

Farewell to Tomorrow

by

D.B. Bang

- *Prologue* -

The Cauldron

MY WORLD WAS A HELLSCAPE OF FILTH AND DECAY. FOOLISHLY, I'D allowed myself the indecency of turning 40. I'd lived a life of regrets, but today—on my 40th birthday—I regretted most of all turning down that invitation to join the Logan Runners. How I wished I'd been able to fuck myself to death in a pleasure dome at my peak. But alas, I lacked the courage to be done by 30, and submitted myself to another decade of misery.

But to dwell on regrets was pointless. I'd grown accustomed to it, but today was different. Today was a day of hope. All thanks to my finest client. My sweet, sweet Henrietta.

I'd finished buzzing off my curls and applied another layer of traversal balm when Henrietta knocked at the door.

"Come in," I called.

"My, my! Your hair!" she said upon entering.

"How do I look?"

"Gorgeous as always," she said, smiling that wrinkled smile of hers. "And ready, hon. You look ready."

She led me down into her bunker, and there it was—"Cauldron-1." The damned thing truly resembled a cauldron,

albeit with a glossy white sheen and outfitted with levers and valves.

I knew Henrietta was smart, but I'd never fully grasped the depth of her brilliance until we got drunk one night, and she revealed her inventions. I suppose being a good fuck counted for something.

"Now, you just climb in there and get into a fetal position," she instructed. "It'll fill with a solution, but don't worry. It's for your protection. Close your eyes, relax, and countdown from ten."

"Wait," I said. "Before we start... I got you something."

"You shouldn't have."

"I wanted to." I pulled her gift from my duffel bag and revealed it to her. "I know it's not much, but it's to remember me by. For old time's sake."

"Oh, my goodness," she said, marveling at a mold of my member.

"Steady Freddie made it for me. Some kind of ballistic-gelled silicone. Supposed to feel just like the real thing."

She took it in her hands. "Sure feels that way," she said, laughing with that mischievous twinkle in her eye.

"It's the least I could do. This gift of yours... it means the world to me. Honestly. I'm the luckiest guy in the world."

She nodded, her gaze growing heavier. "You sure about this?"

"Never been more certain."

She nodded again, looking wistful. "I'm gonna miss you giving me the time of my life."

I looked at her frail, bony hands clutching the mold and tried to explain its features. "Steady Freddie said it has different settings. Different frictions," but I couldn't stop the tears.

We both broke down, holding each other tightly for the last time. She felt so small and fragile in my arms—so many years of

living, so many achievements, and yet, she had given me the gift of a lifetime. I was going to miss her dearly, even if our relationship had always been transactional.

I brushed back a strand of gray hair, took off her glasses, and gave her one last kiss on her geriatric lips.

“Okay, you go now before you change your mind,” she said, her voice a whisper.

I shed my clothes, giving her one final look at my naked body before climbing into the Cauldron. I tucked my legs into my chest, and began the countdown: ten, nine, eight... until I passed out, consumed by an eerie blue light.

“Bon voyage, J. Bon voyage.”

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Stork Envy

IT STARTED INNOCENT ENOUGH: FLESHY BITS FONDLED HERE, there, and “Yes, there, there!” Proclamations of love, animal sounds—our marital proceedings concluding with a truncated gasp and a climaxing body collapsing over mine. Consummation completed, our depleted bodies lay in our collective filth—neurons firing a million miles a second; an outstanding performance by the participants. Tucked snug in my husband’s arms, who knew such a revelatory mood could be so fleeting?

“Can I be honest with you?” he asked. “Brutally honest?”

And so began the troubles.

“Sure,” I said. “Go ahead.”

“That was the best sex I’ve ever had.”

Phew. I grabbed Tom’s face and kissed him all over, unable to contain myself. Even though we’ve had our fair share of memorable romps, hearing that as a newlywed, I couldn’t stop smiling.

He continued, “It was unbelievable. So much intentionality behind every move—everything fitting perfectly. It was... kismet.”

A better word is “cheesy.” But I admired his candor, his corniness—endearing.

“Can I be honest about something else?”

Uh-oh. Did I fart?

"I know it's hard to believe, but I swear that was the first time I busted inside without a condom."

I shoved the filthy boy off, repulsed by his frankness. He claimed he wanted to be completely honest now that we were married, even if it was an embarrassing admission.

