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The Old Apartment

They had only lived in the new apartment for about two months; it was only a handful of blocks away from their old place, but this one had a lot to offer that the old place didn't, like French doors, and a dishwasher. Now they lived with one cat named Pickle and one roommate named Marcia. And each other, of course.

"Do you want to talk, or would you rather watch something on TV?" This was a frequent debate the two had when they settled into bed every night, still unsure how to make the right amount of noise to mask the unfamiliar creaks of their new home. He didn't seem to care that asking her if she wanted to talk relieved any of the organicness that might have come from their conversation. He didn't mean it this way, of course; she always took it that way, but he just wanted to make sure she understood all of their options for the evening. He was very pragmatic, in that way.

"What?"

"Do you want to watch something or talk?" he repeated.

"Oh," she didn't quite want to do either. It felt, to her anyway, that all they could find to talk to each other about lately was food. What to eat tomorrow, what they ate today, which restaurants seemed interesting, things like that. "We could talk for a bit."

"What do you want to talk about?" What *about*? She would never have to ask Marcia what they should talk about; she didn't want to compare their relationships, but she could talk to Marcia about anything without giving it much thought. He didn't seem to have much trouble determining what to talk to Marcia about either, for that matter. She

and her husband could talk for hours, too, but coming up with a topic to get the metaphorical ball rolling often felt like trying to run through a tar pit. She thought maybe the Talking period of relationships always ended after the getting-to-knowing part was done. Maybe the only way to have interesting conversations in your life consistently was by maintaining a constant stream of new suitors and then dropping them off after they get all talked out, as they eventually will. She couldn't remember what they used to talk about before they really knew each other; maybe that was why they couldn't seem to do that anymore. But sometimes she did wish they didn't know each other so well. "Dinner was good." Idiot. Her husband agreed silently. She wondered how to elaborate.

"Although,"

"What?"

"It's just that I had suggested we go for drinks together and you didn't want to."

"So?" It felt as though the temperature in the room was rising.

"I just mean that... I wanted to go on, like, a date sort of. And you didn't want to, but then you *did* want to go to dinner with Buck and Hallie, and we got drinks with them, so it's not like you just didn't want to drink." She let her voice trail off.

"What are you trying to say?" He sat up in bed. She was boiling alive. She felt like a hunter caught in her own trap. *Backtrack, backtrack.*

"Just that it would be nice if you and I did something just us this week, is all."

"Oh, yeah, absolutely," He sounded genuine, and she knew he meant well, but she also knew that when it actually came down to it nothing would happen. He wouldn't feel like drinking that night, he'd be too tired to go out, he wouldn't want to spend the money

until he got back on his feet, all of that. And it was all reasonable, too, which was the worst part because then she didn't really have a leg to stand on. But if Buck and Hallie or Jen and Michelle or even just Taylor wanted to go out, he would want to go out with them. Money was only worth spending when he could maximize his social interactions, it seemed. Maybe she didn't count toward that. She looked for patterns in the stucco ceiling and regretted choosing not to pick this particular fight again. "You know what else we can talk about?" he added.

"What's that?"

"Let's have sex." That was the other thing they did: they talked about what they wanted to eat and they had sex. She felt like they must be sixty-somethings in Florida, bored out of their upper class minds, not twenty-somethings starting a new marriage in a bustling city with everything, supposedly, ahead of them. So they had sex.

You didn't clear your dish off the kitchen table after dinner, she thought. You didn't pick up cat food on your way home, like I asked you. Your bedside table is covered with old trash. Needless to say, she didn't finish but he did. He offered to help her out, so to speak, but it didn't feel worth the time to her. She hated to just lie there and wait while he prodded around; it always took so much time and she had a lot to do and usually by that point she was tired and just wanted to read her book that she really liked but never had the time to read. On her walk to the bathroom to freshen up she moved his dishes into the sink and washed them. He noticed that she was gone longer than usual, but would not notice that his cleaning had been magically done for him when he dirtied more dishes the next morning.

“Were you shitting?” he teased.

“Shut up.” And they went to sleep.

