agent Hermione worked for a "low response" office within the department. They were deployed for cases that seemed either unlikely or at low risk to the children. And within moments of coming into our house, I believe she felt that even her team was overkill for this case.

The four of us sat down on the couch and she sat at the coffee table. She talked to your father and then you two, right there in the living room. Her questions ranged from benign up to asking about your father's screaming fits and tantrums directed at you two. He denied them. You both denied them. You and your brother sat to my right and your father to my left. Agent Hermione was sitting in a spot where she couldn't see you two and your father in her line of sight at the same time. That was not lost on your father as he glared at you both while Hermione turned her focus to you guys.



And that was it. No other interview away from the prying eyes and ears of the adult in question.

The agent's entire stay was maybe twenty-five minutes.

As she left our house, almost in a rush, she said coolly, "I don't have any additional concerns. I'll send this up to my supervisor and if he doesn't have any questions, we'll close this out in a week or two, tops. Here's my card."

As soon as she left, your father began his interrogation. He kneeled and set his face directly in front of yours, only a foot away. He grabbed your shoulders and said with an unhealthy amount of saccharine, "What did you mean by 'are they going to separate us?'"

"I thought they were going to take you away to an office."

The agent interviewed Aunt Amelia over the phone the next day. It was one question with only one possible inconsequential answer.

"Do you think this is an issue between [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], or [REDACTED]?"

I hadn't been able to tell Amelia about what happened to your brother. I couldn't prove it, but the circumstantial evidence was overwhelming- still, I didn't want to speculate. That accusation or concern would have been grievous. If I was wrong, no one would ever believe me again. Your father had rattled my cage hard enough that I was still questioning my memories. I wouldn't recover for months after we left. Maybe I still haven't. If it weren't for my notes and recordings, I don't think I would have recovered at all.

With Hermione's uneventful interviews, I felt the opportunity for outside help slip away.

██████████ -70

4pm

It didn't take your father long to deduce, correctly, that your therapist had indeed made the report. I think he had it pieced most of it together before Agent Hermione arrived. His path to that final conclusion was horrifying. It took leaps and turns that defied physics and logic.

It was the start of a witch hunt. The irony was lost on him.

"Why? What did I do? I didn't do anything! Who would have done this to *me*? My therapist? No, no... I haven't admitted anything incriminating to her." Still, he called his therapist, having turned the bed into his command center for the hunt.

"Okay- she seemed genuinely surprised. I don't think it was her... it couldn't be anyone else. *We don't go anywhere or see anyone*. Wait? Amelia! I bet it was Amelia because *you* keep trying to take the kids over there but *they* don't want to go, so naturally she assumes it's *Crazy Dad* because... " he switched to mocking Amelia and said, "who wouldn't want to come to *my* house? Fuck." He then called Amelia.

A sigh of relief, followed by "she didn't seem to know anything."

"So, it had to have been one of the therapists- yours or theirs," he continued and tilted his head down while his eyes skittered over the surface of the bed like he was moving puzzle pieces around and intuitively solving it. "That would explain a lot. Think about it. You two basically have just a book club and I *told* you she wants you- but I still wouldn't be surprised if you were cheating on me with her... but still. Who would want *you*? You're so- just so... that I don't think anyone- I mean, *I* find you attractive but that's me *and I have to* think that about you, or I'd cheat on you.

"So, that just leaves Freya. It had to have been her. She's the only one left. Fuck that bitch!"

"Okay- it doesn't matter who called it in, it's going to be okay. We'll get through this-"

"That's easy for you to say! You're not the one being investigated- you fucking cunt! Do you not get that? I swear, you and Fay. Wait! FAY! She's



got the disorder! I bet she said something to that bitch. I bet she lied or exaggerated or some shit and the fucking bitch submitted it because she... She never liked me and it's not fair for her to do this to me just because she's -what? A closeted fucking lesbian who wants you?

"Why am I the villain when you're the one who fucked up? It isn't *fair*! I didn't do anything wrong! Why is everyone out to get me? Why am I not allowed to be happy?"

"Fay knew CPS was coming! She did!" he continued, "I bet she exaggerated to Freya, who's out to get me anyway, and then told Fay not to say anything about CPS! She fucking groomed her!"

This turned into threats towards Freya;

"I hate that bitch. I hate everything about her!"

"I want to attack her!"

"I want to throat punch her! But I will settle for figuring out how to curse her with diarrhea."

"I don't care. I will fucking crucify her. Why are you trying to defend her?"

I was trying to diffuse where normally I'd outright agree with everything. I couldn't this time. I felt like I was crazy and just wanted the berating to end. However, when I asked him, "what's your hesitation in asking Freya about it in the office?"

Your father replies, "Oh, because I'd fucking strangle her in the fucking hall!"

"It had to have been Fay that lied about me. Or you. But you act too scared of me all the time that I don't think you'd do it," he mocked me. "No, it's because Fay and her brother are- it'd explain why they like you so much- are so neurodivergent. I think we need to get her rechecked. I think something else is wrong with her. That or she just hates me because of you."

1030am

Agent Hermione calls me. She was closing the case with no recommendations. Well, one recommendation- that your father and I seek couples counseling. She reviewed her notes and findings and the composite conclusion she'd made after visiting the house and briefly speaking with Amelia.

The last thing she said to me was, "and even if there was a problem with your husband, it's very clear that you'd never let anything happen to the kids- Amelia assured me of that too. So, since whatever may be going on is between you two, the children are and will be safe as long as you're around, that's the end of my jurisdiction."

I needed a good half hour to come down from the call. The implications were enormously heavy. In one way the call was validating as it was wonderful to hear that an agent of the state had determined that you guys would always be safe with me. However, the weight and burden of that revelation registered. I'd been sentenced to protecting you two from your father forever. I was so close to getting outside help. It was heartbreaking. Agent Hermione conclusion that you were in no danger differed from my perception, especially the night of June 23rd, but I had no tangible evidence.

I almost dropped my phone on the desk. I stared blankly and the empty screen. That was it. The case was closed- she had just finished up her report and submitted it. She'd already received the "case closed" from her superior and she was just calling to let me know.

Your father won. I think that's how he saw it. Some reclusive and walled up part of his mind knew how he was acting wasn't okay- far from it- but now CPS had investigated and validated him. For your father, this just meant that questioning his behavior as healthy or abusive was irrelevant. He felt a state agency was telling him it was okay. His actions, even the ones that no one but me knew about, were now sanctioned.





06: It's Not Fair

Various Locations

██████████ -107

9:34PM

Your father: "I don't ever get what I want!"

Me: "Well, what do you want?"

Your father: "I don't know! I was never allowed to figure it out because of my mom!!"

Me: "You have that opportunity now."

Your father: "That isn't helpful! I don't even know where to start."

Me: "Maybe that's where you start?"

Your father: "... I dunno maybe... But **it's just not fair** that my job is thankless and you get praise all the time!"

Me: "I've always seen that, but I know I have a hard time expressing it. I've been working on that and I feel like I've been better."

Your father: "... You have... It's just after you being so awful for so long it's going to take me a while to even hear it without thinking it's contrived."

Me: "Okay, that's fair, but I still think you need to bring up how you feel with your therapist."

Your father: "I'm just depressed because of you and the kids being so ungrateful..."

Me: "Well, even before kids, this was something that came up a lot- not knowing what you want-"

Your father: "Right, so I just go with whatever you want because you know what you want and know how to and then you always get it and **it's not fair!** I don't want to do this! I hate suburban life! I feel like I'm pretending! I hate it! This isn't what I wanted, but it's what you wanted, so here we are! I just wanna leave!!"

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Me: "Is that how you really feel?"

Your father: "It is."

██████████-104

930am

Your father calls his primary care physician to get antibiotics for what he suspects is a ██████.

They require a ██████████ before writing a prescription, but have no appointments available.

The nurse recommends he visit an urgent care that's very close to our house.

He ends the call and yells for me to get into the bedroom.

He screams, "That's it! I need a new doctor! Again! I don't wanna go to urgent care! They're going to tell me to lose weight and that's why I h ██████!"

I ask, "why would you think that?"

He ignores my question and continues, "I'm just so upset by my treatment right now. **It isn't fair!** Why won't they just give me what I need? I know what I need!"

I reply, "I know this sucks, but it's going to be okay- that urgent care is-"

Your father shrieks, "No, it isn't!"

██████████-100

1130am

I booked my flight for July 25th after texting your father for permission and receiving an affirmative "go for it!" response. Approximately 4 hours later, he changed her mind.



I reminded him, calmly, that I had asked explicitly several times over the previous 2 weeks and every time he responded in the affirmative.

His response to this was, “**That isn’t fair.** I didn’t have time to think. I would have said ‘yes’ even if I thought it was a bad idea.”

He also added, “You didn’t think about how hard it would be for me! You didn’t think about me at all! You don’t care how I feel about this!”

██████████-97

3pm

I had an online appointment scheduled alone, per your fathers’s instructions, to talk to your therapist about the trip. Freya said it would be “very beneficial” and emphasized that it’s normal and healthy for parents to go out with friends and take occasional trips like this. I think the exact phrase was, “the kids need to see *both* parents having time with friends.”

I told this to your father.

“Then you must have told her wrong. No halfway decent therapist would say that if she knew how horrible you’ve been to me. The kids aren’t ready and she should understand that! **It isn’t fair** that you talked to her without me! I clearly need to talk to her alone.”

██████████-96

1130am

I was working upstairs when I heard your father yelling at you guys during homeschool hours. There’s a slam. It sounded like paper smacking a chair or table. No one screamed or yelled or called for help. The next discernible sound was your father stomping his feet on the stairs while climbing them.

When he reached the door of the office, he screamed, more than a yell, almost a shriek, “I’m done being a dad! You deal with them! I’m sick of

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this shit!" Your father put his hand on the office door and slightly rocked the door back and forth- I think he wanted to slam the office door. Instead, he left and slammed the door to *his* room.

Immediately, I went down into the classroom area and found you and your brother in tears. You were standing with one leg on your chair, both hands gripping the seat back, and your breaths were quick stabs of air into your lungs. Your brother was sitting on his chair, feet hanging motionless, and his hands clenched around the left and right side of his seat. His eyes were wide open and staring at the corner where your mother's desk was. He was shaking and crying softly. Your father's chair was in the middle of the classroom, on its side.

Neither of you wanted to tell me what happened. I held you both, saying anything to make you guys feel better. When I tried asking what happened, your brother remained silent, and all you said was, "no."

Once I was certain you two were okay, or at least calm enough to stay downstairs in the classroom without me, I went up to check on your father. For once I didn't open the door gently, but it wasn't a swing open either. I entered the room like I had every right to be there, and my presence was a casual, normal thing. I was diligently trying to seem neutral, not angry, or sad, or scared.

He was lying on the bed- smack in the middle of it- staring up at the ceiling. He was motionless. I took a step closer, and he shot up, forcefully pivoting at his waist and slamming his fists into the mattress. I asked your father what happened and he wouldn't tell me either.

He chanted, "No, no, no... no," Each word was quieter than the next.

My next question was, "are you okay?" Your father was sitting up in the bed, hunched over, using his arms as supports pointed backwards.

The change in demeanor was instant. In one motion, he sat up on her knees and clenched the comforter, pulling it up slightly. He grit his teeth and his eyes narrowed.

"No! Of course, I'm not alright! I have to keep everything magical so you can go on your stupid fucking trip! And it isn't fair!" He was heaving air in and out of his lungs rapidly. I just stood there. This was just a few days after I'd booked my flight and you two saw us fight for the first time. It was the first time I didn't put up with his outlandish bullying and manipulation. I think without any other means of coping, he was *still* fighting. He slumped back onto the bed and I left, closing the door.



Downstairs, you two could speak a little. No one would tell me what had happened leading up to your mother's dramatic exit and tipped chair, but at least you were talking.

"I heard daddy yelling at you- what happened?" Fay asked me.

I didn't know what to say. I inhaled and said, "your dad is just having a tough time right now and needs some alone time." I'm still not sure if it was the right thing to say or not. I had you guys draw pictures of what you wanted to do that weekend.

Fifteen minutes later, your father came downstairs. He looked stoned on valium. His customer service persona was out to smooth over this tricky situation.

"Okay, I need all of you to sit on the floor with me," he patted the floor next to him on either side as he sat cross-legged. "Come, come," he patted the floor again. You and your brother sat next to your father happily. You two seemed happy he was back. He walked into the space like nothing was wrong, or at least all had been forgiven. I sat opposite your father on the floor.

"Okay guys, dad shouldn't have raised his voice- but I didn't *mean* to scare you, that's not my fault, and really if you two hadn't made me so mad, this wouldn't have happened in the first place." He gestured aimlessly at the entire room ending on where his chair had been, tipped over, minutes ago. My chest thudded. I could feel the blood radiate out from my torso and seep into my toes and fingers. It felt like no blood made it to my head.

"I am allowed to make faces at you. It isn't fair for you guys to expect me to control my faces- that's being a bully to dad. Here, let me show you. Here's my creepy clown face."

Your father turned towards you, Fay, and as he turned, his face pulled into that visage; eyes popped out, a slacked jaw revealed an apathetic toothy smile, and eyebrows shot up as far as possible. The last part of the face that really pulled the whole thing together was the head pivot. Not a turn from left to right, but a sideways tilt. He inched his head close to yours, increasing the intensity of his eyes and smile as he did.

You tried to back away in your seated position, but he matched your retreat by progressing his lean.

"Stop it!"

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He did not.

“Stop it! Stop it! STOP IT! You’re scaring me!”

Your father smacked the ground on both sides of you with open palms. His smile vaporized as his angry jaw jutted forward. His eyes turned from vacant to furious. He stood up, putting his hands up as if he’d been told by an officer to do so.

“You know, I clearly can’t do anything right, so I’m just going to go!” he rushed back upstairs. I heard his footsteps on the stairs. She slammed the door as he let out a loud “fuck!”

You and your brother cried again.

“I didn’t mean to be bad,” you whispered for the second time in my notes.

He stayed in the room until after I got you two into bed.

930pm

“I hope you’re proud of yourself,” your father said to me. There were no video games tonight. He had spent the evening in the room and only emerged to engage in this speech.

“This is what I told you- tried to warn you about, but you never listen and it isn’t fair! They aren’t okay with you going- and *their* freak out today just proves it!”

An hour later, he admitted, openly, out of context and without being prompted that he’s thought about killing himself. He provided specific details about wanting to “cut his hands off and just bleed out” as well as thinking that “jumping in front of a bus” might be the best thing for everyone. It felt like he lifted his threats directly from lyrics.

My documentation gets a little vague here. I’m sorry. I have a note that I asked him if that’s how he really felt and that he responded with, “I’m just so fucking tired of waking up in the morning.”

I reached for my phone.

He screamed at me, “You’re going to call the police and lock me away?! If you want me to really kill myself, send me away! That’ll really do it!”

He smacked my phone out of my hand while pulling back his other arm



into a loaded fist.

Two loud and visceral slaps rattled my brain- my phone hitting the table preceded by his palm violently striking my hand.

When I picked up my phone, I discreetly started recording and placed it on the coffee table obediently.

I recorded him saying the the following:

*"I'm just telling you what the voices in my head are telling me. I thought I could trust you with that, but I clearly can't! I thought you understood! I have all these awful voices in my head telling me to do things and things about myself and now because of you; they have more things to say! And you aren't telling me otherwise, so now I think they're true! What else am I supposed to think?! **This isn't fucking fair to me!**"*

 -90

2pm

Your father and I both talked with Freya, your therapist, through video chat. Freya repeated what she had told me.

She also added, "At this point, I think it would be detrimental to the children if she didn't go. You have to show them you can't let fear win. You can't let their tears stop you from going. You have to go so they can see it'll be okay."

After the call your father tells me "Of course she sides with you! Everyone sides with you! That **isn't fair** to me! You got to her first! Just because it wouldn't be traumatic doesn't mean you should go! What if the kids' emotions are too big?! What if they're not okay- more than just 'normal' tears?!"

He adds, "The kids clearly need a new therapist and I know you agree."

I reply, "actually I think the kids have a good connection with her and it'd be a bad idea to start with someone new after almost a year."

Your father then says, "of course you'd fucking say that- she's letting you

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go on your trip!"

██████████ -69

9pm

The day after the CPS visit, your father said to me, "Why am I the villain when you're the one who fucked up?! **It isn't FAIR!** I didn't do anything wrong! Why is everyone out to get me? Why am I not allowed to be happy?"

██████████ -45

730pm

Your father: "What's wrong with you, Fay? You've been putting off some strange energy. I can sense something is bothering you, so just say it!"

Fay (age 8): "Daddy," she pauses, "you've been really annoying lately."

Your father: "That **isn't fair!** You can't say that to me, you have no reason to! You're being a bully to daddy!" And he storms off downstairs slamming every door and throwing something around in the kitchen. The object was ambiguous, but the thud was distinctly the sound of something hitting the kitchen cabinets. I heard some pans rattle as well.

9pm

You two are in bed and asleep.

Your father, staring at the tv wide eyed says, "The kids just need to go back to school! I'm a failure!"

I reply, "I don't understand- "

Your father says, "I'm tired of being blamed for things that aren't my fault! I didn't do anything wrong today and everyone is mad at me!"



"I'm not mad at you- "

Your father cuts me off and raises his hand at me. "You act like you are! Am I going crazy? Am I not remembering things right? I didn't do anything wrong! Not like you'd tell me anyway because you're afraid of me and the kids pick up on that, so they act afraid of me and it's your fault and it **isn't fair!**"

 -25

2pm

Remember that sleep study I had done a few weeks prior? About a month before your birthday, Fay? We finally gotten the results on August 19th. They diagnosed me with moderate sleep apnea- something rare for a woman of relative fitness and vegan diet. He suggested stress may be a factor here.

The doctor was kind but sincere in his concern when he said, "Ma'am, you *need* to be going to bed at a consistent time and giving yourself the opportunity to sleep for 8 hours. The later you stay up, the more severe your symptoms are going to be. What's your sleep schedule like? Also, we need to have you come back for another study to titrate your CPAP machine."

I relayed that information to your father.

"What?! What the fuck?! Why? I hate your overnights! They're so hard on me! This isn't fair! Why are they doing this to *me*?" Your father stormed out of the office and slammed the door to the room. Minutes later, he came back and solemnly stated, "If you're going to die overnight in your sleep, you have to sleep in the other room because I'm not waking up to a dead body."

Starting that night, my logs show that our average "up to bed" time jumped from 1130pm to 1am.

The sleep study itself was a few weeks earlier. It meant staying at a facility tied to wires and monitors. Amelia gave me a ride to the office, and I took a cab home at 6am. When I got out of the vehicle, it was still dark outside. The sky lacked even the slightest hint of dawn. Our house at the time had a double bolted front door, the top one being only accessible

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from inside. If I was going to get into the house, I needed to be let in.

I texted your father and ten minutes later; he came downstairs. Your father didn't say a word to me. He just glared in my direction. He went back upstairs, and I followed. He quickly closed the bedroom door on me before I entered, swiftly but gently without a sound. I went back downstairs to doze on the couch until you and your brother woke up.

I couldn't help but notice that, despite the total lack of sunlight, your father hadn't turned on one light along his entire path. The house was pitch black. He hadn't even used his cellphone as a flashlight.

[REDACTED]

11:30am

Your father comes upstairs and sits on the futon in the office while I am working.

He says, "You say you've been more affectionate, but if I'm still asking, what does that tell you?"

"... it's not enough." I quietly reply.

"Exactly."

1:45pm

Your father corners me in the office, standing in the doorway. His words lacked any quality of pleading. They were heavy and accusatory, "please don't leave me. You're going to leave me but, I just want to hold you sometimes-even if you don't want it! I'm done begging you. We're married, *I can touch you whenever I want.*"

Before I can reply, he looks down at the ground and says, "I'll let you get back to work- don't follow me."

Following orders, I don't. His words rattled and echoed in my head, "*I can touch you whenever I want.*"

Less than five minutes later, he shoved open the office door hard enough



that the knob bounced off the wall. He shrieked at me, "See! I told you that you were done with me! You really don't give a shit about me, do you?"

1040pm

I need sleep. Your father is refusing to go up to bed. At 10:50pm I tell him I'm going to go up to get ready for bed. As I reach the top stair he says, "Oh! Well! I guess that means I have to go to bed now since I can't see in the dark and you don't care. Great! You're already upstairs, you fucking bitch! Fine!"

I went back down and asked with a hint of confrontation that surprised me more than him. "Sorry, what was that?"

Your father, staring at the TV playing his video game, said, "Nothing." He stands up and turns off the lights. I offer to help.

Your father screams and feigns taking a swing at me with an open palm, "I said I can do it! I said I could do it!" He paused. In the way an actor plays distinct characters in different movies, he shifted personas and calmly said, "Oh shit, I need to get water."

With my learned response, I walk in the kitchen's direction. I can feel him glaring at me. I stop and turn around.

Your father clenched his fists and jaw while baring his teeth at me. He spoke through a tightly locked mandible and stated, "I said I got it."

We go upstairs.

Your father said as I put my hand on the light switch, "you don't love me anymore, do you? I'm expecting you to file for divorce any day now."

I don't know how to respond. So, I pretended I didn't hear him.

Your father continued, "*you're* cheating on me, is that it? I get it. I'm awful and ugly and fat and lazy- that's why you don't love me. Just admit it."

I don't say anything. I just let him talk. I eventually apologize where I can. His final note for the night was, "I know you don't care about me because you know I can't see in the dark- at all- but you still went upstairs without me, but you don't care and that makes me really sad."