"And truth is, I'm vanilla," he added.

I studied his face—such a precious thing—then told him my own truth.

"That was my first time letting a guy do that."

"Bullshit."

"Before tonight, if a man wanted to come into my establishment, he had to come in a jacket."

"See! Kismet!"

Maybe it was, but that's when he made his mistake. He scooped me into his arms and announced something dreadful.

"Hopefully, you don't get pregnant too soon. I'd like a couple more rounds of that. A lot more."

I waited for some clarity, but all he offered was, "Then again, if we decide to pop out multiple kiddos," and winked.

"Can we not talk about this?"

"Sorry," he said. "I'm in some mood, reveling like some horn dog."

"Yeah, you're really making me regret saying 'I do.'"

He laughed even though I wasn't sure I was joking. I mean, I was, but then again, was I? All I knew was I felt icky. I had to clean him out of me. I slipped out of his embrace and attempted to roll out of bed when he grabbed ahold of my arm.

"Where you going?"

"Bathroom."

"What for?"

"To clean up."

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’?”

“It’s just I heard it helps if you stay in bed for half an hour—”

“For what?” I interrupted.

“You know! To keep my boys inside! Let them do their thing.”

His face was beaming. I wanted to punch it, but before I committed battery, I needed to make sure he was saying what I’m pretty sure he was saying.

“Did you think we were trying to make a baby just now?”

“Uh, yeah!”

“Who said anything about that?!”

“You did!”

“When?!”

“You said, ‘Forget the condom.’”

“I didn’t mean that as ‘Let’s make a baby!’”

“I thought that’s why I was going in raw. Why else would I bust my nut inside of you?”

“Because we just got married! Let’s celebrate! Consummate the marriage without the rubber!” Maybe I should’ve been clearer, but I was caught in the moment. “You know, live a little!”

He shrunk down like a kid, suddenly bashful, looking so small. I asked why he thought we were trying when I was still on the pill.

All he could muster was, “The subtext.”

“Believe me, there won’t be any subtext when it comes to babies,” I said. “Is this something I have to worry about?”

“No,” he responded. “Of course not.”

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AND BEFORE I KNEW IT, I WAS STARING AT A CHUBBY BABY PERCHED

atop my husband's knee, his face glowing just as it had on our wedding day. The newborn seemed so unconcerned by the burdens of life—so empty-headed yet destined to absorb hatred and vileness the moment it learned to conceive a thought.

Why should I perpetuate this cycle of wickedness? Whether shaped by evolution or God's design, malice is etched into our bones. Since the dawn of time, we've been clubbing one another to death over trivialities—because one cave was roomier and less drafty than the other. If I felt this way now, what depths would postpartum plunge me into?

"Sally? Hey, Sal. You there?"

"Huh?"

I turned to find the balding, cherubic face of Benji Gomes, Tom's best friend and producing partner, handing me a bottle of beer.

"I see why you're distracted. He's a natural," he said nodding toward Tom cradling his newborn Charlie.

A keen observation. Had the boys staged this get-together to showcase Tom's baby-wrangling skills and push me toward baby-making?

I drank my beer to drown the thought. Then some more to stave off the boredom I felt as I unwittingly became an audience for Benji's monologue about home renovations. Mid-century modern this, mid-century modern that.

"And when we finally brought Charlie home, it was like we were literally stepping into the next chapter of our lives."

"Wow," I felt like I had to say.

As Benji continued waxing poetic about reaching milestones in his life, my resentment toward the boys began to build. While they lounged around watching football, Dana seized the opportunity to take a nap—her only reprieve after Charlie had

kept her up all night.

“My nipples are a fucking war zone—Charlie won’t stop biting,” she told me before retreating to the bedroom. “I’m going full formula—waving the white flag.” She laughed, but it was hollow, her face weary and depleted.

Why couldn’t the strong, virile man be blessed with the so-called gift of childbirth? If women were made from the rib of man, why couldn’t they sacrifice another pair for their progeny? Benji could’ve sucked his cock whenever he pleased to relieve himself of the pains of breastfeeding.

Instead, he was in my face, droning on and on about the hardships of raising a baby while running a TV show, and all I could do was long to escape to the world he created with Tom. A world where puppets and children sing about science—where biological clocks don’t tick and women weren’t burdened with the weight of bearing children.