The next morning, he brought her coffee in bed, which was very sweet and she really appreciated the gesture, but she didn't really want the coffee. She wished he knew that she didn't want the coffee, because she hadn't wanted coffee for the past few weeks, and she didn't really like how he had been making it lately. Something seemed different, maybe it was just the new environment, or Marcia's coffee maker. He loved the coffee, though, and always got up early to make it for them both, so it felt ungracious to decline, especially at this point. So she drank it anyway, or as much of it as she could, and then excused herself to go for a walk.

She walked the handful of blocks back to the old apartment. The walk was comfortable; she couldn't fathom how things could feel so differently from one house to another when she could practically see one from the other. There were new tenants living there now, but she didn't know anything about them. There was a black sedan in the driveway, and a little yellow tricycle on the front steps. She could hear a dog barking inside. She crept closer to the window, and peered in to see a young couple playing with a toddler. The young boy ran toward his mother and pressed his hands onto her swollen belly. The woman stepped back from the window and pressed her own hands onto her own belly, flat and hard. She had spent so much time, so much physical and emotional energy, trying to make it smaller, flatter, harder. It did not seem like a place where any living thing could grow.

Perhaps without even realizing it, she rang the doorbell to the apartment. The husband came to answer it; he was handsome enough, tallish with one of those craft-beer-drinking beards. *I bet he isn't drinking now, to support his wife*, she thought, but didn't know why she thought that. "Hey there, can I help you?"

"Oh," she faltered. Why had she come here? "I was just looking for Johnson."

"Sorry, I think you've got the wrong place. We just moved in a few months ago, but the people who used to live here didn't leave a change of address or anything. The did leave a hole in the wall in the kitchen, though." He laughed at that.

"Oh, of course, thanks anyway." They both waited. "Do you like it? This apartment, I mean."

"Sure, it's a place to live, right? Anyway, if you don't mind..."

"Right, of course. Thanks anyway, have a good one."

"Sure, you too." He closed the door, leaving her standing alone. She put her fingertips on the rusty doorknob she had touched so many times before without thought. The new place was nice, and it was objectively a better setup, but it wasn't the same. This apartment used to be her husband's before they were dating. She unofficially moved in after they had only been dating for three weeks, but it worked for them. They got married a year later, and six months after that they moved into the new place with Marcia.

They chose the new place because it had a lot of good qualities, and because it was less expensive and they had gotten more or less tired of living beyond their means. She liked it well enough, or at least she said that she did. And she really could, and she really wanted to, but she just sort of didn't. It always smelled like a cage match between her

husbands' and Marcia's cooking that always seemed to clash. Marcia's perfume was cloying when it mixed with her own. The cat smelled like shit, to be completely honest, and it bit her a lot. She could hear the man who lived in the room above her own loudly masturbating at seemingly any and all hours of the day. The apartment itself had its own weight, it seemed. Its own personality that competed with hers-- always louder, always more stubborn, somehow less bitchy.

When she woke up late the next morning, her husband was already sitting on the couch watching TV. His breakfast dishes were still on the kitchen table. The vacuum was plugged in, but clearly had not been used. She wanted to turn around right then and march back to the old apartment. It was a good space. She bet it was clean, that the husband didn't leave used napkins piled next to him on the sofa, that the wife never thought about needing to mop during sex. But he was like a dog when she walked into the room, bounding excitedly to embrace her. It made her feel guilty; he seemed so small, and he loved her so much. It made her feel like a fly-trap, always luring, trapping, taking. Conning people into loving her and then chewing them up and spitting them out. Maybe that was the problem; maybe she was just hard to live with. She wondered if she should check her birth control dosage again-- that is what men in the past had advised her to do when she was overcome by these moods of hers.

"I had the strangest dream last night," she offered as she sat down next to him. He absentmindedly rubbed her feet.

"Oh yeah?" But he didn't turn off the TV, and hardly looked up.

“Yeah, I was in my mother’s house, you know, like where she lived when I was little? And I was walking up and down the hallway between our bedrooms, just pacing I guess. And Mitski was barking, but obviously we didn’t have her when we lived there since she’s Allison’s dog,”

“Allison?”

