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A late fall morning, late to meet an old girlfriend of my husband's for brunch. I wrapped a scarf around my neck and took a last glug of coffee, then knelt in the front hallway to scratch our dog behind the ears. He licked me all over my face; slobber went in my nose.

“Ugh, no.” I pushed him away, laughing.

Jeremy stood in the open doorway. “Claire, I’m leaving.”

“Okay okay okay.”

Fortinbras bumped his big, boxy head into me, hard enough that I had to throw my hand back to catch myself against the floor. A year earlier, I’d found him starving under a car. We assumed he was a full-grown, dun-colored mutt, but a bath revealed his coat to be white, irregularly mottled with blue-gray, and the vet said he was still a puppy, a Great Dane. His marled coat was probably why he’d been abandoned: “You

can't show dogs like this," she'd said, in her frustration sounding mad at *us*.

Jeremy took another step toward the porch. "I am genuinely leaving you now."

"No no no, I'm there."

We bumped our bikes down the front steps. Outside our house, yellow leaves drifted down from the spindly trees. Air cool and sharp, though not really cold enough for the puffy down coats on the kids hanging out by the Laundromat. As Jeremy crouched on the sidewalk, rolling up his cuff so it wouldn't catch in his bike gears, strands of gray glinted in his dark hair.

At the corner, we swerved around a small shrine marking the place a teenager had been shot dead a week earlier. Maroon chrysanthemums dry as straw were heaped on the sidewalk beside a guttering candle; an exhausted Mylar balloon wobbled a few inches from the pavement. On the wood of the telephone pole, people had written messages in Sharpie: *RIP l'il brother. Love you 4-eva.*

When we stopped for a red light, Jeremy asked, "Are you nervous?"

I shook my head and smiled quizzically. In truth, I was a little annoyed. I didn't like that he imagined it would throw me to meet an ex-girlfriend. "It's been a long time," I said.

"I saw her at that W-K fundraiser last fall."

I'd meant a long time since they'd been together: their last two years of high school, nearly twenty years before.

"Watch how long it takes Gita to work Harvard into the conversation," Jeremy said. Then, "God, what's with this light?"

As usual, our lateness was my fault: it had taken some time to decide what to wear. I'd settled on a nip-waisted tweed jacket

from the forties over a T-shirt from the seventies—once black, now foggy gray—with a flaking Star Wars iron-on. Skinny drainpipe jeans, cuffs turned up to show olive green wedge-heel boots that zipped up the back.

“We’re *five* minutes late. She might not even be there yet.”

Jeremy nodded in that way that didn’t mean he agreed or had even really heard. Across the street, a clot of Norteños joked and wrestled outside the corner store, wearing their 49ers jerseys. When I first moved to San Francisco, the zeal for football in this part of the Mission had surprised me, but red and black had turned out to be gang colors. A few blocks from here Sureños slouched around in Dallas Cowboys gear.

The light changed and we kicked off, turning left onto Twenty-Fourth Street. Through the open door of a storefront church came the sound of electric guitar and tambourines; there were more people onstage than in the folding chairs. Past butcher shops with their soft funk of meat, a crater-cheeked man selling spears of mango dredged in chili, an empty nail salon where a woman napped across two of the chairs, paper mask covering her nose and mouth. We passed one of the stores that were just beginning to seep into our part of the neighborhood, the kind that sold the Perfect Cherry-Handled Garden Trowel next to the Perfect White Shirt and the Perfect Walnut Salad Bowl and then always one witty synthetic thing, Pop Rocks or Chinese jacks or action figures, and one utterly bespoke thing, like lipstick blended to exactly match the inside of your cheek, or succulents in tarnished antique sugar bowls.

Outside the restaurant clustered groups of two and three. As we coasted to a stop, Jeremy raised his hand. “Sorry we’re late.”

A woman stepped from the crowd. She wore a windbreaker and the top of her hair was frizzy. “You’re not even late. I put our name on the list. Your name, actually. No one ever knows what to do with Jayaramen.” She turned to me to shake hands, then said, “So cold!”

“The ride over, I guess.”

“Here.” Gita took both my hands and rubbed them between hers for a moment. “Better?”