Variety hailed them for “*puppeteering fun into science*” and “*educating our future with puppets*”? *The Hollywood Reporter* dubbed *Dr. Warbles’ Laboratory* the love child of *Bill Nye the Science Guy* and *Sesame Street*. And thank God for its success—otherwise, I’d be slumming it with Oscar, singing duets about our love for trash.

As Tom likes to recount the story of our meeting, he was blinded—his vision blurred by a thick curtain of stress-induced sweat while wrangling a chaotic pilot shoot under searing studio lights.

When he finally cleared his eyes, there I was, standing amidst a gaggle of children, captivating them with Count Bacterula, the fanged, anthropomorphic bacterial cell puppet I’d crafted. Channeling my best Bela Lugosi, I twirled the Count’s cape and

had him curtsy.

“The kids were enthralled,” he always says. “And so was I. It was like, ‘Yes! This is the magic we’re creating.’ It was the most beautiful sight I’d ever seen. I had to meet you. I had to.”

And so began our whirlwind romance: long hours on set, late-night eats, Abba dance-a-thons, and morning carpool rides to the studio—all culminating in a quickie marriage with “Hasta Mañana” playing us off.

But, here I was, watching Tom doting on the newborn, envy creeping in. I wanted to be cradled like Charlie—with that same tenderness and devotion. I took another drink, hoping to quell the thought, but Charlie’s high-pitched wailing shattered the moment. The sound pieced through me, sharp and grating. I shuddered.

“Is he hungry? Should I grab Dana?” I asked, trying to hide my discomfort.

Benji waved me off, dismissing the baby’s cries as mere fussiness. He offered to take over, but Tom shook his head, cradling Charlie closer.

“Relax, relax. Take a load off,” he ordered Benji before making a face so absurdly funny that Charlie instantly stopped crying and burst into giggles.

“Holy shit,” said an awestruck Benji. “You gotta teach me that.”

The baby whisperer revealed his technique: “Believe your face is the funniest thing ever—boom: Mr. Happy.”

While Tom continued perfecting his technique with Charlie, Benji leaned toward me. “So, when are you two bringing a little friend for Charlie?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m not sure I’m ready to give this up,” I

said, taking an exaggerated swig of beer.

“You know, if you have any reservations like I did, don’t. It’ll be the best thing you’ll ever do.” He leaned in closer. “I promise you’ll regret not doing it sooner.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, suddenly hearing the ticking of my biological clock.

“You gotta have them while you’re young, so you can enjoy them.”

I took a long drink, but soon found it empty. “But he’s just a little thing,” I said. “Not even a person yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, no personality.”

“Oh, he’s got plenty of personality.”

“Sure, but what about when he’s older? You don’t know what kind of person a baby turns into.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mitch McConnell used to be a baby,” I suggested. “What if Charlie grows up to be someone you don’t like?”

Benji sipped his beer in silence. I regretted opening my mouth. “God, I’m sorry. I’m joking. Sorry. Really bad.”

“Oh, no, I was just thinking about your question,” he said with a smile. “Well, honestly, I wanna believe we’re not the type of parents that would raise someone into a Mitch McConnell, but if we did, we’re gonna love our turtle-looking bastard, even if we don’t agree with him. How can you not? He’s perfect.”

Benji went back to admiring his son rather than continue our conversation. I decided to follow suit when I noticed Tom staring at me.

“Wanna hold him?” he asked.

“Oh, no, no. He’s so happy now. I don’t wanna bother him.”

“Take him for a test drive. He won’t bite,” chimed Benji.

Tom handed Charlie off to me, but not before taking a whiff of

the newborn's head. "God! That smell! I love it!"

I reluctantly swayed the baby in my arms as the boys browsed pizza places on their phones for lunch. I wished I could look at pizzas. I'd rather hold one, too. But the baby was sort of cute. Much lighter than I expected. Maybe this was a sign. Maybe I could do it.

I glanced up and caught Tom observing me, his expression soft and encouraging. I was about to smile back when Charlie made a noise—his face twitched.

"There, there, Charlie," I said, hoping he'd understand. Instead, he squirmed harder. "There, there." No luck.

Then it hit me—Tom's technique! I conjured up my best silly face, big grin, big goofy eyes. I even added a tongue thing.

But it came out strange. Horrific. I knew it was bad because Charlie started crying again—way louder and more terror-based than his earlier one.

