

Subjective Perfection

By

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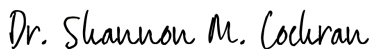
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Abstract:

This creative thesis is a collection of short stories that examine the complexities of womanhood through the intertwined experiences of marriage, motherhood, and personal identity. Centered on the emotional realities of girls and women navigating various stages of life, the collection explores how societal expectations surrounding femininity, particularly ideals of agreeability, submission, and silence shape and often constrain women's understanding of themselves and their relationships.

Through a diverse cast of characters from different backgrounds, the stories engage in themes of romantic relationships, friendship, postpartum struggles, grief, and enduring love. Each narrative offers an intimate portrayal of the internal and external conflicts women face as they negotiate cultural norms while seeking authenticity and emotional fulfillment. By challenging traditional expectations, the collection highlights the tension between societal roles and individual desires.

Collectively, these stories illustrate the layered rationality behind women's thoughts and actions, particularly within roles that are often idealized yet emotionally demanding. The work brings visibility to suppressed struggles, sacrifices, and unspoken desires, revealing both the risks and resilience inherent in navigating these identities. It underscores the mental and physical strength required to exist within systems that often leave little room for self-expression or acknowledgment of personal needs.

Interspersed throughout the collection are three original poems that serve as thematic and emotional bridges between sections. These poems deepen the work's symbolic and narrative complexity, offering additional perspectives that enhance the exploration of voice, identity, and shared experience.

Ultimately, this thesis traces the continuum from adolescence to adulthood, examining the evolving nature of identity, the intensity of female friendships, and the psychological fractures that can emerge within motherhood. By presenting honest, nuanced depictions of women lived experiences, the collection seeks to interrogate and reimagine the social constructs that define and often limit womanhood.

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Mother Bearing

You carry for nine long months.

You carry the baby to the car.

You carry the diaper bag.

Your breast carries *the* milk.

You carry the toys.

You carry the snacks.

You carry the laundry that never stops becoming.

Your heart carries the guilt.

You carry boundaries that are never left untested.

You carry unconditional love.

You carry the home.

Your eyes carry the tears that no one sees fall.

You carry self-doubt.

You carry mental exhaustion.

You carry the slow work of forgiveness.

Your mind carries questions.

so many questions,
endless as the days.

except one.

Who is carrying you?

Oh Honey, Things Happen

It was 7:30 in the morning, and the house felt peaceful and still. When I rolled over, the soft scent of laundry detergent lingered in the sheets I'd changed the night before. Sunlight peaked through the half open blinds at the foot of the bed, and I could feel the warmth. Outside, the birds couldn't have been any louder as their songs pierced through the air. My husband had already gone to work, and I imagined my two-year-old still sleeping tucked between his plush monster truck and favorite dinosaur. For once, I resisted the urge to reach for my phone to scroll through Pinterest boards or spiral into thoughts about everything and nothing. Instead, I freshened up, slipped into an oversized T-shirt and black leggings, and headed toward the kitchen. Some of my best days started with a fresh cup of coffee and a book by the fireplace. But as I reached for my mug on the shelf above the stove, I noticed the clock on the microwave was dark. I flicked the light switch—nothing. As my mom would say, "It's always something".

My mother did the best she could with what life handed her. She raised me alone, stretching every dollar and every ounce of patience until there was nothing left. She didn't get to see much of what I became as her life ended tragically by a drunk driver not long after I graduated from middle school. As for my father, well, your guess is as good as mine. No one ever spoke his name; I just assumed for good reason. After my mother passed, my grandmother took me in. A religious woman to her core, she was as holy as she was unhinged. She believed in scripture, superstition, and saving souls, especially mine. Her house always smelled of coffee, collard greens, bleach, and fresh scented candles. Though her rules felt harsh and suffocating at that age, her lessons have never forsaken me.

With coffee being my quiet religion, I always keep back up. I was never a coffee drinker before motherhood, water and cranberry juice was my jam. But after having David and finding myself in the looping rhythm of stay-at-home days, coffee became my best friend. My actual best friend lived eight hours away, so the mug became my new confidant. I'm not a coffee snob who boasts about beans or insists it has to be black. Hot or iced, I don't care. I just need it sweetened with milk and ears to listen to me yap mainly about nothing. Each cup settles me, reminding me of my control in this overtaxing blur of motherhood. When I drink it, my toddler's tantrums don't make me want to jump off a mountain, my husband is the finest man alive, and even my baby pudge isn't the most disgusting thing I've ever seen. Coffee doesn't just increase my energy; it awakens the me that has been isolated by motherhood.

Quietly, I tore open an instant espresso packet with my teeth, whisked it together with milk and poured it over ice. Having time to myself is rare, a sacred thing I almost never get. Everyone warns you about the most basic things while you're pregnant, such as the lack of sleep and the best stroller to purchase, but there's no true depth. They don't tell you how after you have a child, your life is no longer yours. Your emotions become unbearable, and your tits will sag whether you breastfed or not.

You feel alone but don't want to be bothered. You constantly hear noise, but quietness creates dangerous thoughts. Your patience is as thin as paper and somehow anger turns into resentment when you start to miss the version of yourself who could breathe without thinking. The woman who could eat a grilled cheese sandwich for dinner is now responsible for dinner every other night even when her appetite is loss. I opened the blinds in the living room and settled on the edge of the fireplace with my coffee and book. Three pages in, and the inevitable had already attacked my ears. In a perfect world, it would be my husband walking

through the door, handing me his card while slapping my butt saying, “Go spoil yourself.” but the spoiling myself would come hours later because he would somehow convince me sex was the answer to both of our problems. The only time he had shown me real emotions in those days was when he was horny or about to get horny. Outside of his pants, he whimpers almost more than our two-year-old about working so much or nonchalantly cares for my wellbeing. Any who, David woke up.

I sighed, slid my feet into my pink, furry house shoes, and made my way toward his room. Although motherhood has swallowed me whole, he’s the piece that makes me feel complete. It’s like a double-edged sword; motherhood punched me in the gut while rubbing my back. The punches sometimes felt like guilt after giving your child a lollipop for breakfast because you just couldn’t handle the morning tantrums. There was also the guilt of dissecting yourself—every word, every choice, every purchase. All the while, my little David thinks of nothing. He lives in his blissful little world only concerned with what new toy he can put in his mouth and how far he can jump from his chair to the couch. I sat on the floor beside him, wrapping him in kisses and soft giggles, and wondered what we might do with this day that already felt like it belonged to him.

Struggling to get him dressed always feels like I’m wrestling with an alligator except a small one with squishy skin.

“All this wiggling and whimpering, is this really necessary, David?” I asked, half pleading, half defeated.

Still giggling and bouncing, he kned me right in the face.

“This is just stupid. I said stop!”

My patience had run out, and I slapped his leg, just a tap, but enough to still him. His body froze. His big brown eyes widened, glassy with tears, before his face crumpled into the most dramatic cry. It's not like I'd let him keep twisting until he knocked his head against the bedpost. Maybe sometimes he needs that consequence. Maybe sometimes, I need that flicker of satisfaction. I deserve it. Being a stay-at-home mother requires a level of patience that shouldn't legally be expected of any human being. I honestly don't even know how I made it this far, but that same patience that motherhood forced upon me is the same patience that keeps me alive.

I thought about taking him to the cafe around the corner from our house to grab some breakfast but just the thought of that exhausted me. But we needed something since the power outage was inhibiting me from cooking. I cut up a green apple, grabbed mozzarella cheese strings and an apple juice box from our still simi cold fridge, and sat him down at his toddler table in front of me on the couch. In a full-on tantrum and trying to mouth the words "want eggs", He threw his entire plate across the room.

"Pressing my buttons this early in the morning son is not smart, I promise you."

I huffed as I stuffed back the few curly pieces that fell from my ponytail back in the tie and cleaned up the food. I decided that maybe enjoying some sunlight in the backyard could restart the day positively. Most days, we don't get out of the house. It's easier to manage David in my own space, but the same routine every day gets dull fast. Time disappears and the hours and days run together. But in my town, it's considered a privilege to be a stay-at-home mother.

After their forty-five-minute Pilates classes, they rush to their perfect modern farmhouse kitchens, flipping gluten-free pancakes in lace panties, all while catering to their children and husband's everlasting demands. A true scam if you ask me.

It's a facade because that same woman just got told her by her cheating husband that she's fat, so she forces herself to go to Pilates, that generic style of kitchen screams sleep fest, the gluten free pancakes are gross, and those lace panties causes yeast infections. The illusion of luxury hides the real struggles and often puts extra stress upon women who just wants to enjoy the simple things in life. Enough of my rants.

We made it to the backyard with our little collection of morning treasures: my faded lawn chair, coffee, and my book tucked under one arm; his excavators and monster trucks clattering in a blue plastic bucket. Soaking up the morning air, I sank into my chair, one eye on my pages, and the other on David as he drove his trucks through the dirt with joy. Then came a soft knock on the fence. My shoulders were tense and my eyes rolled. Of course. Someone needed something as soon as I sat down to enjoy something for myself. But at last, I made my way toward the gate with my book still in my hand.

Through the slats, I saw a tall man in a pale uniform and a white hard hat. Before I could swing the gate open all the way, he offered a polite nod assuring me that they were working diligently to get the power back on. Forcing my smile, I thanked him and closed the gate motioning for David to return to his patch of dirt. From the other side of the fence came the familiar sound of my neighbor directing her kids into the car for school drop-off. Through the narrow gaps in the fence, I could see Sherri's bright red lipstick, and her kids wobbling toward the car in their school uniforms, carrying oversized instruments slung awkwardly on their backs. As she hums, they grunt. Sherri's a sweet woman, really.

She's the one who brings baked goods to your doorstep when you move into the neighborhood like they do in the lifetime movies except she's not deranged.

And yes, she cheats on her husband who's always working out of town, but who am I to judge? We all find our own ways to survive the monotony, don't we? She's doing her best. right?

With her husband being an entry level flight attendant, she works from home as a data entry specialist and manages the kids full time. Well, a couple of weeks ago, I saw her managing someone else. A man that I would have never imagined being her type. Her husband is a handsome man with clear dark skin, thick brows and a sharp jawline. His hair is always cut nicely, and he seems super loving towards her and the kids. She's told me occasionally how his religious tendencies bore her to death, but she always seems deeply in love. So, it was a surprise to witness this chilled, tattooed, slim built guy straddle her from behind as they went into her house. I watched their interaction through my bedroom window flabbergasted. Maybe he wasn't as religious as her husband, maybe he made her laugh more, maybe he was sure of his emotions and wasn't afraid to show them.

Either way I applauded her internally because she seemed free. She and her husband married and had kids when they were young, so she was at a stage in her life where things were a bit less chaotic. Her kids were all in grade school, and overall, they seemed to live a pretty structured life. Just like me, her family and friends lived hours away so now her world mainly consists of marriage, motherhood and, I guess, Mr. Tattoos. Having an extramarital affair blows my mind, because where do you find the time, patience, the audacity. Sherri beat the system of motherhood in my book. She found a way to cope with the loss of identity by finding a new way to grow in her independence while still keeping her family intact. What a lucky slut.

After she pulled off to take her kids to school, I looked down at my phone and somehow ended up on my Pinterest board. I began scrolling through hearted folders filled with expensive cookware and clothes I'll probably never look good in. David was still in his corner of the yard, happily burying his monster trucks in the dirt, making the cutest truck sounds. Much like Sherri's husband, mine works insane hours, gone before sunrise, home long after dinner. Sometimes I wish I had more help, more time to myself, more freedom but I guess I should feel blessed.

I decided that I deserve something nice. Still scrolling, my thumb paused on a picture that instantly caught my eye. A royal blue Le Creuset Signature Round Dutch Oven, glowing as if it held all the secrets of domestic perfection. The caption read a limited-time discount, and I knew I had to act fast, as if this was the only time during my lifetime these pots would be on sale. I could already see it on the stove: chili simmering slow and rich, lamb so tender it falls apart; you could smell the peppery notes and cumin seasonings from outside.

I won't cheat like Sherri, but I will flirt with our savings for this pot. That feels fair. Besides, what's a little indulgence for a woman who spends her days half-buried in laundry and Cheez-It crumbs? Decision made, I realized my wallet was still inside. I rose from my chair and walked toward David. By now, I could tell he was reaching that hungry, restless point of the morning. He was hurling handfuls of dirt into the air, watching it rain down over his trucks before slamming them into the ground with small, furious grunts.

"Hey, baby," I called gently, "I'm just running inside really quick to grab my wallet, okay?"

He didn't look up. Instead, he hurled his monster truck at the fence with a loud clang that made me flinch.

“That’s a no-no, David. We do not throw toys!”

For a split second, he seemed to understand — his little hand hovering over the truck, his gaze flicking up to mine. But I should’ve known better. Without a word, he snatched it up again and launched it straight at my face. It hit me directly on my nose so hard, I stumbled back and held back tears. Before his next blink, I snatched him by the collar, scratching the bottom of his chin and lifted him off the ground.

