

Sweet Dreams

My mother called me on the day of my husband's promotion.

He'd come home ecstatic, almost crying at the thought that his work had finally paid off—*Mary*, he'd cried, *Mary, darling, we can start trying, finally, we'd be able to raise a little kid, with the benefits and the new salary—*

The path ahead was opening, and the light was so blinding that I began to tear up as I held him closer. There was joy, of course, giddily chirping through my veins, but it was a quieter feeling that made my vision blur.

Contrast—the difference between my stark, joyless childhood in an apartment with no windows nor warmth, and the life I had been able to grab for myself, this life and this future in a sunny house filled with love and possibility. It was a type of bliss that sunk into my bones, this knowledge of what I had left behind and what I was walking towards.

I jumped at the sound of my phone ringing. An unknown number. Joseph let go of me as I answered.

“Hello?” I spoke into the phone, and I could hear my own smile.

“Mary?”

The smile slid off my face. The voice was disconcertingly familiar, but I couldn't yet pinpoint it.

"Mary-Anne, answer me." A Pavlovian fear rushed through my body. *Ah*.

"Hi Mom." It'd been years since we last spoke. My mother stayed silent on the other line. "Why did you call?"

"Come see your mom." She laced her voice with a sickly sweet pleading. "I fell. Fell right down the stairs, the old fucking rust-bucket ones, you remember—and I think," her voice cracked, "I think I broke my hip... and a few other things. Help me. I can't move."

"Did you call an ambulance?" I sounded colder than I expected.

"I hate hospitals, you know that. I'm not leaving this house." My mother breathed heavily for a moment. "Mary, please. Please come help me."

I hesitated. My mother continued to speak. "I think I failed you as a mother. No, I know I did. I was young, and I was cruel to you. But I'm still your mother, and I love you. Please believe me. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry, Mary. Please help me. My lovely daughter, you're all I have."

"...Okay," I whispered.

"I'm sorry, Mary, I love you, please believe me—"

I hung up the phone.

The sun was setting in the kitchen, bathing the counters in warm, fuzzy orange. Joseph looked at me, concerned. I floated in silence for a moment, staring at the sunset.

Sunsets felt almost ethereal, didn't they? Like something too good for our eyes. I blinked the colorful shades away.

"Are you okay? Honey, what happened?" Joseph asked me, gently taking my hand. I squeezed it back.

“My mom... she fell down. She got really hurt. I... should go see her.”

“I thought you didn’t speak to your mom?”

“I don’t.” My mouth seemed to run on autopilot for the next words. “But leaving her like that is cruel. I shouldn’t just let her suffer.”

“Well...” My heart fluttered in my chest as he ran his hands through my hair. “You’re right, honey. That’s the right decision. Do you want me to come with you?”

My heart sank. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to hear, but that wasn’t it.

“It’s alright, Joey.” I pasted a smile on. “I’ll go on my own.”

“Okay. We can celebrate when you get back, alright?”

“Yeah.”

I slung my purse over my shoulder and walked out the door.

The train station seemed to sprint towards me. I was face-to-face with it far more quickly than I wanted, and it scared me. I meandered outside its doors.

The sun hid its face behind a layered cloud, and darkness draped over the tall, imposing doors. For the first time, I thought the stone eagles poised outside looked eerily like crows, sneering down their beaks at my hesitation.

I could see a smaller, better me hurrying back without hesitation, old grudges forgotten by a young mind. But... somewhere along the way... I must've become a bad person.

“Spare some change?” A drunk teenager in ratty cloaks rattled her coin cup at me. When I didn’t respond, she continued. “C’mon lady, just enough for a ticket so I can sleep in the train for the night.”

“...Sure.” I dug through my purse until I uncovered an old five-dollar bill. As I handed it to her, black, greasy hair slithered back to reveal a blooming bruise on her eye. She quickly tucked it back under her hair.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

“Don’t you have a train to catch?” she replied, already turning away from me.

“I’m... not in a rush.”

She gave me a sideways glance. “Where you going?”

“I’m visiting my mother. I haven’t talked to her in a long, long time.”

“...Woah, your face got mad scary just then, you know?” A grin twitched at her lips. She plopped down on a bench. “Does your mom suck?”

I didn’t answer.

“My mom sucks,” she said, looking at her hands webbed with thick shells of grime. “I’d never go back to see her.”

“She’s sick. She needs me.”

A bleary, unfocused eye blinked up at me. She tilted her head, and her whole body followed. “So? You don’t have to go. You don’t wanna go, I can see it in your face—”

“I *do* have to go.”

“Why?”

“I can’t let her die alone, I can’t just... she’s my mom.”