"Shit! Guys—!"

Luckily, Dana swooped in from behind to save me. She scooped him up, patting his back, murmuring soothing sounds. "Oh, it's okay, baby. It's okay."

Now, that was a mother. I squeaked out an apology, but she just laughed it off.

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart. Babies cry."

Benji quipped that Charlie took after him, and the room laughed in agreement—even though the crying baby was drowning them out. I couldn't take it.

Over the wailing, I shouted, "I'm gonna get some air!" and fled to the sanctuary of Benji's backyard.

I slid the door shut behind me. Peace at last.

I breathed in the hot stifling air and shielded my eyes from the big, bright sun. My forehead prickled with sweat, but it was

worth it for the quiet. I just needed to pull myself together and be more graceful—get myself into mother mode like Dana.

Just then, my ears perked up—the silence of the yard replaced by a faint chorus of laughter. I turned and saw Tom using his funny-face technique on Charlie, now giggling uncontrollably.

Dana was astonished. “Wow! You have to teach me how to do that!”

Tom really did look like the ultimate father. It was as if Charlie were his child, and the actual parents were just bystanders.

A bead of sweat rolled down my forehead. I wiped it away, but another followed. And another. The heat pressed down on me like a suffocating weight. I was melting.

The swimming pool sizzled, steam rising as water spilled over the sides.

I staggered back, fumbling for the table to steady myself. It gave way, its legs buckling—melting—under the oppressive heat.

Breathe, damn it. I needed to breathe. In. Out. In—in—the breaths came rapid, shallow, useless.

Panic stabbed my chest as I witnessed the chairs, plants, the pool handrails warping, crumbling, succumbing to the inferno.

This was it. The end times.

A pool float popped with a deafening crack, the sound reverberating through my skull.

I wiped my forehead once more—and froze. My hand—the flesh bubbled and ruptured—melting before me.

A scream clawed its way up my throat as the pool burst into flames.

I awoke gasping, sprawled on the cool tiles of the living room floor. The air conditioning caressed my skin, bringing me back to life. My legs were propped up on a sofa cushion, and there was

Tom, knelt beside me with a portable fan aimed at my face, his eyes wide with concern.

“What happened?” I managed to ask.

“You fainted.”

I turned toward the backyard, peering through the glass door at the remnants of my contributions to Benji’s home renovation—toppled tables and chairs.

The Gomeses emerged from the other room laden with pillows and Gatorade. I wasn’t entirely sure how those were supposed to help, but the gesture was appreciated.

“Oh, my God, Sal! Are you okay?” asked the concerned mother.

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I just got hot all of a sudden.”

“It’s this damn heat,” she said.

“Maybe something else,” muttered the father, earning an elbow from Dana.

What did he mean? I wanted to ask, but Dana cut in with an idea for the boys. “You guys really ought to do an episode on climate change. Teach these kids something useful before hell breaks loose,” she suggested, turning to Charlie in a sing-song baby voice. “Isn’t that right, Charlie? Wouldn’t you like that?”

From the crook of his mother’s arms, Charlie’s blank stare met mine, sending a shiver down my spine.

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AND I WAS HOME, SPRAWLED ON THE SOFA WITH A PACK OF OREOS on my chest, zoning out to a food vlog on the TV. But Charlie’s listless expression was etched into my mind.

That nasty, wretched, empty expression—how I despised it. Judging me when he had the luxury of being coddled, loved, and forgiven for any wrongdoing because of his supposed cuteness.

How I hated the bastard.

Jesus. I jolted upright, horrified by my own thoughts. Monstrous. A hypocrite. A danger to society, making puppets for a kids' TV show. The master of puppets—evil, evil, evil.

Oh, God. I had to tell him. I can't do it. I can't be a mother.

No, no, no. Eat your Oreos. Shove those thoughts back. Build a wall, Sally. Build a wall.

I reached for a beer on the coffee table, eager to do anything to flush out my feelings, when Tom burst in and snatched the can from my hand.

Panting and sweating, he said, "Sorry. I just—I ran a mile on the tread—I'm thirsty," and took a long pull from my beer.

"Get your own." I reached out to reclaim my drink.

"Maybe you shouldn't." He hesitated. "Heat exhaustion, alcohol—probably not the best combo."

"I don't care. Give it back."

"You sure you don't need to go to the hospital?"