I pulled away, giving a little hum, smiling in a way that didn’t mean yes but could have.

Gita told us in great detail about finding a parking space. She spoke quickly and smiled a lot and tipped forward on the balls of her feet. She projected eagerness, a kind of nonspecific enthusiasm that made her seem young, though she and Jeremy were thirty-seven, five years older than me.

After Goldsmith-party-of-three was called inside, after we squirmed out of our jackets and scarves, after we scooped into one of the high vinyl booths, she pulled their prom picture from her purse and handed it to me: “Can you believe this?”

In the photo, Gita wore bottle-green taffeta, shiny as a beetle, knee-length in front and floor-length in back. Eye makeup, also green, that she’d gobbled on in a way that suggested she didn’t usually wear it. Next to her in the photo, Jeremy looked skinny and serious, with an unfortunate mushroom-cloud haircut that made his ears stick out even more. His bright green cummerbund didn’t quite match her dress.

“We bought into it so totally. . . .” Gita studied the photo she’d just handed me. “But it was still a really nice night. What about your prom?”

“I had zero interest in going.” More precisely, I hadn’t been asked. Nicole, of course, had been part of the royal court. Not queen or princess; one of the twelve ladies-in-waiting. Maybe being from the Naked Family kept her from the very top rung of popularity—or maybe it was the simpler fact that she was solidly built and had to bleach the faint dark hair on her arms and upper lip. She dated basketball or soccer players, but the very slightly off-brand ones, boys who were shy or had too-curly hair or took art for elective.

Jeremy put his arm around my shoulder and toyed with my collar. Now that we were here, Jeremy’s annoyance at me for making us late had dissolved. As someone with a tendency to nurse grudges, I admired—grudgingly—that he let things go.

“We wanted its theme song to be ‘Don’t You Forget About Me,’ remember?” Gita asked. Was she still talking about prom? “Jeremy was in student gov but he got outvoted for ‘We Go Together.’” She used her hands a lot when she talked and then went very still, canted forward, waiting for an answer.

I bumped Jeremy’s knee with mine. “Oh shit, it’s the Mean Waitress.”

Gita said, “You know. From *Grease*.”

The Mean Waitress had reached our table. Sighing deeply, she pulled her order pad out of her apron. She didn’t say anything, looked away from us.

Gita asked for a salad, no dressing. I’d been about to get just a grilled cheese, but Gita’s dieting spurred me to show off, adding fries and a chocolate shake. Jeremy ordered blueberry pancakes, like always. Gita was apparently familiar with this habit, too; she caught his eye and laughed. Then, as the menus were being

shuffled up, she turned to me, touching her finger to her nose. “Did that hurt?”

Reflexively, I reached up, mirroring her. The silver ring felt cold beneath my finger. My nose had been pierced so long—since a bored night in college—that most of the time I forgot it. “Not too bad.”

“She did it herself,” Jeremy offered. “With a safety pin.”

“Yugg.”

I shrugged, secretly pleased. Even after all these years, impressing someone gave me a kick like I used to get when Nicole and I shoplifted in high school: the sense of pulling off a trick.

“We saw a good play last night,” I told Gita.

Jeremy said, “I don’t think it would be your thing, necessarily.”

“I like plays.” She sounded defensive.

“This company is putting on Beckett down in one of the warehouses on Cesar Chavez,” I said. “It’s actually six short plays simultaneously, and you walk around them.” I had trouble picturing Gita in that neighborhood, where syringes glinted among the waist-high weeds and the shit on the sidewalk was as likely to be human as dog.

Jeremy said, “Claire’s always finding cool stuff no one else knows about,” and I had to swallow a very uncool grin.

Our food arrived. There was the negotiation of silverware and ketchup. Jeremy talked about Wilkerson-Kettlewell, the private high school where he and Gita had been students, and where he now taught. My phone buzzed: a text from Nicole. *How is she?*

Squiddish, I typed quickly, holding the phone under the table.

Jeremy was telling Gita about their old English teacher, her probable alcoholism. Gita said, “She’s still there? She seemed so old.”

“She must have been about forty then, I think.”

“Goodnight.”