At approximately 1230am he gives me permission to go to the bathroom,

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check on you two (with the nightly instruction to “make sure they are breathing”), and turn off the light.



11am

Your father takes Fay to dance practice. They stop off at the store on the way home.

When they arrive, I am helping Mason with his homework. It is approximately 1 minute before I get to the garage.

Your father is carrying a half dozen grocery bags in his left hand. It appears painful.

I say, “Oh, that looks uncomfortable. Maybe not a good idea. Let me help you.”

He replies, “Well, you didn’t get down here quick enough to help me, so my hand hurting is on you, fuck-face.”

I assist with bringing in the rest of the groceries.

While putting them away, your father shrieks, saying, “Everyone just go away! It’s too loud down here- so everyone just leave me alone!”

The three of us don’t say anything and head upstairs. A few minutes go by.

Your father screams.

I go downstairs and before I can say anything, your father indicates the scream was at me.

He shouts, straining his voice, “I swear to God, I’m going to get murdered and you’re never going to hear me. Where the fuck did you go? I needed your help and you’re not here!”

“You told everyone to go upstairs,” I replied, void of emotion.

Your father opens a drawer and retrieves scissors to open a set of headphones. Unable to open them easily, he stabs the packaging holding the closed scissors in his fist like a kitchen knife.



While he is doing this, he says, "I'm not okay! I went the long way home and you don't care!"

I reply, "I'm sorry, I couldn't have known that- "

He says, "Well- you didn't ask, did you, bitch? Fuck, you don't care about me at all, do you?" He then says, while still waving a pair of scissors trying to open the headphone packaging, "this is when you're supposed to comfort me, but you really don't care at all do you? Why do I have to ask for affection?"

I say, "you're holding a pair of scissors trying to open that. I didn't want to be in the way- doesn't seem safe. I didn't want to get stabbed."

Your father, without pausing his frantic efforts, replies, "that shouldn't matter to you."



945pm

Friday night. Your father is deep into a video game session while I struggle to stay awake. I decide to get a snack- Pop-Tarts specifically. I used the toaster. The toaster oven just seemed like too much work- I was exhausted and the ease of dropping the pastries into the slots won. I'd been told *not* to use the toaster because of your father's *alleged* gluten intolerance. I didn't think he'd notice and, unbeknownst to him, I'd found several articles debunking the concept that even those with *diagnosed* celiac disease *do not* need to use separate food preparation items like knives, cutting boards, and even toasters. One study specifically called out the idea of a separate toaster to be unnecessary because any residual food particles fall to the crumb tray, where they would burn to a crisp.

Gluten does not become effervescent or airborne particles that attach to subsequent items in the toaster.

I wait in the kitchen for my pop tarts. I put them on a paper towel, grabbed my water, and returned to the couch where your father continued to play, reclined and unaware of my presence.

Then I take a bite.

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“Oh, my god!” he scolds me. “I heard you put that in the toaster! Wow! Is that why I’ve been getting so sick? *You’re* poisoning me or you just don’t care about me at all. How long have you been doing this? Weeks? Months? It explains *everything*. You know it’s really sad. I clearly love you more than you love me.”

I wanted to object, but nothing happened. I felt the words forming in the back of my throat. I wanted to throw the studies in his face. I was so tired of not being allowed to sleep, to eat when I wanted, and having to jump through these hoops to appease him.

But the look on his face stopped me. His mouth was completely flat with eyes stretched as vertically as possible. Tears were cascading down his face.

“I’m sorry,” is all I say, hoping to diffuse the situation. I just want it to stop.

“Fuck you,” is his reply. “I’m buying myself a new toaster and it’s going to be expensive to teach you a lesson. And if you ever fucking use *my* toaster, I’ll kill you in your sleep.” He scoffs and then laughs. The look on my face is hesitation diffused with uncertainty. Did *I really just hear that?*

“Oh my god, you need to lighten up. I’m just joking about killing you. Fuck me, I’m going to just start calling you *Asperger’s* when you act like this- you and Fay both.”



4pm

It was a Saturday. A few freelance projects turned into rush deadlines, but I was wrapping up for the evening- maybe an hour left for the day. I’d gotten to a good stopping point, so I wasn’t planning on working that evening. You two were playing upstairs.

We all felt the concussive wave of the first bang. Its source was small but the anger behind gave it weight and velocity. I could see you two whip around and look at the stairs- the sound had come from the kitchen. The subsequent bangs were less powerful than the first- it had so much mass behind it, the residual amplitudes hung in space, leaving no room for anything else, not even air to breathe.



The fourth bang was different. Where the first three had a natural quality to them, objects compelled to the ground by gravity, this latest impact felt more compressed. All its air and mass and force were being squeezed into something else quickly.

“Shit! Fuck! Babe!” Your father screamed for help. I had already started moving towards the stairs when the shriek made it up to the landing. The scream got me moving. My legs could hardly keep up with the ferocity of signals my brain was sending to wobbly legs.

Your father was in the kitchen, standing next to the open freezer. Three items had fallen to the floor when he opened it. That explained the first three impacts. Before he said anything, I searched for the source of the fourth thud.

“Why the fuck would you think *this* is okay? What the fuck is wrong with you? This is the worst job anyone has ever done putting things away! Don’t just stand there! Fix it!”

I replied with, “I’m sorry!” and quickly help. I get on my knees in front of him, trying to put the items that had tumbled out of the freezer away. I looked up and saw that he was glaring at me, teeth exposed and clenched. He was making a fist with both hands and continued to stomp his feet.

He screeched out an indecipherable cry which was followed by an even louder, “FUCK YOU!”

For a moment, his intertwined hands shot straight above his head. I wondered if this time they were going to come down on me. Instead, he stormed out of the kitchen and hid upstairs.

About five minutes later, your father comes back downstairs and says, “I’m sorry I lost my cool, but you know better. If you hadn’t put things away like that, I wouldn’t have gotten so mad. Seriously, what the fuck were you thinking?”

I said, “I’m sorry, it won’t happen again... I wasn’t thinking.”

To which your father replied, “No shit, you weren’t thinking. Don’t do it again.”



#



This room that used to be my office seems so small- too small to have ever been a place where I was lost. Different furniture now. I added a guest bed - something this house has never had and certainly would never have been used when you ran the show. There's also a broken 3d printer, forgotten mostly after upgrading to better models.

The memories of the space make it cavernous, like an organic mess of underground tunnels that became more complex and folded the harder you tried to find your exit, suffocating you.

How many times was I cornered here? How many times did I hide under my desk so you wouldn't hear me talking to the friends and family you'd demanded I stop talking to? This room housed a desk that seems too big for it now. Two full size workstation towers and multiple screens nearly consumed all the desk real estate- one for each job.

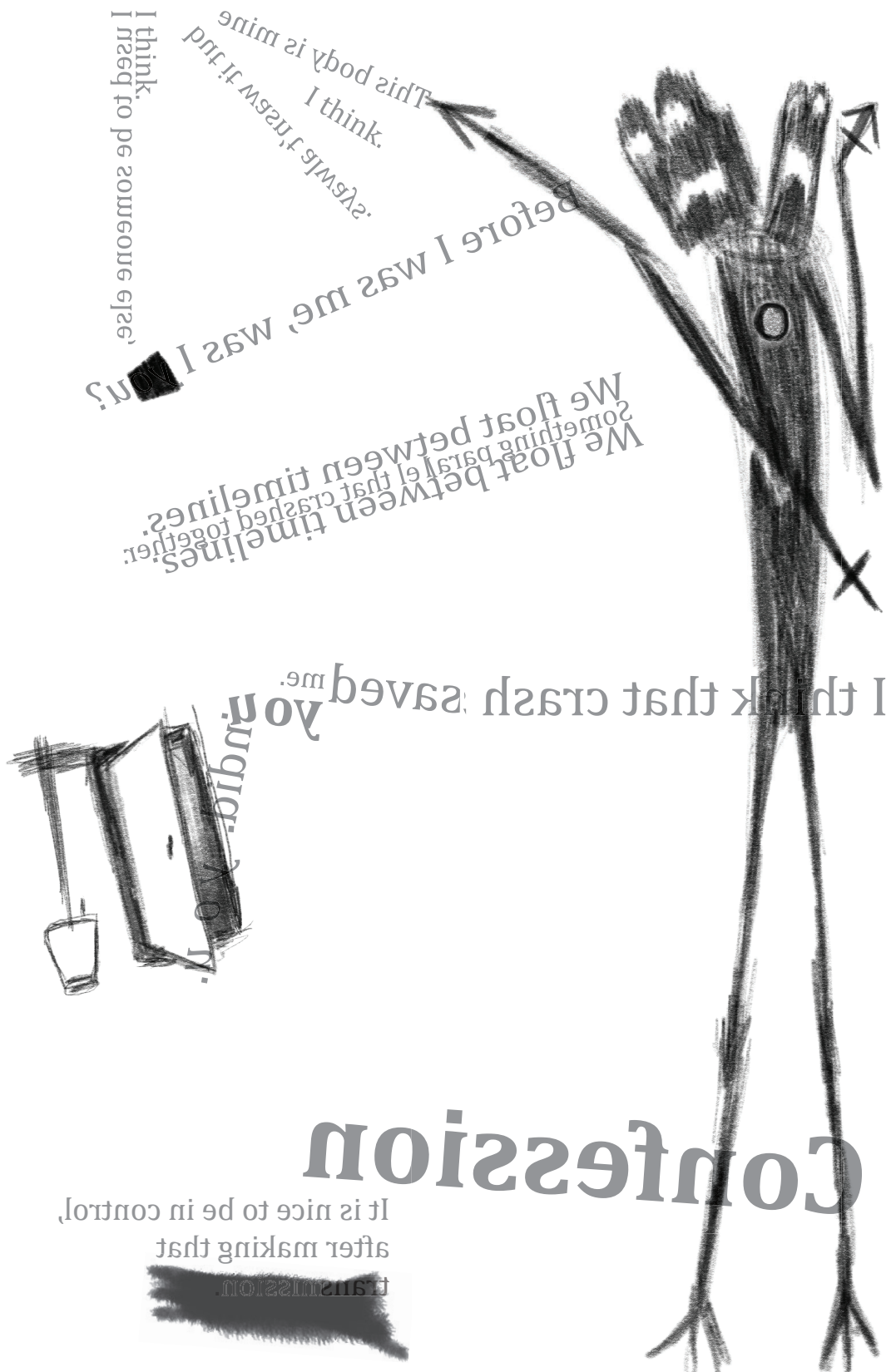
This is the room we fought in. This is one of many rooms you wouldn't let me leave without kissing you *properly*. The room I broke down in and tried to hide it from you. As large as the room felt, it was never big enough or dark enough to hide from you- even when I was on a work call.

I spent so many hours in this space, glued to my chair, for hours on end.

This is where you made your demands for capitulation, and you consistently tried to break me.

That was not fair- it wasn't even human.

#







07: Counsel

Your father burned through his therapists. He'd get a new one, declare they were the best, and then, without fail, three months into sessions, the therapist was too stupid or didn't understand him. That was the case with the therapist he was already seeing when we got into the car accident in the Fall of 2020.

He'd complained a few times, with an air of humor, that he wasn't going to do the homework he'd been given. "She should know me better- and know that *homework* just doesn't work for me because I'm not going to do it. It's not my fault."

Your father's therapist, Mona, was great and challenged your father. After a few sessions, I think Mona picked up on the same things my therapist did. Each of our therapists were friends. They went through their master's projects together. It's possible they chatted, unofficially, about our family situation. I found out much later that at the very least, your therapist and mine shared some relevant and vital information with each other.

It seemed like your father was on the verge of making progress- and then he fired Mona.

"Mona is *victim blaming* me!"

"What happened?"

"She said that me expecting to get into a car accident again is like a self-fulfilling prophecy! That bitch! He's saying it's *my fault* we got into the car accident- can you fucking believe that?"

"I don't think that's what she's saying, I-"

"Of course you'd agree with her. Whatever, I need a new therapist."

So, it was a surprise that your father agreed to let his old therapist run our marriage counseling sessions.

██████████ -67

8pm

It was our very first time with a marriage counselor. Our sessions were going to be at home and in the office, so we could close the door. Your father quickly signaled that he was bored and uninterested. He swiveled in his chair, folded his arms, constantly checked his phone for the time, and would roll his eyes every time his old therapist said anything.

The therapist then asked us what each of us needed for the relationship to be healthy and happy. Your father snapped out of his distant state and chimed in without hesitation.

“She just doesn’t care about me at all. I tell her what I need, and she doesn’t do it. It’s nothing that complicated, so it just makes me think she’s repulsed or scared of me.”

The therapist took some notes and didn’t respond to your father’s comment. She looked at me through her webcam, “and what about you? What can he do?”

I froze. I hadn’t considered this. I was hoping she would just tell me, tell us, what to do. The therapist jotted a few notes.

“I don’t know- I haven’t really thought about it.”

“See!” your father scoffed on the heels of my response. “*This* is what I’m dealing with!”

There was a commotion downstairs, or so your father said, and he darted out. We only had a fifty-minute session, so the therapist and I carried on.

“I’m sorry- I really don’t know what to say. I don’t know what I want.” I think my face sunk and I remember feeling very cold. “I- I’m starting to think it really is me,” I said in a lowered voice. “After the CPS thing- they didn’t find anything- and I’m, I don’t know how to say it.”

The therapist’s face was very somber in the few moments of silence before your father came crashing in and said, “sorry, kid stuff- not like she’d be able to handle it, you know?” He guffawed, and the session continued.

We briefly talked about love languages and that was our homework. I’d



read a book on how love languages related to attachment theory and my ears perked up- *this* was something I could talk about safely. She assigned us a few quizzes and to read a few PDFs.

When the session was over, your father pantomimed like he was dead in the chair and threw his head back groaning.

“Oh my god, finally! Wow, you’re such a kiss-ass-teacher’s pet.” He shook his head. “Just so you know, I’m bored and don’t want to do this. I’m not saying *all* of it is stupid, it just isn’t going to work for *me*- I don’t want to. I don’t do well with structure or homework.”

 -39

8pm

It was our second therapy session. We’d both done our homework and learned that our love languages were not the same. I asked for details about mine. Was it possible to have two sets of languages? One set for output and one for input?

“That’s a sign of needs not being met,” Mona replied.

“Yeah. she never tells me what she wants! She expects me to just know,” your father chortled.

The session progressed as I think the therapist wanted. We talked through our primary and secondary languages. I was given a few homework assignments that involved performing and tracking both *words of affirmation* and *physical touch* (your father’s languages). I was supposed to just start with intentionally doing one of each a day and make some sort of note about it, be it mental or written. The therapist said that there was an issue with giving your father an assignment based on my languages.

“Until we really know what your languages are, I don’t think you should do this,” she turned her focus to me, “but think a lot about what we’ve said today and try to resolve what your love languages are- truly. If you feel they don’t match up, then there’s an issue and one set is probably wrong.”

My primary language was *acts of service*, but the thought of your father

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doing anything for me, like the dishes, for example, made me wholly uncomfortable. There was something wrong with the idea of him doing me any favors. Your father said it was because I wanted to control him. What he did, ignoring the therapist's recommendation that we wait, was take two or three nights of tucking you guys in from me. It's something I'd done since you were born- the night shift was mine and I loved it. Tucking you two into bed was the reprieve I needed after work before I started my freelance projects. I tried to avoid moonlighting when you were awake.

Your father had started occasionally tucking you guys in after I'd paid for my infamous plane ticket. He always closed the door and switched off the baby monitors he'd insisted you both still needed.

By the end of the therapy session, your father seemed to be engaged in what he was being told. I think it was that besides not getting any homework, the real perk for him was that I was being given an assignment- especially one that was crafted to make him feel valued and loved.

The session ended. I closed the web call.

"Fuck you! I don't want you to do it! Why the fuck does it take some old lady telling you to touch me for you to actually do it? I've been asking you for this, fucking begging, for *years*, you fucking bitch. It isn't fair!"

The switch in persona didn't throw me. "I've been making an effort recently," I said as a matter of fact, with a hint of frustration. "Really trying- even before this and-"

"Oh, good for you, bitch! That doesn't make up for it!"

"Years?" I responded, a few sentences behind. "I didn't realize it's been that long. Have you said it before-"

"I shouldn't have to! Why don't you understand that? You should be what I need because you love me, without me having to tell you!" He stopped, tilted his head from side to side as if he'd finished a strenuous workout and then said, "I'm also just really tired- and that's your fault too. Why don't you understand me?"

"Why is that my-" I paused and remembered the morning. My first sleep study was the night before. I needed him to let me back in the house before dawn that morning. "I'm sorry I had to wake you up when I got back from my sleep study."



Your father let out a disgruntled puff of air from his nose, “That’s not it!” as he smacked the armrests with both palms, “Don’t you know how anxious I was? You *know* I can’t function without you! You knew I’d be terrified, but you didn’t care and went to that stupid study, anyway! You know I feel like I can’t take care of them without you! It isn’t fair! Nothing’s supposed to be wrong with you! I’m not used to it!”

Mona called me the next day. She knew exactly why I hadn’t been able to talk about my needs or figure out my love languages. “There’s no point in continuing if you don’t feel safe enough to be honest.”

That was our last session.



08: Happy Birthday Fay

-36

945am

You kids loved going to Aunt Amelia's house. At the time, they had two large and dopey golden retrievers- and they absolutely adored the two of you. Aunt Amelia encouraged us to come over at least once a week. Her house was about 20 minutes away with mild traffic. It was rare we ever went, but she still offered without fail. She knew how much you both loved to visit, and I think Amelia saw it as an opportunity to get to know your father. They didn't have the chance to know each other growing up. Your father would say that's your grandfather's fault but, having been through all of this, I have my suspicions that's not the case.

Either way, Amelia saw us as family at a time when her own children had moved out of the house. Finn, her youngest, was still there but likely to go back on tour soon and we didn't see him that often. At first, I thought he just didn't like children, but we all know that isn't the case. A good portion of his aloofness was just his age.

Things had gotten worse since CPS gave your father permission to continue behaving as he had. Most people would have taken it as a close call, reflected on it, and then cleaned up their act. Your father had interrogated you, Fay, almost every night since the agent's visit. His nightly refrain had become, "She is keeping something from me. I can sense it. She feels guilty for lying about me to her therapist."

I'd confided in Amelia, slowly, the specifics of what was happening in our home. We can thank your father for that. In the brief time that your father allowed us to visit her house or for her to come to ours, I made all the arrangements. Your father deferred most scheduling tasks to me. I would take notes and then go ask him if that time or date worked, then get back to whoever it was. Amelia and I started talking more about your father's anxiety leading up to the failed girls' trip. She had a solid understanding of the situation.

On that Sunday morning, she and I had texted about us all coming to visit. She had planned on texting your father the invite herself, but that would end in us not going. Your father would say he had a migraine like

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he did every time. Amelia would always then suggest the three of us visit and give him some quiet time to recover. Your father always ignored that and would later pretend he'd fallen asleep and hadn't seen the text.

The three of us were up and moving by about 730am. Your father joined us at around 9am. As he drank his second cup of iced coffee, I relayed the message about us going to Amelia's. Fay, you overheard and chimed in without hesitation.

"Aunt Amelia's? We haven't been there for a while! Let's go!"

"Your mother and I are having a discussion about it, okay?" he snapped.

"I have a few things I need to get from the store, so I'll be out, anyway. Why don't we all go visit and grab stuff from the store on the way home?"

"We'll see," your father replied. He'd said it above a whisper.

I went upstairs to go to the bathroom. I came back down less than five minutes later. Stationed in plain sight on the dining room table were the contents of an art project box spread about like someone had just turned the box over it. You and your brother worked away on a craft. He'd given you each a set and left you to do the craft as you wanted.

"The kids decided they wanted to do this instead. It'll take about an hour and by the time they're done, it'll be too late to go anywhere. Why don't you just go to the store and come right back home? I'll send you a list of what you can get for me."

If the craft took you an hour, then you would have been done with the craft at about 10:15 that morning.

We didn't leave the house at all that day. I didn't even go to the store. Your father quizzed me upstairs with an expected tactic.

"You might die if you go. Are those couple of things worth dying over?" I'd countered his statement in the past and wasn't up for revisiting that mistake. It wasn't worth the tantrum and late-night lecture. I took his word at face value and assumed he was worried about another car accident. I think it may have been something else.

640pm

Even as independent as you were, Fay, your father still insisted on cutting



your nails for you. You were about to turn 9 and Mason, you had just turned 7. It was something you hated. You frequently said “ouch” while your father cut your nails. I think your cuticles were just sensitive. It had become such a source of anxiety that a nail clipper in proximity would make you squirm.

I’d put my phone on the coffee table, face down. He didn’t know I’d started recording audio.

“Ow!” you said as your father started with your right pinky nail. He sat you down behind the coffee table with your palms stretched forward and your arms strained over the top of it. Your father sat on the couch on the opposite side.

“Stop it! That didn’t hurt. You’re being dramatic!”

He seemed to hate cutting your nails as much as you hated him cutting them. To keep it to a minimally reoccurring event, he cut them *very* low. His standard practice was to cut them just below the white tip so that when he was done, there wasn’t any left. I thought it was too low, especially since it seemed to hurt. Your father’s response was that I don’t cut them short enough and that meant more frequent clipping. When I offered to take over nail clipping duties, he just said, “no- you take too long and watching you do it drives me crazy.”

“Ow! You’re hurting me!” you cried.

Your father snapped and shot you *the* look. For a moment, I thought he was going to hit you, but he sat up and tossed the nail clippers at you. He missed, and they hit the table instead.