"I'm fine," I said. And I meant it.

"Sorry. It's just... something Benji said after you fainted. About why you might have."

"What'd he say?"

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Doom and Gloom

I SAT ON THE EDGE OF THE BATHTUB, BITING MY NAIL, WATCHING Tom pacing around with an overeager smile.

A pregnancy test lay on the counter. Benji had suggested I might have fainted because I was pregnant. Prick.

“We should film this,” said Tom.

“Film what?”

“The reveal! In case it becomes a reveal.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. There’s like less than a one percent chance.”

“Exactly! Imagine how momentous that would be!”

His phone was out, ready to commemorate the moment. I covered my face.

“What’s the matter?”

“You tell me. Ever since we got married, you seem to be in a rush to start a family.”

“I am,” he confessed, and when he saw my eyes widen, he added, “I mean, I figure since we’re eventually having one, why wait?”

“We haven’t even talked about it!”

“Yes, we have.”

“Not seriously. You know, like what a child entails—how our

lives would be over.”

“You want to talk now? Let’s talk.”

I didn’t feel like talking. I felt like sinking into the sofa and letting someone else take the test. I stared at the dreaded stick, and told him, “Maybe after we see what that says,” and chewed my nail again.

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AFTER WE RECEIVED THE RESULTS, WE HEADED TO THE DINING room where I drained a glass of wine as it was a call for celebration. Tom picked at his leftover pizza.

“Relieved?”

I responded with another full pour. “You have no idea.”

His forced smile couldn’t hide his disappointment. “Look, I’m sorry, but to be perfectly frank, I want to be a dad,” he blurted before adding, “Unfortunately, I’m perfectly Tom.”

I blinked, confused.

He cracked up, staring at me as if I should understand. “‘Perfectly Tom,’ not ‘perfectly Frank?’ Get it? See I’m already making dad jokes!”

I took a long pull from my victory cup.

“I’m sorry, but it’s in my DNA. I see a boy with his father, I get chills! I’m ready, Sal. I was born ready.”

“Aren’t you scared?”

“Of what?”

“Everything. No more going out. No spontaneous trips. No sleeping.”

“Worthy sacrifices for the most worthwhile experience we’ll ever have.”

“What about the kid?”

“What *about* the kid?”

“Don’t you think it’s irresponsible bringing a child into a world on the verge of catastrophe?”

Tom stared at me, confused, as if I were speaking gibberish.

“The environment’s fucked.”

“Jeez Louise,” he muttered, exasperated. “Since when did you become such an alarmist?”

I ignored his question. “And if our kid wants any shot at success, they’ll have to be a cog in the machine that’s wrecking with the planet.”

“Enough with the doom and gloom.”

“Enough with the naive outlook. This is the reality of having kids.”

“Not for us.”

“You don’t know.”

“You really think I’m gonna be a parent who prioritizes raising his kid to be mega successful in the eyes of capitalism?”

“No, I just... I never expected the world to be like this. The world’s in a shitstorm!”

“The world’s always been shit! World Wars?! Famines? Depressions! We still made babies.”

“Exactly. Why put a kid through that?”

“Because kids with the right guidance can grow up to be adults that fix shit.” He leaned in, his eyes searching mine for understanding. “Humans endure. And sitting here with you, in our beautiful home, paid for by our dream jobs—what’s there to complain about?”

I had many reasons, but I offered two. “The oldest ecosystems are dying and our reservoirs are drying up. How can we knowingly bring a child into that?”

His penetrating eyes locked onto mine before losing focus. His voice dropped.

“So, what then? Are you saying you don’t want kids?”

I stayed silent.

“Oh, God. Oh—”

The tears came instantly—ugly, messy, snotty tears. Like a scared little boy. I’d never seen him cry like that. I made babies cry. I made grown men cry. I wanted to cry.

“No, no, honey! That’s not what I’m saying!”

“Bullshit! You don’t want kids!”

“I do! Of course, I do.”

“Then why are you saying all this?”

I hesitated. “The world’s in a bad place. I don’t want the kid to blame us. That’s all.”

“Really?” he asked, studying my face. What hideous thing did he see?

“Yes. I promise.”

Tom wiped his face with his shirt. “Jesus Christ. I feel like a baby.”

“It’s okay. Let it out.”

He caught his breath, the silence thick, my knees shaking.

“Can I sit with you?” he asked, timidly.