“What is your problem? why would you do that?”

My nose was burning, and the thought of it possibly bleeding encouraged my rageful thoughts. My anger didn’t allow me to look at his face, but I could feel his fear as his little legs were dangling. I walked him over towards the gate. Oddly, he wasn’t crying, almost as if he enjoyed the thrill of it all. His body went limp, and his breath calmed as if even he understood the line he’d just crossed.

I couldn’t care less. I needed quiet; I needed to get back to my precious pot. I just needed a moment before something worse ensued. With my other hand, I opened the gate and placed him on his feet just outside of it. Before he could even turn around and look at me, I yanked the gate closed and began walking toward the house. He then realized what was happening and screamed. I could hear his small fists pounding at the gate.

I kept walking, intentionally ignoring him. I reached for the back doorknob to the door of the house and then silence. I didn’t hear a car pass, so I knew he didn’t get hit. I wondered if someone had snatched him, but that would have been too fast. But maybe he needed to be with someone else. Maybe I haven’t been enough for him. Maybe he was still standing there, and something caught his attention. It was too late, though. And honestly, I didn’t mind.

He was gone from my presence and the peace and quiet that wrapped around me like a warm bath felt amazing. My only purpose then was simple, almost sacred: find my wallet, buy the pot.

My purse wasn't in its usual place by the front door. I frowned, scanning the hooks before heading down the hallway toward my bedroom. Once there, I spotted my purse hanging from the knob of the closet door. I retrieved my wallet and headed back to the living room. Walking back down the hallway, I passed David's room, and a sharp tremor crawled up my spine. The air got thick and heavy with the faint scent of baby lotion. The memory of his fear flooded my heart, and his stuffed animals watched me as I fell to my knees in shock, dropping the wallet on the floor.

I bolted through the hallway and out the back door, hoping he was sitting behind the gate; The yard was empty, and his tiny trucks were still lined up in the dirt. The gate was cracked open just a little, as though he'd tried to come back and found no one waiting. My chest caved in. The sound that escaped my throat wasn't a cry. It was something else, a rawer sound that every mother recognizes when their child is in danger. My heart shattered, piece by piece, into the quiet that I craved so badly. I ran down the street as fast as I could, breathless, shouting his name.

“David!”

I looked left, then right, scanning driveways, yards, and sidewalks, anywhere a flash of his small body might appear. It felt like a nightmare where my legs were sinking into wet cement while trying to run from the killer. I prayed to God that even if I go to hell for what I've done, please let my baby be alright.

“David!” I screamed again, my voice cracking this time.

The neighborhood began to stir. Curtains were shifting. Doors were opening. I could feel eyes on me. Did they see what I did? Are they genuinely concerned? My vision blurred; tears stung my eyes until the houses and faces around melted into just shapes. A few neighbors rushed forward, their voices overlapping — What happened? Is he missing? When did you last see him? — but I couldn't form words. All I could manage was another hoarse cry of his name,

“My David!”.

Without full understanding, my neighbors continued to run with me to find him. Every second stretched, until it felt like I'd been running for hours. Before I knew it, I was right back in front of my house. Sherri's SUV was turning into her driveway, as she removed her sunglasses to place them in the holder above her. Exiting her car puzzled, I stumbled towards her using whatever breath I had left to speak.

“Please, Sherri, help me find my baby. I don't know where he is”.

In that moment, guilt had consumed me. I thought maybe if I just told everyone what I did, that David would just reappear.

I thought if John was here, this wouldn't have happened. When John accepted this new job, I foolishly believed it would buy us more than just extra spending money, I thought it would buy us more alone time together. Time to breathe. Maybe even time to feel like best friends again. Get a babysitter for a few nights a week. But I guess I wanted my cake and to eat it too. The truth is John sucks at balance. He worked, paid the bills, kissed my forehead without fully stopping to look at me, and mumbled a thank you for my “duties,” as if I were some loyal pet who just happened to walk, talk, and cook. He had always been an intentional man, which

was one of the reasons I fell in love with him, but now he was a robot, predictable and unfeeling. I knew he didn't mean harm, but fatherhood had swallowed him too; it was just that I was the one drowning faster. How in the hell did he still dream of more babies when I spent every waking minute trying not to lose my sanity inside the noise of one?

I didn't complain—at least not out loud. He loved me; I knew he did. He respected me, but he didn't see me. He saw the back of me as we made love or as I stood at the stove. He didn't see the me who cried in the shower every night, letting the sound of the water hide my sobs. The me who pushed through exhaustion and fever because there was no one else to keep this place moving forward. The me who shrank at every cry, every slam, every demand—overstimulated, unseen, but still showing up. I tried to be overly grateful, but I hated feeling like I couldn't complain because someone had it worse, even if that someone was me. John showed up out of responsibility, but I started to wonder whether he actually wanted to show up or if he was showing up because he was getting paid with hand jobs. Did he actually love us and this lifestyle, or was he bored like Sherri and wishing to be elsewhere?

My father never showed up so I'm familiar with this behavior. And once I moved in with grandparents after my mom passed, I watched the way my grandfather belittled my grandmother. I promised myself I'd never let a man own my time, my body, or my mind. My grandmother would always tell me to never say never. The idea of marriage and motherhood repulsed me. I craved freedom that was confidence, the kind I imagined those women on the street had, the ones in short skirts and too-small tops I'd watch from the bus window on late nights with my granny when my grandparents' car was in the shop. I know now they were prostitutes, but back then, I didn't care. To me, they looked untouchable and unashamed. Before John, nothing really mattered to me but education and being able to leave a man bed without apology.

Sex was never just about pleasure, it was about being seen, being wanted, even if only for a moment. It filled a dark and hollow space that I couldn't identify. I lost my virginity to a man twice my age because I thought older men would gratify me in all ways, but no. Men are so much more annoying as they get older. College was my best days. I partied all night, flirting with guys because I could and invited over whoever's fingers caressed me the best in the corner of the club that night. I was a whore but not a dumb whore. My grandmother would curse me if I didn't carry extra lady condoms in my purse. I was doing what I wanted, when I wanted, with whom I wanted every day. Drinking and drugging scared the hell out of me since my mom passed away. I sexed, partied, made straight A's and minded my business.

But then I met John, my senior year. And for the first time, the world seemed lighter. I cared for love and to be loved. John made intimacy believable. I remember the first time I thought we might get physical. I was ready, more than ready, but he paused, sensing my urgency wasn't just desired. He didn't want casual sex; he wanted to hear me.

Naked and tangled in his arms, we cuddled, talking and laughing, tears slipping freely. I fell asleep in his chest, and it felt more intimate than actual intercourse. In that moment, I knew I wanted to spend my life with him.

Before I could resist the feeling, I was saying vows I swore I'd never speak and carried a child I never thought I'd want. Life moved so fast, too fast, and suddenly I was a wife, a mother, and a woman I barely recognized or liked. My areoles are awfully wide; my stomach almost always has a bulge due to diastasis recti, and my thunder thighs, as John calls them, make wearing jeans insufferable. John and I dealt with our new life as best as we could but now, I contemplate if I was meant to be in this position. Moments later, I heard Sherri calling my name frantically.

“Rose, I have David. He was in my backyard.”

Rage almost found me again as I wondered how he could not hear us screaming his name. He’d been next door the whole time. How do children have no awareness of the world around them? I barely processed Sherri’s words; all I saw was my baby in her arms. His small reach towards me humbled my negatively driven curiosities. Finally in my arms, unbothered and innocent, his head collapsed into my chest.

“You scared me, baby. I love you.”

He looked up at me and smiled, licking dirt from his fingers before resting back on my chest as if nothing had happened.

“He must have slipped through the gate and started playing in my yard. Our fences are similar, little guy probably just got lost.” Sherri said as she rubbed my back carefully, unsure if it was okay to touch me.

“It was probably the stupid power guy that left my gate open this morning.”

“Oh, I’m sure it was an honest mistake on his part; or did you leave it open to get a little break from David?”

I paused from swaying back and forth with him on my chest. My eyes got big. Sherri busted out laughing.

“Rose, I’m kidding, but hey, I get it. We all need a break from something or everything.”

I was annoyed to say the least. My smirk hid my true rebuttal of telling her how I knew her “break” was 6ft tall with tattoos. Who is she to make light of my struggles. Her freedom has

allowed her to forget that we all must repent, and her secrets will see the light eventually. I hated that I couldn't be as careless as she seemed.

“Thank you for your help, Sherri.” I said sarcastically, walking away.

“You're more than welcome Rose; I'm glad David is okay!”

I thanked my other neighbors as I made my way back to the house clutching David tighter than I ever had. Every step felt slow and heavy, like trying to walk through the sand on a beach. My eyes kept scanning over his small body, searching for injuries that weren't there. Relief tangled with guilt, I felt like my heart was going to explode. I was angry, ashamed, terrified, and confused all at once, but still I wanted to avoid the thought of what I had done.

By the time we reached the back door, David's eyelids had grown heavy. His tiny hand filled with razor sharp nails was still gripping my shirt. I eased the door open and held him gently in my arms on the couch. The hum of the air conditioner dominated the room, steady and cool, and the clock on the microwave blinked back to life, proof that the power, at least, had returned to normal. But nothing felt normal. My heart was still racing as my thoughts began to devour any sanity I had left. How was I going to explain this to John? We were already on sticky terms because of the argument we got into a couple of days ago.

The fight. A small disagreement had spiraled into a full-blown argument. He'd told me he felt detached and drained by endless hours at work. He was always physically tired but grew too mentally exhausted to do the things that once made him feel alive like painting and golf. I had wanted to care. I did. But the resentment in me was louder than empathy. His troubles sounded like a luxury compared to mine. So instead of listening, I lashed out.

“I'm dying inside and you're the one exhausted? Oh, please! You know what's

exhausting? Being at home day in and day out with a toddler. You know what else is exhausting? Accepting subpar sex from you only to fulfill your selfish needs! Everyone's overlooking how being a mother is tearing me apart, and I don't know how much longer I can last!"

"Subpar sex? I can barely stay aroused long enough to convince myself to keep going. You just lay there, like a stiff doll, like it's a chore, like you're doing me a favor. I walk around here on eggshells not knowing when you're angry, sad or just need a coffee."

"You want me to have all this energy during sex, but you walk around like you're sleep with your eyes open. You wouldn't have to walk on eggshells if you would just acknowledge what's around you. I'm tired. I'm always tired, but your only concern is sex."

"That's not my only concern and you know that"

"Do I?"

"You can't be serious right now. Everything I do is for you and David. I work a job that steals all of my time. I rarely do anything for myself. I come home to you complaining which makes it worse, like what's the point of doing all of this if you're not even happy."

"Why are you trying to be the victim so bad? You work because you're supposed to, you're a man with a family that you chose."

"Rose, before I say some things I'll regret, I'm ending this conversation. You're on purpose trying not to understand where I'm coming from."

"Whatever John."

I could barely process the words spilling from his mouth; They fiercely struck my ego but fluttered my vagina. I was angry but turned on. For the first time in what felt like forever, John

wasn't distant or calm—he was feeling, burning with emotion. I took his warning of regretful words as a threat, but it meant something more assuring to me. It showed he truly cared, a feeling I'd been missing from him for a while.

John stood in the corner of the room with his head down as I walked out and down the hall to David's room to make sure our shouting didn't disturb him. I had hoped I didn't hurt John's feelings too bad. I just wanted him to understand even a fraction of the turmoil that was eating me alive. The crazy part of it all, we were both longing for the same thing, control over our lives and our desires.

When I returned to our room, John was in bed, but I could feel he wasn't in a deep sleep just yet. I slid beneath the covers and turned my back to him. Seconds later, he scooted closer to me, pulling my body into the familiar warmth of his as we remained silent.

Now with David in my arms sleeping on the couch, I realized those same emotions I threw at John in our argument a couple of days ago tormented me, as I purposefully could have caused true harm to my baby earlier today. Still rocking him gently, the sound of our front door being unlocked knocked me out of my thoughts. I was anxious but nonetheless happy to see John walk through the door as his presence still brought me comfort.

From the moment I met John, he'd had a steady, calm essence. He was the kind of man who made people feel safe just by standing next to them. He carried himself with quiet confidence, always listening, always attentive. That steadiness came from the world he was raised in. He grew up in a two-parent household where his father worked extremely hard and his mother was an educated homemaker. John followed his parents' instructions about life. He went to college, got into a good career, and started his own family. He never veered, never stumbled,

never dared to question the path laid out before him.

“Hi, honey. How are you guys doing?” John’s voice floated through the doorway warmly and unexpectedly.

He set out the collection of gifts on the counter, takeout sushi from the restaurant where we’d had our first date, a bundle of pink balloons, and a dozen red roses wrapped in a red bow. The smell of soy sauce and roses mingled in the air, sharp but sweet. I pressed a finger to my lips, signaling him to lower his voice and pointing to David in my arms.