“My stepmom, you know that.”

“Right, right.”

“Anyway, so I guess in the dream, mom and Allison were already married and Mitski was there,” She was getting frustrated. *Does he really not know Allison by name?* she wondered. Her mom hadn’t been remarried for very long, and he had only met her moms a handful of times since they lived so far away, but he must know. She began to feel silly for talking for so long, and sort of wished she was telling Marcia this story instead because she would just listen and then say wow that’s so crazy or something boring but Supportive Enough like that. But she continued talking because she wanted so badly to have a normal and new conversation with him, plus she had already started so it just wouldn’t make sense if she stopped now right in the middle of things, right before the good part. “And then I started barking, too, right? But it wasn’t fun anymore, it was actually really scary. And I guess I was barking too hard or something because then I started choking, and eventually I vomited up a beehive. How fucked is that?”

“Wait, you vomited? Or you coughed it up.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I guess there isn’t one,”

“Okay, well, isn’t that so fucked?”

“Yeah, Jesus.”

They sat on the couch together for a while in silence before Marcia came home from her run. Marcia was a good roommate, for the most part, but she had a nasty habit of leaving used mugs and dishes strewn throughout the apartment. It bothered the wife much more than it bothered the husband, although it did bother them both. She had complained about it the previous morning, saying that she was exhausted enough from doing her own dishes and didn’t want to do Marcia’s as well. Also, she wanted Marcia to clean Pickle’s litter box more often, and to stop subscribing to the newspaper if she’s not going to read them and she’s just going to let them pile up on the goddamn coffee table for months until someone with better sense comes along to handle it for her, because god knows she won’t. Her husband had responded to this at first in agreement, because he was sick of it, too. But then he said enough was enough, and that if she wanted something to change she had to say something to Marcia, and she couldn’t just complain to him about it every day because, you know, it really brought his mood down and he couldn’t do anything about it anyway. She wasn’t going to confront Marcia, though. She was just going to clench her fists until the lease ended. And maybe take Pickle on her way out.

“So you’re not going to say anything to her, then?” he asked, later that evening when the two were alone.

“I’m just trying to make the best of things until we can get our own place. We already called her out about the hair in the drain this week. And I know she’ll just say she was running late for work anyway, so nothing will change and she’ll just keep on doing it

and we'll all just keep getting upset and, frankly, that's getting boring for me. I just need to accept that this place is nasty and we won't be here much longer."

"Well that's not a good enough excuse to leave your dishes out every morning; she needs to wake up earlier then," he sputtered. She wondered if he genuinely did not know that his own dishes were still out on the table, as they frequently were, or that they would be until she finally put them away for him. She felt a hot flash of resentment toward his mother for probably letting him get away with murder his whole life and now leaving her with this tall child who wanted so badly to seem like an adult. She wondered how he and Marcia could possibly clash so often when she seemed to be picking up after them both. Sometimes she wondered if they were actually having an affair, and that their bickering was a ruse to control her suspicions. They could keep her busy with the household bitchwork, then she would be distracted and they would have more time. They somehow got along too well for people who frequently butted heads over the smallest misunderstandings.

"Yeah, sure," she left it at that.

She started jogging a few times a week, and made sure to pass by the old apartment each time. She liked to see the small changes that happened there, so subtle you wouldn't notice them if you didn't see it nearly every day. It was like time moved underwater there. Sometimes she could see the family playing together out in the yard. Her husband didn't want a baby, and she probably didn't either, but she had to admit that seeing the three of them and one on the way did give her a certain sense of missing *something*. She didn't want to be one of those couples who had a baby to save the

marriage, but maybe they could be a couple who had a baby just to have something to do. Her friends with babies complained that the only thing they and their spouses ever talk about is the baby, but she thought that must be a pretty interesting thing to talk about.