He smiled. “Goodnight.”

I asked Gita about moving back to San Francisco. She said she’d loved Boston, where she’d lived for fifteen years—God, such a dull city to declare *love* for—but her parents were getting older, and she was an only child. She’d taken a position here, running a small marine lab that partnered with elementary schools on science education. Her hands jabbed and twisted as she talked. From a distance, I might have thought she was using sign language.

“My salary’s like—” She held her palms in the air, a half-inch apart. “I guess I’m one of those anomalous Harvard people who turn out not to be ambitious.”

I glanced at Jeremy, then at my watch: she’d gone twelve minutes before mentioning it. With just the tiniest wobble at the edge of his voice, he told me, “Only Gita could head up a nonprofit and think it’s not ambitious.”

“It’s a very tiny nonprofit.” Hands rushing together. “And I’m not the head, there’s a board.” Her hand hit the air, then hit again higher.

“Right,” he said. “One of those very, very tiny nonprofits that has a board.”

She had a surprisingly great laugh, loud and delighted.

Next we paid our respects to what I did for a living, restoring old furniture. I found myself slipping into that mode of bragging disguised as self-deprecation. The financial precariousness of having my own business, etc. The seeming mismatch of a nice Jewish math teacher and a woman who worked with power tools, etc. I said I hadn’t been sure I could even handle a normal

relationship, considering how fucked-up my role models had been.

“Her family lived with her dad’s girlfriend,” explained Jeremy.

“For six years. The girlfriend and her kids and her husband.”

“Who was their minister,” Jeremy added. He liked to help lay out my gaudy history; his own parents had been stable and a little cold.

Gita looked kind of dazed. “Wait. Your minister?”

“We were Unitarian.”

“Ah, *Unitarian*.” Gita sipped her tea. “Did you sing ‘Kumbaya’ at church?”

“Sing what?”

“‘Kumbaya?’ *Really?* You don’t know it?”

Jeremy kicked me under the table. I kept my face blank. “Nope, sorry.”

Of course we’d sung “Kumbaya.” But people always asked that same exact question in the same exact jolly, self-congratulatory voice.

I said, “Maybe if you sang it? That might jog my memory.”

Jeremy interrupted to ask how she liked her new neighborhood.

After we’d gone around the circle a couple more times, filling in our microbiographies, we stood at the register so the Mean Waitress could ring up our bill. Then Jeremy headed back to the table. He’d leave too big a tip, I knew; he always tried to fix unhappy people. From behind me came the gusting of wind and a sound like someone had chucked a handful of gravel at the front window: rain hitting the glass. When I twisted around, the street had gone dim. Cars slowed, wheels slurring, turning on their headlights. It was chilly inside all at once, and damp. The Mean Waitress stared out the wide front window. The top

two buttons of her shirt were undone, revealing a beautifully detailed tattoo of a luna moth big as my hand, its pale green wing tips just touching her clavicle on each side.

Gita asked me, “Do you have any tattoos?”

“God, no.” I noticed her expression. “Wait, do you?”

“Um.” She pulled up her cuff to show a fat orange star about the size of a half-dollar on the inside of her wrist. “Grad school.”

“Huh.” This was exactly why I wouldn’t get a tattoo: even people who wore nylon windbreakers had them.

At our booth, Jeremy took a last sip of tea, then put down bills, using the cup to anchor them. He had a jutting Adam’s apple and heavy eyebrows that touched above his nose. Bert-brows, he called them. When I looked over at Gita, she was watching him, too. I could tell part of her still liked him—*liked* him liked him, we would have said in high school. But everyone had a ghost or two. That Gita’s seemed to be my husband only made me feel lucky.

A flurry of awkward goodbyes. Gita stepped forward, then back just as Jeremy stepped forward, and they ended up doing one of those one-armed side squeezes. When she turned to me, I stuck out my hand.

I’d convinced Jeremy that instead of biking home we should wait out the rain at the bar across the street. By the time we ducked into Pop’s, my hair and jean cuffs were soaked. Blowing off work—I was supposed to be refinishing a bureau, Jeremy should have been grading tests—made me a little giddy. I lifted my T-shirt to dry my face. Jeremy touched my stomach with his cold hand.