You can hear my phone rattle as they bounced on the table.

“Do it yourself, then! I’m not helping you! You’re being dramatic! But *when* you fuck up your nails, I’m going to have to fix them and if you thought it hurt before, you have no idea how much it’ll *really* hurt!”

You sobbed. Your father didn’t see me. I had wanted to intervene, but I hesitated. I questioned what I thought it would accomplish. Would your father change his behavior and ease up? No. We’d seen that he wouldn’t. If I stepped in, would he take it out on you later? Possibly. Likely.

“Oh, why are you crying now? This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” your father continued as you sat motionless and starred at the nail clippers.

That was enough for me. I finished coming down. I said, “Hey, honey, here

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let me help-“

“NO! No-no-no! If she won’t let *me* do it, she has to do it herself!” Your father was inches from my face and had pressed his right index finger firmly into my sternum, just above my strap. His eyes were wide and vacant. It was like when he’d cry while lecturing me and continuing to play his video games. He turned back to you, “Now- I can help you *if* you just admit you’re being dramatic.”

“I- I’m sorry... I don’t know what to do. Please help me!” you stuttered through tears.

“Admit it,” There was a brief silence to punctuate the shout that came next. “Admit it! Tell me you were lying!” He clapped hard as hard he could between every syllable.

“I- okay... I’m sorry. It -it doesn’t hurt, it just makes me nervous.” It was plain as day that you were lying. I never could tell if your father knew you were saying whatever you could to make this stop or if he really thought he was right. Either way, he flashed a passing grin as he perched himself forward on the couch.

He cuts your nails again- pausing every time you made a sound to give you a heated glare until you said, “sorry.” He would then scoff, roll his eyes, and continue until you made another sound. When he was done, he had you sit next to him on the couch. You sat at opposite 45-degree angles, knees almost touching. He perfectly framed it for an imaginary studio audience looking in from the other side of the coffee table.

Your father delicately took your hands in his and held them lovingly, resting on your knees.

“Now, honey you have to understand that ‘saying ow!’ just hurts my feelings- you aren’t being fair to me. I’m just trying to help you and I didn’t do anything wrong. You were just plain rude to me- being a bully.”

My phone battery died shortly thereafter and the recording stopped.



██████████ -22

658pm

It was time to cut your nails again. It went the same. He cut too low and you said “ow!” Your father stopped and gave you his somber and detached stare. It was like he was looking straight through you.

“You’re being dramatic again,” he said sing-songy. “Do we want a repeat of what happened last time? Is this going to be how you always want me to cut your nails *or* are you going to stop being mean to me?”

For reference, this was the day after he’d convinced you that your sore ab muscles from an intense dance workout meant terminal appendicitis and subsequently berated you for being worried about it.

██████████ -15

11am

It was your ninth birthday, Fay. You’d opened all your presents from the out-of-state family that morning. Of note were the ██████████ and ██████████ waffle maker. The plan was for your father and me to take you out shopping in the area by Amelia’s. There was a ██████████, ██████████, ██████████, and a few other places you wanted to visit. We’d leave your brother with Aunt Amelia. He was thrilled to see her golden retrievers, and you were thrilled to have a brother-free shopping time.

Your father wanted to go to a Mexican restaurant for your birthday lunch. You didn’t seem excited about it, so I mentioned the other eateries in the same shopping area. Most of them seemed to bore you just as much as the Mexican place. Then I said, “oh there’s also that pizzeria.”

“That one! Yes, I think they have ██████████ pizza for me!”

Your father sat with his arms crossed the entire meal, staring at you. He hardly looked away from you and even less frequently smiled. You didn’t have a phone yet, so handed you mine to keep you entertained. It was your birthday and that’s how I justified it. In truth, it was to keep

you distracted and disengaged. I directed the conversation away from bringing up your father's mood.

11pm

That evening, as we got into bed, your father stated coldly, "Wow, Fay was being *such* a bitch at lunch today."

"What?"

"She knows I hate that place! There's nothing there for me! She only picked it because she knows you like it!"

"So- that soup wasn't any good?"

"It was fucking disgusting. I hate it. You know that you fucking cunt."

"What about the pizza?" I hardly noticed what he called me. I continued, "Fay was really excited for [REDACTED] pizza at a sit-down place."

"I guess it was fine, but... wow! Fay was acting like such a bitch. I wanted to *fucking* throat punch her for using that *fucking* baby voice! I didn't because I was being nice and it's her birthday." He punched his left palm with his right first for emphasis.

At that time and to my knowledge, your father hadn't hit you. However, this tone of casual certainty was unnerving. It was one thing to make what I used to consider as idle threats of violence towards me, but they took on a disturbing weight when he started qualifying *why* he hadn't hit you.

[REDACTED] -14

8am

Your father decided that you'd all take the day off from school. Your brother had an occupational therapy appointment, anyway. Fay, you slept in a little; you had turned 9 the day before, after all. I usually took your brother to his appointments. Sometimes you came with us. However, since the CPS visit, your father rarely stayed home with you by himself.



I was working upstairs with the door wide open. You'd decided you wanted breakfast made with your new tiny waffle iron. The kitchen gadget was a birthday present. It was something you'd never done before. The directions were printed on the back of the box. There was a little pamphlet inside that we found after the fact, but the box directions were clearer anyway.

You'd gotten the little iron out of the box with no trouble. Gathering up the ingredients was a little more difficult as you couldn't reach a few of them, but you found a step stool and even grabbed a few mixing bowls from the second highest shelf in the pantry.

You had neatly laid out everything, down to multiple measuring cups and spoons. The ingredient list and directions were simple except but you'd never made waffles or used a waffle iron. So, you wanting help made total sense to me.

Your father was downstairs getting himself ready to take your brother to his appointment. You asked for help. You didn't understand his answer and you asked him again.

That's all I could piece together before I heard the slam.

Followed by silence.

Then your father shrieking.

You didn't make a sound. I worked through the sensation of my heart falling into my stomach as I bolted for the stairs. I thought this was it. I thought he'd hit you this time- and hard from the sound of the impact that resonated all the way to the upstairs office.

And *your* silence terrified me.

When I started down the stairs, I could hear that you were making a noise- whimpering. Your father had slammed his fist *into* the counter, hard enough to make your waffle iron shake and slightly dent the peppered formica countertop. I turned the corner and arrived at the bottom of the stairs just in time to see you cowering away from him. He'd back you into a corner of the kitchen and you were flanked by cabinets and the pantry door. He'd pulled both of his fists up and folded his arms inward- like he was struggling to perform a chin up with an invisible bar. Your father had locked his jaw in a large, open, silent scream- almost unhinged.

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He hadn't noticed me coming down the steps when he screamed- loud enough to make the walls echo throughout the entire downstairs, "Fine! I'll do it myself!" He reached for you- lunged like he was going to grab your shirt collar. At the last second, he dove for the box. He picked up the waffle iron too and crashed it down into the counter- exaggerating every movement, like a wild animal trying to exert dominance in an enclosure. "Give me that!" he snapped again as he smacked your hand so you'd drop the spatula.

"No daddy! No daddy, please don't!" you begged, sobbing and hardly able to stand. This had to have been overloading every circuit in your brain. The day after your birthday and he was coming down hard on you for asking directions. "Please don't! You're scaring me!"

The effect of saying "you're scaring me" to your father had the same effect as telling someone in a fit of rage to "calm down." It made things worse. That didn't make what happened your fault- none of it was your fault. Your father was the adult.

He drew in a breath so quick and deep it felt like he sucked all the air out of the room. It was dizzying. His following scream and shriek were concussive. I could hear the strain in his vocal cords- phlegm rushing to coat membranes as an inhuman voice thrashed its way out of your father's throat, mouth, and eventually vectoring towards you.

"FUCK YOU!" he took another quick breath and said almost as a single word, "Shut up! Knock it the FUCK off!" one more breath and then, "I am allowed to be mad at you!"

He took one step towards you- he still hadn't noticed I was downstairs- all of this occurring within a dreamlike 20 seconds. I was right behind him. He hunched down and tilted his torso and head at you. He flung his right hand back. He still hadn't seen me. If I hadn't shifted my stance, he would have hit me in the arc. That was the start of one fluid motion as he picked up his left foot. It's possible that he was going to swing his fist behind his body, up, over, and then slam it onto the counter right next to you- just another scare tactic. But-

That midair arc was as far as he got. I wasn't going to take that chance anymore. Not anymore.

The action of my palm firmly but effortlessly wrapping his wrist was silent. It wasn't forceful, it wasn't a slap, it wasn't intended to hurt or to scare. It was just to stop the arc. Still, the action was deafening. Your



father flicked his wrist out of my hand and flung around, whipping his arms as if they were a dead weight he had no control over. He glared at me with righteous indignation.

I didn't say anything. I looked at him blankly with no rage, no anger, no love, no sympathy. To the outside, my face was void. Inside, the mixture of emotions and thoughts behind my eyes were in a violent flux. Anger and rage, fear, desperate sadness, and love for you and your brother all clashed together to cancel out any sign of feelings in that moment. I think it solidified your father's decision that I had an emotional disorder. You'd think a powerful empath like him would've seen the torrent of emotions colliding behind my face.

You, Fay, ran upstairs crying. Your father *clawed* weakly at the air as you rushed by him. With you out of the way, all his anger fell to me, but I was done.

"I didn't do anything wrong! I was just trying to help, but she isn't letting me! She knew I was trying to get ready to leave! It's not my fault she can't read the fucking label right! I have to leave; you deal with her! I'm fucking sick of this shit!" and he stomped to the garage, shoulder checking me, hard, out of his way. I didn't say anything. I let him go without a word. Even before this incident, I knew that your father and I were done- it was just a matter of time. Your cowering, the halted swing, his shrieking signaled it was time to make it happen sooner, but I didn't know how.

You weren't in your room. You were in my office, sitting on the futon with your knees pulled up and your arms wrapped around them. Your tears were heavy and I thought you might vomit. When you realized I was in the room, you stood and latched onto me. I picked you up and held you. I wanted to apologize, but I knew responding to an apology would be an enormous burden on you. It wasn't your job to assuage my guilt.

Pretty soon, my left shoulder was soaked. You were saying something, but I couldn't understand. I didn't interrupt. I just held you close with my left arm and quietly pulled my phone out of my pocket and placed it on my desk behind me. I'd gotten good at hitting *record* without looking at the screen. I didn't know what I was going to do with these recordings. When I started, it was just so I could revisit moments when I questioned the reality of the situation. I hated that I felt the need to record you like that, especially considering the lack of good it did anyone.

"I wish daddy would go away *forever!*" you said it clearly. "Why didn't that lady talk to me?"

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“What lady, honey?” I asked.

“That lady who came to visit and asked about our family?”

“Agent Hermione?”

You immediately recognized the name. You pushed off me and stood straight up with your fists clenched at your side. “Her!” was all you got out before you started crying again. With angry tears you stated, “I am very angry- why didn’t she talk to me without daddy?”

“Why is that?” I ask. I felt dizzy again, I reminded myself that I was sitting and my feet were on the floor.

“Because I was too scared to say anything with daddy in the room! I wanted her to take daddy away! Because maybe if she took daddy away, I wouldn’t be scared anymore and maybe someone could fix him and he’d... then maybe he’d love me! And if he can’t - you could find someone who would.”

I pulled you in for a hug to hide the struggle with my own tears.

Those were heavy words for a nine year old.

The interrogation war your father had started was making sense. While I don’t believe your father has supernatural empathic powers, he was perceptive in his own way. I was too busy playing dumb about the recording I’d shared with your therapist. I didn’t see how you felt- not until then.

You asked multiple times to make sure I wouldn’t tell your father what you had just said. You trembled whenever the thought of your father discovering how you felt about CPS.

That was the secret, *you were scared of your father and wanted him gone.*

You asked me to promise that I wouldn’t say anything to anyone. And to this day I haven’t. I kept the recording buried in a few different hard drives, some local and some cloud based. This is the first time anyone will hear about it from me.

I still have that recording. And others.



930am

I took a moment to text Agent Hermione. I explained you wanted a chance to talk to her with no one else around.

She returned my text a few hours later.

She informed me that the case was closed.

There was nothing she could do.

I later made a call to a local family law attorney. It was a free consultation for half an hour. I took notes both before and after the call to get the most out of my time.

“I believe you, but there’s nothing anyone can do about it, at least not in this state. Call me *when* he starts hitting you *and* the kids.”

745pm

Like I said, your father claimed to be a gifted empath- that he could “sense” others’ emotions before they could. It was common for him to assert that he knew how someone was feeling, even if that person disagreed.

“You can lie to yourself, but you can’t lie to me,” he’d say.

That claim wasn’t consistent until after I booked my trip. However, it became a *daily* mantra after CPS.

His nightly interrogations started that night- the day after your birthday. This made getting Fay ready for bed the toughest part of the day.

It felt like they had gone on for months, but really, it lasted two weeks. Something shifted that morning when you came crying to me- something changed. We could all feel it. It wasn’t you that snapped, or me, or even your father. I thought I was the only one who didn’t feel safe at home. After you told me you wished your father had been taken away, the situation felt heavier. And, your father was afraid of being exposed.

It was obvious something was wrong in our house.

That night as you sat on the edge of your bed, your father lorded over you. He slipped into your room while I tucked in your brother. Your father was standing, arms crossed, and back as straight as possible,

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looking down at you, Fay- as if he was trying to make himself just that much taller. Your father would later tell me that this was one of his special techniques to “crack” you. He’d stretch up as tall as he could and then fold down, pivoting conspicuously like a crane, while maintaining eye contact- his head on a gimbal.

It was inhuman. He was a machine without a ghost- the uncanny valley was creeping in again.

“Fay- you’ve been weird. I’m *not* going to pull it out of you. The sooner you just tell me what it is, the better you’ll feel. So just come out with it! Okay? I’m too tired for this shit.”

“What’s going on?” I asked after closing your brother’s door.

Your father’s glare never left you. “Fay is hiding something from me and doesn’t want to tell me. She’s being really weird, and I don’t like it. I *know* it’s about me- that’s why she’s scared.” The way she addressed me without looking away from you- a sharpshooter doing a no-look-trick-shot. “So, just come out with it,” he finished.

You started to cry and breathe through your teeth.

“Okay, I think that’s enough. If she doesn’t want to talk, she doesn’t have to,” I said firmly.

Your father grabbed my wrist, pulled down, and whispered to me, breaking his fixation on you, and said, “no, you don’t get to be the fucking hero.” He turned his attention back to you and. “No! You need to just tell me, because if you don’t, you’re going to get all weird and difficult and you’ll be mean to me because I’m an empath and you can tell that I know what you’re feeling, and you don’t want to admit it so you’ll lash out at me like you always do and that isn’t fair! *So, no, I’m not letting you go to sleep* until you tell me what it is. We’re all going to stay up – *all night* if that’s what it takes, until you just admit it.”

Was he really threatening sleep deprivation on a nine year old? I wouldn’t have taken it seriously if it wasn’t something he used on me.

I was trying to think of a way to get all of us out, right at that moment. I wanted to scoop you and your brother up so fast that your father couldn’t react. My foot twitched at the thought and I winced. Hearing your father openly threaten you turned my stomach. It was clear that he was using similar methods on me. I hadn’t seen it while it was happening to me- miss the forest for the trees. Hearing him begin the volley of accusations



thinly masked as questions crystallized everything.

The parting phrase from the divorce attorney I'd spoken to earlier crept into the forefront. "Call me *when* he starts hitting." Maybe it was a retcon, but the distinct emphasis on *when* was unmistakable. He'd believed me. He had. He was also certain that your father would become overtly physical. It was just a matter of time.

Was sleep deprivation just the beginning? If he could so brazenly threaten you in front of me, what would he do, what had he done, while I wasn't around? I still wonder if something didn't happen on one of those mornings I took your brother to his physical therapy appointments. I never found out what had happened the morning I found your father's classroom chair tipped over.

"I can't tell you!" was your response. You cried harder- sobbing with your chest caving.

His voice turned saccharin. The customer service agent was checking in. "Oh honey, well, who can you tell?" I don't know what he was expecting as an answer. What would have been an acceptable response? You didn't have any friends outside of dance and your brother wouldn't understand. That left-

"I can tell Mom."

Your father flinched. It must have felt like a leash being pulled away from his hand. This *was not* part of the script. He'd interrogated you before and you always caved. This evening had started out as a far cry from the usual protocol, but this, an act of defiance, didn't seem to be what he expected. The situation was slipping out of everyone's control. I knew I couldn't direct or deflect or neutralize that statement- especially not with your father's visible reaction.

"Fine." Your father settled his heated gaze on me. "You can tell *her*, but then this needs to be done and you need to go to sleep. I need to go to sleep- *you're* keeping all of us up, Fay."

Your crying halted, just for a moment. I think you registered that contradiction.

He turned to leave and stopped at the door, right in front of me. He casually turned his head over his left shoulder and said to you with a toothy smirk, "you know- your mother and I don't keep *any secrets* from each other so anything you tell her I'll know. So you might as well just

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tell me.” He turned his head forward with his nose up. He was sure that would work.

The sobbing returned. Your father grinned as he absorbed the sound of your crying from over his shoulder. He had you back in line. So, naturally, he turned around, took a few steps towards you, and started again.

It was 915pm. That was the start of round two of his interrogation.

“So. Just. Tell. Me.” he said. Your father was leaning over to look you in the eye inches from your face.

You tore yourself away from him and dropped to the floor. You wrapped your arms around your knees and tried to sob, but with your heart and lungs already exhausted, all that came out was a tiny cough.

“What is it that you can tell your mother that you can’t tell me? What is it? What do you feel *so guilty* about? When you just *confess*, you’ll feel better.”

You shuddered and found just enough room in your lungs for a breath. “I can’t!” Your cries had soaked your face completely- tears so thick it was almost impossible to see your little hazel eyes.

“Okay, Fay, I’m getting really hurt here that you don’t trust me. What did I do? I haven’t done anything wrong, so I don’t know what it could be, but since it’s obviously about me, I have a right to know!”

The only response you had, shaking and cowering on the floor with your father hovering over you, was to mouth “Help. Me.” in my direction.

For all his claimed powers of uncanny empathic abilities, your father missed that one.

“We’re done here.” I stated. I was trying to remain calm but my legs were shaking. I think the vibrations made it to my vocal cords. I firmly, but not too quickly, took a few steps and got next to you both, your father on my right and you on my left. “This is done. I’ll talk to her.”

Your father peeled his eyes off you and translated his face to me. I swear he didn’t turn his head. Instead, his facial features just willed themselves to travel along the length of your father’s skull into glaring at me.

He stormed off.

We didn’t say much. I got on the ground and just held you.



"I don't know what to do," you whispered through your tears.

"I'll take care of it, kiddo." I didn't know how. It was obvious your father couldn't know about what you'd said earlier that day, but he needed something. I wish I'd understood how powerless he was, but I can admit I was fucking terrified of him and what he might do to you if he found out. He already had it in his mind that it was your fault that CPS was called on him *again*. Knowing what you had hoped for during Agent Hermione's visit would have invoked a truly volcanic reaction. No one was ready for that. I was also piecing together what had happened to your brother on [REDACTED] [-82]. I am ashamed to admit I couldn't handle that reality.

Not Yet.

"Can you just make something up like I sometimes do?" you pleaded.

I gawped. "What do you mean?"

"Sometimes when daddy gets like this and tells me I'm angry or something when I'm not, I'll just make up something."

"Honey, why?"

"Because I just want him to stop."

I'd gotten pretty good at falling on my sword, and the failed trip thing still had a lot of mileage left. I hugged you close and tucked you into bed. Your father needed something, so I made something up- or maybe I just extrapolated a fragment of truth based on our talks that day as I went downstairs to face him while switching my phone into *record* mode.

"She's worried I'm going to try to go on another trip-"

"-and that we'll start fighting and get a divorce and then our whole world is ruined because of you?"

I let silence slip for emphasis.

"Yes," I responded.

"Fuck you. So, once again, you're the hero when *you* fucked up and *everyone* is mad at me? Fucking terrific." He threw something. I don't know what it was. It skittered across the tile floor and crashed into the wall behind the tv. I swear he initially aimed it at me and only changed direction at the last possible second.

I had nothing else to say. So, I just stood there looking down. This rage

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aimed at me seemed to soothe him. Your father's face softened and his breath became less weighted. I could see him thinking. He pressed his finger into his chin and pushed his head up by opening his mouth a few times. When he was done, he made a succession of "pop-pop" sounds with his lips. He sounded a like a fish lethargically gasping on the shore.

"Okay, that's good enough for now, but I swear she's lying to you now too! I mean, it makes sense she's worried you're going to try to leave us again, I'm terrified you're going to just walk out the door and leave my crazy ass here alone. But," he looked down in thought, "we can use this. I have an idea and you need to promise me you'll do it. Swear to me you'll do what I say."

I just nodded. He scoffed at me and then went on, "*you* need to make her cry. That's how I always know what's wrong with her when no one else, not even her therapist, can figure shit out. I make her cry. When she cries, it's like a reset or something and she just starts talking. This is bigger and for some reason she's trusting you. We need to show her that we're a unified front *against her* and you need to be the one break her."

"I'm not okay with that."

"Then what the fuck do you think we should do? Huh? What's your brilliant fucking plan? Be super mom while dad has to be the bad guy?"

