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Celebration

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Celebration

It was Holme who introduced me to Olivia. Olivia was already in love with him, but Holme couldn't love anyone and only tried with other men. It didn't take long for me to fall in love with her. Even though it took some time for her to love me back.

It didn't take long for me to forget the old group from college and willingly admit its end, leaving those memories in crates to gather mildew in the spare bedroom. That was the unspoken agreement. When it ended, and everyone knew it would, we would just walk away. Forever was never in any of our vocabulary.

Peach expatriated to Paris, Greenly was sickly thin and addicted to sleeping pills and Miranda had simply disappeared. I still talk to Brady now and again. He's dating the model he sells cocaine too and teaching physics at a Jesuit high school in San Diego. He told me a while back that Holme was apparently back in the closet and married. With kids.

We were drifting at altitude in an oversized DC-10 when Olivia woke up. I was studying the pictures in my Rolling Stone and licking the last taste of beer from my cup.

"We're still in the air?" she asked.

"You weren't asleep for that long," I said.

During her nap, I saw her eyes darting around behind their lids and I wondered what she was looking for.

"I could see your eyes moving around."

"No one can sleep on a plane."

She hadn't been sleeping well for a while. She used to sleep with a smile, and sometimes I'd wake myself up just to see it. She had a tragic face, naturally and effortlessly suntanned. She kept it tight when she slept now, like something in her dreams had left her with an impossible responsibility.

"Have a drink, then. Maybe it'll help." I said.

"Avi. The baby."

"I'm sure a little alcohol at the early stages of fetal development won't hurt," I said.

She'd only been pregnant for six weeks and I didn't really know anything about the little glob growing inside her. I felt guilty; it wasn't even supposed to have happened. We weren't married, but it just didn't seem right to get rid of the baby. We never made up our minds and now I could see a tiny lump and we both knew it was too late.

"Sometimes I doubt what kind of father you're going to be."

I wanted to be a good father. Maybe if I could raise a kid right, there would be at least one optimistic human being in the world.

"I'm not going to be a pedophile, at least," I said.

"Well, I quit smoking," she said.

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"I'll be a good father," I said, but I could tell everyone around us was getting uncomfortable with the conversation.

We were landing when she woke up again. It was a long flight, but we left early and the city was pale and indistinguishable as we lowered into a time that was neither evening nor afternoon.

"Does it feel weird coming back?" I asked Olivia.

"It feels right."

"I feel out of place. Like everyone in the city is looking at me and recognizes me and wonders where I've been."

"Like coming home," she said.

I looked at her just in time to catch a sleepy smile fade from her eyes.

"I'm glad you're happy to be here," I said.

"Are you not?" she asked.

"I'm happy wherever you are," I said. I could never tell if she was rolling her eyes at me. "It's the truth," I reassured her.

"I'm sure, Avi. And you keep me rooted in the world. It's stabilizing."

"Stabilizing?"

"Stability, Avi. You're stable."

Stable, I thought. Solid. Rooted. I couldn't make the word sound good.

"You belong," I said.

"To you," she answered, and let the tiny muscles in her lips pull, labored and ungracefully at one corner of her mouth. But her eyes did nothing.

We got the invitation to Holme's fortieth a few weeks ago. It was addressed to me and I wondered what kind of lengths his wife went through to find my name and number, probably written on some tiny yellow post-it and shoved into the pages of a book just-in-case, and knew that Holme must have gotten rid of Olivia's altogether. I wondered who else he'd gotten rid of.

"I wonder if he's gained weight or anything," she said after she saw the invitation hidden in my desk. "I mean, not like he would let himself. He'd put a gun in his mouth first," she said.

"Holme's probably different," I said.

"Holme is the one person who wouldn't change. Not like Peach or Greenly, they lost their fun, their dedication."

"I don't think it's a matter of dedication," I said.

"He was always dedicated to," she stopped—she didn't mean fun, Holme was bigger than fun, he was a symbol to her, to all of us, of something more—"life," she said. And I thought she was right.

"He's got a wife now. Brady said he has kids."