Carefully, I tucked him between the couch pillows, draped a throw over his tiny body, and lingered for a second to watch his chest rise and fall. He looked so precious, untouched by the chaos of the day. Taking John’s hand, I led him into the kitchen. His fingers immediately interlocked with mine. I wanted to pull away because I felt so unworthy of such kindness.

“What’s all this?” I whispered, my voice barely holding itself together.

“Baby,” he said softly, “the other day, we both..., I said some things to you that weren’t the nicest and I’m sorry. I heard you loud and clear. I really do appreciate everything you do for the house, for David... us.”

I felt so stupid, so undeserving, and so sad, and all I could say was thank you because honestly, I hadn’t been thinking about our fight. I was wondering how I was going to tell John that I failed at being a mother today. I wasn’t sure how far his patience could stretch, or if it had already reached its breaking point. Would he see it as a moment of exhaustion, or would he see me as a threat? unfit? Could he still trust that I loved our son more than my own sanity, that I didn’t mean to hurt him, that I just needed... a break? No matter what, I knew I needed to tell him what occurred.

I took a shaky breath and told John what had happened to David, well, most of it. I left out the part explaining why dried blood rested under our son's chin from my nails scratching him during my fit of rage. I decided he didn't need to know I slammed the gate in our son's face happily. My voice trembled as I spoke, afraid of what honesty might cost me. The thought of him being disappointed in me, or of him taking David away, made my chest tighten until I could barely breathe.

So, I kept the ugliest truth buried, hoping silence could somehow keep our family intact. Sheesh, I don't know how Sherri does it. John left the conversation believing that the worker left the gate open by mistake and David escaped while I ran into the house to use the bathroom.

“Oh honey, things happen. Boys love to explore. I am glad he didn't get far, and you both are okay.”

He hugged me and kissed my lips softly.

“What, not a forehead kiss?”

We laughed and embraced. By nightfall, the house was quiet again. I sat on the edge of David's bed, rubbing the last bit of lotion into his soft skin, breathing in the faint scent of baby soap and lavender. His eyelids closed slowly but quickly back open as if he was trying to fight his sleep. Flooded with gratitude, I gave him a goodnight kiss and closed his door behind me. The guilt was standing right in front of me. The thought of if something had happened to him and I wouldn't be able to comfort my baby to sleep every night made me want to die.

“I don't feel well,” I murmured to John, clutching my stomach. “I think I need the bathroom.”

He laughed softly, pinching his nose, and teasing me.

“Go handle your business, babe,”.

As soon as I shut the bathroom door behind me, the mask cracked. My knees buckled, and I dropped to the floor crawling toward the corner of the room. I sobbed uncontrollably as if my tears were confessing my remorse. I buried my face in my shirt to muffle the sound until my chest ached. The weight of my guilt was trying to kill me, and I knew I deserved it.

But beneath everything, I knew this much to be true: I loved my family. I loved that my husband and I had created something tender and lasting together, and I didn't want to exist outside of it. Even in that moment of defeat, I still longed to be a good mother and a gentle wife. On the cold bathroom floor, tears blurring the tiles beneath me, understanding came quietly. I needed to forgive not only myself but my husband as well because I knew he was trying, just as I was. Humility settled over me as I waited for whatever reckoning or mercy life still had in store. Ready to confess to John the entire truth, I stepped out of the bathroom to see him peacefully sleeping. I turned off the lights and cuddled beside him, saying nothing.

I Miss Him

Sometimes I catch myself missing him. The man I think about during the day. The one who used to leave flowers on my car windshield while I was at work and who whispered *I love you* countless times a day, and planned dates that felt like something out of a dream, a museum rooftop under the stars, a candlelit dinner waiting at home after a long day. Once, I called during my break to tell him I'd started my cycle, and by the time I got home, he had cooked cajun shrimp pasta and drawn up a bubble bath, as if he could hear my body asking before I could.

The man I love with now barely asks about my day, cuts me off when I speak, and when he helps around the house, it feels like a critique rather than care. Flowers must be requested; massages come with expectation. Today, on a lunch break call, he rambled about his new boss while I laughed and nodded, trying to care. When I finally tried to speak, he interrupted:

“You must really miss me. You’ve been talking nonstop.”

I was pissed, but a part of me remembered the man he used to be, the one I had fallen in love with. Later, as he climbed into bed, I was scrolling through old photos of him. He noticed, adjusted the comforter, and said,

“Those were the good old days, weren’t they?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “I miss this version of you.”

“I miss him too,” he said.

And for a moment, the man my husband used to be, the man I had been missing seemed almost within reach again.

I Got You, My Baby

Victoria lied at her six-week follow-up; Every circle on the questionnaire was marked zero, no sadness, no fear, no intrusive thoughts. In the margins she wrote that she felt reborn, radiant, grateful, and thrilled to be a first-time mother. The nurse smiled when she read it. Victoria smiled back, the kind of smile that lives only on the mouth. The truth had already begun rotting beneath her skin. Six weeks ago, and exactly three days after she gave birth, Devon left, quietly, like a man stepping out of a room he never meant to stay in. He said he wasn't ready. Not for the hunger of an infant, not for the exhaustion, not for the drought of intimacy, not for longer shifts and heavier responsibility. He said this wasn't the life he'd planned.

Only a week after, time lost its edges. By the first week after giving birth, hallucinations sat in, while Zoe lay in Victoria's arms feeling more like a stranger than a miracle. Some nights, she felt Zoe's thoughts press against her mind, cooing that she'd made a mistake, that she never should have gotten pregnant by Devon. The smell of baby Zoe didn't soothe her; it didn't connect her. Victoria waited for love to arrive the way everyone promised, but it never did. She watched the TV without seeing it, fantasizing for a heartbeat that Devon would return, but his return brought suspicion as she imagined him snatching Zoe from her arms and leaving forever.

By the second week, sleep abandoned her too. She didn't sleep while the baby slept. She organized her closet, wiped the bathroom tiles, moved things back and forth at odd hours. Days passed without sunlight touching her face; the curtains pinned against the wall, the air stale of dried milk and baby's puke. In a moment of cleaning Zoe on the changing table, Victoria felt it sway slightly. She clamped her hands on the side of it and hovered over Zoe like a predator as she caught a shadow stretched across the room.

By the fifth week, her thoughts began to fracture, one moment she felt sure, chosen, certain she was made for something divine, and the next she was hollow, convinced Zoe would be better off without her. Her mood swings were whiplike, and somewhere between the highs and the depths. Reality began to thin, stretching and warping until Victoria could no longer tell which version of herself was real.

After they cut through seven layers of her body to pull Zoe into the world, Victoria smiled. When Devon refused to cut the umbilical cord—his hands shaking, fear overtaking whatever love he still claimed—she smiled again, reassuring him, swallowing her own disappointment like it was another medication. When they argued their first night home from the hospital and he walked out without apology, without looking back, she smiled as the door closed behind him. When her mother offered help and Victoria refused, desperate to prove she had it under control, she smiled into the phone, her voice steady while her hands trembled. When her nipples cracked and bled as Zoe latched and pulled, pain radiating through her body like punishment, she smiled down at her daughter, teeth clenched, eyes empty. Smiling became her reflex, her shield, the last familiar thing she could still perform correctly. She smiled at her six-week follow-up and smiled and smiled and smiled.

At home, everything felt unbearably loud and overwhelming. Sleep remained elusive. Every creak on the floorboard made her jump. Every shadow seemed to loom with threat, endangering her and baby Zoe. One evening, after finishing feeding, Victoria rocked Zoe in her arms, trying to lull her to sleep. Hungry herself, she decided to grab a snack. When she opened the fridge, it hissed sharply, rattling the milk bottles inside. *It's just the fridge*, she told herself, snatching a yogurt and returning to bed.

The next night, the ritual repeated. Victoria held Zoe close after feeding, trying to soothe her drowsy body. She approached the fridge again, but this time the door seal snapped violently, startling Zoe into crying. Victoria's chest tightened with a mix of exhaustion and anger. She felt certain the fridge was mocking her, tormenting her for being awake, for being tired, for trying to care for both herself and her daughter. The next night, a louder noise, sharp, sudden, and wrong emerged from the kitchen. Victoria arose from bed, already suspicious of the fridge. Zoe was still asleep beside her, oblivious. Victoria carefully made her way to the hallway, which felt longer than it ever had before.

Walking into the kitchen, she heard it again, a rattle and then a loud pop. It came from the refrigerator, low and insistent, a breathing thing pretending to be an appliance. Victoria was already sweaty and uncomfortable; the summer heat forced the fridge to kick out more heat. And although the cold spilling from its metal mouth didn't feel too bad, she feared the sudden bursts of sound, dangerous, hostile, but not to her, never to her, but to the baby. She muttered threats to the fridge before going back to her room and barricading the door with a dresser. The hums of the refrigerator refused to let Victoria sleep. So, she stayed up for the rest of the night, folding and then refolding Zoe's clothes.

The next day approached too quickly. Every time Victoria left her room, she tiptoed around to not disturb the beast. But anger would always follow because every time Victoria carried Zoe into the kitchen, she cried. Every time she got Zoe down for a nap, the refrigerator growled louder. Victoria leaned close to Zoe and whispered warnings, her lips brushing the soft curve of her daughter's ear. *Quiet, quiet*, she begged, heart racing, certain the refrigerator could hear everything. She told Zoe to be still, to be smart, to survive.

The thought of unplugging it bloomed fully formed in her mind, silence, safety, and relief, but she knew she also needed to keep the breast milk safe. The bottles lined up inside like proof she was still a good mother, still doing something right. Suddenly, low unsettling rumbles came from the refrigerator again.

She ran back to the bedroom and slammed the door shut. Believing the sound was too loud, too revealing; she shoved the dresser and Zoe's changing table against it. As her heart pounded, she wrapped Zoe tightly in one of Devon's old shirts; the fabric still faintly holding his scent, familiar and anchoring. They retreated into the closet, the narrow space where the hanging clothes brushed her arms as she crouched low, rocking Zoe against her chest. In the dark, Victoria felt certain she was doing the right thing. Vigilant. Necessary. She was actively protecting her daughter from the refrigerator, from its reach, from its listening hum. Time dissolved there. Minutes stretched into hours, her body trembling, her mind sharp and watchful.

Then, at 3 a.m., just as it was time to feed Zoe, she heard it again. The sound had cut through the silence, unmistakable, alive. Victoria big, puffy eyes widen. Zoe stirred, hungry, and whimpered. Victoria aggressively covered her mouth, convinced that even the smallest sound could give them away.

“Shhh baby, it will hear you.” She whispered to baby Zoe.

No longer tethered to reality, Victoria burst from the closet as if escaping a fire no one else could see. She moved fast, frantic, packing a bag for herself and Zoe with the conviction of someone fleeing a disaster, diapers shoved in sideways, clothes mismatched, essentials and nonsense blurring together. She was convinced at this point that Zoe was in complete danger and had to do something.

She bolted out the front door, a raging headache hammering in her skull, and ran to the car. The summer night breeze brushed her face, slowing her racing thoughts just enough for her to realize she was buckling the car seat in, without Zoe in it.

Leaving the car door wide open, she raced back upstairs, her front door half ajar, fighting not to imagine the worst. Her mind spun back and forth, convinced the refrigerator had taken Zoe, and she had somehow left her alone inside the house. Her heart stuttered. She stepped inside and called out, no answer—only the house breathing back at her. Then she heard it: the muffled, broken cries of baby Zoe, distant but unmistakable. She followed the cries, passing the couch shoved awkwardly across the entry to the kitchen, an unnatural barricade that made her stomach drop. When she got to her room, her gaze locked onto the closet. She yanked the door open to see Zoe laying inside, red-faced and gasping beneath a pillow far too close for comfort.

“Oh, baby,” she sighed, scooping Zoe up immediately, clutching her to her chest.

Victoria rubbed Zoe’s back in slow, soothing circles, murmuring reassurances, *you’re safe; you’re safe now*, as the baby’s cries softened into hiccupping breaths. Still rocking baby Zoey, Victoria lay on the bed and fell asleep. The next morning, she got into her car and went to her mother’s house. She barely parked before she was out of the car, running to the front porch, body writhing with urgency, bouncing on her heels like she might lose control if she stood still. Glancing back at Zoe in the car, Victoria pressed the doorbell and didn’t let go.

She watched the frosted glass, waiting, pleading, until the silhouette of her mother appeared—soothing, familiar, wrapped in a nightgown. The door opened. Light spilled out. Victoria stood there trembling, with just an oversized T-shirt and pink crocs.

“Is everything okay, Vicky? Where is Zoe?” Her mother asked.

As Victoria gestured toward the car, her mother took a clear look at her. Her hair was matted; she wore only a shirt and shoes, and dried tears stained her face.

“I need help mommy.” Victoria whispers to her mother, “I’m not okay.”