“That kinda thing doesn’t really mean a lot by itself, you know?” The teenager smiled at me, baring her teeth.

I didn't say anything, clutching my purse as I stared back into the eyes of the crows beckoning me to the entrance. Next to me, I heard the telltale click of a lighter. I turned to stare, and the teenager breathed out a billowing cloud of cigarette smoke.

"What, do you want one?"

"No." I grimaced. "I stopped smoking when I got married. It's a nasty habit, you know."

The teenager shrugged. "Smoking won't kill me faster than I could."

I twitched. "Don't say that."

She completely ignored me. "I'm glad you didn't want a cig. I didn't have another one anyway."

The smoke blurred my vision. Strangely, it didn't smell of anything. I sat in it, relishing in the blindness and murkiness it offered.

"Are you planning on going anytime soon?" she asked after a pause.

"Can I pay you to be quiet?" I snapped.

"Oh, she does have a sense of humor." She grinned. "I was right, wasn't I. About your mom."

"Like yours is any better."

"Maybe we've got the same one." She snorted. I stared at her for a moment, wondering. She blinked back at me, dark eyes familiar pools of miseries and sunken hopes. I turned away as she snuffed out her cigarette. Its soft cherry glow extinguished into smoke, and I got up to leave.

"I have to catch my train," I said, fishing out my wallet from my pocket. "It's been nice."

The teenager pursed her lips.

"We're next to a pretty busy street," she said, staring off into the distance. "Well, now's as good a time as ever. How's this?" She swayed as she stood up and pointed to the river of cars

rushing by. The wind from their paths buffeted her hair and clothes away from her pale skin, billowing behind her like wings. The last dregs of sunlight shone through the gaps in her figure.

“If you go into that station, I’ll jump into traffic.”

“What?”

“It’d be so easy, you know. These cars, they’re going at, like, a gazillion miles an hour, they won’t even notice me.” Her voice had a light, musical quality to it.

“What are you talking about?”

“Stay, or I’ll jump into traffic the second you go into that station.” She smiled. “It’s a threat.”

“You’re crazy,” I pulled in a panicked gust of air as I reached for her hand. “Don’t do it. Don’t. You’re so young,” I babbled. “Things will be different, things’ll get better, you’ll find a better place to be and you’ll find a better life for yourself, and you’ll stay there, and it’s all gonna be okay, so don’t, don’t you dare...” My voice trailed off as I took a closer look at her. Standing there, dimples in her cheeks, light in her eyes... *ah*.

“So stay.” She said, unyielding.

I wondered when I became so unrecognizable to myself.

“You... you...” I grasped for words, but every thought seemed to dissolve into the air around me, releasing the pressure in my body one thread at a time. I collapsed into the bench.

“...Okay,” I whispered, and a part of me trembled at the weight of it.

“Okay,” She repeated back before she sat next to me.

It wasn’t okay.

The truth was hard to ignore. I’d left my mother in her time of need, gripping old grudges until my palms scarred with resentment, clenching them and crumpling them until the threads of

our relationship became knotted and ugly and gnarled—I knew. I knew I’d chosen vindication over forgiveness. I knew I’d chosen to leave her in all the ways that mattered.

One steady breath escaped me, and it hung in the air with a terrifying finality. The sun receded into the horizon. Shadows crawled over me. I stared at the metal rungs of the bench, and my vision blurred as warm tear after warm tear fell from my eyes.

Even over this chilling awareness, bone deep relief resounded through my body. I left her, but I got to stay. I got to stay here, here with the sunshine and the future and the house with the windows.

Oh. I really have become a bad person.

The sin landed on my ribcage, dragging me into another sob. It was the closest thing to grief I’d ever felt. Gone was that mirage of a mature adult, of forgiveness, of acceptance.

In the dusk haunting the entrance of the train station, there were only two bitter children.

“Am I a bad person?” I asked her.

“Well, you did just save my life. So no. You’re good.”

I watched the final rays of light sink into the darkness as the silence between us grew.

“Thank you.” I spoke only after the world turned so black that I couldn’t see myself. I wiped away the last of my tear stains on my cheeks, long since cooled. “I should call her, at least. I-it’s the least I could do.”

The girl didn’t answer.

Neither did my mother. The dial tone rang in my ears, a signal for the end of an era echoing through the ink black night.

“Oh.” I sighed. “She must be asleep.”

“She’s got the right idea. I think I’ll catch the next train to sleep in.” The girl patted me on the shoulder in a farewell before she headed into the station. “Goodnight.”

I didn’t know who I was speaking to, but I replied, “Sweet dreams.”