"He would never let life get the better of him," she said.

"You're pregnant," I said, "what does that say about our life?"

"It says," she said between the lines of the invitation she was rereading, "we're going to this party."

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"He probably won't even want us there," I said, but Olivia had already put the invitation on the refrigerator and marked the date on our calendar. I relented but I told her that we would fly in the day of the party, make an appearance and fly back the next morning. She squealed and let her fists wave in front of her clenched eyes.

It was the squeal I loved, the way Olivia used to lose control of everything in and outside of her when she was happy. We would leave places early so we could make love on a couch, biting each other's lips so we didn't make too much noise.

It was a good time to be poor, to have no responsibilities other than a few classes and getting laid. Holme was great at it. We'd go to his nightclubs, places like The Manhole and Erector Set's. Everyone would get drunk and laugh at the men Holme would bring home, covered in glitter but almost no clothes. Holme relished the attention and made his flaws handsome, so he could control how people saw him. His early graying hair and his coy, flirty shoulders were irresistible to most men and all women.

It didn't bother me that Olivia looked at him, because everyone did. It didn't bother me that she was in love with him, because everyone was. No one was looking for permanence and when we stopped laughing at Holme, he found other people who did. Olivia wanted to cling to Holme, but no matter how hard she tried, he saw only old novelty where I saw refreshing idiosyncrasy.

Our hotel room was fifteen minutes from Holme's apartment. Inside, I could see Olivia in the mirror, standing in the bathroom, her head surrendered into her shoulder as she put on earrings I hadn't seen before.

She flirted with herself and beamed at the mirror with impish animation, squirming in a pink dress that fell all over her curves.

"Who are you getting all dressed up for, beautiful?" I asked.

"I haven't looked beautiful in a very long time," she said.

"You've looked beautiful since before you were born."

"If only this lump were either obviously a baby, or not there at all. It just looks like belly fat now."

"But I know it's our beautiful baby and it's sexy." And it was. Olivia in pink, sparkling from the ears, red in the lips, was somehow dragging me inside her in a way I hadn't felt since I used to clumsily look for the button near her belt with shaky fingers.

I pulled her toward me as she walked by and she threw her palm into my shoulders, locking both arms at her elbows.

"Now?"

"Yes, now. You're stunning."

"Why are you so uncontrollable? So deliberately inconsistent?"

"I haven't seen anyone as beautiful as you look right now," I said.

"You're going to need to be stable for the baby, Avi."

"I will. Now lift your dress so I can see you."

"We're late." She swung her purse onto her shoulder and dazzled me as she floated toward the door.

It was my pants, I thought. She said that pleats were not flattering on me. I rolled up my sleeves like I was debonair, because I thought she liked it when I got my hands dirty. I followed her out of the door and into the elevator. She had called down to the lobby while I was in the shower and a taxi was already waiting.

"We have no idea what Holme is like, now. We have no idea if anyone else we know will even be there," I said.

"Holme is exactly the same. He is a rock," she said.

"He's a gay man with a wife and kids."

She popped a sigh from her tongue. With the sound of a kiss and then the labored exhale.

The building ascended into the dark where I lost it in the stars. It seemed to frown at me and I frowned back. Nothing about it reminded me of Holme and I looked at Olivia three steps ahead of me, heels clicking.

It was only when the apartments Olivia and I had lived in were filled with people that they ever felt like a home. The crates we used as seats and the couches that smelled like asphalt were part of an aesthetic. A romantic current only completed when it was too crowded to realize how poor and dirty we were, when the music was too loud and we were all too drunk to see how slow we were moving.

Then the quiet—the awful and disorienting quiet—swept through and left Olivia and me with each other, so we followed the houses out of downtown, as they spread like bread crumbs further and further away from where we came.

Holme's apartment, I knew, would not look like the old one-room, one-baths we had wandered through. It had a family, it was a home and I didn't care to see it. Mine was fine enough. It had a wine cellar in the basement, an upright piano in the living room and a table Olivia kept set just in case the neighbors stopped by. That was a Home. It was our home. It was not what we would find on the thirty-second floor of this building.