Victoria lurched forward quickly and unsteadily. Her mother caught her just in time, wrapping her arms around her daughter’s thrashing body before she hit the ground. She rocked her the way she once had when Victoria was small like Zoe. She smoothed Victoria’s hair as she motioned to her husband who had just come down to get Zoe out of the car.

“It’s okay, baby,” she whispered repeatedly to Victoria. “We’re going to get you some help. You’re not alone. I got you.”

Subjective Perfection

I create life

to protect, to provide.

I create love

through bends and bruises.

I create relationships

with trust that mend invisible cracks.

I make mistakes

when fragile, but

I create meaning

to every life.

Sure, they can too.

But not like I can.

I can internalize frustrations and not murder my entire family.

I can admire without attacking.

I can nurture without ego,

But I also can empathize.

I understand their pressures,

 why they hide their vulnerabilities,

 why they feel isolated,

 why they have internal conflicts,

I understand that they are not perfect,

But I am, I am a woman.

The Man at the Gas Station

Sadie had opened her eyes to pure darkness. The air was thick with the sour taste of her own breath. Panic arose through her, and she screamed; her voice swallowed by the black. There was no way out. She began to kick until the sound of her own desperation faded into exhaustion. Her heartbeat pounded like a drum against the stillness; The casket pressed in around her, a narrow, confining rectangle that left barely any room to shift. Her palms were slick with sweat, as she felt the unnerving chill of the inner walls. A sour, acrid stench slithered into her nostrils, triggering another wave of panic. She twisted her head back and forth against the pleated pillow beneath her; each movement constrained, almost futile. Time stretched, each second dragging longer than the last.

Sadie met Jarvis at a gas station a week prior. While letting the pump click into place, Sadie went inside for a snack. She turned down an aisle and that's where she saw him. Or rather, where he noticed her.

“Popcorn and a candy bar this early in the morning?” a male voice teased. “Living on the wild side, huh?”

Sadie chuckled and glanced up.

“I'm just stocking up on snacks for later at work,” she said, barely lifting her eyes from the rows of candy bars lining the shelf.

“Oh really?” He replied. “Well, can I buy your favorite one?”

She shook her head with a small smile. “That's kind of you, but I've got it.”

“No worries,” he said easily, stepping back. “I’ll leave you to it. Have a blessed day, beautiful.”

“Sure, same to you,” Sadie murmured.

Moments later, she carried her items to the counter and set them down. The cashier rang them up, then paused.

“Your total is \$10.17,” she said, glancing toward the door. “But the gentleman who just walked out left money to cover your purchase.”

Sadie’s eyes widened. “Oh wow. Thank you so much,” she said softly.

Sadie was flattered. Her high cheekbones betrayed her with a blush she couldn’t hide. Outside, she slowed near her car, half-hoping to catch another glimpse of Jarvis so she could thank him properly. As fate would have it, he stood on the opposite side of the gas pump. Their eyes met, and he smiled.

“I couldn’t help myself,” he said gently. “I hope I didn’t make you uncomfortable.”

“No,” Sadie replied, reaching for the nozzle. “It was sweet. I really appreciate it.”

He hesitated, then added, “If it’s not too much, I’d love to take you to dinner.”

She paused. “I don’t know if it’s the right time.”

“The right time?” He echoed.

“I’m not sure if I’m ready to date,” she said.

“That’s fair,” he said without pressure. “May I give you my number just in case you change your mind?”

She smiled. “I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

They exchanged numbers and went their separate ways. As Sadie pulled away, she thought about the impression he’d left, his easy confidence, the sleek matte-black BMW with its flash of red interior. On the drive to work, Jarvis kept returning to her thoughts. She tried to dismiss the attraction, but it followed her anyway.

Her hesitation traced back to her last two relationships. Trevor, whom she dated for nearly three years, died in a motorcycle accident. Like Jarvis, he had been charming and strikingly handsome. They met in a small café near Sadie’s home, where his honesty and good looks drew her in at once. Soon they were inseparable, sketching a future in the spaces between effortless conversations and electric intimacy.

One rainy morning had changed everything. Trevor insisted on taking his motorcycle out. Sadie pleaded with him to take the car, even offered to ride along, but he only kissed her cheek and promised he’d be back soon. He was headed to his favorite thrift store, twenty minutes away, hoping to surprise her with a vintage leather jacket he’d fallen in love with earlier that week.

Two hours passed. No call. No text. A knot of worry had tightened her chest. When his phone went straight to voicemail, dread began to seep in. She had checked his location, and it was still pinned on Highway 55. She told herself he was stuck in traffic, that maybe he couldn’t hear the phone over the roar of the bike. But her intuition already knew. Seconds later, her phone rang. Sadie answered, breathless with relief. Sadie’s relief shattered the instant she heard the voice on the line. It was an EMT, calm and practiced, confirming that Trevor had died in an accident. Grief took an unimaginable hold on Sadie.

In the weeks that followed, she had plummeted into a darkness no one could pull her from. Work fell by the wayside; her phone went unanswered, and meals turned cold on the counter. Days blurred together as she sat in silence, staring at photos of her and Trevor, frozen smiles from a life that no longer existed.

Her mother had checked on her gently, careful not to push too hard. Her father had died of lung cancer years earlier, and she knew how grief clung. Her sister, who was less patient but deeply loyal, gathered Sadie's friends and started showing up every day. Some days Sadie had let them in; other days, they just sat on the porch, keeping vigil in the quiet. They didn't need to say much, just being there was enough to remind her she wasn't entirely alone.

For a while, it almost looked as if Sadie had begun to accept Trevor's death. She found joy in small routines again, laughing with her sister during movie nights, throwing herself into work, even saying yes to a few dates. But every date unraveled the same way: the moment a man smiled a certain way or used a familiar phrase; she slipped into imagining Trevor in his place. Until she met Karter. They came from different worlds. He was raised by his mother alone and barely finished high school before she died of cancer. Afterward, he had spiraled, partying too hard, using drugs, until he dropped out of college to pursue tattooing. That path, he told Sadie, was what saved him.

When Sadie met Karter, she didn't see Trevor; she saw someone entirely different, and that difference thrilled her. He intrigued her, almost too good to be true. He spoiled her with lavish trips, made love to her with intensity, built natural bonds with her family, and never tried to reshape who she was. Sadie had always loved the idea of being in love, and she was grateful to have found it again after losing Trevor. At first, her mother warned her it might be too soon because it had only been

seven months, but Sadie refused to listen. Not because she didn't respect her mother's intuition, she just respected her desire to be in love again more.

Sadie and Karter had been together for a year when the shift happened. The more time she spent with him, the more the façade thinned. He grew distant in bed, quicker to anger, lined with jealousy, and slipped back into drugs, despite having sworn he'd quit long before they met. After one long night of arguing, Sadie searched his phone while he slept. The messages were flirtatious, scattered across multiple women, but one name held her: Robyn. It was the same name that was inked across his chest when they first met. He had told her it was his mother's. She had never asked again.

She read through the thread and learned that Robyn was an ex-girlfriend he still loved and that Robin was, in fact, his mother's name. The truth settled slowly and heavily. He wasn't just flattering his ex; they had been intimate only a week earlier. Sadie felt the break clean and final. She gathered her things and left without waking him. She didn't want explanations or apologies, and even as months passed and Karter kept reaching out, she never looked back.

She admitted her mother had been right; maybe it had been too soon to date after Trevor. Though she was heartbroken, this loss felt different. Trevor hadn't been taken by deceit but by a sudden accident, something beyond her control. Karter, she felt, was a choice she had made. She had ignored the warnings, eager to fall in love again, and the hurt that followed cut in a way that felt almost worse. She had trusted him, and despite their brief year together, she believed what they had shared was real.

For the next two years, Sadie focused solely on herself. She didn't retreat into despair or close herself off to love; she simply paused, tending to her mind and body, investing in her

career and long-held dreams. When she met Jarvis, she wasn't searching for anything. Still, he held her attention, and that surprised her. Beneath her caution lived a quiet refusal to accept that she was unlucky in love. She wanted it again, the laughter, the ease, the future she wasn't afraid to imagine. So, she agreed to go on a date with Jarvis, the man from the gas station.

Once she arrived at work, Sadie stole a moment on her break to text Jarvis, her stomach fluttering with butterflies. Unbeknownst to her, he had already found her LinkedIn account and discovered exactly where she worked. By the time her shift ended, a bouquet of flowers waited beneath her windshield wiper with a small note that said:

“Thank you for making my morning a little brighter. I hope these do the same for you.
From Jarvis.”

She was delighted until a FaceTime call with her mother gave her a pause. The gestures felt rushed; her mother warned.

“Sadie, you must be careful, don't you think this is too much, too soon? All the love bombing sounds like Karter.”

After all, she'd met him only that morning and she knew very well her mother's intuition never lies but anyway she agreed to one date with Jarvis, promising herself that if anything felt off, she would stop talking to him immediately.

Date night arrived, and Jarvis had secured a table at a downtown restaurant. He suggested that Sadie stop by his place first to “pre-game” before heading out. At first, she bristled, convinced he was trying to be sly, planning to get her over there with something more in mind. Still, a small part of her wanted to believe he meant no harm. Jarvis greeted her with the same effortless charm and polished composure he'd shown at the gas station.

Still, Sadie noticed everything. Across the street sat a small church, its graveyard stretching quietly behind it. He explained, a little too quickly, that a recent house fire had forced him to rent here. He said he didn't mind; it was close to work, convenient.

As he continued to get dressed in his bedroom, Sadie noticed how clean his place was. Too immaculate. The walls were bland, the sofa stiff, the coffee table unmarked by time or use. Faint outlines on the walls suggested photographs that had been taken down. The bookshelf was dustless; its books were untouched. Only one thing seemed lived-in: a folded church program tucked into a Bible. Sadie noticed it and said nothing.

Jarvis didn't mention it either because he was on the brink of losing everything; including his position as the senior pastor at the church across the street. Church members discovered his affairs with multiple church members, including a choir singer. The apartment had been his hunting ground, a place where he drugged and violated women.

Once ready, Jarvis emerged from the bedroom, in good spirits, cologne drifting in the air. Without asking what Sadie liked, he was already in the kitchen, pulling glasses from the cabinet. She didn't realize he was making a drink for her until he grabbed the juice from the fridge. Sitting straighter, she noticed him idly swirling his finger inside a glass. Unease crept in. The way his back was turned just a moment too long, his laughter answering a joke she hadn't made, her mother's intuition was screaming at her. When he finally faced Sadie, his fixed, unchanging smile said more than words ever could.

She started pulling on her jacket as he approached with the drinks. She lied, claiming to have had a family emergency, apologized, and headed for the door. Jarvis set the drinks on the coffee table and followed. Just as her hand brushed the doorknob, he shouted her name. When

she turned; he lunged toward her.

That was the last thing she remembered before reality snapped back. She tried to push the lid of the casket open, but it wouldn't budge. Then, all of her regrets trampled her. She questioned why she hadn't noticed Jarvis's pushy gestures with the flowers left on her car and wished she hadn't chosen to overlook the fact that he never told her he was a pastor. Her shortness of breath turned into dizziness. She screamed one last time as loud as she could. She then heard footsteps approaching. Seconds later, the casket was lifted open.

"She's still breathing!" a paramedic shouted.

The team carefully lifted Sadie from the casket, laying her on a stretcher before slipping an oxygen mask over her face. Her body was beaten, arms and legs marred by dark bruises and streaks of dried blood. Her features were barely recognizable, her hair unevenly chopped, and she wore only a black sports bra and panties. With a blanket draped over her, Sadie was loaded into the ambulance.

The drive to the hospital quieted Sadie, a single tear tracing her cheek. She felt foolish, maybe love simply wasn't meant for her. Maybe Trevor had been her only true love, and that was the end of it. When the ambulance reached the entrance, the paramedics began lifting her out, her sister's frantic voice reaching her from a distance. As she was wheeled inside, Sadie lifted her head just enough to notice a tall, slender woman with long black hair, speaking with a police officer and her mother.

Sadie's sister held her hand tightly. "Sis, the asshole was married. She found you, but your screams saved you. She called 911."

After nearly a week in the hospital, flowers and calls surrounded Sadie, but relief eclipsed them all, the relief of being alive. The coffin had been a strange gift, a reminder of how fragile life could be, and it had changed the way she imagined love. Close to death, she realized what truly mattered: the courage to open her heart again, no matter the risk. She opened the last card in her basket; it was from Karter. Sadie couldn't help but giggle, rolled her eyes, and called her sister over to read it with her.

The Children in the Car

Anika sat in her car as she witnessed Etta circling in the parking lot, eyes darting between open spaces and the building. Anika recognized the familiar tension, the careful calculation of how close was close enough to reach the building, yet far enough to avoid drawing attention to the children in the car.

Etta eased into a spot a few cars down from where Anika sat, completely unaware of her presence. Etta scrambled with car seats and bottles, giving what looked like hurried instructions to the children before stepping out of the car. There was tension in every movement, the careful calculations of time, distance, and safety. Etta made her way toward the small brick building that housed the market research office right next to a grocery store, the very same one Anika had visited decades ago when she needed extra cash between paychecks.