We ordered Guinness, shook our heads at the bowl of kibble the bartender offered us, made our way to a table. I sipped my

beer. “You know when I first had Guinness? At Santa Cruz. The college I attended for college.”

“You didn’t like her.”

I sighed and tipped back in my chair. “No, I liked her fine. I don’t see us becoming great friends but—yeah. She was fine.”

He frowned.

“What?”

“Just, you never like my friends.”

“I like lots of your friends! I like . . . Steph. I like Pankaj. All I said was I didn’t see myself being super close to Gita.”

“You call Steph ‘The Open Wound.’”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t *like* her.”

Jeremy reached over, gathering my hair, wrapping it around like a boxer taping his hands. He tugged gently, at once reproach and forgiveness.

At the table nearest ours, a man with a strawberry nose had a small green parrot on the shoulder of his worn tweed jacket. He whispered to the bird between slugs of beer. The parrot closed its eyes, cheek pressed against the man’s.

“That’s so sad,” Jeremy said quietly.

I took his hand. Jeremy worried about people. I loved the way he seemed to lack a layer of insulation. If one of his students had a crisis, Jeremy couldn’t think or talk about anything else. The man stroked the parrot, murmuring. He didn’t seem all that sad to me.

Pop’s was one of the last old-man bars that hadn’t yet been driven out of the Mission by the rising rents or discovered by twenty-three-year-olds as a quaint walk-in diorama. I’d moved to the city after college because I’d liked it on the handful of weekends I’d come up from Santa Cruz; Nicole had moved here

because one of her sorority sisters needed a roommate. Back then, every future had seemed equally plausible: I could just as easily have gone to Seattle, or saved up to travel around the world, or married someone who needed a green card. But once Nicole and I both chose San Francisco, it began to feel obvious, then inevitable, and ten years later we were still here.

Jeremy and I lingered at Pop's, as I'd known we would, one beer turning into a second, one game of pool into *just one more*. In the late afternoon, we came out into cottony damp, the sun wan and low. We crossed the street and unlocked our bikes. I didn't feel drunk, but the world had a pleasant gauziness. Motor oil rainbowed a puddle.

"Race you," I said.

"For what?"

"Doesn't matter, you're not going to win."

Jeremy tilted his head as if considering the offer. I'd turned to admire the bright blue paint of a truck when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him jump on his bike and begin to race away.

Clambering onto my bike, I stood on my pedals to try to catch him, but he'd gotten too much of a head start. "You cheat!"

The wind caught his laughter, spinning it. He swerved to avoid a pothole and then without slowing swung right at Folsom. His tire skidded, hopping on the pavement. He slid sideways, seemed to right himself.

I yelled, "Ha!"

Then he hit a crack. The bike jumped, twisted. The wheels went up and his body slammed down into the pavement, a sound like a window blowing closed. His bike bounced onto him then clattered to the street, spinning in a half-circle.

“Jesus fuck!” I jerked sharply so I didn’t hit him. Kicking into the pavement to stop myself sent a jolt all the way to my hip. “*Fuck*. Are you okay?”

His front wheel still spun, whirring. He pushed himself up, pushed up the ripped sleeve of his oxford to show a wide pale graze. “Ouch.”

“Can you bend your arm?”

He tried a few times. “I don’t think anything’s broken.” He pulled open his ripped pant leg: another, deeper scrape, bumpy and maroon like bacon. “*Ouch*.”

“You cheat,” I said again.

“You’re just jealous,” he croaked. He put a hand over his heart, then reached out and I helped pull him up. He leaned down to his calf, wincing as he tugged out a couple of the black chips of gravel caught in his leg hair.

I jammed my shaking hands in my pockets to hide them. “Think you’ll survive?”

“Touch and go.” Taking a couple of gingerly steps into the street, he bent to lift his bike. When he stood, he was outlined against the waterlogged sky, torn plaid sleeve pushed above his elbow. Long, knuckled nose; caterpillar brows. He reached out, unstuck a strand of hair from the corner of my mouth, fingertips grazing my cheek. “Scared?”

I shook my head. “Yeah, right.”