As it turned out, Holme's apartment covered the entire top floor and had a view only money can buy. It extended for miles, it seemed, in a sea of hardwood and glass that spit the light back at you in crystalline hues.

The books had never been pulled off the shelves and the furniture, which couldn't possibly be found in any store, had never been sat in. More than a hundred people were scattered throughout what seemed like a page torn from the interior decorating text book. I had trouble discerning faces among the razor suits, hairspray, starch, and stingingly white teeth. I looked at the invitation one more time. It said nothing about this being a black tie event.

I glanced at Olivia, the color in her dress and on her lips screaming in the

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Valencia J. J.

murmuring room, and down at my olive Dockers and faded brown shoes. I stopped myself from walking backwards out the door. A woman appeared from around a corner and greeted us through a practiced smile.

"You must be Holme's friends."

"Yes," Olivia said, "from college."

I nodded and waited for something to erupt. The woman's overreaching smile looked permanent and painful.

"You must be Holme's wife," Olivia said.

"Yes, you mean Homestead, of course."

"Homestead?" Olivia asked.

"Why yes. Homestead."

"Not Holme?"

I twisted my face toward Olivia and tried to fangangle my eyebrows into an encouraging pose, but I think it looked more like I was having a stroke, because Olivia quickly diverted her stare back at the statue in front of us.

"Homestead and I have been married for eight years now."

"Eight years," Olivia repeated. "I didn't know Holme had it in him."

"Indeed," the woman said, "I'm Missy."

"I'm Olivia and this is my friend Avi," she motioned with her head. Her hands rolled and released the hem of her dress.

"We're going to have a baby," I said.

Missy nodded. Olivia sighed and I think I almost cried.

"Homestead will be arriving shortly," she said. Then Olivia and I were left to sort through the wreckage.

It was silent while we tried to unfreeze ourselves from our positions near the door. It kept repeating itself in my head, and everything in the room felt heavier. I was, maybe, nineteen the last time Olivia and I were friends. I watched her eyes fall to the ground and I tried to catch them, but I only put my hand on her shoulder and ushered her, as bravely as I could, into the room.

We kept to ourselves for another twenty minutes. We ate shrimp and sushi. I clawed my way through glasses of champagne as Olivia shifted her weight back and forth. I said nothing to Olivia who only licked her lips and leaned on a desk by a window.

When the phone rang, the room hushed. Olivia, who already had sunk below herself, didn't even raise her head.

"Hello?" Missy said into the phone.

Oh yes, dear. Dinner is ready.

Of course. For your birthday. Lobster. Lobster and Steak.

Ok, darling. I'll see you soon.

It was no surprise, but I hated knowing exactly what the other side of that conversation was like. And it was worse realizing that Olivia knew too.

Hello honey. Is dinner ready?

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Oh yea? Is it something special?

You are so terribly good to me. I'll see you in five minutes. I'm on my way up.

"He'll be here in five minutes, everybody. Find a place to hide," Missy said.

Olivia and I slid behind a bookcase. I saw men crouch behind couches so their suits would not touch the ground. I saw women put themselves in corners.

Olivia and I were alone in the shadow and chilly quiet of the bookcase. She put her arms on my hips and her head on my chest. I lifted my hand to her head, but let it fall back down because I knew that Olivia didn't want to be touched. She only wanted to touch something close to her. All I could do, I thought, was be as close as I could so all she ever had to do was touch me and all I ever had to do was be touched.

We heard the door open and Missy come to her husband and greet him. In unison, everyone jumped out of their hiding places and harmonized an insincere surprise!

He didn't look that different. He was dressed nicer of course but he didn't seem like he aged at all: his hair was still gray in all the right places, his shoulders still ripe with a tender vulnerability. Holme walked through the room with the same eyes he always had. For a moment, I was relieved.

I could feel the heat from Olivia's arms, though they hardly grazed mine. Her cheeks were rosy with what might have been coy nervousness or anxiety, and her eyes blinked like a vibrating piano string.