Ready to intervene if even a single second of risk threatened the children, Anika knew, without a doubt, exactly what was unfolding and exactly how to be in the right place at the right time. After the forty-five minutes slipped by, Anika noticed a nurse in scrubs walking slowly toward Etta's car. The nurse was on break, balancing her warm lunch in one hand, the faint steam twisting in the cold air. She set it carefully on the roof of her car to fumble for her keys and then she heard it: a high, piercing cry that made her stomach drop. She spun around and in the car beside hers were several small children alone, their tiny bodies trembling, faces streaked with tears.

The nurse's instincts took over. She leapt for the handle of one of the doors, pressing her face against the glass to see more clearly. A six-year-old rocked an infant in her arms. On the floor, a toddler banged his fists against the seat, legs kicking wildly, while another clutched the window, two toddlers that had grown bored. The nurse tried to remain calm through the chaos, fear, and helplessness; she worked to get the attention of the oldest child. She then crouched beside the car and turned to the child, her voice gentle but urgent.

“Are you okay?” She asked.

The child gave a small, shaky nod, eyes fixed on the infant in her arms as she rocked back and forth, trying desperately to quiet the crying hungry baby. But the nurse could see the fear behind the gesture. She glanced around, taking in the fall air; the chill wasn't severe yet, but she couldn't leave them there another moment. Heart racing, she stayed at the car window while flagging down the parking lot police, waving her arms desperately. Still watching from afar, dread clenched in Anika's chest. She threw open her door and sprinted toward the corral of abandoned shopping carts, her flats slapping against the pavement. The carts were too far, and Anika didn't make it to Etta's car before the police arrived.

Within seconds, the police officer was moved quickly toward the vehicle. As he checked all the doors for an unlocked one, the driver's side door opened. He reached his arm back and unlocked the door to the backseat. While the nurse explained what she had seen, her voice was shaky with disbelief.

“I was coming to my car to take my break and that's when I heard them.”

Moments later, Anika appeared from the other side of the car with a shopping cart.

“Hey, what's going on?” Anika asked calmly.

“Ma'am is this your car?” The police officer asked.

“No sir, it's my daughter's.” She claimed.

“Are these your kids?”

“No, my grandbabies. We were on our way into the store with their mother to shop. Is something wrong officer?”

“Well, this woman claim that these babies were left in the car alone.”

The nurse was stuck trying to recount every detail, every hesitation, wondering if perhaps she had missed something, if maybe Anika had been nearby retrieving the buggy. She rehashed the scene in her mind, eyes scanning the parking lot in memory.

“Yes, but for only a moment while I got a buggy.” Anika exclaimed.

“Where is the mother and why did she go in before you guys?”

“She needed to rush to the bathroom so I told her to go ahead, and we will meet her in there.”

Moments later, Etta, the mother of the kids spotted the police officer at her car and ran towards them frantically.

“What's going on? Are the kids okay?”

“Hello mam, yes, they are. I was called here because this woman believed your kids were left in the car alone.” The officer said, nodding towards the nurse.

“I was only...”

Anika interrupted her.

“No, she didn’t. I was right here, just getting a buggy for them.”

Etta’s eyes widened as she watched Anika speak, someone she had never seen, yet who seemed to carry an unspoken authority. Silver streaks framed the front of her neatly pulled back bun. A long, flowing coat of soft cream wool draped around her; the edges swaying gently as she moved, and a matching scarf trailed behind her like a quiet whisper. On her feet were tiny black flats.

When she spoke, her voice was soft, measured, and certain, a sound that seemed to settle tension in the air. Etta just stood frozen as the nurse began to apologize in embarrassment to Anika.

“I am so sorry, I didn’t see you. I thought the babies were left alone. I’m so sorry, I was mistaken.”

The officer’s brow furrowed slightly as he listened to his radio, suspicion flaring in his eyes. But then a call for a robbery just around the corner demanded his attention.

“Everything looks fine here,” he said finally, his tone professional but calm, as if trying to reassure both himself and the onlookers. “Thank you for being overly cautious.” He turned to the nurse with a nod of respect, then offered a quick smile to the mother and daughter. “You all take care. Stay safe and enjoy the rest of your day.”

He climbed into his patrol unit, the leather seat creaking beneath him. With a flick of the siren switch and a flash of red and blue lights, the engine roared to life, and in moments, he was gone; tires biting the asphalt as he sped toward the next call. A moment of silence occurred before the nurse turned to both women and expressed once more her regret.

“I am so sorry again. If I saw you, I wouldn’t haven't called the police.”

“It’s okay darling.” Anika voiced to the nurse.

The nurse walked back toward her building; the weight of what just occurred still pressing on her shoulders. Minutes had slipped by unnoticed as Etta buckled the last child into the car seat, glancing around as she tried to make sense of Anika’s presence. Who was she? And why had she offered such a steady, unspoken grace in chaos? But when Etta turned to thank her, Anika had vanished, as if the air itself had swallowed her. She scanned the lot, eyes darting left and right, but there was no trace, not a shadow, not a ripple in the sunlight.

Etta slid into her driver’s seat, leaning her forehead against the cool steering wheel. She turned on the radio to distract the children, soft music filling the car, but the sounds couldn’t reach the lump of grief rising in her chest. Quiet, trembling sobs escaped as she closed her eyes, trying and failing, to process everything that had just unfolded.

The oldest child in the car was her own, a small face she had brought into the world, fragile and familiar. The other three children were entrusted to her care through her Home-Based Child Care program. Struggling to make ends meet, she had made a choice she thought was harmless leaving them in the car while she stepped into the building next door to complete a ten-minute questionnaire, a simple task that paid for her time. With the money, she planned to buy lunch for the children at the grocery store. She thought she could do it all in under thirty minutes.

Still in the parking lot, Etta faced what she had done, how easily minutes had stretched into danger, and how love had not been enough to protect the children. The truth settled, sharp but necessary.

Yet alongside it came gratitude. Anika was gone, but her mercy remained. As Etta pulled away, she resolved to do better, and in the hush of the moving car, she offered a silent thank-you to the woman who had seen her and chosen grace.

Anika slid into her driver's seat, leaning her forehead against the cool steering wheel. She fought back tears and reminisced how years ago; she was in the same situation. Just like Etta, she had once left her seven-year-old and three-year-old in the car, trusting that nothing would go wrong during those few minutes she thought she would be gone. But when she emerged from that building years ago, there wasn't a random woman with a cart to save her. There were police sirens blaring, officers surrounding her car.

In a haze of disbelief and fear, Anika struggled to find words to explain herself. Her hands were cuffed behind her back, cold metal biting into her skin, as she was ushered into the back of a police car. Her children's eyes, wide and terrified, followed every movement, their small bodies trembling with confusion and dread. She spent nineteen long days in jail, her heart heavy with worry for them as they were left with family members. The weight of that moment, of seeing her children so small and vulnerable, of feeling powerless, stayed with her for more than twenty years, a shadow she carried quietly with every choice she made.

As soon as she seen Etta leave those kids in the car, Anika recognized the same storm she had known all those years ago. She felt the desperation that pulled at Etta's every step, the fierce determination in her gait, the wavering love reflected in her eyes as she left the children in the car. Every instinct, every heartbeat, told Anika she understood perfectly and silently vowed to protect Etta in ways she hadn't been able to protect herself.

No one had stood up for Anika all those years ago. No one had spoken for her or softened the sharp edges of judgment. She knew too well the hollow ache of doing everything possible for your children and still being told it wasn't enough. And because of that knowing, she refused to let Etta walk away believing she was alone or worse; that giving up was the only option left. Anika intervened not to excuse danger, but to interrupt the cycle of punishment without compassion that once destroyed her own life.

Loyalty

Hazel, Mia, and Chloe met in high school, shared secrets and scraped knees, first loves and long nights. Their bond remained solid throughout adulthood. After high school, Hazel and Chloe grew even closer, both attending the same university three hours away, while Mia stayed behind at a technical school in their hometown. After college, the three remained inseparable, rarely seen apart; their lives intertwined. They worked similar jobs and even settled in the same neighborhood, keeping their worlds close. By the age of twenty-seven, Hazel was a stay-at-home mother and married with two children, Chloe taught Environmental Science at the local university, and Mia had become an art teacher at their old high school, each carving their own path while maintaining what they called their sisterhood.

Once Hazel became pregnant with her third child, her family outgrew their home and had to move out of the neighborhood she shared with Chloe and Mia.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving us for a man.” Mia said jokingly to Hazel.

“He could sleep on the roof for all I care, my kids need more room.” Hazel replied.

They laughed and hugged, though Mia was moving only fifteen minutes up the road, it felt like she was hours away. Their bond had always been unshakable. In college, when Chloe discovered her boyfriend was cheating, Mia drove three hours in the middle of the night, Hazel beside her, to comfort her. When Mia’s wasn’t getting any luck with getting her artwork accepted into shows, Hazel arranged for her uncle to display Mia’s artwork in his studio, while Chloe hired a company to create bumper stickers featuring her Mia’s artwork. And when Hazel suffered a miscarriage with heavy bleeding,

Mia and Chloe stayed three nights in the hospital, holding her hand, refusing to let her face it alone.

Long after those three nights in the hospital, Mia refused to let Hazel lose hope. On many mornings, she brewed tall, steaming glasses of tea; herbs meant to encourage healthy fertility, and dropped it off at Hazel's house. When the anniversary of Hazel's miscarriage passed and the world forgot, Mia did not. She spoke it aloud, acknowledged it, and gave it weight. She refused to let Hazel grieve alone. That simple act of remembering, of holding Hazel's grief as if it were her own, meant more to Hazel than words could say.

But Hazel and Chloe had no idea that Mia carried her own pain in silence. Months prior, her boyfriend at the time beat her so badly, causing ongoing migraines, an agony she never shared. The pain always began at the base of her skull, where she used to hold herself rigid, bracing for his moods. After she left him, the migraines arrived without warning, blooming behind her eyes like a bruise she couldn't touch. Light sharpened into blades. Sounds thickened. Even her own thoughts seemed too loud.

The migraines flared when someone raised their voice, when a door slammed, when a man stood too close behind her in line. Her nervous system stayed alert, hypervigilant, long after danger had passed. Mia's body remembered what her mouth never said out loud, and she carried the mental and physical scars of that relationship alone, burdened by shame and embarrassment.

One night after dinner, a migraine forced everything open. Mia finally told Hazel about the torture she'd endured at the hands of her ex-boyfriend. They cried, ate ice cream straight from the carton, briefly entertained a reckless plan to slash his tires, then cried again. Hazel couldn't stand to see Mia in pain and offered her a leftover Percocet from her miscarriage,

an impulse born less from judgment and more from love. Mia was thankful for having some real relief. But as time went on, the pills soon became a refuge for Mia, and she slipped into addiction, drawn to the numbing escape they offered.

When the time came for Mia to accept her dream job as an art teacher at her old high school, excitement battled with anxiety; she knew a drug test stood between her and the future she longed for. Mia knew she couldn't produce a valid prescription; she would fail the drug test and lose her chance to become a teacher. She knew she would need someone else's urine to pass the test. Chloe wouldn't understand; Mia knew that. Chloe believed in doing what was right, no matter what, and she had never judged her for it. But Mia wanted this job badly, and the thought of asking Chloe didn't sit right. Hazel, on the other hand, felt safer, but Mia hadn't told Hazel that she'd gotten addicted not long after she gave them to her. Mia continued to purchase them through a dealer she met through her ex-boyfriend when they were together.

Still, she felt she had no choice. When she finally asked Hazel for her urine, Hazel didn't condemn. She agreed, but on one condition: she would help Mia only if Mia stopped taking Percocet and went to a doctor for help. Mia promised, but the promise didn't last. After starting her job as an art teacher, her migraines intensified; the constant redirection, the loud children, the smells of the paint everyday deepened the pain. She leaned on Percocet even more hiding now another struggle from Chloe and Hazel. On their weekend outings, Hazel and Chloe sometimes sensed a subtle shift in Mia's energy, a shadow behind her smile, but they never questioned it.

Last Friday, Hazel gave birth to her third child. Chloe and Mia stayed by her side through the night, returning home Saturday afternoon as rain gathered in the sky. Rain often triggered Mia's migraines, and she felt one coming on. Before leaving, she slipped into the bathroom and took a pill. By the time the rain began to fall, she and Chloe hugged tightly, whispered their

goodbyes, and ran for their cars. Mia slid into the driver's seat, a faint warmth already spreading through her. She drank water to steady the lightheadedness, determined to make it home.

She shifted into reverse, pausing as a horn honked. It was Chloe, waving goodbye one last time. Mia returned the gesture and pulled out of her parking spot. As she merged onto the main road, the rain pelted harder, fogging the windows, prompting her to turn on the wipers and the defroster to clear the view. At the red light, the drowsiness amplified. Once the light flicked green, she exhaled sharply and continued to drive. It felt like she was moving through water and she closed her eyes.