She continued jogging, but generally began to let her guard down. She would occasionally go around to the back porch to see how the planters she had left behind were doing. Sometimes she would peek in the living room window when she thought no one was home, just to see. They had only made a few changes to the apartment, but they did paint over the colors she and her husband had painted it not so long before. Her grasp on the place where she felt best was slipping, and she and her husband didn't seem to be quite themselves in the new apartment. It was like the air itself was different there-- harder to breathe. She felt like she was always a bit lightheaded, a bit malnourished now. He seemed to grow where she shrank. It never used to be that way. She didn't think so, at least.

After about a month of her increasingly observatory jogging, she noticed balloons tied to their mailbox; the baby girl was born. The next day, she left a box with an orange baby blanket inside on their front steps; the apartment could get drafty, and she didn't want the baby to get cold. She wondered if the husband got up with his wife in the night when she had to feed the baby. She wondered if he sang to the baby. When she returned home, her own husband remarked that she had been jogging an awful lot lately, slapped her ass, and said "tight."

She began to sync her jogging schedule to correspond with when she knew the couple would be at work. They both seemed to work standard office hours, and their little

one went to daycare Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. An older woman, probably one of their mothers, came to babysit on Tuesdays and Thursdays. So when she came by on Monday, around one o'clock, she knew she could peek under the fake planter to see if her old spare key was still there. She knew she should have gotten rid of it when they moved out, but just... couldn't. She figured maybe it would help out whoever moved in someday, in some sort of an emergency. At least, it was helping her now.

Entering the apartment felt like a fever dream for her. Everything was the same, and yet?

It just didn't seem like her house anymore. She walked through the house she still felt, always, like a phantom limb. In the living room, they had repainted and rearranged the furniture-- the couch was supposed to be against *that* wall. The kitchen was more or less the same, but their starkly unfamiliar decorative inclinations made her feel cold and almost dizzy. Everything was ever so slightly wrong. This wasn't what it was supposed to look like. She pushed the kitchen table back into the center of the room, where it was meant to be, instead of against the wall where there really was no space, and then what would you do if you had guests over? In the middle of the room really was much better, and she thought they would like it better, too. She walked into her old bedroom.

She hadn't really had any furniture in the bedroom there since it was her husband's room initially. He had his own bed, desk, and dresser set up before he had even met her. When she first started sleeping over, he cleared out the bottom drawer of his dresser for her. To establish her independence, and to publicly reject the idea that she was living there, which she was *not* even though she *was*, she mockingly filled the

drawer with bagels and granola bars that she could feed herself for breakfast. Her husband was charmed by this, and she didn't know how serious she was when she said she meant it, she was not interested in monogamy. But either way, after a month of really living there while she insisted she didn't, she moved her breakfast foods into the pantry and filled her drawer with clothes like her husband had been waiting for.

All of that furniture was still here, since it belonged to the landlord. The new couple's sheets were light, icy blue. They hung matching curtains to keep out the light from the street lamps. She ran her hands over the starchy sheets on the freshly made bed and wondered if they made their bed together every morning. She had started turning down her own sheets every morning since reading an article about germs that fester in the damp dark all day while you're not sleeping, but she did miss the look of a crisply made bed. Slowly, hoping not to cast a wrinkle in their pristine duvet, she crawled into the bed and laid down. She inhaled deeply from the pillow; it was hard to tell which pillow belonged to whom since both bedside tables had matching nondescript lamps and clocks and similarly dry historical fiction-looking books. But the pillows smelled like white flowers and laundry detergent and mulch, at once so attractive and so familiar and so painfully desperate.

She woke up an hour or two later and let herself out the backdoor. She couldn't remember if she turned the bedside lamp back off or not, but it didn't much matter. She felt kind of amazing, actually. She was excited to see her husband when she returned home; she felt like she had been away for a long time. She imagined herself bursting

through the door, happy to see him, happy to fuck, feeling recharged like maybe this was the fresh start she needed. She painted her nails while he cooked them dinner.

“That was a long run, I guess,” he prodded.

“Hmm?”

“Didn’t you leave around noon?”

“One,”

“Yeah. It’s six now. Don’t you usually run for an hour?” She was surprised that he knew that.