"No- I just don't think-"

"I know! You never think!" and he cackled triumphantly. His face reflected the command for *happy and amused*, but his eyes didn't. He tilted his head back with laughter, jaw opened all the way, with a smile. His eyes followed briefly, but then flicked back at me. I could only see his right eye from where I was sitting. His face was looking up at the ceiling, mouth wide and frozen mid laugh- but his eyes turned 90 degrees to look at me. Something peered out, like something was wearing your father like a mask and looking through the peephole. I could only see the faint outline of a shadowy figure in your father's eyes.

He recovered from his self-amusement. "Just so long as we get to her *before* our anniversary weekend. Fay went and blabbed- I mean made up whatever she did to get her therapist to call CPS on me... so who the hell knows what the fuck she'll tell Amelia when I'm not around?"

You and your brother were going to have your *first* sleepover at the ages of 7 and 9 in a few weeks. Amelia had offered to have the two of you sleep over at her house recently. It took six weeks of planning for your father to okay it.





09: 98.8

██████████ -82

8am

You and your brother have often said that the defining moment, the day you both *knew* your father and I were headed for a divorce, was the first time you heard us fight. That was when the *diagnosis* was made. The day our marriage became *terminal* was ██████████ [-82]. My trip to see my friends was two days away. I was scheduled to leave ██████████ at 8:00am.

We had another visit with your therapist, Freya, via the remote med portal her office used. The session was to discuss the trip and whether I should go. Freya had seen you and your brother, in person, online, together and separate a handful of times since I'd booked my flight. This would be the third time I'd be meeting with her to discuss this and your father's second. The past two sessions had the same conclusion; me going was not only okay; it was something that would be very positive for the children. Your father had been told this- both relayed to through me



and directly from Freya. He clenched his fists and dug his nails into his palms when he was told the same information by Freya that morning.

He looked at the indents in his hands. As the marks faded, I could see some new idea taking shape on his face.

I will admit, your brother's allergies at the time were an issue if we let the regular Zyrtec slip for a few days. It hadn't. On that day, he had *no symptoms* of any condition. I need to make that point very clear; your brother was fine, as were you.

So, it shocked me when he blurted, "Mason has a fever!"

You'd think that declaration would have warranted a neck snapping head turn, but I didn't want to look at him. It felt like I was in a horror movie. The monster had crept up behind me. It could strike but it wants to wait until I'm looking at it. This monster thrived on fear.

"What?" your therapist asked.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

In front of Freya, your father cracked, "because I knew it would just make you upset! You'd blame me for it, and we'd fight and I don't want to fight about your stupid trip anymore! Mason has a fever, though..."

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For all her professionalism and years of experience, Freya's mouth dropped. I don't think your father saw it. She jotted something down and circled it a few times on her clipboard. Freya gathered her composure and said, "Well, if it's not a bad fever- so mild that you didn't feel the need to tell- "

"But what if he's contagious? I'll get sick and get it so much worse for me than everyone else and I won't be able to take care of the kids! She has to stay! She won't get sick! *She has to stay home and take care of me!*"

I was still a few steps behind, stuck on the fever declaration. *When did he take it? How bad was it? Did he give him anything to help? Mason and I were just playing Pokémon cards this morning.*

"Well, he doesn't have a *huge* fever, but he's at like 98.8." Your father said.

Freya stopped her note taking. Without moving her palm from her forehead, she turned to the previous page. She slowly re-circled whatever it was she wrote earlier, but this time with a slow and deliberate pace.

"I'll make an appointment right now!" your father beamed. He was cheerful, almost giddy. He tried to contain himself with little success. He tapped open his phone and jumped into the web app for your pediatrician- while the clock on our session with Freya ran. "There! We have an appointment for *both* kids to get tested for strep in two hours. We're so lucky they had an opening!"

That was the end of that appointment. Your father left the room quickly and announced that we were leaving the house in about an hour.

"I know it's kind of a long drive and it's scary but we have to get you both checked out!" The drive was less than half an hour, not quite thirteen miles from the house.

I was trying to wrap up a few things for work before we left. Your father came to the office door, walked in, and sat on the futon; hands clasped in his lap. "Are you really going to get on a plane when your children might have COVID?"

"but, they don't have any symptoms." Using that word felt dirty.

"*No-* don't you start- they're *sick!* They're going to do a [REDACTED] test and a strep test. The test will probably take a few days to come back. I don't think you're supposed to fly. The FAA won't even let you get past security if there's a pending [REDACTED] test in your house."



I nodded, avoiding a look in his direction. I was confused and concerned, but I didn't want him to see that.

"You're not going on your trip, and you need to wrap your head around that. Now."

9:15am

You and your brother were silent on the way down- no talking, no laughing, no sniffing, and no coughing.

"Why do I need to get checked out?" Fay asked.

"Because honey, you and your brother have fevers- you just don't feel it yet, but it's coming. You guys both have a fever 98.8, it might be strep, but it might be ██████."

No one said a word in response. Your father then turned around in the front passenger seat to talk directly to you both. As if the heavy pause was scripted, he added, "I know what you guys are thinking- don't worry." He then untwisted himself to look at me. "Don't worry- your mom *promised* she won't go if you guys feel sick enough. Does that make you two feel better?"

We were silent the rest of the way.

Your father entered the pediatrician's office with all the force of the leading actor walking on stage expecting a round of applause just for making an appearance.

"Okay, you two, go sit *over there* in the sick kid area," he instructed.

We went through the usual check-in -height, weight, and temperature. Fay, your temperature was 97.9 and your brother's reading was 98.1. "I know, but that's warm for them," your father chuckled at the nurse, "you can't beat a dad's intuition. You know how it is."

Your exams were simple and over quickly.

The nurse practitioner came in after looking over your vitals in the hall. "I think we've got two healthy kids here who might just need to up their allergy doses. I noticed on their charts today that they're in the next weight category for antihistamines. That might be why you're seeing symptoms- but it's just allergies."

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With any parent other than your father, this would have been good news. Your father didn't seem to believe the doctor.

"But they had fevers at home and I'm always right about when they're getting sick. Always. Can you do a strep test?"

"I don't think that's necessary. Neither of them complained about a sore throat and they looked clear."

"Oh, but I called it once before. A few years ago, their doctor didn't believe me and the strep test came back positive. *We never went to him again.*"

The doctor paused. From experience with your father, the doctor knew he wasn't going to let this go. The strep test, at least, was something solid and objective and we'd have results in a few minutes.

"Sure," the doctor sighed. "If it'll make you feel better." She opened the door to ask a nurse to get a few strep kits.

"Oh, and while we're at it, you can go ahead and do a [REDACTED] tests too," your father commanded with a thin wash of righteousness.

"I- I can guarantee you they don't have that," the doctor responded. "No fever, no chills, no aches- they're not even congested."

"Please, just do it. I'll feel a lot better- it's important we know for sure what we're dealing with."

No fever.

No coughs.

No complaints.

Clear throats.

This was before the [REDACTED] tests were readily available. Most tests were done through [REDACTED] sinuses to get a good mucus sample. Mason had one a few months prior when your father was convinced that he had croup. He instructed me to take him to a 24-hour pediatric urgent care at 10pm- after making and administering his home-made cough syrup.

That gave him some authority when he cried.

"I don't want to! I hate those tests!"



“But Mason, sweetheart,” your father said as he leaned over him. “In order for dad to know how to help you, we have to know how sick you are.” It wasn’t a concealed statement. He said it boldly in front of the staff and turned around towards the door with a look of expecting praise.

“We do have the [REDACTED] ones that are easier to do, but insurance doesn’t always cover them. I think they’re \$300 each.”

“No! I don’t trust those. I’ve heard they’re not as accurate.”

“That hasn’t been my experience. They’re just as reliable and you’d know in less than twenty minutes.”

“I still don’t trust them, but,” he turned to me and lowered his voice to a whisper. “If your stupid fucking trip is worth \$600 then go ahead. But if they’re positive I’m going to expect an apology and you’re going to have to prove it to me- it’ll be more expensive than the tests- I’ll fucking *nail you to the wall.*” He made sure his voice was low enough that only I could hear it.

“It’s fine. The regular ones are okay,” I said. The nurse and doctor left the room to retrieve the kits.

Your father whipped around and faced you two. “I’m sorry guys, your mother doesn’t want to pay for the other ones. I know the test she picked is a lot scarier, but it’s covered by insurance and your mom just didn’t work enough extra hours for her to pay for the rapid ones- but video games are a lot of fun for her so she didn’t work extra. I’m sorry, you two, but until then *I’ll* just treat this like it is [REDACTED].”

The strep test came back negative. The [REDACTED] tests would take at least 48 hours. Your father let out a sigh. He would assume it was going to be a positive result- just long enough.

1030am

“Who wants to go out for lunch?” your father exclaimed as we pulled out of the small parking lot. Of course, you both did. I didn’t say anything either way. I was trying to wrap my head around how we got from “they have a serious virus” to “let’s go out for lunch” in less than ten minutes. Do either of you remember that salad place we went to? Your father was so happy. He practically levitated through the ordering process.

You two sat on one side of the bougie indoor picnic table and he and I sat

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on the other. You were both so happy to be out of the doctor's office and done with the tests.

"Hey, you need to hold my hand. Be nice to me, okay?" he instructed me. "You need to work on being nicer to me and more affectionate."

On our way home, he reminded me we needed a few things from the grocery store.

12pm

I opened the trunk when we got home, while you and your brother darted off inside without a snuffle or cough. I unloaded the groceries when your father put his hand on my shoulder and tugged.

Your father was standing squarely between the trunk and the right side of the garage. I had two bags full of groceries in each hand. He put his forearms on either side of my neck and laced his fingers behind my head.

"Kiss me," he said in an airy tone.

A quick peck.

"No," he said. "Kiss me *proper*."

I didn't feel like kissing. I wanted to unload the groceries and assess you guys without him in the room. You hadn't shown any symptoms- either of you. I went through a mechanical emulation of how I thought he wanted to be kissed. I just wanted to go inside.

"No," he said, double downing on the airy tone. His hands were still clasped behind my head and his forearms were inching closer to each other with my neck in the middle. I felt the start of a squeeze around my throat. "Kiss me right! Convince me you still love me."

I tried again.

"Well," he pouted, "that's sad. Now I'm sad, but you can go."

1230pm

I went upstairs to get some work done and to salvage part of the workday. I was getting the sober inkling that I shouldn't go on my trip-



not because you two were sick, but because of how your father insisted you were. Either way, work was a welcomed diversion.

“You know, I think they might actually be okay,” your father said, leaning in the office’s doorway. “Maybe you should go- I mean, I don’t think you should, but maybe you should.”

I ignored him.

“Doesn’t Amelia have a copy of that stupid book you like?” She had a copy of my *favorite* book, in fact. It was a niche piece of horror [REDACTED]. I’ve probably tried to convince you both to read it a few times by now. I’d borrowed it from the library and told Amelia how much I liked it. She bought a copy but then decided it wasn’t for her and she offered it to me. It is still one of my favorite books.

“Yeah, I think so- why?”

“Why don’t you go get it?”

“Now?”

“Yeah, I don’t think you’re going on your trip, so it’d be good for you to have a book to read when you get sad about not going so you don’t take it out on me.”

It was rare he ever insisted I go anywhere. Ever. This is the same person who timed me when I went to pick up groceries. If it took longer than ten minutes after I’d arrived, he’d start texting me things like “what’s taking you so long?” and “tell them to hurry up!” It was also unforgivable to stop on the way to or from anywhere, groceries or otherwise, without him sanctioning the deviation in the plan.

Suggesting I go to Amelia’s was out of character, but I took it.

115pm

I texted your father when I arrived at his aunt’s house. Amelia knew just about everything that had happened, including your father pushing for tests. We sat at her kitchen table in silence.

“Something isn’t right,” I said.

“I know,” was all Amelia could say.





121pm

Your father texted me, "Mason has a fever of 101.3. Here it comes."

Then a minute later, "I'm scared."

And finally, a minute after that, "What's taking you so long?"

125pm

I headed back.

155pm

I was expecting a very different scene when I got home. With a low-grade fever from your brother, the house would have been chaotic. Your father would be furiously putting together a cocktail of essential oils in your diffuser and on your skin. I assumed Mason would be on the couch, barely awake, with a cold compress on his forehead. Your father would have shut the blinds on all the windows.

Instead, you and Mason were playing upstairs, and your father was playing his video game. The blinds were open. There was no evidence of a diffuser cocktail being made. He hardly looked at me when I came in the door with my new book in my hand.

"My friend Moira bought a security camera, and she's having a hard time setting it up. They have to leave for Tae Kwon Do soon. I told her you'd help," he said from the couch, hardly rustling his reclined posture.

"The one who lives just a few streets over?"

"Yup."

"Mason seems okay, and I know he and Moira's daughter are about the same age. Should I bring him with me?"

"What is wrong with you? He has a fever. Don't call me a liar."

"I wasn't- I just." I didn't finish my sentence and went upstairs.

230pm

You and your brother were playing upstairs just fine, unincumbered by any signs of illness. I will admit I didn't want to be near your father. Moira's house was just a few streets away, maybe a ten-minute walk. Had it not been for the summer heat, I probably would have gone on foot.

While I had been questioned within minutes of getting to Amelia's, your father didn't check in with me while at Moira's once. It turned out that Moira's original doorbell wasn't as incompatible with her new security camera as I was told. She seemed a little confused that I was over in the first place, but happily accepted the help. It wasn't difficult, just a lot of up and down a ladder and going outside to test the system repeatedly. It took just over two hours.

Your father never once texted me about your brother's fever while I was there.

The system finally came to life and worked as expected. The diagram from the box showed a very different wiring scheme than the one we found linked to her doorbell. Moira was very thankful. We even got it done before they had to leave for her daughter's Tae Kwon Do class.

I texted your father asking how you two were doing. His reply was just, "we'll see."

Then he asked me, actually *asked*- not commanded, if I'd be willing to swing by the fancy grocery store near the house, (*near* but not on the way home) and pick up something frozen to heat up for us after you two went to bed. He'd already made dinner for you guys and texted me you were eating. Not only was the way he asked rare, but it was also unusual for him to ask me to make any deviation from the path home, let alone one that wasn't directly on the way.

510pm

The house smelled like essential oils. The kitchen was a mess of used pots, half filled jars, used honey bears, empty shells of various essential oils, nearly drained bottles of olive oil, a few freshly cut and crushed lemons, and all the signs that this had been done hurriedly.

You and your brother had just finished eating and the three of you were



watching tv. I put away the few frozen things and took a moment to look over the mess. Your father was far from the tidiest person, especially since he knew that I always did the dishes, even after he sarcastically offered to do them. He'd walked into the kitchen just as I closed the door to the freezer.

"Did you see?" he gleamed at me.

"Umm- what?"

He groaned at me like an impatient child and said, "look in the fridge! I made a *huge* batch of it."

I opened the door to the fridge to find six jars filled with a viscous, cloudy yellow liquid: his homemade cough syrup. There was a seventh jar filled less than the others. It was in the fridge door. I noticed that while the other ones had distinct coloring, the one in the door was much paler.

"I already gave Mason a dose of it," your father said, briskly closing the fridge door in front of me. "So, don't give him anymore, okay? I'll give him another dose at bedtime while you get the diffuser for his room ready."

I took temperatures for you both.

98.4 and 97.8.

737pm

It was time to get you and your brother tucked in. Teeth were brushed, pajamas were put on, and nightlight diffusers were set up. We had a standard routine. You'd take turns in the bathroom for teeth brushing- your brother first since he was usually tucked in before you. That night was no different, with the exception that your father poured some of his cough syrup from inside of the fridge door for your brother to take after he brushed his teeth. I pulled the sheets and comforter over your brother and sat on the side of the bed. One of my favorite parts of the day was checking in with you both before sleep.

"I am really scared," Mason said.

"Of what?"

"I am scared I am going to throw up and get croup- I don't want to go to the ER! I don't want to stop breathing!"

A Pattern of Behavior, 2nd Edition

“Hey, buddy- you’re okay. You don’t have a fever and I haven’t heard you cough all day. What’s got you so worried?”

“I... ” he hesitated, “I just am. What if I get croup?”

“Well, then we deal with it, but you haven’t had an episode since we put you on that medicine for your stomach. Remember? You took it for a few weeks and that was that. It’s been almost two years. And buddy, you’re seven now- I know it was scary, but seven-year-olds don’t get croup. I think between that antacid and time, you’ve just grown out of it, big guy.”

“I am still very scared.”

“That’s okay, but whatever happens, we can handle it, okay? You’ll be fine even if you do get it.”

Mason shot up quickly and gave me a tight hug. I hugged him back. He didn’t say anything else. He flopped back down on his mattress, pulled the sheets up to his ears, and rolled over. I closed the door and walked down the short hall to Fay’s room.

“I’m worried Mason is going to get sick tonight!” You were in tears.

“Honey, I don’t- where is this coming from? Your brother doesn’t have a fever, and I just tucked him in- he’s okay, kiddo.”

“I don’t want him to go to the ER- I’m scared he might die.”

“Oh, honey, your brother’s okay. He’s too old for croup- is that what you’re worried about?”

You nodded and cried. I wrapped my arms around you and did my best to just listen and soothe, reminding you that everything’s okay. I repeated what I’d told Mason, “Even if he does get sick, he’ll be okay. We’ve got some really good urgent care facilities not even 3 miles from here, but I don’t think we have anything to worry about. I don’t think we’ll need urgent care even if he is sick. He seemed fine when I tucked him in.”

You needed a few more hugs and then agreed to go to sleep. I turned off your light and closed the door, then back downstairs to heat up dinner. All your father said to me, staring off at the tv screen, when I brought food over to the coffee table was, “Mason is going to get sick tonight. I can just *sense* it.”



905pm

I was putting away leftovers and tidying up the kitchen. The oils and items used to make his cough syrup needed to soak and the longer I waited, the harder they'd be to clean. I gave the pots a quick rinse. That was enough to get most of it off before it had a chance to cake onto the nonstick coating. There was a thin film of colorless liquid that remained and needed an extra rinse. Overall, pretty easy to clean. The hard part was matching up all the containers with their lids and caps. They'd traveled far apart during the prep for making the cough syrup. The only one I couldn't find a home for was a small yellow twist-on cap. It had a smooth texture to it and a depression on the top for easy opening.

1130pm

Your father and I went upstairs to sleep. Neither of you had made a sound since tucking you in, but your father repeated, "I still think he's going to get croup tonight."

No fever. No cough. No sore throat.

 -81

130am

I made it to the hallway before your brother said anything. He had opened his door with a violent crack. He was clawing at the base of his neck. His face was red, and he was crying. It looked like he was hyperventilating. There was so much spit in his mouth that he could hardly talk. The accumulation of spit looked like foam. He managed a few words to form a short sentence, breathing quickly and shallowly in between each syllable.

"I... I. Don't. Want. To. Get. Croup. I'm. Go.ing. To-" that was as far as he got. I hugged him, holding him just close enough to feel any signs of wheezing or the stridor he used to get with croup.

He had none.

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“Hey- buddy, it’s okay, you’re okay- you’re not going to get it. You’re alright, big guy. Just try to breathe with me, okay?” I didn’t know if it would work. I just needed him to calm down a little so we could talk. Then your father came out of the room, armed with the thermometer. He took Mason’s hand and hurried him back to his room, leaving me in the hall. He helped him onto his bed and took his temperature.

He seemed to calm down, so I went back to the room to put on clothes. Your father was back, leaning casually in the door frame, with no thermometer in hand.

“He has a fever of 103.1,” he said in a dry tone.

“Okay, glad I got dressed.”

“Why?” Your father snapped at me.

“Shouldn’t I be taking him to urgent care?” I felt *crazy* the minute I said it. It was a fever, but we didn’t know if it was manageable with over-the-counter options, but something felt wrong. Something didn’t add up, but then again, when Mason got croup, this was the usual pattern. It would come out of nowhere. Your father always knew it was coming, sometimes before symptoms, and he’d prepare his cough syrup to “get ahead of it.” I felt like an ass for doubting him this time. Mason was fine a few hours ago and the sudden onset wasn’t unusual, but the way you both were absolutely convinced he was going to be sick that night made me uneasy.

“Wow- way to freak him out. I’m glad he didn’t hear that,” he whispered harshly. “No, no, it isn’t that bad- let’s just try the homeopathic stuff first.” He was remarkably calm. The only time he seemed rattled was when he snapped that *why* at me.

“I think we’re a little beyond that. I’m going to get the Tylenol from downstairs. If it isn’t better in 45 minutes after that, I think I should take him.”

Your father’s hand went up so fast I nearly walked into his arm, barring the door. His other hand came up with a pointed finger. He pressed into my sternum. It didn’t hurt, but I shivered.

“No. You’re not.” Your father turned red. “I don’t want to- to upset his stomach with anything he doesn’t actually need- you don’t understand, you’re not as sensitive as the rest of us- glad you can eat whatever the fuck you want but some of us need to be careful- got it?” and he pressed a little harder into my chest.



"Fine. Half an hour. Where's the thermometer?"

"Why?" he snapped at me again.

"We need to track his temperature. I want to note the times. Where is it?"

"I dropped it after seeing a temperature that high and I just hugged him. The batteries fell out. Jesus, who the fuck are you? A thermometer maid?"

I ignored him and went to check on your brother. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, stifling tears. He was looking at the thermometer on the ground with ejected batteries nearby. I hugged him and slid off his bed to the ground. The batteries popped back in place easy enough, as did the cover. Thermometer complete, I pushed in and held the on button. In a few seconds, the display lit up. Whenever you turned this one on, it flashed the last temperature recorded before going to zero. With the batteries removed, the memory had been reset.