Holme wasn't walking toward us, he wasn't even facing us. He was ushered through a crowd by handshakes and dainty kisses.

"Do you want to say hi now?" I asked.

"No."

"We'll wait."

"Those eyes," she said.

"He really hasn't changed," I tried.

"Those smiles," she said.

"Maybe a little, but he looks good."

"Were meant for us."

My shoulders dropped. She wasn't angry, she wasn't sad. She was just observing the numbing truth.

"They were. Not anymore."

"They were ours."

"Homestead," I said.

"We're leaving," she said after she had already started walking.

"But we've come all this way. We should at least shake his hand. Say something fake. Something encouraging."

"It's over," she said.

I'm not sure whether he saw us when we drifted by him. If he did, he didn't

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say anything then, and he hasn't since. I'm sure my phone number is still there, just-in-case. I sometimes try to think of scenarios that would make him call, but I have never been able to think of one.

After the party, Olivia and I went right up to our room. The cab ride back to the hotel was much shorter than the one there and I wished it lasted a little longer. Instead of leaving the door open for me to watch this time, she closed the bathroom door behind her to take her makeup off, to put her earrings away, to wonder, I thought, whether she knew all along what would happen.

But when she came out, she hadn't done anything. It was twenty minutes and I had almost fallen asleep. I wanted to stay up and spend the time thinking of something to say. But by the time she came out, I was only half-conscious with my legs dangling off the bed with my shoes still on.

"You're still dressed," I said.

"So are you," she said. "I'm going to the hotel bar."

"To drink? Really?"

"No, I just don't want to take my dress off yet."

"Ok, do you want me to come?"

"No. Thank you. You should get some sleep."

The room echoed with the sound of the electronic lock in the door. Then, after the thick, weighted silence there was only silence. Olivia wanted to be alone. I could understand that. Even though she should be with someone, someone who still loves her, who won't change unless she wants change. But, if Olivia wanted to touch me, I thought, she would have asked. I fell asleep after a while, leaving a spot on one side of the bed for when she came back.

I woke up into dark, my head a sandbag. I reached over to nothing but sheets. I didn't believe it until I turned the light on. The room was just how I left it, my shoes on the side of the bed, my watch on the nightstand. Shit, I said to the pillow. Shit. Shit. Damn it, I thought as my head cleared and the recognition pulled me into lucidity. God damn it, Olivia.

The chairs were stacked in the bar, no bartender, no vibrant and neon light from the TV, only drab gloom lit up by a woman in a pink dress, hunched over her glass with fog in her eyes.

"Olivia," I said.

"Don't, Avi."

"It's late. Are you drunk?"

She picked up her glass and slammed it back down like she was proving its innocence.

"Christ, Avi. Ginger ale."

"You've been here for five hours sipping ginger ale?"

"You got me pregnant," she said.

"Sorry. I didn't mean too."

"I know," she said, relenting, almost as if she meant it.

"I love you," I said.

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I was going to walk away, to end the conversation, to let Olivia feel air until she needed to touch something solid, but she picked her head up.

"Avi, say what you mean to say."

"I mean to say I love you. Or, I still love you. I've always loved you."

She laughed from the throat, coming up from her gut as if the baby was laughing too. It was a laugh I hadn't ever heard before and I hoped I would never hear again.

"You want to tell me that I'm so-o-o-o beautiful and you want to make love to me."

"I want to ravish you, darling."

"You want to take me right here."

"No, Olivia."

"Take me right here, Avi. You want to rip my clothes off! You want me more than you've ever wanted me before."

"I want to kiss you. On the mouth. On your eyelids. Your fingers."

"You want to make me scream."

"I just love you."

"To make me cum."

"I love you," I said.

The fog in her eyes wisped away to wherever fog goes after it lifts from the ground. I stepped forward, maybe to cradle her. Maybe to tell her that everything would be ok. Maybe to say that we would have this baby. But before I could wrap myself into her, she sucked in air as if she were out of breath, and it was a crushing laugh, disorienting and hollow.

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