Reopening her eyes slowly, she barely swerved to avoid hitting the car ahead veering into the next lane without looking. A blue sedan collided with another vehicle to avoid hitting Mia's car after her sudden turn into their lane. She heard the crash allowing her adrenaline to peak and sped away, glancing back at the mess she'd possibly caused. Body trembling, she burst through her front door, kicked off her shoes, and climbed into bed without changing or cleaning up. The rain was still dripping from her hair and clothes.

Mia didn't stir until the next morning, turning over to glance at her phone. Fifty-plus notifications blinked back at her. Her chest tightened; something was wrong. She dialed the last person who had called her: her mother. The line trembled with sobs.

"Chloe... she's gone," her mother whispered, and the world seemed to tilt beneath her.

"What do you mean gone?"

"I'm so sorry baby, she was in car wreck yesterday afternoon."

"I don't understand. Is she at the hospital? Can I see her?"

“No, baby... she’s gone,” her mother’s voice cracked. “They worked on her all night, but she passed this morning. I’ve been trying to reach you. Since I’m out of town, I sent Hazel over to check on you earlier this morning, but she said you didn’t come to the door.”

“I don’t believe this,” Mia screamed.

“I know, baby. I really hope they catch the car that caused the accident.”

“They say there were witnesses... they think the car had a bumper sticker, but the rain made it hard to be sure.”

Mia screamed, dropping her phone into the narrow gap between her bed and headboard. She paced the room, mind racing with a thousand fragmented thoughts. When Hazel called, she couldn’t bring herself to answer. She stumbled into the bathroom, splashing cold water on her face, but the moment she stepped out, her knees gave way. She sank to the floor, tears streaming, her world shattering around her. Chloe was gone, and Mia couldn’t accept it. A dreadful realization settled over her. The accident happened just as she was leaving the hospital. She thought what if she had been the one behind the wheel, the one responsible for the crash that killed her best friend and left the scene.

Mia’s mind spun in endless loops. Her mother’s words swirled relentlessly, each repetition tightening each temple. Then a single, sharp detail pierced through her panic: the mention of a sticker on the back bumper. She bolted downstairs, heart hammering, to check the back of her car for the customized bumper sticker Chloe had gifted her years ago that showcased her artwork. At the trunk, the sticker was gone. Relief glimmered, then doubt. She convinced herself that her car couldn’t have caused the accident and maybe her car sticker fell off a while ago and she just hadn’t noticed.

As Mia sat down on her bed, her ring camera buzzed. At first, it was just her neighbor's cat prowling across the yard. But then she noticed earlier notifications from the morning when her mother told Hazel to stop by. She replayed the footage and saw Hazel step out of her car, knock on the door, and, after getting no answer, began to head back to her car. She then saw Hazel pause, staring at Mia's car for nearly twenty seconds. Hazel glanced around and tried to snatch the sticker from the bumper. It didn't budge. She tugged harder, her fingers scraping uselessly against the edge as the adhesive held fast and tenacious. With a frustrated huff, she stepped back, wiped her hands on her jeans, and walked away as if she'd changed her mind.

Minutes later, Hazel returned. This time, she wasn't empty-handed. She crouched beside the bumper with a container of acetone, and a small blade, working carefully at the corner until it finally began to lift. The sticker peeled away in slow, stubborn strips, leaving behind a cloudy smear of glue that Hazel scrubbed at until her knuckles reddened. Only when the last trace was gone did she stand, put the bawled-up sticker in her pocket, and glance once more down the street before disappearing again.

Mia's mother told Hazel the same information she told Mia about the witnesses. Hazel was able to put two and two together and chose to protect Mia from guilt she knew would destroy her. Mia stared at the footage in disbelief. She stumbled to the bathroom, swallowed a pill, and collapsed, lost to the world for the rest of the day.

A few days later, a memorial service was held for Chloe. Chloe's favorite flowers were sunflowers, bright, unwavering things that always seemed to turn toward the light. It felt only right that her funeral was held in the same church where she had grown up, where her laughter once vibrated through the halls, and her childhood footsteps had worn the floor thin. Now, sunflowers filled the space, lined the pews and gathered at the altar.

The room was heavy with mourning. Tears fell freely, punctuated by quiet sobs and sudden, aching cries that rose and collapsed into silence.

Chloe had been deeply loved, adored in a way that left an unbearable emptiness in her absence. Her parents sat shattered in the front pew; their hands clasped tightly together, as if letting go would undo what little strength they had left. Losing her was unthinkable; she was their only child, their beginning and their everything. Chloe had never been a burden to them, only occasionally testing their patience with the normal bratty bearings of adolescence.

Beyond that, and well into her adulthood, she shared a relationship with them rooted in mutual respect, warmth, and love. She called often. She showed up. She carried their pride with her, without ever realizing how deeply she was cherished. One row behind them sat Mia and Hazel, sat shoulder to shoulder, hands entwined, faces pale and hollow, mourning not just the loss of Chloe, but the loss of the future they had always imagined would include her.

Mia portrayed little emotion, barely glancing at Chloe in the casket. She bite her fingernails to distract her unspoken regret.

“I remember Chloe coming home, telling me she didn’t need me to protect her from the school bullies anymore, Mia had it handled,” Chloe’s mom, Mrs. Claire said from the podium, her voice trembling. “Mia has always been such a steadfast friend to our Chloe, and we will be forever grateful.” Mrs. Claire’s eyes softened as she spoke, the depth of her love for Mia clear. Mia felt she didn’t deserve such acknowledgement and kept her head bowed, black shades hiding her eyes; her grief and guilt contained yet palpable beneath the dark fabric.

Chloe’s parents were being consoled as the service drew to a close. Mrs. Claire gently pulled Mia and Hazel aside, taking their hands and leading them to the back of the church.

Her voice faltered as she spoke, explaining the investigator's findings, the same details they had already known. "I just want closure," she said, her eyes glossy with tears. "I want the person responsible to come forward."

Mrs. Claire's voice broke as tears choked her words. Mia reached into her purse for a tissue and, as she pulled it out, a pill slipped to the floor. Hazel caught sight of it and turned her head quickly. In that instant, everything clicked. She felt a stab of guilt and sorrow. Mia was still addicted to the pills; the same ones Hazel had introduced her to. Hazel couldn't help but connect the dots: the pills, Mia's migraines, and the accident. Although she felt she was saving Mia by removing the bumper sticker from her car, the same way Mia had shielded her from grief after the miscarriage; she blamed herself too, feeling just as responsible for Chloe's death.

Mrs. Claire's husband gently guided her away, leaving Mia standing there, the weight of her own emotions pressing down, unaware that the pill had fallen. Hazel picked it up and tossed it in the trash before following her. As Mia turned to leave, Hazel caught her hand and squeezed it tightly.

"It's going to be okay Mia, you're not alone."

Mia went home and changed into her pajamas, preparing to stay in bed for the rest of the day. Mentally, she had sunk into the darkest place she'd ever known. She tried to return to work, but her focus shattered under the weight of her migraines, which felt like death itself. Finally, she made an appointment with a doctor. She promised herself she would let go of the pills that caused so many sleepless nights, demonic dreams, and uncontrollable sweats.

Hazel spent the next month trying to stay sane while remaining present in her roles as a mother and wife. When her husband mentioned something she'd forgotten to around the house

She would snap. *“It’s not all my fault.”* He would reassure her that everything was okay, that he wasn’t blaming her for forgetting to sterilize the bottles or switch the laundry from the washer to the dryer; he was only reminding her. But for Hazel, it was never about the bottles or the unfinished chores. It was about helping Mia get addicted to Percocet. It was about tearing the bumper sticker from the car. To her husband, Hazel appeared to be experiencing normal postpartum shifts; to Hazel, she was loyal.

It had been a month and a half since the funeral and since she’d spoken to Mia. Grief had taken them in different ways yet bound them together for the same reason. One night, unable to sleep, Mia got into her car and drove to Hazel’s house. She didn’t expect to go inside; she just needed to be near the one person who seemed to understand it all. Mia parked in the driveway and sat there, holding in a silent scream.

As Hazel passed the living room window on her way to the kitchen, she noticed Mia sitting in her car in the driveway. She had just finished breastfeeding and laid her baby down to sleep. Her husband worked away in the basement, and her older children were already asleep for the night. She retrieved her bowl of ramen from the stove and opened the door wide enough to signal to Mia that she was welcomed in. Hazel sat on the couch and eventually she heard a car door close. Mia, without a word, entered Hazel’s home, closing the door softly behind her. She slid off her shoes and sat beside Hazel on the couch. They lingered in silence while Hazel slurped on her noodles and Mia stared at the wall.

Unknown Friend

Taylor and I met on the first day of ninth grade in homeroom, two shy girls pretending we weren't terrified. She walked in with her bouncy, chestnut-brown curls, big brown eyes, a black miniskirt with long socks and a red Ed Hardy bag with her name spelled out in studs. Somehow, we just drifted together. Soon we were sharing lunches, whisper-laughing about our math teacher's dramatic sighs, and texting nonstop about the boys we wanted to kiss someday. By the end of freshman year, we were basically a package deal. If you saw Taylor, you would see me. We both eventually made other friends but mainly hung out with each other. From sleepovers, to studying together and swimming at the lake, we truly enjoyed each other's company.

Even though Taylor and I fit together so easily, we came from totally different worlds. She was an only child with parents who were not just well-off, but the kind of rich that showed up quietly, in the way her mom never stressed over bills, and her dad knew everybody in the city because, well, he was the mayor. Their house felt like something out of a magazine: three stories of Savannah gray brick, a three-car garage, and ceilings so high my voice echoed when I laughed. What surprised me most was how kind her parents were, genuinely kind. They always made me feel safe and welcome, like I belonged there. And I loved Taylor, I really did. But sometimes, walking through that house, seeing her picture-perfect life as an only child with all the things I used to dream about... yeah, it made something tight twist in my chest. Envy, I guess. The kind you pretend not to notice.

My mom always told me she ran away from her old life the minute she graduated, like the ink on her diploma wasn't even dry before she packed her bags. She hated how strict and broke my grandparents were, how she could never go to school events or hang out on weekends because there was never enough money.

So, right after graduation, she left my grandparents' house and began working a low-paying call-center job just to stay afloat. That's where she met my dad. He was the manager, smooth-talking and confident, and on the side, he dealt drugs, something she never said out loud, but I pieced together over the years. I think his whole lifestyle felt exciting to her, like a world she wasn't supposed to touch but wanted anyway. She fell for him, hard, and got pregnant with me not long after. Somewhere in all of that, the dream she once had of becoming a teacher slipped away, like she misplaced it and never had the time or energy to look for it again.

The three of us lived in a cramped one-bedroom studio until I was four, though I barely remember it. Most of what I know comes from the way my mom tells the story, how my dad went from charming to violence, how one night she finally grabbed me and walked out without even packing a bag. Not long after, she found out she was pregnant with my brother. She said that news was overwhelming, leaving her feeling alone, broke, and stuck in a job she hated.

She didn't want to, but my mom was left with no other choice but to move back in with my grandparents until she could breathe again. Slowly, she started rebuilding her life. She got a job as an administrative assistant at my preschool, and that somehow reminded her of who she wanted to be. She enrolled in a teacher-education program at the nearby college, juggled homework, shifts, and two kids with no complaints. Eventually she saved enough for a two-bedroom townhouse just north of the city. It wasn't fancy, but it was ours. Raising both of us alone wasn't easy; she said it in her eyes more than in her words, but she kept us safe, fed, and loved. I didn't always have the newest shoes or get to sign up for every school activity, but I never once felt unloved. She was my superhero.

I knew my mom did the best she could, but I still hated sharing almost everything with my little brother. I used to daydream about having my own room with pink wallpaper, a big bed with matching sheets and pillows, the whole princess setup.

So, when I slept over at Taylor's one night and saw her bed covered with this gorgeous purple-and-pink daisy throw, I couldn't stop staring at it. It reminded me of the bed sets I would see on the Pottery Barn website. The next morning, right before my mom came to pick me up, Taylor went into the bathroom. And I don't know what got into me, jealousy, desperation, maybe both, but I slipped that beautiful throw cover into my overnight bag. Zipping it shut gave me the power I had been longing for.

The very next day at school, Taylor asked about the throw cover. My stomach dropped, but I pretended I had no idea what she was talking about. She just stared at me; she knew I was lying. I tend to rock back and forth when I'm lying and *boy was I rocking*. And because I was apparently the world's worst thief, I didn't even bother hiding it. That weekend, when we stopped by my house to change before going to the skating rink, she walked right into my room and saw it lying on my bed.