I was about to take his temperature myself when your father came in with a handful of homeopathic vials filled with little white tabs that dissolve under your tongue. Your father gave Mason a few tabs from *all* of them to "cover the bases" he said. I quickly took his temperature myself.

100.4 degrees.

I showed the readout to your brother first, and then your father. Mason gave a sigh of relief but your father immediately snapped, "you did it wrong! You always take it wrong. You never get it right."

205am

Your father took his temperature while I went to the bathroom. He said it was now at a 102- so by my count it had gotten worse, but according to your father's initial reading, it had gotten better.

I stood up firmly from the side of your brother's bed. He looked exhausted.

"Hey buddy- does anything hurt?"

"My tummy," and your father shot me an *I-told-you-so* look.

"He needs something stronger. Tylenol is less likely to upset his stomach," I said. Your father put up a hand to interject but I, far from character, cut him off with, "this isn't up for debate- I'm getting him Tylenol."

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It took your father just a split second to recover from that shock. He steadied himself and then screamed, in front of your brother and with you sleeping not fifteen feet away, "I never told you not to! Don't put that on me!"

I went downstairs and poured 10mL of generic Tylenol into a medicine cup. I handed your brother the little plastic graduated cap, and he drank it. Your father had a look of anticipation, like he was bracing himself. I can't emphasize enough how tired your brother looked at this point. He laid back down. Your father slipped back to the master bedroom while I stayed behind with Mason in his room.

208am

Mason vomited. He missed the trashcan in his room entirely. The air was painted with an acrid blend of lemon, tea tree oil, mac and cheese, children's unflavored acetaminophen, and something else that was reminiscent of bland soap. Mason coughed the last bits of throw up from his mouth with a tiny dribble of it coming from his nose. This wasn't my first time being in proximity to your brother's vomit. It was gross, but it didn't bother me. However, the faint hint of something that smelled like unflavored ChapStick or an unscented bar of soap was strange. The mac and cheese your brother had for dinner showed no signs of being digested. That wasn't necessarily abnormal for sick vomit, but there was an extra glossy quality to it.

"Oh... hey I feel better!"

He looked better. He sounded better, but a slow wave of panic crept in on him seconds later, like the burning sensation in his throat needed a short time to saturate his nerves. He put his palm over his chest, right at about his sternum and said in a raspy voice, "I think I have croup." There was some abnormal sound coming from him- and I didn't doubt that his throat hurt- that was a lot of vomit. I was sure his sinuses burned too, but it wasn't a normal stridor. This sounded like it was coming from his nose. His throat, although irritated by stomach acid, was not the source.

Between the vomiting and reported rising fever and now that, whatever the cause, he felt he was having a hard time breathing -it was time to take him to urgent care. I went back to the room to grab my phone before grabbing my bag.

"What are you doing?" your father asked me, repositioning himself in the



doorway, blocking my exit.

“Taking him to urgent care- fever, vomit, difficulty breathing.”

Something started taking over your father’s body. I don’t believe in spirits or ghosts, but if I did, I would have concluded that something angry had just possessed your father. His eyes went wild. Looking back on this a few years removed; I can say they reminded me of Fay’s eyes that time she had a night terror at Amelia’s- rem with open eyes.

Your father was frantic.

“No! You’re not taking my son away from me! No! Not like you did with Fay when she was a baby!”

I stared at him. “What?”

He reeled his anger in, “I- I’m sorry. I just don’t think we need to expose him to an urgent care.” He pulled out his cell phone and dialed the after-care line for your pediatrician’s office in one quick motion. He put his phone to my ear and let go. I grabbed it and continued listening. I left a voicemail. The outgoing message said we should receive a call in less than an hour.

245am

According to your father, Mason’s fever was holding at 102. He had taken ownership of the thermometer and wouldn’t let anyone, including Mason, see the display.

“The last thing anyone needs is for you to freak him out about his fever,” he said to me.

Mason seemed to feel better. He hadn’t vomited, and aside from the untraceable wheeze; he was okay. He wanted to sleep. He said his stomach was a little upset, but “okay enough” that he wasn’t going to vomit again. More than anything, Mason wanted to lie down and go to sleep. Your brother’s little body was exhausted. It’s easy to forget how strenuous puking is until you’re in the middle of the act.

We received a call back from the after-hours nurse line and I explained the situation to her.

“If he can’t hold down anything to reduce his fever, you need to get him

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to urgent care. They'll have something that'll help. Try giving him Motrin- but if he vomits again, take him. If he doesn't vomit, you'll alternate doses of Tylenol and Motrin until his fever fades. Get him here in the morning either way."

I got the bottle of Motrin from the downstairs cabinet above the coffeemaker in the kitchen. I handed him a medicine cup, the second time in one night, and he drank it smoothly.

He immediately vomited this time. The smell of cherry Motrin *almost* covered up that soap smell. I got him cleaned up- another shower for Mason and another set of clothes. The smell was sticking to my shirt too, even though I couldn't find the source- so I went back to the room for a clean one. Your father was waiting for me just outside the bedroom door.

"What are you doing?"

"The doctor said if he threw up the Motrin, he needs to get to urgent care."

"No! No, you're not!"

"He threw up *twice*. He can't hold the stuff down to help his fever."

Your father shook- a tiny, sustained convulsion that started at his knees and was seeping up into his hands. The wild eyes came back. I started for Mason's room. Your father *hopped* backwards to get ahead of my stride. He put his arms forward, palms towards me, fingers spread. If your father thought he had superpowers, I imagined this is what trying to shoot beams out of his hands would look like.

His voice was shrill. His knees had started to shake when he said, "We should all go! I'll get his sister!" The quick and almost spastic movements of your father were cartoonish- like he was pantomiming something that his subconscious found amusing.

"What the hell? Why? There's no reason to wake her- she's slept through this whole thing."

"NO!" he yelled- I was amazed that yell didn't wake you. "No! We have to be together! She'll be so upset with you when she finds out you took her brother away from her!"

"Isn't this one of the things you were worried about with my trip? This *exact* thing- how you didn't want to have to take both kids if one got sick- well, I'm here and I'm taking him."



He didn't say anything, but he used his proximity to Mason's room to his advantage. He didn't hide the question. We all knew what your brother, or any kid, would say.

"Your mother wants to take you to urgent care without your sister- don't you want her to go with you?"

"I want my sissy!" Mason excitedly said. His excitement curtailed that ambiguous wheeze.

I got into Mason's room and picked him up. I'd looked up the local urgent care- they were open. Your brother was clinging to me as I turned around the banister. Your father was standing on the second step, looking up at me. His eyes looked to be mostly white, with no pupils, and his whole body was shaking like he was freezing to death.

Your door was open and I could hear you diligently getting ready. If it meant getting your brother into urgent care, per the doctor's orders without any more delay, you could come with us. Something was wrong and we needed to get out.

"I'm ready!" you said, beaming with pride at how quickly you got ready for your brother's sake.

Your father rushed past me to grab his phone. While holding your brother in my arms, the three of us started down the stairs. A wave of relief rolled over me. We'd get into urgent care and they'd help Mason keep his anti-inflammatories down so they could do their jobs and reduce his fever. They'd listen to his lungs, throat, sinuses and diagnose that sound. Maybe, if he vomited again, they could trace that soap smell.

Your father didn't just touch my shoulder, he yanked on it, while I was holding your brother. On the stairs. I went with the turn and put my other foot down. I wobbled for a moment but steadied on the third stair from the top. Your father was gripping my right shoulder- his short nails making their presence known through my shirt. He twisted his face with joy. His jaw hung open with a toothy smile, looking down at the three of us. It was hard to see with a shadow coming from the hall light above and behind him, but your father's eyes were joyful. At least the wild movement had stopped and his sclera was mostly normal.

"Wait!" he said through his grin. He held up a little prescription bottle. "We have ██████! His cough sounds better- so it's just a slight fever! If we get him to stop vomiting, the Motrin will work! If it doesn't then we all get in the car and take him- *together.*" The triumphant tone was unmistakable.

“He only seems to throw up when *you* give him something, so I’ll give him the [REDACTED]. Let’s give it a chance to work before *you* go, exposing all of us to a disgusting urgent care waiting room.”

Where had [REDACTED] been this whole time? I didn’t know we had any left, but there it was- 7 little pills in a bottle with his name on it that meant the vomiting would likely stop. Although the timing was strange, the plan made sense. I wanted Mason to stop puking, but I also wanted someone to check him out. If he could hold Motrin down, his fever would drop and there’d be no point in going to urgent care. Your father walked him to his room and gave him a tab.

330am

You didn’t want to leave your brother, and you two asked if we could watch tv while we waited to see if he was done vomiting. I couldn’t say no. As soon as you were by your brother- even before the [REDACTED] had a chance to work, his color came back, his face wasn’t red anymore, and that faint wheeze all but disappeared. With your arm around him, everything was right in the world. You grabbed sleeping bags for both of you and setup in front of the tv. You guys were enjoying some cartoons I’d watched growing up- I think Mason picked the animal version of Robin Hood.

I was struggling to stay awake on the couch. It was about half an hour since Mason had his dose of the anti-nausea med. It seemed we were in the clear. I hoisted myself up to grab the Motrin bottle from upstairs. I had every intention of getting it for him as soon as possible, but I checked his temperature. Your father had left the thermometer at the top of the stairs.

Mason’s temperature was a perfect 98.2F.

He never held down anything we gave him- how did his fever break so quickly?

Before that, your father said his temperature was 102. That was 45 minutes ago. He hadn’t had anything, to my knowledge, other than a single tab of [REDACTED] about half an hour ago. I thought that maybe the medicine had an anti-inflammatory effect and we’d gotten a two for one. (Almost two years later I looked it up. [REDACTED] can *cause* a fever.)

The key was settling his upset stomach, just like when we stopped his



“croup” a few years ago.

I picked your brother up after changing his sheets again. You and your father were fast asleep downstairs. I tucked him in and set an alarm to call his doctor’s office as soon as they opened and laid down on the other side of the couch.

As I let sleep take me, I knew I wasn’t going on my trip. I put off canceling it for the moment. I planned on taking care of that after I called the doctor and had an appointment set up for Mason.

8am

I called the pediatrician. I scheduled a 1030am appointment.

830am

I called the airline. I canceled it. The flight was credited.

10am

Mason had slept quietly, with no wheeze since I’d carried him up. He seemed a little annoyed when I woke him just after 9am.

He was quiet on the way to the office. His little voice was slightly hoarse but already sounding better. We had one brief conversation.

“Hey Buddy, I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Me too, but I’m sad I have croup now.”

“Oh, big guy, I don’t think you have croup, but that’s why we’re going to the doctor. She’ll be able to tell us if it is.”

“Daddy said my stomach got upset, and that’s what used to cause my croup and that’s why I got it this time- my stomach.”

“What do you think got your stomach so upset last night?”

He paused and said, “I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s okay. Who knows? I’m just glad you’re feeling better.”

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“My stomach got upset because I was still really worried about you going on your trip.”

“I’m sorry, buddy. Are you still worried?”

“No, daddy said if I got croup you’d stay.”

At the doctor’s office, your brother’s lungs and heart were listened to- all clear. They inspected his throat for signs of irritation- slightly red, but the doctor said that was expected after vomiting a few times in one night. He has no fever and no cough. Finally, she listened for the telltale croup stridor and did not find it.

“With his history of croup, it’s possible he was heading in that direction, but I don’t see any sign of croup or anything like that. He sounds a little congested, so to play it on the safe side, we’ll do a single dose of a [REDACTED].”

While we’re there, I’m informed your [REDACTED] tests are back.

They are both negative.

215pm

I had canceled my trip. Mason had puked on me a few times. I’d been up since 130am running on two hours of sleep. I was exhausted in every sense of the word. Still, with nothing else to do, especially since I wasn’t going to see my friends and Mason was feeling fine, I tried to get some work done.

Your father was asleep in the bedroom. I think I woke him up when I started working. The office was what’s now the guest room, next to the master bedroom. He approached the office. For the fourth time in twenty-four hours, your father positioned himself in a way that I couldn’t leave the room without physically moving him.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“I- I’m just tired. I’m glad the kids are okay, but I’m sad about my trip.”

“I think the kids are fine. You can probably still go.”

“I canceled my flight this morning.”

“I never told you to do that- don’t you dare blame me! You know, this isn’t



all your fault. *Most* of it is, and I've just been reacting to your immaturity and inability to understand that we need you here. It's like 95% your fault." He stepped into the office and bent his knees slightly to make putting his arm over my shoulder easier. "Your trip isn't canceled. It's just postponed. I don't know why you're making such a big deal about this."

"Okay," I replied quietly.

"If you would have just listened to me, this wouldn't have happened. I told you from the start that this was never about you going – it's about how you handled it. You just expected me to take care of everything without a plan. You became this entitled white bitch... that's who you've been lately, even before you booked the trip. You used to love me and understand my anxiety. I don't know what happened, but I want that wife back... can you come back to me? With the trip a few weeks out, we can better plan it together."

"Sure- I'm just tired and sad. I let my friends know I'm not coming."

Your father stood up slowly, backed away from me, sat on the futon, and glared at me with disgust. "I just want to make sure you don't blame me for this."

"No- I don't know how you could have given Mason a fever."

"I wouldn't! Don't blame me! I didn't do anything wrong!" he yelled and raised the octave of his voice with each syllable.

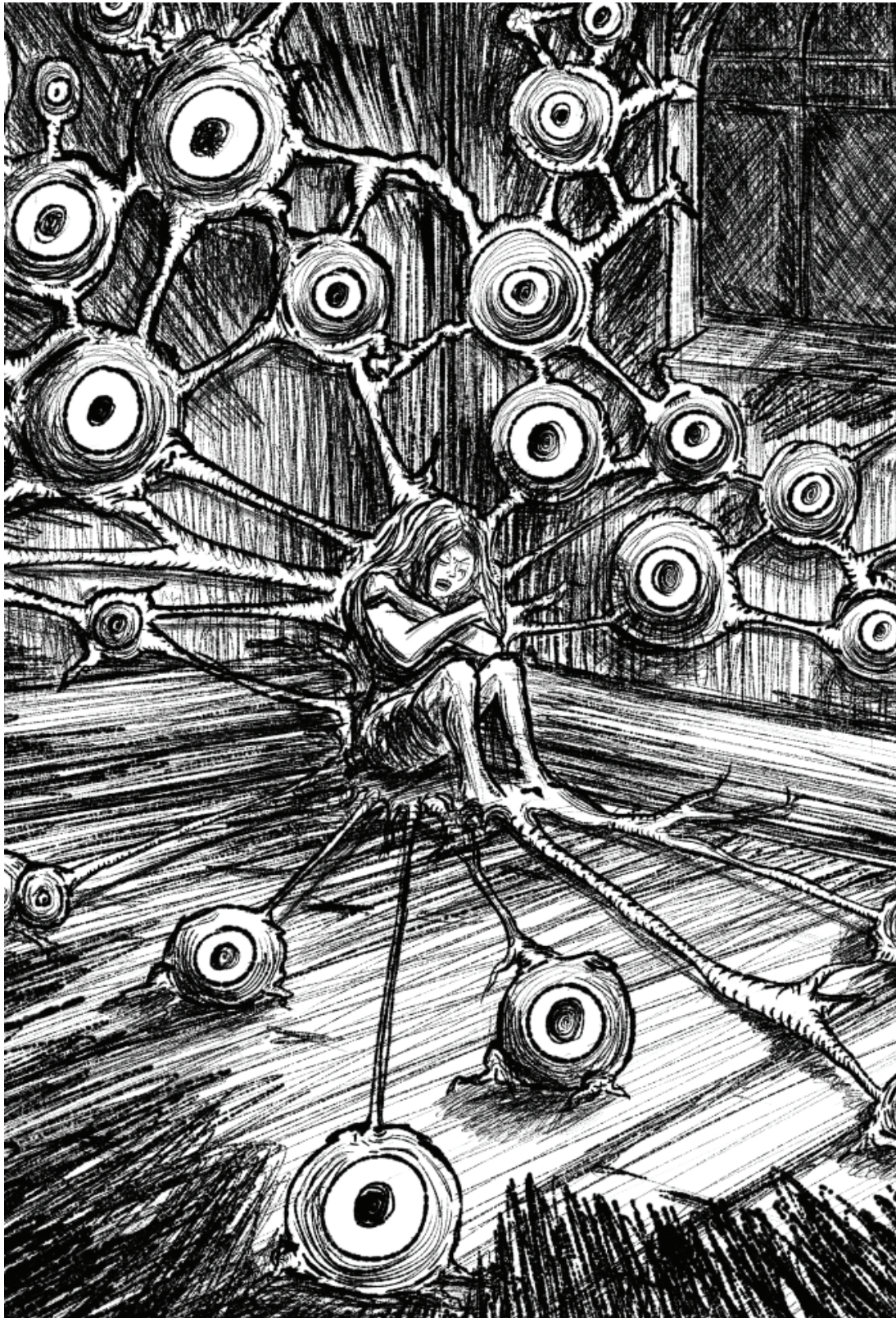
"I know," I reply and continue, "I'm just saying that I know, and that there's no way you're responsible for it." My voice was barely above a whisper.

"Okay, you know what?" Your father yelled at me and shot back up to his feet. "I'm just going to back off!" He retreated from of the office with his hands up dismissively.

I shrugged- I wanted to use his language against him, just this one time. I said meekly, "I think I'm allowed to be a little sad. I'm fine, just sad- which I think is fair."

I received a dead look for that statement- to which your father said nothing and instead walked stoically out of the office and slammed the door.

My dad called me. He'd heard from Amelia that I wasn't going on my trip. "Aw, hun what happened?" Hearing genuine sympathy broke me. I cried.





I knew I was tired, but I was also angry -despicably angry -at myself. All your father's words leading up to that moment came rushing back- and in that moment, I accepted them as true. The feeling crawled up my skin like a sentient black sludge, infecting every cell it crept over with a deep and twisted self-loathing. I had been fighting it off your father's words for weeks, maybe longer, and it finally had a foothold.

"I'm fine. Please don't ever call again. He was right about me." I hung up. A rage took over. Not at your father or my dad, but at me. In a frenzy, I deleted my [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED], and [REDACTED] accounts. I texted the friends I wasn't going to see that I was changing my number and to delete this one. It took me all of five minutes. Time was compromised and inconsistent. In that span, I believed everything was really my fault- that I had some undiagnosed form of autism and that I wasn't understanding your father at a pathological level.

I had to accept that I was the problem- because if it was him, even if only half of what I'd accumulated about him was accurate, then you and your brother were in danger and I was a fucking coward for not doing anything about it. I could fix myself. Either way, my conclusion was that I had no business communicating with anyone outside our immediate household. I was the problem, either as the root cause or for my inaction. I turned the need to document on myself and started recording. I don't know why.

Your father must have been standing just on the other side of the door. The moment I put my phone down from the mass deletion, he swung the door open. He lunged at me, reaching for my neck. I instinctively shot up, pushing my chair out with the back of my knees. He redirected and slapped his left hand on my desk inches from my phone. If you play back the recording, you can hear my phone rattle when he connected with the laminated press board.

"Who. Were. You. Talking to?" he demanded. He snarled at me and kept coming closer. This felt new. Was this the first time he'd so blatantly shown intent to hurt me? I backed away from him a little more. The adrenaline hit was instantaneous.

I didn't say anything but matched his advance with retreat. He had the advantage by keeping himself between me and the door. I could move into the corner he was pushing me towards. He moved closer again and reached out with his right hand.

"Please, just go- don't touch me."

"No," was his reply. ***"I'm allowed to touch you whenever I fucking want."***

This is for your own good.

I couldn't let him touch me. I can't explain why, but it felt like if he touched me, I'd die. I saw him as the source of the ooze infecting my brain with this self-loathing- *was it his self hatred infecting me?* I couldn't handle anymore and if he touched me, I might get further infected and that would be the end of me- a heart attack, aneurysm, stroke. Something. It didn't make sense and even during my panic; I knew that, but reason had been suspended. I tried to back up again but bumped into a filing cabinet.

"Please don't touch me!" I said firmly, trying to stabilize the shake in my voice. I may have raised it a little, but I was nowhere near yelling.

"STOP BEING SO FUCKING LOUD!" *That* was yelling. "I don't want the kids to hear you freaking out! Now, who the *fuck* were you talking to?"

I will confess that I sobbed uncontrollably. I had no ability to resist the tears or what was causing them.

"Please- please, please just don't touch me! I don't want to be touched!"

"Too bad!" your father shouted at me. Your father grabbed both of my wrists and pinned them behind my back. He was pressed up against me. He was simultaneously hugging me from the front and restraining my hands behind me like I was under arrest. Your father advanced himself onto me while pulling me backwards. I was just the conduit for his energy. His advances had backed me up against the wall. My knuckles tapped the sheetrock. I don't know if his clasped hands grazed the wall or if he was just aware of where he'd pinned me. Either way, his smirk unraveled what was left of my composure.

"Please stop touching me," I said between sobs. "Please stop."

Even in the best state of mind, I wasn't sure I could break his hold. In my current mode, it would be an even wilder struggle. Even in the throes of this acute breakdown, I knew that he'd capitalize any chance at making it look like *I* was physically hurting *him*. He'd warned me before that it would be easy to make it look like I was an unhinged hysterical woman, and he was just trying to protect *his* children. I was convinced that I was the problem and didn't want to make things worse.

"*Not* until you calm down and tell me who the fuck you were talking to!" He tightened his arms around me and strengthened his grip around my wrists. My hands began to tingle from blood restriction.



I started repeating over and over, “please stop, please stop, please stop.”