“I stopped in the park for a bit. To read.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I’m actually reading this really interesting book. It’s nonfiction, and it’s all about how to reorganize your physical space so you can also reorganize your, like, personal space. No, I mean, your mental space. You know?” she paused, then repeated her question. “Babe?”

“What? No, yeah, wasn’t Hallie reading that recently, or something? Sorry, I just don’t want this to burn.”

The dinner did not burn, perhaps as a benefit of his undivided attention, and the two ate in near silence except to remark on how good it was. It was quite good. On her next jog, she left the cookbook her husband had found the recipe in on the front steps of the old apartment. She bookmarked a few of her favorite recipes, and even color-coded her labels. Pink meant romantic dinner for two. Green was toddler friendly. Blue was quick weeknight meal.

She and her husband had sex that night. It was probably the only time they would that week, so she made sure to warn him that she would probably be sore from running so much for the rest of the week. She wondered what he thought of her as they laid in bed together with their legs barely touching, their backs sticking to the sheets with sweat. Sometimes she wondered if all couples hated each other, at least a little. At the very least, she knew he didn't hate her. And she didn't really know if she hated him, to be honest. But probably she did, at least a little, at least on nights like tonight when all he could do was roll his sweaty body off of her, grumble about the commercials on TV, and snore too loudly all night. But while he slept she felt so overcome with wanting him, with wanting to be good together, that all she could do was bury her face into his back and regret every bad thought she'd ever had about him while he slept facing away from her.

On her next jog, the family pulled into the driveway as she was retreating from peeking into the window by the front door. That window looked into what had been her and her husband's reading room, but was now the new family's nursery. She had left a bottle of wine on their doorstep with a card reading "for a date-night-in." She figured they probably didn't get out much, with the new baby and all. *Wait, can she even drink? I don't know shit about babies,* she realized.

"Hey, I know you," the husband walked toward her while the rest of the family waited in the car. She waited, too. "You came by here before looking for somebody. You run on this block."

“Oh, yeah, you’re right,” she was nervous. He appeared calm, but he was speaking, somehow, so firmly. She noticed a tattoo on his left hand; it looked so big and rough. His family waited in the car.

“Have you been leaving all of those things?” He had noticed the wine. “Look, that’s a nice enough sentiment but we don’t know you, so I’m going to have to ask you to stop.” Her eyes started to swim.

“I just wanted to be a part of...” she was becoming frantic. “This isn’t what was supposed to happen.”

“Excuse me?”

“I didn’t want it to be like this, I mean, I just wanted to...”

“I’m sorry, you need to leave.”

“I just have to--”

“I’m going to call the police if you don’t leave. Now.”

She quickly turned away from him, back toward the front door, and made a move as if to charge up the steps and go back into her house and lock the door and never let them back into what was hers, to never leave there again, to tear down all of the gaudy shit they had plastered around her home and throw it out the window. The husband grabbed her arm and yanked her back to face him.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” They were shouting now. “I just need to get something! I left something behind. I need to get it. I need to get it.” She wasn’t really sure who was talking anymore, or what was being said. She stepped on his foot, hard, to shake him off.

“Fuck you, bitch!” She couldn’t believe he would talk to her like that. Did he talk to his wife like that? It was a betrayal. Her eyes burned and she felt herself fill with quaking, poisoned emotion. It was time to leave.

When she returned home, sweatier than usual, her husband asked if she had a good run. She said yes, they were all good runs. She cleaned up his breakfast dishes that he had left out, and Marcia’s coffee mug. She pushed in all of the chairs that were pulled out from the table, and closed all of the cabinets and drawers that had been left open. She closed the lid to the trash can that she had asked everyone to please remember to fucking close for once because they were attracting flies and it smelled bad and made the house look like a pigsty. She sat with her husband and watched TV for a good long while before he asked her what she wanted to order for lunch.

She did not stop returning to the old apartment. She made sure to go during hours when she knew she would not be seen, like late at night or very early in the morning, but she did not stop. She wondered if the baby was healthy. She wondered if the couple was having sex again, and if it was good. She wondered if the little boy liked his new sister, if he would look out for her when they were older.

She sat on their back porch until the sun came up. Some mornings she would sit there for a very long time.