We used to argue about stupid stuff all the time, but this one exploded fast. One minute we were yelling, and the next we were swinging at each other. Our moms came running from the living room, both wide-eyed and furious, though honestly, I think half their anger came from dropping their precious hazelnut lattes all over the carpet in the chaos. We never made it to the rink. When Taylor left, she paused at the door and said, "You didn't have to steal from me. I would've just given it to you." The words stung, mostly because they were true. But the stubborn part of me twisted it into something else, like she only said it to remind me how easy her life was, how much she had that I didn't.

The summer before tenth grade, Taylor and I practically lived at the lake near my house. It was where all the popular upperclassmen hung out, especially the football players we spent entire sleepovers whispering about like they were celebrities.

So, when we heard one of the junior players was hosting a barbecue there one Saturday, we couldn't wait to go. We piled on makeup and squeezed into the skimpiest outfits we could find, giggling the whole time like we were getting away with something huge.

The thing was, I could actually do makeup, way better than Taylor. Whenever my grandparents slipped me a couple of extra dollars, I'd run to the dollar store to either buy a book to read or buy the cheapest palettes and crusty lip glosses I could find. If I chose a book, I would get lost in the different worlds for hours but if I chose makeup, I'd lock myself in my room and watch YouTube tutorials while practicing on my dolls. "Ugh, too much blush," I'd mutter for the hundredth time, wiping it off and trying again. Eventually, I got good. Really good. It was one of the few things in my life that made me feel talented, like I had something special that didn't depend on money or luck, just me.

Taylor's mom dropped her off at my house after gymnastics practice, her hair still damp and the scent of chalk clinging to her clothes. Once she changed, she immediately started helping me pick out my outfit. Fashion was her superpower. Her mom bought her every teen style magazine just because, so she always knew what went with what.

"I think that skirt would look way better with my matte black and gold Coach purse," she said, holding it up against my black denim skirt as we studied ourselves in the mirror. "You can wear it, if you want." She smiled, all generous and effortless, like handing over a pricey designer bag was no big deal.

But my grandmother always warned me that jealousy was a dangerous spirit, and honestly, it felt like it sat right on my shoulder whenever I was around Taylor. My other friends were so similar to me that they didn't phase me the same. The more she offered that gorgeous purse, the harder I rolled my eyes.

It was just another reminder of everything she had that I didn't. So, I smiled, shook my head, and went with my plain white purse, even though I wanted hers so badly it almost hurt.

When our makeup was finally perfect, we tiptoed into my mom's room and sprayed ourselves with what we were convinced was "grown folks" perfume. The second we stepped outside, we realized it smelled awful. We burst into hysterical laughter, praying the summer breeze at the lake would save us from reeking like retired grandmas.

When we reached the corner of the lake, the smell of barbecue floated through the air, warm and smoky, and music thumped from the cars pulling into the gravel lot. Everyone seemed hyped, laughing and dancing before they even got out of their cars. Taylor was ready to jump right in. Me? I just wanted to chill, read a book, and make snarky comments about the boys.

But ever since people figured out who Taylor parents were before the end of our ninth-grade year, she'd become another type of popular than me. I was popular for not necessarily my fashion or looks like Taylor but more so for my intellect. Upperclassmen noticed her and complimented her outfits. Upperclassmen noticed me for knowing the answers in class and starting book clubs around the school and even though we had other friends, we just blended so well together. No matter what, Taylor stayed cool and gentle and almost weirdly humble.

Sometimes I wondered if it was easy for her to be that way because she grew up without the stuff that weighed me down. She never had to dig through the church donation box hunting for clothes that fit. She never did homework with a candlelight because the power got cut off again. She didn't grow up having to watch her mother cry about which bill could wait another week. Maybe that's me being a hater, like I always joke but sometimes it felt true.

We finally made it past the parking lot and onto the grass, where people had tossed down blankets and frisbees. Taylor and I found an empty bench and sat there pretending we belonged,

trying to look casual even though my heart was practically doing somersaults. It didn't take long before David, one of the football players, noticed us and waved Taylor over to the gazebo like they were old friends. I could tell Taylor and David were into each other. They laughed, leaned close, and joked like they'd known each other forever. Meanwhile, I stayed on the bench, texting other friends asking why they didn't come and people-watch, but after thirty minutes, irritation crept in.

I didn't mind her talking to him, well, not really, but I had no one to hang out with, no one to laugh with, no one to be me around. I thought this party was supposed to be about us just having some girl time. I didn't even realize how possessive I'd become. I knew I should have made sure other friends would be here so that I wouldn't be alone. Finally, I snapped. I stormed over to Taylor, who was perched on David's lap, laughing like I didn't exist.

"Taylor! I thought we were hanging out, but here you are, all cozy with some guy you barely know!"

She jumped off his lap and waved him off with a calm smile, grabbing my hand. "I'm sorry for leaving you alone for so long," she said. She waved bye to David, and we wandered the party a bit, grabbed hotdogs and juice, and claimed a bench to gossip about everything. For me, that was the best part of the day, when it was just me and her, no interruptions. When we finally made it back to my house, we kept talking, giggling about boys until sleep claimed us, tangled up in blankets and the soft hum of summer night air.

Tenth grade? Total snoozefest. There's nothing to talk about there. But eleventh grade... that's when things got interesting. Mid-year, a new guy transferred in after getting kicked out of Celestial High. Rumors swirled that he was a rebellious troublemaker with a hundred girlfriends. We didn't care. Every girl at our school, myself included, was instantly obsessed with Luke.

I'll never forget the first time I saw him in the cafeteria. I was sitting at our table, trying not to gag over a half-cooked chicken sandwich, when he walked by. He was like a gust of fresh air in a room full of stale, awkward cornballs. He smelled... grown-up. Like he raided his dad's cologne, but sharper, muskier.

He was tall, smooth brown skin, straight teeth, short and glossy curly hair, and a bold unibrow that somehow made him even more magnetic. He wore a shirt that said, "Do not be afraid," with black basketball shorts that showed off unusually hairy legs. Everything about him was memorizing, and we couldn't take our eyes off him.

The friendship between Taylor and I was pretty much the same until she and Luke became a couple. He swept her off her feet, and I couldn't help thinking it was kind of cute. My boyfriend and I had broken up during my tenth-grade year. See, I told you it was snoozefest. Anyway, I was single and initially was really happy for Taylor. Until all her attention was on Luke. They started hanging out as much as, if not more than we did. And I mean, I got it. The first few weeks of a new relationship is dreamy but suddenly, our dynamic shifted, and I always felt like the third wheel.

For the most part, Luke was cool, down-to-earth, and I could see how happy he made her. But then I started seeing him in a different way. We ended up in history class together, sitting side by side, getting paired for projects, and before I knew it, those classes became the best part of my day. Just talking to him felt... easy, like I was finally seeing a side of high school that wasn't stressful or awkward.

As our friendship grew, he started sharing little things he didn't like about Taylor. He'd wrap the critiques in jokes, but I still felt uncomfortable hearing them. One day, he came into class and was clearly upset. For a moment I was unsure what to do, then I just placed

my hand on his shoulder and asked, “Are you okay?” He barely even looked at me. It was strange, a little cold, but I let it go and focused on class.

Not even five minutes later, I caught him staring at my breast with the most unnatural smile I’d ever seen. It freaked me out. Embarrassed and creeped out, I grinned as if I was in on the joke because this had to be one. He told me that he and Taylor got into a bad argument, and he wasn’t seeing things clearly. But later that week I caught him watching my butt as I got up from the desk and that same day as I opened my locker to put my books in, I heard commotion down the hall and wondered if a fight had broken out. I turned back around and hurried to put my books in my locker and that's when I noticed an anonymous note that wasn't there moments ago when I opened my locker. It read “I want you instead.” Confusion couldn't stop me from blushing; I folded the note and put it in my back pocket looking around to see if anyone was watching.

I suspected it was Luke—the handwriting gave him away, and his sudden, flirtatious attention made it obvious. And then I thought maybe he’s just being nice because of the way I took up for him the day before. We had a project where we had to dress up in tailored attire, and Luke was essentially teased. They called him “Fake Dracula” and “Bat Boy” because of his gothic flowing cape and popped collar. The guys couldn’t wait to bash him anyway as they were already mad about all the attention he’d been receiving from all the girls all along.

I gave him a complement loudly expressing how I thought his outfit was super cool and how I’d love to know where he got his cape from. Soon all the girls surrounded him in the class. He gave me a fist pump and the middle finger to the boys chumped faces. But either way, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy the attention. There was something thrilling about the way he watched me, the way he made words feel like a game I didn’t want to end. I never admitted

I knew it was him putting notes in my locker; part of me secretly wanted the attention to last forever.

Eventually, I noticed when he and Taylor were back on good terms—he went back to acting like his old self, and I didn't mind. One day at lunch, he finally spilled the story about why he'd been kicked out of his old school.

“I don't get it. How do you get kicked out of one of the best schools in the district? What did you do?”

He shrugged. “I set the bathroom on fire. Nothing too crazy.”

I blinked. “That's dumb. Why?”

“I was skipping class and got bored.”

I laughed. “If you were that bored, you could've just gone to class.”

“Well, that's dumb,” he shot back, mocking my voice. We laughed and got up to toss our trays.

He was so charming but in an annoying kind of way. This turned me on, a feeling I didn't fully understand. I could feel heat between my legs and the hairs on my neck stand up anytime I was around him. His smile made me think of him in the shower and each conversation with him felt too short. One could say I was falling in love with my best friend's boyfriend, but I would deny it. By the next semester, Luke and I didn't share any classes. His thing with Taylor was still going strong, though I secretly wished it would implode. Meanwhile, my feelings for him were multiplying by the day. Hungry for any sign he noticed me, I begged my counselor to tweak my schedule just to be near him.

I missed our long talks, the flirting, and that one time his hand slid up my skirt in the hallway. I didn't even realize he was walking behind me. I tripped over my stupid boot strings and as I was falling forward, he pulled me from behind with one hand on the back of my waist and the other up my skirt. It was such a smooth catch and as I turned around to thank him, he was gone. But I knew it was him, and I was sure he felt something between us. But there was Taylor, our friendship with her was solid, and neither of us wanted to destroy that. It made everything feel tangled, stimulating, and impossible all at once.

So, I decided to pull back, trying to carve out a life that didn't revolve around either of them. But after a few canceled plans, and me spending time with my other friends who I now deemed as kind of boring, I realized I missed Taylor and Luke too much. Although I was still head over heels for Luke, I'd learned to live with it. Sort of. We began to hang out more regularly again, and sometimes it felt like Taylor, and I were sharing Luke, and that sting of jealousy burned every time, but it kept me fascinated.

One Friday after school, we headed to the lake to roast s'mores around a fire. Bundled up against the chill, Taylor and I perched on a long, fallen branch while Luke scavenged sticks for the fire. We teased him, joking about not getting too excited given his... history. He laughed; sparks flew as he got the fire going.

"Y'all acting like old ladies. Let's get some music going and dance," he said, scrolling through his phone. "Ah, yes, my favorite Pandora station." Then he grabbed Taylor from the branch and spun her around, laughing.

A jab of jealousy pricked me, but I shrugged it off, unwrapping my scarf while swaying to the music, letting the crisp air and the crackling fire drown out my envious thoughts. Taylor laughed, caught up in the moment, while Luke suddenly started to sing. His voice was actually quite good.

“I didn’t know you could sing, Luke,” I said, gliding a little closer.

He smirked, eyes twinkling. “*There’s a lot of things you don’t know about me.*”

Taylor leaned closer. “He thinks he’s so smooth.” We both burst into hysterical laughter. Her face glowed in the firelight, vibrant, alive and for a moment I forgot how much I’d missed her. I missed our girl nights at my house where we would stay up all night and talk or when we would just dress up just to take pictures in her backyard. I hadn’t realized how fast everything had shifted since Luke showed up. I didn’t care about him anymore. I wanted my best friend back and for a second, I almost told her everything, about him, about me, but then the crackling fire and the rush of cool breeze across my face made the thought vanish. Something in the air felt off. The fire flared suddenly, sending sparks into the night sky.

Feeling queasy, I stumbled back toward the log, but it wasn’t where we’d left it; it seemed farther away, like the world had been disturbed. I thought maybe I was just tripping and started back dancing. Taylor turned around and started dancing on Luke, giving him a full-on lap dance. I’m hyping her up as any best friend would do, and then I glanced at Luke. He was haunting a smile at me that I’d seen before. I had so many mixed emotions, my God, I loved him but Taylor was my best friend. I wanted to be turned off. I wanted to roll my eyes at him with disgust. I wanted Taylor to leave so we could be alone. I wanted to feel him on me.

After changing to another song, he grabbed Taylor’s face and began to kiss her, and she obliged happily. My stomach twisted, and I muttered an excuse, and headed for the parking lot. Seconds after I stepped away, Taylor’s phone rang. While distracted on the phone, Luke caught up with me wrapping his hands suddenly on my waist from behind as he did before. The intensity in his fingertips proved to me that he loved me more, a heat that made my pulse race. When I turned to face him, his grip tightened, pressing me against him, like he wouldn’t let me escape.