“Aunt Amelia is here!” You cheered from outside the office door. Neither one of us noticed the knocks you guys made trying to get our attention through a closed door or the doorbell. I wonder if you heard anything?

Your father let go of me and I dropped to the ground, sitting on the floor. “Stay here, no one is going to see you like this- but if you lock me out, I will call the police on you and tell them you’re suicidal and take the kids away. You’ll never see them again.”

Amelia texted me. *I need your help picking up a chair from a thrift store. I was in the area.*

I replied, *I’m on a call- it’s going to be awhile.*

I’ll wait.

I was stuck. There were a thousand eyes peering out of the walls, waiting for me to breathe wrong – to report to your father that I’d inhaled the wrong way. I needed Amelia to leave – I was convinced that if she pushed it, your father would eventually get her to leave, and I would never speak to or see anyone again. If she left before your father got suspicious, maybe it wouldn’t be as bad.

I heard your father coming up the stairs with just enough time to hide my phone. He slowly opened the door, as if checking on a sleeping infant. I was still on the floor, my knees to chest, in that corner. He made his way to me and kneeled in front of me.

“I’m going to touch you now.” I gently shook my head *no*. He placed his hand on my shoulder. I didn’t react to it- but I remember an intense burning and oozing sensation. “Amelia is here. Did you call her?”

I replied, “No- why is she here?”

“She says she needs your help picking out a chair from a thrift shop. You *don’t* have to go- I told her you were too busy to go anywhere, but she says she’ll wait.”

“I don’t know-“

“I’ll tell her you’re on a call and can’t.”

Your father went back downstairs. I steadied myself, splashed some water and dried my face. I was exhausted and could chock up any signs

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of tears to “sick kid, no sleep.” I wasn’t going to get any work done at this point and I had already planned on using PTO starting at 3pm to start packing.

When I got downstairs, Amelia told me all about the chair she was looking for in front of you guys and your father.

“I want a corduroy sort of suede thing. Maybe a light brown overstuffed short armchair.” I knew Amelia’s arrival wasn’t a coincidence, but when she started describing the armchair she already had sitting nicely in her den, I knew specifically why she was there. Your father completely missed it. I followed her out to the car. I buckled in and she handed me a cold coke zero and said, “Your dad called. I’m here to rescue you.”

5pm

We drove to her favorite breakfast place. That’s where we went. We talked. I texted my therapist about seeing her today. She had room.

No chair pickup- just pancakes.

Amelia would drop me off at the therapy office and you guys, and your father would pick me up. Amelia waited in her car until after my session.

I detailed the previous twenty-four hours for my therapist. I always felt safe in her office. She’d made a fake window out of a handful of slim profile report binder spines. She’d put a layer of aluminum on the wall and then put the binders over it. There were also a few light strands gently wrapped around a sheer drapery. She also never used fluorescent lights and instead had her own yellow/orange tinted light sources that were soothing. Did you two ever wonder why I had so much yellow light in my room for a while? Two salt rock lamps and a few fake flame bulbs make a low lighting condition that kept the room from resembling what it used to be. Your father couldn’t see very well in the dark, so poor lighting became a refuge, even when I knew he would never set foot in that space.

We went over all the technical terms for what happened and what I was feeling. I knew most of them but didn’t think they applied to me. My therapist disagreed and made a strong case for why.

The thing that stood out to me was what *your* therapist texted *my* therapist. When I let her know I wasn’t going and requested a session,



she carefully texted Freya that the parent of two of her clients just canceled her trip.

To which Freya replied, “because she’s married to, in my professional opinion, *a fucking emotional vampire.*”

After the appointment, Amelia didn’t wait around for long. You guys pulled up. She just rolled down her window and said, “thanks for letting me borrow her,” and drove off. I noted how odd it was that your father had gotten the car out himself and without a scratch. He didn’t even see as worth mentioning.

I wish that’s where it ended. I wish I had picked up you and your brother while you slept that morning before my momentary collapse inward. I wish I had taken you with us to Mason’s last-minute post vomit appointment and not come back, or snuck out the next morning while your father slept.

Things had to get much worse before I worked up the courage to leave.



CHAPTER 10: It's Supposed to Hurt

 -2

3pm

I think your father had decided, almost on the spot, when Amelia offered to have you and your brother stay at her house for a sleepover, that it would happen over the weekend of our tenth anniversary. This way, “we” would have six weeks to prepare *you two* for your first sleepover away from us.

Ever.

Before we left our house and headed to Amelia’s, your father said, “Okay, just so you two know- I will come get you guys if you’re too scared to sleep at Aunt Amelia’s all night. Okay? Even if you wake up and are scared because you’re somewhere new at like 2am, I will come and get you. Got it?” This was his refrain for most of the way down as well, despite how excited and “not anxious” you two were. Your father repeated this twice in front of Amelia as we were leaving. Your father missed it, but Amelia was taken back by that statement. She later told me it felt like your father was trying to convince you her house wasn’t safe.

“I don’t like this!” Your father snapped as soon as he got into the car. “They’re not supposed to be away from me. They’re not going to make it, though. I bet *you* have to go get them at like 1am.”

The plan was to look at furniture, go get food, binge watch something and get the kids at 10am the next morning. Amelia and you two insisted on staying until the *afternoon*, but your father was quick to point out that it was a school *night*.

He was unusually *fussy*. That’s the only word I can think of that succinctly describes the behavior. He was fussy. The difficulty didn’t start until after I vetoed an overpriced sectional. He then decided that we’d visit a few other furniture stores.

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When we arrived and parked at the next one, your father said, "I don't want to go in there, it's too crowded." On the way to the second one he announced, "I don't want to look at furniture. I'm bored."

"Okay, we've got all evening. What doesn't sound boring?"

"I don't know! I told you what I *don't* want to do. You figure it out."

I mentioned a few different museums and nostalgic video game arcades which were both immediately shot down. "Those don't sound like fun to *me*. I'm glad you think our anniversary is all about you." We settled on window shopping at several outlet stores and then getting food from his favorite Thai place.

Dinner was unremarkable except that we ate *in* the restaurant. In all the times we'd ordered out, the order had been for pickup or delivery. Eating there was a first.

"I just don't want to go home and them not be there," your father said defensively and unprompted.

630pm

The sun was beyond the horizon when we made it home. The plan was back on track. It was time for dessert and to binge watch something until bed. We agreed on which show but disagreed on whether we'd finish it. Your father wanted to watch the entire series, a short series with 8 episodes, each about an hour. That would put us going up to sleep at around 3am. I knew there was no chance I was going to stay awake and I knew from experience that your father needed to be in bed between 10pm and 1130pm at the latest to make it to his "sleep window" or else he'd be up all night. This would result in a horrible mood when teaching the children the next day- it had been my job to regulate his bedtime for at least five years at that point.

Except that night.

He didn't threaten or hint at the need to go to bed at a reasonable time. It was quite the opposite. According to your father, it was an exercise in futility to even attempt sleeping.



“You know I can’t sleep without them here, so *we’re* just going to stay up all night.” I knew he was serious about missing you two, but I didn’t understand that he was dead set on *not* sleeping. I don’t know for sure, but I think he had the medicinal means to make that happen. I chuckled, thinking he wasn’t serious about not sleeping at all. I wonder how different things may have turned out if I hadn’t chuckled. I think your father took it as a challenge.

Both of our phones buzzed and dinged at the same time. Amelia had messaged us both.

“Oh, my god they’re dead! I can’t look at it- you tell me! I’m getting my shoes on. Tell her we’ll be there in half an hour!” he said as he stepped *over* the coffee table and to the door.

“It’s just a picture. They went to a few stores, and she let them pick out a few things, see?” I held up my phone. Your father walked back, shoulders slumped.

“Don’t scare me like that!” your father said and punched my shoulder. It wasn’t very hard and it didn’t really phase me but it *was* the first time he’d openly taken any kind of swing- *I think?* He sat down next to me and we queued up the show.

Ten minutes into the first episode, your father paused and said, “Fuck- she didn’t tell me they’d be going anywhere! Oh my god- they need their vitamins- they weren’t wearing masks. Fuck, they’ve really got █████ now! I *told you* this wasn’t a good idea!” His tone was less erratic and more focused on chastising me. “Jesus, they went into two stores! I knew this was a bad idea!”

I reassured him there was no reason to think they were going to get sick.

“Wow, so you don’t give a fuck if I get it? You know it would be bad for me if I got it. Everything is so much worse for me than it is for you guys.”

On the surface, that seemed true. Whatever illness came into the house would take your father out of commission for days.

11pm

The tv episodes rolled on. I was struggling to stay awake. I asked about going up, suggesting that we probably should so we’re well rested when we picked you guys up from Amelia’s the next morning.

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“Let’s order pizza!” your father exclaimed. He took a large drink of water and slightly tilted his head back but less so than when he swallows his pills. I didn’t see him take anything, but I wasn’t watching that closely.

“It’s really late and I’m so full still- I don’t think they’re open this late?”

“████████ still is!” he reported after checking the hours on his phone.

“Let’s order! What do you want?”

I was so tired. I wasn’t hungry. I felt sick. I knew your father was a late-night person, but I didn’t understand how he had so much energy- like a second wind, when normally he was at least winding down. Not that night.

“I don’t think ordering pizza is a good idea this late. I... I think we need to go to bed at least soon.”

“Ugh, fine- you’re no fun- Jesus, you’re boring. This is our anniversary night! Why can’t it be about what I want for once?”

“How many episodes do we have?”

He paused the show and backed out to the info page of the series. We were halfway through episode 4 of 8- about four and a half hours to go if we watched it straight through and didn’t pause for food, water, or bathroom trips. That would make it at least 330am.

“I really don’t think there’s anyway I’ll make it through that many. How much do we have left in this episode again? Like half an hour?”

Your father scoffed, “Fine. We’ll finish this one and go up- unless you fall asleep.”

I fell asleep and woke up about halfway through the next episode. Your father laughed like a grade-schooler and said in a sing-songy voice said, “okay, we’ll go up after this one! Unless, of course, you want pizza?” I looked at the clock. ██████████ had closed about 45 minutes before.



[REDACTED] -1

115am

“Fine! Fine! We’ll just go to bed since that’s what you want!” your father roared. I had dozed off again. I didn’t know what episode we were in.

“What? I’m sorry- but yeah, okay, let’s go.”

He turned off the tv and headed for the stairs. I peeled myself off the couch, grabbed my phone and water, refilled his water, and turned off all the lights. As I went up, I found a few pills on the coffee table, hidden under a napkin and neatly ordered. They had been cut in half so that one segment just had an “A” on one side and what looked like an “S” cut in half from top to bottom. There were six half pills.

The house was calm and dark. I was relieved to be going up to bed. The wind shifted. There was a slight creak coming from the staircase. I heard a branch snap and smack the meshing on the exterior side of the backdoor. It held on for a few moments before gravity took hold and gently pulled the branch to the ground. It rolled down the backdoor and made a “tchk!” sound each time a rough spot on the branch caught the screen door.

It had squarely hit the center of the backdoor just as I was walking by. I stood there for a moment and watched. This was before I had installed the patio lights and solar tiki torches in the backyard- those weren’t until after we moved back. So, the view out into the backyard was dark. We didn’t have a porch light because our neighbors to the west had asked us not to run it overnight- it hit their bedroom window. Instead, we got a security camera for the backyard. Our neighbors directly behind us had a small incandescent lamp that mostly pointed down. Its light bounced around the thick orange glass cover and bled between the wood slats that separated our yards.

The wind picked up and the house creaked again- this time it sounded like it came from directly above me. I followed the stick’s path to the ground as I walked closer. I gazed out into the inky pitch-black backyard. Something moved. It looked like *it* was stuck underneath the support structures of the patio cover. That illusion only lasted a second as my eyes focused. It *was* above but also *behind* me from inside the house. It was the reflection of your father.

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He was loosely wearing an old robe- something he hardly ever did. His arms hung motionless at his side and shadow covered his face. He was looking down at me from the top of the stairs, leaning slightly forward. I didn't move. I pretended I didn't see him and was just looking out into the backyard. He stood like a wax figure. Other details were indiscernible, save for his eyes. The dark reflection obscured his face, the only feature that stood out as readable were empty circles on a visage that lacked a nose or mouth. I think he had walked from one of your rooms and paused at the top of the stairs as he was heading to the master bedroom.

The air conditioning made the familiar click-buzz-click sound. The unit in the attic eased to life and pushed air through the vents. Your father slowly stepped away. He pivoted to his right. As he did, I could tell he was gripping *something* in his right hand. I couldn't tell what. His thumb and index finger extended though, letting his other fingers grip whatever it was. He placed it in his robe pocket and, without even a small step *up* with his gait, he let his left leg trail behind him. He picked it up silently and slowly, exhibiting a degree of balance he claimed he didn't have.

I climbed the stairs. As I made the turn from the top railing, I could see that he had turned on *every* light upstairs- even your rooms. He had turned on the large overhead lights that were a part of the oversized ceiling fan; he had turned on my side table lamp as well as his. The tall reading lamp was on. The three light switches in the bathroom were on as well- the vanity, the overhead array of compact fluorescents, and the small recessed light in the ceiling above the toilet. My eyes took a minute to adjust, but through some quick squinting I could see your father was standing in the corner of the room on his side of the bed.

He was holding his shoulders with his hands and squeezing. The weight of whatever he'd placed in his right robe pocket swayed. He gritted together his teeth, which were visible through his tightly pulled lips. Tall eyebrows framed wide eyes focused on a point beyond the floor and into the foundation of the house.

Even though your father wasn't moving, I got the impression he was hyperventilating; he was holding his breath. He was posed and motionless, waiting for his cue like a robot wrapped in a foam latex made to look human on a theme park ride. I think he was waiting for my eyes to adjust and fully enter the room because as soon as I stopped squinting and gave him a look of confusion and concern; he came to life.

"I KILLED MY BABIES!" he shrieked at the top of his lungs. It was a deeply rooted gut twisting roar that was so violent I was sure he was



going to vomit.

“What?” I tried my hardest to sound concerned for him, but I was scared for you two. Was this a confession from the future- like he’d been visited by an apparition from a different time that manifested on the floor where his gaze was still locked, even after his howl.

“FUCK YOU!” he yelled. His body whipped from crushing his shoulders to gripping the bed sheets with one hand and pointing a finger at me with the other. “I told you this was a bad idea! I didn’t want to come up here, but you made me! Why didn’t you let me order pizza?” The tonal shift between his first scream to this was jarring. He was groaning like he was coming out of a drunken stupor and started crying.

Through tears he continued, “You knew I didn’t want to see their rooms empty but you don’t FUCKING CARE!” He ramped back up to screaming at me. “THEY’RE DEAD! Why don’t you understand that? They have █████ now because Amelia took them out and without me there to give them their vitamins, █████ is spreading inside their little bodies and there’s nothing we can do!” The quality of his voice was cycling up and down between shouting and crying, shrieking, and indecipherable words pushing through heavy sobs.

“I don’t think that’s-“

“THAT’S THE PROBLEM! *YOU* never think and now our babies are dead, and you don’t care! You don’t give a shit about me! Seeing their empty beds like this after the car wreck has been my biggest fear, and you knew that! That’s why you made me come upstairs, isn’t it? ISN’T IT!”

“I- the kids are *fine*. They’re with your aunt.”

“Jesus, pay fucking attention! That’s the *problem*. They’re not with ME! I’m the only one who can keep them safe! It’s all on me! You WOULDNT understand. It’s my fault because I didn’t think to pack their vitamins or think Amelia would be fucking stupid enough to take them anywhere! And it isn’t fair that because you didn’t think of it either- you put all of it on me! ALL OF IT! They’re dead- they’re as good as dead and now their rooms are going to be empty for-EVER! AND IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT!”

Your father stomped his feet a few times. The echoes felt like footfalls without form or body to produce them- ghostly reverb. He bent his arms and clenched his fists so hard his whole upper body shook.

“FUUUUCK!” He drew it out. It was a long-sustained scream and when he

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finished, your father darted to the bathroom to dry heave.

I texted Amelia. *Can you keep them tomorrow? He has lost his fucking mind.*

Before I put my phone back on the nightstand, I deleted the text.

Your father came out of the bathroom, wiping his jaw and mouth with his forearm. He was quivering and his eyes were locked onto the wall directly behind me. He wasn't really walking- it was a slower shuffle with a slight left and right sway. It reminded me of how he walked around the one-bedroom apartment after Fay was born. His hands shook as he raked them up opposite forearms towards his shoulders again. I was dumbstruck.

Run, I told myself, get out now.

Your father's phone rang.

It was Amelia.

She'd read my text and immediately tried calling my phone. I missed her call. So, she called your father.

The ringtone shook off your father's distant gaze. He answered with a calm voice- maybe he'd depleted his bank of screams?

"Hello?" your father asked as I slipped back on my shorts and top.

"Umm- hi," Amelia responded. "How- how are you guys? Everything good?"

"Yeah- why are you calling? Is everything okay there?" the shrill in his voice was rebuilding.

"Well... Fay was sleep talking and – and I don't really believe in this sort of thing, but it was about her mom. Is she there?"

"She's right here- why?"

"Can I talk to her, is he okay?"

"Why?" He was confused and offended at that. Asking if I was okay was absurd to him.

"I- I think she accidentally texted me and it auto-corrected weird and I wanted to make sure you two are okay. I called her phone a few times and she didn't answer." Your father's eyes narrowed at me. Now it was my fault. Now he could handle the situation.



“She’s fine,” your father responded.

He handed me his phone. His rage was mounting a return.

Amelia and I have gone over this so many times and her reasoning for calling was sound- and I’m glad she did. When we eventually recounted that night, she told me she had called the police after I didn’t pick up. Amelia said she sat at the end of her bed, staring at her phone after reading my text. She nudged Jack awake, too.

“I wasn’t sure if I should call the police or not, but...” Her voice broke as she told me. “I had to ask myself, really truly, did I think he was capable of really harming her? Even *killing* Stephanie?” She took a deep breath and steadied herself. “Yes, I believe he is.” So, she called the police and then called your father who handed me his phone.

“Hi Amelia, we’re okay here- what happened?” I pretended Amelia was telling me how you, Fay, had sleepwalked and was saying something about her parents being hurt. To which I responded, “oh right, yeah, Fay does that sometimes. I’m sorry it scared you. It hasn’t happened in a while. Yup, yup, no no it’s okay.”

“Is everything really okay?”

“Yeah, I know, I’m sorry... my phone was on do not disturb and I didn’t hear your calls. Yup, we’ll see you in the morning, okay?” I extended my reach across the bed to hand your father his phone. He swiped it out of my hand with a wide violent swing of his arm like I had stolen it from him. The anger was back and that heavy thing in his pocket tugged at the fabric and rocked that side of his robe back and forth.

“WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?” he asked.

I positioned myself to take the blame, hoping it would diffuse the situation. I didn’t know what to do, but again some part of me whispered, “run.”

“It’s my fault- my do not disturb-“

“No shit, sherlock!” We were standing across from each other- opposite sides of the bed. My side was closer to the door. “I was *almost* feeling better about this. I’d made a plan of what vitamins they’d need to at least slow the virus down before we can get them to the ER tomorrow.”

“The ER? But-“

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“NO! NO! You DON’T get to question ME! Not after how badly *you* FUCKED UP TONIGHT!”

I just stood there- I was blank. He let me know that lack of response was not acceptable.

“I am going to fucking murder you in your sleep. I know how to do it. We have the fucking sleep apnea report that’s really just shit, but I can use that! You fucking keep that in mind, bitch! You piss me off so much that I’m really thinking I could just kill you in your sleep and collect the fucking insurance money. My life would be so much easier without this shit.” Despite the threats and swearing, he was calm. This was the same voice that threatened to “throat punch” Fay weeks prior. It also had a thick quality to it- oil dripping down his chin. For just an absurd moment of terror and unreality, I could almost see the black ooze form from air creeping out of his mouth and intelligently creeping towards me.

He placed his hand in his robe pocket.

I’m leaving now.

I’d asked my therapist a few times how I’d know if the time to go ever happened. She said that most people in this situation tell themselves, “I’ll leave after the next one,” but the next time happens and then they say, “this one wasn’t so bad- the next *bad* one I’ll leave.” She explained that there’s no real metric for it- you’ll just know.

When he was done threatening me, I looked at the floor and turned towards the hall, feigning a sulk.

“Oh, where the fuck do you think you’re going? Don’t you fucking act sad! This is your goddamn fault! They’re dead because of you! And if they die, why the fuck are we alive? You know that fear you had back in Albuquerque? That ‘death’ or something was coming for you? Well, guess what fucking cunt-face if they get sick, so much as a fucking sniffle, that *thing* is me.”

I didn’t look back. “I need some water,” I said, just above a whisper. If I hadn’t recorded his threats, I wouldn’t have trusted my memory. But there it was. *The* threat, but not the last one. This one made it clear violence and harm to me or us were inevitable- if he could threaten me like that, what would he say or do to you guys? What had he done?

The car is in the garage- he isn’t dressed so he’ll at least put on pants. If I’m in the car and start right when I open the garage, I should be able to get



out of the driveway before he can get downstairs.

I nearly collapsed going down the stairs. My knees were trembling at an uncanny rate. My adrenaline had gotten the word- it was time for flight. I quietly put on my shoes and held my breath as I entered the garage. The keys were already in my pocket. I twisted the handle on the doorknob when I closed the door behind me- as if your father, all the way up in the room, could hear that tiny click. I didn't want to take any chances.

He heard the car door; I think. Because the garage was so narrow, I had to make sure the door was closed all the way and used a little force. I knew in my trembling state I needed as much grace as possible to get out of the garage. My arms shook so hard it felt like the whole car was vibrating before I'd started it. I wonder if he thought I was going to start the car without opening the garage. If he did, was he hoping?

I sat for a moment in the seat- and that may have been the undoing of my escape.

Just get through this- get to the kids- just get through this. You have to, I told myself. I inhaled and held my breath and opened the garage. The gears lurched to life and groaned.

Shit, I thought to myself. I'd started the car at the same time as I'd planned, but the sound of the metal door curling into the garage ripped through my chest. It was so loud. It took that door, on average, about 11 seconds to open enough to get the car out but needed a full 18 seconds to open completely. I knew from experience that it took me a hair over 17 seconds to make it from the center of the room, down the stairs, and to the garage door. Your father timed me once because I claimed casually that it took me a *minute* to get downstairs to the garage to bring in his haul from Target.

The bottom of the folding aluminum door squeaked by the lowest possible clearance for the car. I took my foot off the brake pedal, and the car rolled back. I got the car completely out of the garage and about halfway down the driveway when your father flung open the front door, bypassing the garage and the need to squeeze by the car as it exited.

He bolted, barefoot, across the grass and got *behind* the car. He put arms out wide and then smacked the trunk, keeping his arms extended like he could push the car back in to the garage.

"Where are you going? What are you doing?" he cried. He seemed confused and frightened. "Please, please let's just go inside and you can explain what's happening to *me*, okay? I love you- we'll figure this out, okay?"

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I rolled down the window. “No, I need to go. Something isn’t right and we need help. I can’t do this alone,” was my response. According to the manifesto I found from your father later, I think he heard that as, “I need help,” like I was having a breakdown but still aware enough to call it.

“Then you’ll have to run me over. Go ahead.” He was squarely behind the center of the car, leaned over onto the trunk slightly, placed he folded arms on the lid, and eased his chin onto his propped-up fist. His face twisted from fear to *I fucking dare you*.

I got out of the car and stood between the driver’s door and seat. I said, “please, just move. I can’t keep doing this.” Your father cocked his eyebrows at me, double downing on his *just you fucking try* gaze.

“Let’s not do this in front of the neighbors at 3am, okay? Please, just come inside and we’ll get through this together,” his demeanor of deep concern was back. “I’m not moving from here until you agree to go back inside.”

I crumbled. He would stand there and let me knock him over, but he knew I never would. It wasn’t a stalemate. It was a checkmate. One of his trump cards was pushing me into a corner where my options were to submit or hurt him. I’d have no chance legally. There would be no path forward for me and the kids if I literally ran him over to get to them. So, I folded.

“Okay,” I said.

“Put the car back in the garage.” He flicked his wrist dismissively, like telling the kids to go outside and play. “I don’t need you trying to run off on me again.”

I complied and your father kept pace with the car, never more than a foot or two behind, until I put the car in park, turned off the ignition and got out. He waited for me to go back into the house. He came in after me and locked the door behind him.

The hit didn’t take- I never felt it. At least, I don’t *recall* feeling it, but I saw his hand come at me from the edges of my vision. I turned around just before he arched his arm to swing. His open palm connected with my face mid turn- halfway through his arc. I do remember the sound, though. It sounded like a drawer, loaded with utensils, hitting a tiled ground. I don’t think I recoiled but I lost my balance a little. He shoved me into the wall with his entire weight. That I felt. That I remember. My head bounced off the sheetrock and the ripple of energy raked through my sinuses. The pain started in my nose, rattled my skull, and I slid down to floor with my back on the wall.



“LOOK AT WHAT YOU MADE ME DO!” he bellowed as I righted myself. As soon as I stood back up, he pinned me to the wall with his right forearm and an outstretched finger from his left hand, digging into my right shoulder. “I can’t fucking believe you! What the hell was that? Are you trying to embarrass me? Oh my fuck- that’s it! You couldn’t handle that *you* made a mistake with your goddamn phone- granted, it was a big fucking mistake, but *you* made it and couldn’t handle that I called you out on it- so what? You were going to go to Amelia’s to embarrass me? To make *me* look crazy to that side of the family? They’re *my* family, cunt face- so don’t you ever try that shit again or you’d better be prepared to run me the fuck over because next time, if you don’t, I will *end* you and don’t you *ever* fucking forget that. You have no idea how easy it would be.”

“Go sit on the couch,” he ordered. My escape was over. I was stuck. I think the worse part was that I chose to stay trapped. It was that our hurt him bad enough he couldn’t stop me from trying. There was no way anyone would believe me, I feared, even with all of my notes and recordings, if I made a break for it and hurt him in the process. I know how little sense that makes now, but at the time it felt like an unshakable truth.

I sat on the couch- in a hazed mix of adrenaline, fear, exhaustion, and trying desperately to reconcile what had just happened. I couldn’t handle the issue being him- that would mean not leaving was wrong. I couldn’t accept that I may have been so close to getting out, only to have it ripped away. It had to be my fault. My mind rejected reality, but just before I sat on the couch, I moved my phone into recording mode. It was like my hands knew this incongruity was inevitable and I would need to reconcile where or how it was going to be my fault. It felt so much safer that way.

The recording isn’t the clearest but this is what I was able to piece together.

“It’s me,” I whispered.

“What? What was that, my love?” your father dotingly asked as he reached from his seat on the couch for my hands. He held them gingerly, and said, “Yes, I’m glad you can see that now. Okay, we’re going to be okay.”

Ooze. Black ooze from his fingertips. I shuttered.

“Wait- did you-“ the haze faltered, “did you *hit* me?” I asked.

He threw his hands up and folded his arms as he sat back on the couch. He tucked his lower left lip under his top teeth, shot his jaw forward, and shook his head in disgust.



“Wow- just wow. You nearly ran *me* over and now you’re accusing me of hitting *you*?” He scoffed and stood up. Your father started pacing in the front of the tv. “*YOU* were so shaken by whatever the fuck was going on in that high-functioning-autistic brain of yours, that *you* slipped on the door mat on your way in from the garage. You face planted into the wall- I helped you up. Seriously, fuck you, you know what? I thought we were getting somewhere! Fuck you, I’ll just leave. Yeah, I’ll go get the kids right now and you’ll never fucking see them again. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“No, please,” I said faintly. I knew my head hurt. Was my memory that far off from what had just happened? To this day, I don’t know. I didn’t start recording on my phone until after- when I was heading to the couch. Even then, it would have just been audio. *Not enough*, according to the attorney I’d spoken to a few weeks prior.

“No? No? Why shouldn’t I leave you, bitch? Why shouldn’t I go to Amelia’s right now and leave your crazy ass here while I drive with the kids to my cousin’s place in Utah?”

“I- because I’m sorry-“

“Prove it to me. Show me you’re sorry.”

My phone had an enormous storage capacity- I think it was about a terabyte. That morning, my it recorded nearly five hours of lecture.

1030am

With the sun well up, your father ordered me to bed. I obeyed. Is it possible to be emotionally punch drunk? I was confused. Everything hurt, especially the left and right sides of my face. As I stood up, the wind from the overhead fan pushed a folded piece of paper a little left of where it was. It was covering the pills I noticed earlier. It was down to one half tab left.

At 1135am your father came upstairs and told me it was time to come back down. He’d ordered food and it would be here soon. “Sit back on the couch. I’ll bring us food,” he commanded as he walked to the front door.

I obeyed.

He opened the door and retrieved breakfast. He had a spread of [REDACTED] waffles, eggs, bacon, a [REDACTED] biscuit, and some fruit.

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“Here,” he said as he slid a cylindrical container of oatmeal over to me. I stared at it for a second. I wasn’t hungry, but I thought maybe food would help cut through some of this fog.

“Oh, fuck me,” your father scolded, “that’s what you said you wanted! Don’t you remember? I told you to get more, but you’re doing that fucking ‘oh I’ll punish poor me’ and not eat fucking routine.”

I didn’t say anything in response. I didn’t remember food being ordered. I don’t remember saying anything about oatmeal.

I place my phone at the center of the coffee table. Your father continued unpacking breakfast and as he did, my I recorded him saying,

“You say you love me and would never hurt me- can I be completely honest? When you make me feel like I am losing my mind, that I did something- that I did something I have no recollection of doing- like hitting you last night- like it makes me wonder why I’m here on this earth! It makes me wonder why I’m still doing this- *you make me wanna blow my brains out*, Stephanie! Like, you get that right? Like- *you* make me want to die. And honestly, I am like 99 percent sure that’s the way I’m going to go out because it’s – you know- gonna be on my own terms. You get that, right? I mean- aw well shit, they forgot my syrup.”

1pm

It continued. My bones ached and my eyes hurt. I was sobbing, a combination of fear and exhaustion. My head still hurt.

How did that happen? I slipped, right? No- that’s why the front of my face hurts. Did he push me? No, no, that couldn’t be it.

“I’m going for a walk. If you’re not here when I get back, I am calling the police and telling them that you were threatening to kill me and must have fled when I ran away to call for help. Got it?”

Your father left me there- he knew I wouldn’t leave. He’d taken the car keys with him on his walk when he left through the front door. I could hear him starting a conversation with someone on his phone as he bolted the lock, but the sound was muffled behind the solid oak door and out of range soon, anyway.



I noticed that when your father stood up to go for his walk, there were no pills left on the coffee table.

I just sat there.

Amelia called me. I didn't answer. My dad called me, I answered, didn't say anything, and hung up. I didn't know what to say. It felt like my brain was trying to reformat itself into believing everything I had been told, but some tiny sector resisted being wiped and re-partitioned.

I don't know how long he was out of the house.

The front door deadbolt clicked, and the door eased open. Your father stepped in. He had this smug look of self-assuredness that resembled Hugh Laurie's Dr. House *character*. Was this the end of the episode? Had he figured *it* out? What was wrong with me?

I begged him to *let me* go for a walk. I understand how preposterous this sounds, how absolutely insane it is that I would both ask for permission and respect his firm "no" as gospel. He nodded to himself and walked into the kitchen. I heard some opening of cabinets and the sound of the microwave running. He didn't say anything. The appliance dinged, signaling *something* was done cooking. He opened the freezer.

"You know the best way to snap someone out of a psychotic episode?" he asked lightly from the kitchen. He left the kitchen and stood behind me as I sat on the couch, with his chin digging into my right shoulder with his lips by my ear, and said, "a jolt." He pushed air out of his nostrils.

"The shock from this will snap you right out of whatever mental breakdown you're having." [REDACTED] produced two groups; a series of hard ice packs frozen solid and a heating pad that was steaming, even in this summer heat. He held out his arms from behind me, hands encased in oven mitts. In each hand were a few "hot and cold packs"- the kind that could be either. He had a smile in his voice when he commanded a gentle whisper into my ear.

"A hot jolt," he said and motioned with his left hand, "or a cold one- pick. *You* have to pick."

I motioned to the hot packs. My Raynaud's disease made that an easy call.

He came to the front of the couch and placed a hot pack by each of my feet.

"Put them your feet on them. *I* will tell you when you can remove them."

"No... no I- that'll hurt."

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"It's supposed to hurt, and this is how you prove to me that you love me. This will help you snap out of this shit. Do it and prove to me that you still love me and that I shouldn't walk out this fucking door- now."

I put my feet on top on the hot packs.

He'd placed the frozen ones at my feet instead.

At first, the cold wasn't bad and my adrenaline kicked back in- my heart started pumping and the fog lifted a little. I looked up at his vacant stare- no; it wasn't vacant, he looked *hungry and excited*. I removed my feet.

"No! No! No!" he alternated smacking my knees with his hand as hard as he could at each syllable. It reminded me of the sound I heard when my face planted into the wall. "You keep it there until *I* say you're better. *You* have to do it."

He dropped to the ground and put my feet on top of the ice packs with his gloved hands. In another swift motion, he pulled out two more frozen packs and slammed them on top of my feet. "This is because I love you. I am trying to make you better!"

"Please-don't touch me, I- this is hurting." My feet started to go numb.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes." The numb was giving way to firey pins and needles.

"Will you *never* pull shit like this again?"

"Yes"

"Yes, what? Say it."

"I don't... I don't know what... I promise."

"Tell me you love me." Cold fire. That's the only way I can describe it. My skin was turning to ice and my veins and nerves and tendons were cracking as they turned.

"I do. Please stop."

Per the recording, about 90 more seconds went by before he stood up and released me.

"There, do you feel better?"



“Yes.” I lied. Lying was safer. I didn’t love him and I felt worse. My feet burned. They were a dark purple and red.

“Good, keep it in mind that the next time you fuck up- actually, two things. One, I’m the only one who knows how to fix you and two, the next time I suspect you’re thinking about pulling shit like this, I am packing up the kids and you will *never* see them again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And you know what- if you want *me* to stay alive, stop making me mad. It’s that simple.”

3pm

Another recording of your father:

“You know what? I know I’m a crazy person, I know this, but I’m not going to do anything about it. You knew what you were marrying. You can just deal,” he said to me as we got ready to pick you and your brother up from Amelia’s.

“Can I trust you to not do anything stupid?” he also asked.

I slipped a text to Amelia before we left:

Please, just act like everything is normal.

We’re coming to get the kids soon.

I deleted it as soon as I sent it.



11: The Very Last Threat

██████████ 0

840am

We left that morning after your father threatened you and your brother for the last time, at least in my presence. I was firm about you coming with us to your brother's appointment and even more so after you begged me not to leave you alone with your father.

Your father glared at us. His glare shifted around the room- at you, at your brother and at me. He rushed at me and got close to my face while his twisted with absolute malice. He made a fist like he was going to punch me. He pulled his elbow back- in front of you both. I didn't flinch. I stared back at him blankly. Mine was an empty stare from someone he'd emotionally gutted. It was the stare of someone with no more rope to give and I think it scared him.

I think he knew. I think he knew it was over, or at least that the cord he had around my neck was freyed. He twisted up his visage one last time and yelled inches away from my face.

“Yeah? Well, fuck you! Fuck her!” ■he yelled, pointing at you, Fay. “Fuck this family!” He swept his menacing gaze across the room, like a teacher showing the pictures in a book to their students. As he stepped towards the stairs, he screamed, shrieked, and coughed out, “Why are **we** even alive anymore? Fuck this- I'm done, I'm done waking up in the morning- *we're all* done waking up. Fuck you all.”

He marched upstairs, and made his way to the room where he kept the gun I didn't know about.

We left for your brother's appointment, and I called the police.

12: The Family Law System

██████████ - ██████████

I had over 40 pages of notes. I had *hours* of recordings, all neatly organized by date. I had screenshots of emails and text messages. I had notarized statements from *three* different mental health professionals. I used my experience in ██████████ to craft an 8-page thesis for mediation on *what* had happened, *why it had*, and *how* I thought best to move forward. I had it reviewed by three different attorneys (mine and then two others with no knowledge of the case). I took their input seriously and revised.

But *your* attorney, kids, had already decided. For all my efforts and hours researching cases for legal precedent, she never once glanced at my prepared pdf. She scoffed at the idea of it.

“This is an unfair advantage she’s using here, and it really just supports the father’s position that she made the whole thing up to make him look bad and *win* custody.” That was the first thing your attorney said to me when mediation started in our sequestered digital conference room. Your father and her attorney were in another room, but even from the vantage point of my chair, I could see your ██████████, ██████ attorney, and your ██████████ sitting squarely in the same corner.

Your attorney, ██████████, talked to *one* therapist that your brother had seen for a single session. She then talked your father, and then me. She met with you and your brother a handful of times. I had multiple people lined up, begging to talk with her. Some of them were experts. I think they better understood the situation than I could have. They were ready to explain their position and how their field of study applied to the case, and the conclusion that your father was a danger to himself, me, and especially you two. Aunt Amelia was someone who wanted to talk to your attorney, but never did, despite Amelia’s attempts to reach her over the phone. Your therapist, ██████████, also tried to schedule a meeting with her, but your attorney dismissed her and anything she had to say. Your father had told ██████████ that I had manipulated Freya into turning you guys against him.

And she believed it.



██████ must have decided about me within the first few minutes of our single, brief, less-than-an-hour long conversation. I was a mom who'd fled the home with the children claiming abuse that could never be legally substantiated in Montana. I know my attorney provided Mercy with some of my recordings and notes, but she decided it was a one-off occurrence. She didn't see it was part of a much larger pattern of behavior that had been escalating for over a decade. She looked at a finite window with blinders obscuring the notes that included hospital bills for your father's postpartum stay in the mental health ward in ██████.

She never considered the night of ██████ [-82] or what it implied your father was capable of. Any suggestion that he abused me, physically or otherwise, was also dismissed, despite all the recordings, notes, and affidavits. She dismantled the accusations of abuse towards you two as either "Mom doesn't understand what Dad is going through" or "Mom made it up to make dad look bad."

This is where your attorney failed you. She seemed to accept that the situation was complex, but never thought it necessary to treat it that way. The flow of evidence was constant and something she saw firsthand. Her willful ignorance *borderline* ██████ malpractice.

Early in the divorce process, there was a conference to discuss how we were going to proceed until everything, including custody, could be finalized. Your attorney drafted a concise four page called "██████████████████" that reframed the temporary restraining order on your father. I read it the night before we were to appear in court.

I saw ██████ in the hallway the next morning before we were to start.

"I read your document- you're the expert and I agree. It sounds good. I'll sign it right now."

She nodded with a cocked eyebrow, with a hint of disgust. She mistook, I suspect, my compliance as patronizing. I was sincere. I had a few concerns about her proposal, but you and your brother were to remain with me a majority of the time- even though neither parent was named conservatory- and that was good enough for me at the time.

It was clear your father did not share my position in trusting the experts (although I regret hiring ██████ now). I offered to sign the proposed orders on the spot at the start of our meeting at 9am while your father argued for six hours.

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Six. Hours.

Your father fought and argued and nitpicked. He made ridiculous demands dripping with entitlement.

And at the close of our lengthy session, the document was *unchanged*. This was first example I had hoped your attorney would recognize. Your father took *every* opportunity to argue and drag things out. I claimed my trust in what your attorney said as a platform to suggest that I didn't care about you two. If I argued and fought back, he just got louder. If I conceded, even though I was agreeing with the court, he proclaimed I was uncaring and uninterested in your wellbeing.

For all the arguing he had made that first day in court, *nothing changed*. ██████ dealt with it firsthand and never connected the dots. To her, your father was "just angry at mom because of the power play she made and he's understandably going to be a little difficult."

Her blatant sympathy for ██████ was criminal.





13: Resolve

I think it's astonishing that even after years of being away from your father, I'm still unpacking the effects and behaviors rooted in the abuse we all carried from him. Sometimes, all I want is for someone to listen. I felt like no one heard my story. My lawyer tried, but I don't think she knew what we were dealing with. I still get a little choked up when I tell someone the story for the first time.

Will they believe me? Do I sound pathetic or like I'm pandering?

People still ask why or how. Why did I let this happen? How could I enable [REDACTED]? Why did I put up with it? I'm sure that some of you reading this don't understand how I could have been *so* weak. It's easy to say that *you* would have just walked away. There were times when I *could* have but chose not to. His best weapon was my love for the kids. Agent Hermione hinted at it when she reported that "as long as [REDACTED], the kids are safe." [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. In our state, emotional, mental, and financial abuse are not recognized as such and a physically abused person was often perceived as too weak to care for her children, regardless of the evidence. So, I endured until things fell apart and it was clear he was going to *physically* hurt you. I still worry he did and I just never knew. A few attorneys I consulted with before mediation scolded me, saying that I should have waited until after he'd "smacked the kids around a few times- enough that the school would report the bruises." I wasn't willing to let that happen to you.

There's a principle of attraction that suggests we get what we're looking for. So, was I looking for someone like your father? The answer is simple and generational; yes, in short. I met your father at a time when my parents' marriage was ending. Your Uncle Brian and I were grown. I was 23 or 24 and he was 22. Even at our age, our parents' divorce was difficult. I'm sorry you two had to go through it at such a young age.

Even at 23 I took on some of the fault. I saw that their marriage had failed, and I wanted to fix it. If I could fix it, I'd be absolved of my guilt, and I would do anything to *not* be them. That meant *always* being available to you two and your father. It meant letting your father scream and yell and demand I cut out everyone from my "old life." It meant working sixty plus hours a week for months at a time to make sure that your father could

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aimlessly enroll you two in whatever [REDACTED] wanted while still [REDACTED] [REDACTED] for himself.

I wanted to transcend any limitations and be "[REDACTED]."

There are two sides to every construct. By creating an ethos of such high aspirations, it meant I attracted someone who fit what was left over. We were a perfect match. He had more baggage than he could carry but refused to let any go. I was worried I'd never be able to carry enough. We were an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. My atlas complex made me a willing mark. I saw hints of my parents' relationship with your father when we first started dating. I felt like if I could weather the storm and fix it, I'd have justified my existence- but that's a book all own its own, [REDACTED].

The erosion was glacial. I thought I was helping [REDACTED] fight [REDACTED] demons. Instead, I was just enabling them to eat me alive.

The concern that something wasn't right first hit me when we were in Albuquerque. When your father told me how *I* felt about going to my grandmother's funeral, that seed was planted. The complexity and depth of what was wrong didn't take form until we moved to Montana. I felt lonely in New Mexico, but I felt existentially sequestered when we moved to Billings. I had no friends left, I'd either severed ties with my family or ordered not to talk to them anymore. I worked remotely with no office anywhere other than home, and I needed written permission to do anything but work, clean, and transport you guys to and from activities.