“Luke what are you doing?”

“Exactly what you’ve been wanting me to do.” He smirked.

The butterflies I usually felt around him were there but moving slowly. I knew Taylor cared for Luke, but I was almost certain she didn’t love him the way I did. I placed my hands on top of his that was still wrapped around my waist, welcoming him to me. Just before his lips touched mine, Taylor yanked him away from me.

“How could you?!” Taylor screamed, storming off.

Luke just stood there as I ran after Taylor.

“Please, Taylor, stop! I swear I would never do that to you. He’s trifling—he tried to kiss me.”

She slowed from running to a fast walk toward the branch where her purse and sweater lay. I had never seen her so furious. She stopped, turned, and faced me. My knees became weak; I had no idea if she was going to spit in my face or curse me out. Tears glimmered in her eyes, but her voice was sharp.

“You know through our entire friendship, I’ve tried to be nice to you, even after all the times you’ve shown me how jealous you are of me. If you want Luke, fine—you can have him. I’m done with both of you.”

She snatched her things from the branch and started toward the visitor’s center, waiting for her mom. I wasn’t ready to give up, so I sat on the steps beside her. Without lifting her eyes from her phone, she snapped, “Leave me alone.” No matter what had ever happened between us, Taylor had always been patient and understanding. And now, I had let her down. I hated it. But she was too angry, and nothing I said would reach her, so I stayed silent.

I didn't go far. I settled under a nearby tree, just to make sure she got into her mom's car safely. The stillness of the air pressed in on me as I tried to think, heart heavy, mind racing. I had no idea where Luke was when Taylor's mom finally pulled up. She jumped into the car without a backward glance, and in that moment, I felt unbearably small.

I headed back to our lit fire to grab my things, accidentally dropping my scarf into the fire. The fire roared, a sudden, greedy flare that lunged at me with heat so intense it singed my skin. Sparks leapt like tiny demons, hissing as they struck the dry grass. I stumbled backward, hitting the ground hard. Another wave of nausea churned in my stomach. My limbs refused to obey; Fear clawed at me, and in desperation, I screamed for help. I called out Luke's name.

He appeared like a shadow, unnervingly calm. "Looks like you're in trouble," he said with that same devilish grin. He helped me up but wouldn't let go of my arm. He grabbed my face and placed his eyelids directly on top of mine. I had the Ed Hardy bag, my parents had money, and I was kissing him. I was Taylor. I could hear Luke hysterically laughing as my throat burned from trying to scream, but nothing came out.

He pulled me close again, gripping my waist. But I didn't want his kiss anymore. I knew I had just broken Taylor's heart and that's all I could think about in the moment. I was finally able to speak.

"Not right now Luke, I'm not in the mood."

"But you're always in the mood. I know you want to kiss me." Luke insisted. As I stepped backwards to get away from Luke, I tripped and fell again.

He pounced on top of me. His hands gripped my neck, his weight pressing down, knees pinning my arms as I kicked and flailed, trying to get him off me. My heart hammered, lungs burning, every instinct screaming to get away. I felt the heat from the fire growing more out

control. Drifting in and out of consciousness, I caught glimpses of Luke's face shifting, like something inhuman fading beneath. The son of Satan is what my grandmother would have called him.

I knew I was being summoned into a very dark place for Luke to completely take me out. I cried out, screaming Jesus' name the way my grandmother taught me. When I was little, she'd sit me on the front pew at church while the pastor said, "Whenever you find yourself in the presence of something evil, call on Jesus."

So, I did. I screamed his name inside my mind until my throat felt raw. The fire flickered, breaking apart into flashes, quick, stuttering clips of the sky above the lake. My eyes opened. Taylor was hovering over me, screeching my name. Footsteps pounded all around us. My body felt weightless, like I had been pulled out of a burning house. Luke was gone.

Months after, Taylor and I could never talk about what happened at the lake that day. It's like some unspoken rule, we both felt too weird, too... pathetic, even bringing it up. Some people said Luke moved far away. Others whispered he was on drugs and drowned in the lake. The only thing Taylor did mention about that day was that she came back to the park because something in her gut felt wrong. When her mom was pulling away, she saw Luke standing in the road, waving at her with the blackest, emptiest eyes she'd ever seen.

She apologized for leaving me there. When she got back to the lake, she found me sprawled on the ground and frantically screaming. As she helped me up, she heard something rustling in the bushes, but nothing was there. I still write about Luke in my diary, because sometimes it feels like he never really left. Like his shadow is still hanging around the edges of my life. He was right about one thing: there really were a lot of things we didn't know about him.

Is It Worth It?

Becoming a wife

Labor and expectations

Nevermind, I'll pass.

Her Conscience

“Today was hard.”

“When isn't it?”

“Chris will be working from home tomorrow, thank God!”

“I'm guessing he makes it easier.”

“Sometimes and then sometimes it's better when he's at work”

“I get that. Men are distractions.”

“I love him though.”

“I never said you didn't.”

“I mean he's an awesome husband and father, but he just doesn't get it.”

“Make him get it.”

“That's just another thing added to my to-do list. But there are times he gets it, like when he comes home with coffee for me after his five A.M. workout before his shift.”

“That's thoughtful.”

“For sure, it's one of the only times during my days where one thing is made for me.”

“You deserve that.”

“Precisely. I spend my days scheduling lives that aren’t mine—making appointments, cooking meals no one remembers, wiping counters, tucking everyone in like it’s my sacred duty to keep them breathing. I pour myself into everyone else, while the barista at the café consistently makes something just for me, she’s the only one who ever looks at me and asks what I want.”

“I’m sure Chris tries to help?”

“He asks me what do I need for him to do.”

“Men.”

“Exactly.”

“Because if you have to ask him, is it really help?”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe you could find the energy to explain yourself again, to guide him through the needs you carry so heavily, until the help no longer comes wrapped in questions.”

“I could but why should I? He should know what to do. I didn’t lay down with myself and create three kids.”

“Sure, but you did choose to be a stay-at-home mother.”

“Yes, because we didn’t trust or could afford daycare. And granted it has become easier now that the older two are in school during the day but the youngest, he won’t let go.”

“I mean school is a big change for a toddler.”

“But he won’t use the potty. After only a month of preschool, we pulled him out, defeated by the simple truth that he doesn’t care when he soils himself, even as it wears me down. I mean I get he’s adjusting and every child is different, but it wears me down.”

“I’m sure pediatricians and teachers have told you that it just takes time.”

“But it doesn’t change anything. Do you know how weightless I felt during that one month when all the kids were in school and the house belonged to me for hours at a time? I felt free in a way I’d almost forgotten was possible.”

“So now what?”

“My days are spent trying to write stories in the margins of chaos, shadowed by a four-year-old who survives on a single cracker and doesn’t mind soiling himself. I swallow the misery and keep going.”

“You’re not miserable, you’re just not communicating.”

“Communicate with who? Our immediate family lives hours away, help is scarce, and most days I can barely hear my own thoughts—let alone hold a real conversation with my husband without being tugged on.”

“Shove the little twits to the ground and talk to your husband, especially since it seems to be just you two.”

“Just to hear them scream for the next ten minutes?”

“Sounds like another excuse.”

“I’m owed that. I move through my days overstimulated and depleted, holding the house together by sheer will. Even sick, I sip tea between loads of laundry, answering homework questions with a foggy head and a body begging to rest.”

“I think you should be grateful to be able to stay home mother. Some would even say you’re privileged.”

“Privileged? That’s comical. This is not the Golden Ages, but two things can be true at the same time. I’m grateful and I’m tired.”

“Tired of what exactly?”

“Have you been listening?”

“Trying to. You just seem a bit on the edge. Have a glass of wine, some chocolate, something.”

“Now you know I don’t drink. But sometimes I do wish I had something besides coffee to keep me sane.”

“So, try it. What’s the worst that can possibly happen?”

“I could turn into an alcoholic and leave my kids to be raised by family members.”

“Why are you bringing your mother into this? And plus, it wasn’t just the wine.”

“But it was a factor. That’s enough for me.”

“That’s fair, I suppose.”

“Motherhood is overwhelming, but I don’t want my kids to be raised by anyone else.”

“The same kids that won’t let you have a conversation?”

“I could cry right now thinking of them.”

“Oh, here we go!”

“They didn’t ask to be here.”

“None of us did.”

“I know, and the guilt settles deep in my chest. I carried them into this world, and now I complain about the weight of loving them. What kind of mother does that make me?”

“A mother with feelings and thoughts. Good mothers have those you know?”

“I know, but it’s almost unbearable not to feel ashamed when every day I find myself replaying the moments I screamed and cursed at them, wondering if those flashes of anger have already scarred their entire childhood.”

“That’s normal.”

“Some would say. But others would hang me.”

“Please stop.”

“I’m serious. If I’m not obsessing over whether I’ve already ruined their childhood, I feel myself suffocating under the thought that one day something could happen to them—or to me and Chris and they’d be left completely alone.”

“Yes, but you can’t let fear dominate every moment. Motherhood lets you see the world with fresh eyes, almost like a second childhood where staring at clouds, building forts, or feeling rain soak your shoes can feel like discovering life all over again. Your children aren’t counting the minutes you yelled at them to finish their sugar-free yogurt,

they're lost in the thrill of splashing in puddles, of being small and alive."

"But still, I don't want to shout at them."

"That's exactly why you must be intentional. First be intentional about giving yourself grace, then draw lines for yourself, for the children and for your husband. Communicate, Renee. Make your needs known."

"Easier said than done."

"More excuses."

"It's not an excuse. It's a fact. They can smell the seconds I try to steal for myself. The moment I take a bite, a small disaster erupts—someone is hurt, someone is lost, someone needs me. There's no space left for me, not even to think, not even to speak."

"They just love mommy."

"And that makes me so happy but..."

"But?"

"No one ever tells you that motherhood is a mirror of your own shortcomings. They forget to mention that your needs come last, that closing your eyes is only a brief pause, never rest. I don't think I've truly rested since I first became a mother."

"I can imagine."

"And don't get me started on time."

"What about it?"

"It doesn't stop. It actually moves faster."

“You're kidding.”

“I'm serious. The days are long, but the years fly by, almost vanishing. That's why I take so many pictures.”

“You should be proud.”

“Proud of what? Taking pictures?”

“Yes. Time is precious, but you capture it with love.”

“But...”

“Let me finish. Even amid the whiny moments, your true concern is about being a better mother and not which child you should drown first.”

“Are you shaming mothers that have harmed their children?”

“Is that really all you heard?”

“No. I heard you. It's midnight. It's the only time of day I can fully hear you while the entire house sleeps.”

“Good. Try to enjoy the rest of your night, Renee. Wash your face, apply your lotions and rest.”

“I'll try”

“Try harder.”

She Was a Good Wife

This morning was no different from any other. Falon woke up at five, intending to shower, but instead walked to the market for fresh berries. She returned home, ironed her husband's clothes, packed his lunch, and brewed his coffee. She preferred toast and scrambled eggs yet toasted him a bagel and fried a sunny-side-up egg. She draped his jacket over the kitchen chair beside his lunch bag and water bottle. She called upstairs for him to eat. When he didn't come, she carried the plate to the bedroom and kissed his forehead as he lay motionless. Downstairs again, she cleaned the kitchen and hummed her favorite song.

The next morning unfolded the same. She skipped the shower. She went to the store. She carried breakfast upstairs, setting it beside yesterday's untouched plates. She kissed his forehead and returned to scrub the counters. When she noticed she'd bought the wrong berries, she slid on her shoes and headed back out.

"I'll be right back, honey," she said, already moving toward the door.

"Back so soon?" The cashier asked.

Falon smiled, paid the exact change, and stepped into the street. Halfway across, she noticed a woman approaching, long black hair, clear skin, a white tank top stretched over a body that still belonged to itself. The woman's heels struck the pavement with purpose. In a boutique window, Falon caught her own reflection.

Her hair had thinned. Her body softened from the rhythm of daily life. Heels collected dust. Dinners out disappeared. Work replaced everything. And yet, the woman in the heels was recognition that she could still move through the world on her own terms. She hurried home.

She placed the berries in the refrigerator, arranging them exactly where she wanted. She loved her husband, his patience, his gentle humor, the way he had tucked her hair behind her ear on rainy mornings, but she also felt the weight of the years she had given herself over to him. In tending to his meals, his clothes, his routines, she had misplaced her own desires. Being his wife had been everything; being herself seemed an afterthought, almost unthinkable, though she still cherished him deeply.

She calmly climbed the stairs. Greg lay in bed exactly where he had for nearly 3 days; the room quieted around him. Falon stood in the doorway, aware of a world that still existed beyond absence. She could sip her coffee slowly, choose her own path for the day, linger over the berries she loved, hum her favorite songs without waiting for his smile. Loving him hadn't been a mistake; letting herself disappear had been. And that day, for the first time in years, she could exist fully, both remembering him and stepping forward into her own life.