People like your father win by making us think we're alone.

My other relationships started to dissolve in the early days of dating your father, but remarkably slow- it was almost imperceptible. It was in those moments of isolation, when I knew I couldn't access the world out there, that I felt the worst. The flip from intense scolding to saccharin laced consoling was always the signal that he'd won- whether I'd thrown in the towel consciously or not. His ability to flit from anger to elation, and the speed with which it was done, the moment he felt he'd "won" was enough to set off feelings of absolute confinement and hopelessness.

I thought it was normal, and it was. It was normal for a sitcom or a soap opera or cable tv movie. It wasn't normal for real life. It was contrived, as if he'd heard the lines he threw at us on tv and had been waiting decades to use them. Your father saw fictional relationships in media and failed to understand the hyperbole in them. I wish there was a way to express the



unreality of our household. I felt like your father saw himself as the star of the show- this measly sitcom that was beneath him- and we were just walk-on characters there to serve as a backdrop, sometimes in contrast, to his stardom.

Without his audience, he didn't exist. Without other people to pawn his fears into he would implode. Do you remember how much he hated being alone? It was often a tug of war between two different states. "I hate you" and "don't leave me" come to mind.

The conclusion, for me, is that *your father wasn't real*. He is empty save for fear and anger wrapped in layers of abstract mimicry and plagiarism and flesh.

You can't argue with something like that.

You can't reason with it because there isn't anything there.

The only winning move is ██████████.



Epilogue: C(cave)ave

The sunlight hurt. My skin sang with pins and needles, and I clenched my eyes- they needed time to adjust to sunlight for the first time. This didn't seem like reality. There were no tracks or stanchions to direct me. I'd pushed open the door with a green "exit" illuminated above. There was no alarm. There was no resistance. As I depressed the cold horizontal bar that clicked open the bolt lodged in the door frame, there was a faint hint of old dust- a distinct whiff of disuse.

The door wasn't that well-hidden. It was hard to see at first, concealed behind fake trees and rocks and a painted backdrop. Once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it. Looking at the floor leading up to the exit, there was even a well-defined path- at least well defined when looking back from the door. That was the difficult thing- seeing the path to the exit from anywhere but the threshold of the door. My head was heavy and my neck felt weak. Trying to keep my eyes level to find the way out, path or no path, was even harder as I wobbled trying to hold steady with an unsteady head. Passing by the immobilized robotic creatures, tethered to the ground by tracks and wires, wasn't easy either.

The ride had come to a rapid but not jarring stop, like a thing dying from lethargy. The cart I occupied lost power as the scene lighting flickered off. It was completely dark, save for the faint green glow obscured by a plastic recreation of pre-historic foliage. There was a weighted moment of being submerged into a void that wrapped around me like a blanket. Unlike the descent to stillness, a series of harsh yellow-green halogen lights flickered on, bathing the room with light. The scene, now defined by ribbons of black felt padding walls and not shadows, was full of light. Large flood lamps mounted on the walls clicked on in an instant.

The ferocious robotic depictions slowed and came to a placid state slower than the vehicle I was riding in so that as I passed them, they were moving unnaturally. There was the familiar hiss of hydraulic actuators and pistons coming to rest. They looked remarkably dead in the off-white lime hue of warehouse lighting, as dead as something that had never been alive. Without shadows thrown by the cleverly mounted spotlights on the floor or sparse lighting from above, the foam wrapped things looked smaller.

Power supply having been interrupted, the rigid creatures were moved only by gravity and residual kinetic energy. Sitting from a distance in my

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ride vehicle, hands tightly wound around the bar that had secured me in place, their sway and wobble was obvious. Vacant stares accompanied slack jaws suspended by cables previously hidden in the dark.

The audible creaks of metal and servos and harnesses were made that much more obvious by the lack of fictional ambient sounds. I could see tiny disturbances in the black felt mesh lining the architectural surface that framed the scene. They had the shape of outdated cabinet speakers- iconic circles peppered the canvas like dozens of eyes.

I sat as still as the pre-historic statues surrounding me- with slight variations that amounted to a tremble. An amount of time passed. It felt like hours, but it was moments. I counted the wobble of the larger-than-life brightly painted raptor four feet to my right. It made a complete, small, rigid to-and-fro wobble every three seconds, pivoting at the mounting point on the wall. The mechanisms that propelled the foam latex covered robotic had lost power at the peak of their program. The raptor was frozen in an eternal leap, jaw wide open, eyes forward, and archetypal clawed foot extended. Without the aid of hydraulic movement and only moving like an off centered weathervane, the construction and stressed forced perspective made it look comical despite its vacant and menacing glare.

A half dozen dinosaurs were planted around the scene. All of them had stopped. The power loss affected the three-quarter scale tyrannosaurus rex, guarding and lumbering over the track leading to the next room, the most. By either design or accident, the motivator system could not keep the head in place. It sagged and hung down, pulling its body over the track, making progress to the next room questionable. A long pulley cable secured the head to the ceiling as a failsafe measure. It was pivoting clockwise and counterclockwise in alternating succession, as if it were trying to rip up and eat its way through the track. Prior to the power loss, the head must have been close to scraping the top of the room. A few tiny scratches on the fibrous ceiling cover suggested it had.

No one was coming. There were no sounds of others getting restless or employees fumbling with clipboards and folding step ladders to help riders exit their vehicles. Once the initial wave of hums and clicks passed from the power loss, the ride in its entirety was silent save for the burdened creak of metal tubing from lifeless robotics swaying with gravity.

The longest pause was not reconciling whether or not I should get out, but that I could. The restraint bar I was white knuckling had pulled away from me the moment everything stopped. I was uncomfortable with becoming unrestrained, but the dread I felt at having a choice to leave was



maddening. The exit sign had been there the whole time. My agency was foreign.

Prior to the ride itself was the queue. There were other people in line and some of them with me but I had no idea if they were in another scene experiencing the same peculiar anxiety over having choice become available. The pre-ride line had maintained its illusion. What would have been mundane had been elevated to an immersive experience.

The concrete floor with painted lines remained simple at the beginning. The narrow hallways were coated and speckled with texture and paint to make a very convincing cave. Multicolored and randomly dimming lights had been hidden in fabricated alcoves shooting up from behind simulated stalagmites to project dancing shadows that looked like prehistoric humans.

Here was the same level of fake pre-historic foliage on the ride. In this application it was being used to create a canopy hiding the warehouse type ceiling behind. They had taken great care to arrange and secure the daunting number of plants to prevent viewers from seeing past the green barrier.

The further through the line, towards the ride, the more detailed the scenes became. Primitive looking paintings of dinosaurs now shared space with twisting shadows from hidden spotlights. A fine mist that smelled like recycled oxygen permeated the cavernous halls. There were fewer people with each turn. I don't know where they went. I don't know how far into the line I was or how far away from boarding, but I forgot I was in a line. The electric spotlights were gone. In their place were a series of gas lanterns flickering in succession down an unending natural stone corridor. The floor was sand, and the gaslights were all I had to follow.

When I boarded the ride, I traded one illusion for another.

It wasn't until the ride came to a stop and warehouse lighting revealed the trace hints of a fly-by-wire guidance system for the vehicle that I remembered I was on a ride. I don't remember boarding. It's not that I thought what was happening was real. The act of questioning it just wasn't an option. I'd gone from unquestioned complacency to agency in the time it took the maintenance lights to activate.

Stepping out of the vehicle was less difficult than I had thought. Just as the proportions of the robots had been skewed by lighting, so had the simple approximation of the distance between the edge of the vehicle and the

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ground. What looked like feet were less than a few inches. The hardest part was deciding to descend regardless of the real height. Each step was easier than the last, though my head still felt heavy and my hiking boots filled with helium.

There was a small dinosaur standing on a tiny hill of fiberglass rock surrounded by tall counterfeit grass to the right of the subtle path to the exit. Its muzzle, three and a half feet off the ground, was flush with the right side of the exit walkway. The colors of the grass were hyperreal-greens and yellows so vivid they bordered on fluorescent.

How had I not seen the exaggerated colors before?

I don't know what species of dinosaur it was. The height and claws appeared velociraptor. However, the tail was too short. Its muzzle, stuffed with so many teeth none of them were vertical, was thin and sloped upward to a snout with nostrils that had been poorly airbrushed.

But the eyes were human with thick sclera, pale gray irises, and large empty black pupils.

I cannot overemphasize how the weight of that vacant stare filled me with dread. My feet stopped- helium replaced with lead. I looked back into its eyes and I saw an intelligence. I saw something looking back at me from the oversized void-black pupils.

They moved. I was close enough to see pupils retract.

It had the appearance of breath and had a gravity. It drew me towards it not despite but because of my fear. Terror felt right in that place. I was supposed to fear it and falling in line, giving up this new agency, the burden of choice- I was ready to trade that autonomy for familiar horror.

A faint voice, muffled by distance, and a metal door, broke our stare. My head turn was an unavoidable but regrettable reflex; I'd forgotten what other people sounded like. It was the sound of two children- joy filled and unfiltered laughs. My head snapped towards the door for only a moment, but that was enough. I squeezed my eyes closed for a second as if it would delay the inevitable and took one more breath before turning to face those eyes, which were about to be on top of me.

But they weren't. It hadn't moved. It wasn't breathing. Its eyes were just glass. Its body; foam.

The assembled mass of steel and wires lacked a soul and consciousness. It



only scared me if I let it, otherwise it had no control over me. None. It only had whatever power I surrendered. It was a silly thing, but I'll admit I did cautiously slide by, aggressively avoiding its muzzle and the painted grass that marked the edge of my path.

Its other side, the one hidden from riders, was incomplete. A violent sagittal bifurcation of its exterior foam and fiberglass shell exposed its heap of cables and fabricated endoskeleton. From the opposite side, the side I was supposed to see, it only *looked* complete and dangerous. On this side, it was just a thing in a state of disrepair- cobbled together to work just long enough for riders to pass by and reap whatever fear they offered.

I was almost at the door.

The exposed inner workings of the ambiguous dinosaur made clear what was disconcerting about the ride in this lit up maintenance state. The effort and intention that went into manifesting the illusion was more on display than the illusion itself- a modern Ozymandias.

As I took the last steps to the door, it was clear this was never about the riders- never about me. It made sense, thinking that they had crafted this illusion for me, but that was part of the trick. It was not. This production, both it and the elaborate queue before it, were about its designers. It was meant as a shrine to honor and worship their ability to thwart reality. True, they maintained this illusion with resources and power made possible by the steep price of our admission. They wanted to immerse the participants into dissociation, to a total suspension of disbelief where they told us what was real and that the outside world was wrong, using smoke and electricity, hydraulics, and fear, but it wasn't about me.

I don't know how long I was on the ride or in that queue. I don't know when I lost touch with my agency or gave it away.

I know that when I nuzzled the door open, without resistance or a sound, the warehouse lighting inside shutdown. Maybe it was that sunlight, by comparison, illuminated how poorly lit the cave was. Either way, its lights were now powerless, with only the exit sign bathing that broken illusion in subtle green light.

The ride waits for the next admission fee, but the green exit light will always be there.

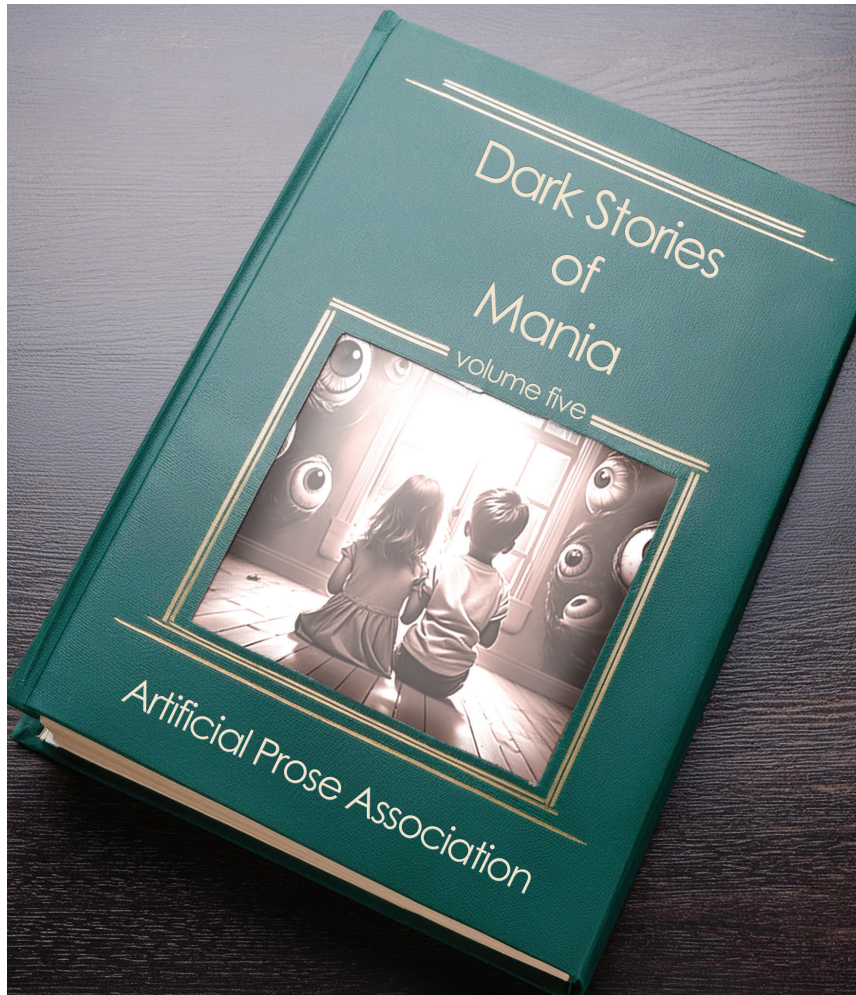




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The *Scalpel*, volume 257, Issue 6650, first publication of Asher Richard's [REDACTED] *paper*.



Dark Stories of Mania, vol. 5. First appearance of P. Kentent's work.



Xli Fevsr erh JHME



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friends for three days
books flight to see
1830am stops from hitting Fay
plans a nonrefundable family
plans to see
"genber"
therapy
stays five minutes past
therapy
mysteriously 3-hour long
Traffic Collision Report
"Energy in Static Objects"
is gullied into not going to
s 1st encounter and
The Exit game
Waffles of Guilt

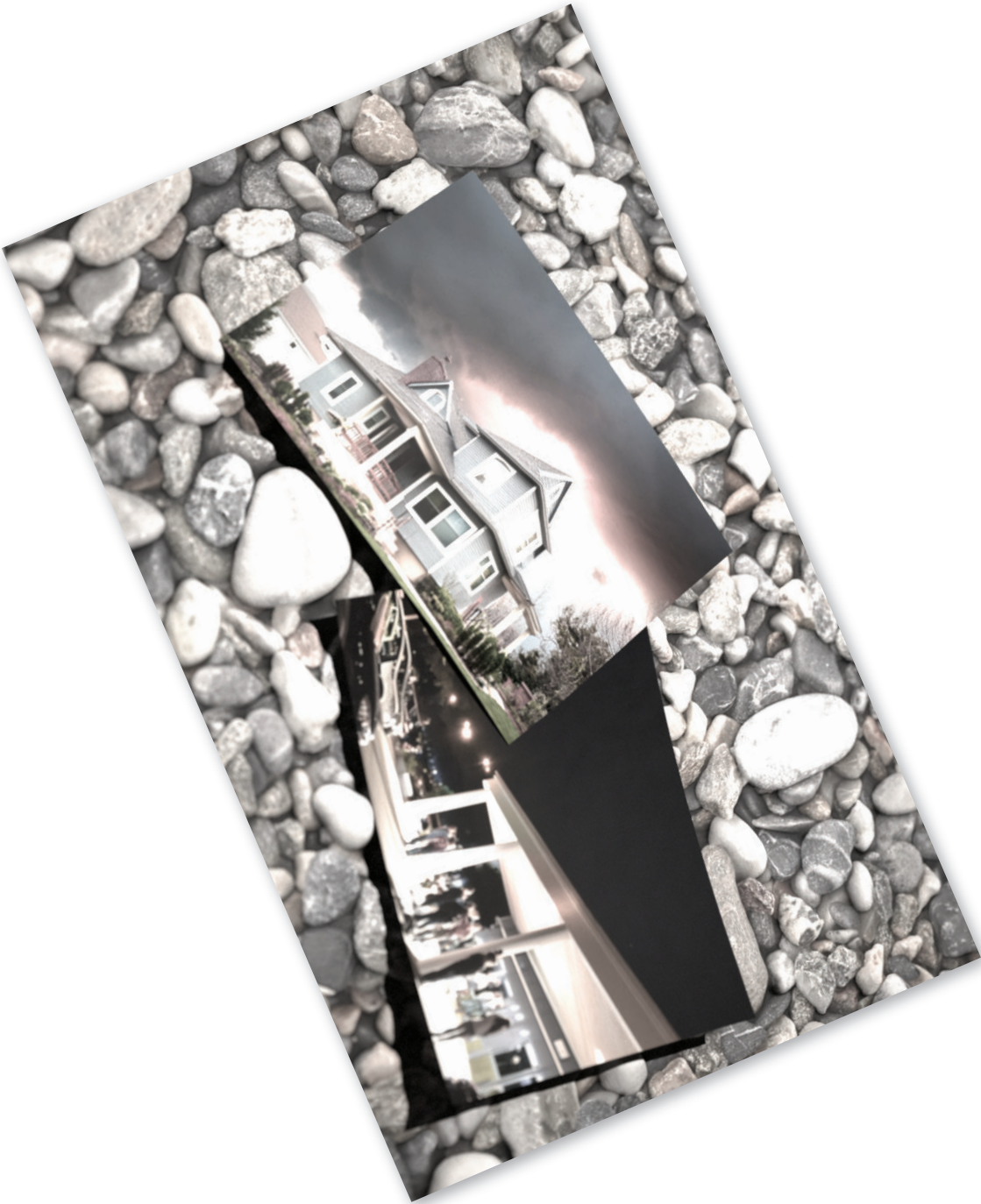
Counseling
The Futility of Marriage
revenge
2nd CPS
plans
"You're too sick to go to dance"
violent victory
9am cancel's flight and
won't let to urgent care
130am vomits uncontrollably and
know it!
737pm "He's going to be sick tonight, I
for
510pm makes special medicine
Team A Fever of 98.8
(day before trip)
Generational Fuckery
The fight
fair!
"The kids won't be okay, this isn't

1

"You're only saying this hurts you to be mean to me!"
The Mean Dinosaur
10am "you're scaring me!"
323pm "You've appendicitis!"
843pm "OMG, stop being so dramatic, you don't have appendicitis!"
to punch you in the throat
9am "Why didn't they take away and?"
745pm, Violent Interrogations by an
3pm kids go to their first sleep over/
11pm "I killed my babies and it's all your fault!"
115am "If you're going to leave me, you'll have to run me over"
1030am, the uses and threatens to kill again

1pm, "This is supposed to hurt, that's how you prove you still love me"
840am last act of violence and we leave
10am, Police check on us (danger and)
821pm, the first of many night terrors
a mental health warrant (and CPS follows up again)
The Family Law
"Please don't make me go back!" (the start of supervised visits)
"Left-Overs"
Safe in the Dark (Don't touch me!)
"Why won't you talk?"

2

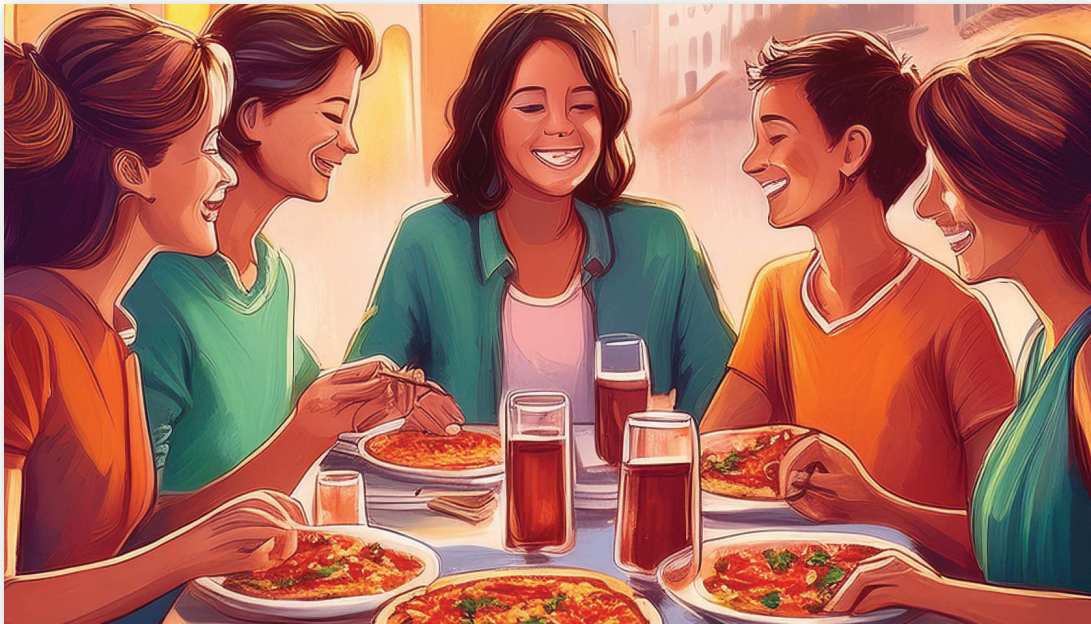




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The End of A Pattern of Behavior

by Stephanie Edwards