“Of course.”

He settled beside me, the awkwardness palpable, and we were suddenly teenagers.

“Look,” he said. “I know this makes me sound like a jerk, but I want a child no matter how bad it gets. But I swear, I’ll always be there for them.”

“What if I’m not capable? I could barely handle Charlie.”

“That’s because he’s not yours. As soon as you see our child, you’re gonna know what to do.”

“How do you know?”

“You’re warm, funny, considerate—”

“Who gives a shit?”

“Me.” He knelt before me, taking my hand, his grip firm,

sending a surge of security through me like warm fuzzy electricity.

He admitted being scared, too. “But whenever I feel that way, I remember who I’d be raising this kid with. As someone who wants nothing more than to be a dad, who’s dreamt about it since he was a kid himself, you’re who I want.”

His grip tightened. “There will be mistakes. Kids can be cruel. They can make life hell for their parents, like I certainly did. But you’re grounded and real and attentive, and that’s exactly who I want raising my kid.”

His words struck me unexpectedly. My eyes welled up. I felt as if I saw the future, something stirring inside of me. Something primordial. Evolutionary. Something-something about extending our bloodline.

“The kid’s basically already won the Lotto,” he said. “So, what do you say, Sal?”

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AND HE WAS ON TOP OF ME, THRUSTING, GRUNTING, FUCKING ME senselessly like his life depended on it. My body responded to every thrust, soaking in every single, itty-bitty sensation.

I wondered what was running through his mind finally reaching this moment he’d been waiting for. I pulled him closer, my lips finding every part of him, trying to anchor myself in the rawness of the spellbinding occasion.

Then I heard it. Somewhere deep in my mind, that sizzle—like bacon crackling in a pan.

I was back in Benji’s backyard, staring at a hazy sky. Flames danced on the surface of the pool. I blinked, shook my head during our throes of passion fighting my invasive imagination,

but the image persisted.

A splash echoed as our friends jumped into the fiery water, cackling their asses off as if nothing were wrong.

The fire rose with the waves, and there was Tom, charred and carefree, holding out his arms and gesturing for a baby to join him in the inferno.

The baby crawled closer and closer, the water rose higher, and my eyes fluttered open to find my sweaty husband towering over me, droplets falling onto my face. He grinned like a child unwrapping the Christmas present he'd always dreamt of getting. So in love. So oblivious.

His head tilted back, and I barely managed to whimper, "Tom, wait—"

Too late. His damp, clammy body toppled over me. I patted his back gently, my eyes fixated on the ceiling, where the apocalyptic pool party flickered in my mind.

Tom wrapped his arms tightly around me, his breath warm against my neck. My imagination began to cool.

"We're gonna make one hell of a kid," he said.

I swallowed. "Yeah."

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Middle-Aged Adonis

THE NIGHT SKY EJECTED ME, AND I SCREAMED, “AH!” MY ARRIVAL came much as it did 40 years ago: naked and afraid. Only this time, I chose to be here.

My body came crashing down face-first onto the closed lid of a dumpster, my bare flesh pulsating against the metal. The impact sounded a loud clang, sending critters scattering into the shadows—likely drawing the attention of passersby. Yet my brutish mind remained on my boys.

I rubbed the joy sacks—kneading them like a cat making biscuits—until the pain began to subside. Clenching my teeth, I forced myself to look down and assess the damage.

Praise be to the Lads of Incandescent Light—the fun pouches had lived to see another day. Instinct dictated I protect them at all costs, even though their purpose ceased to matter—a truth I had come to terms with long ago. The rest of me, beaten and bruised, clamored for a momentary respite.

I lay there for a short-lived moment before my nostrils flared, rebelling against the thick, pungent stench of rot and sour decay; aromas reminiscent of the home I left behind. I rolled my body off the metallic waste vessel, clinging to its side to steady myself

when a gust of wind struck me and left me momentarily stupefied.

Oh, glorious breeze—how it tickled my nether regions, sending sparks of arousal straight to my skull. Every nerve screamed for release despite the battered state of my pleasure pouches. But this was no time for indecent acts, especially one from a naked man in an alleyway. There was a mission at hand.

I stepped out from the shadows, my toes wiggling against the pavement as if it were beach sand. I shut my aching eyes and drew a deep breath of that seductive air, untainted by the alley stench. It was healing—nature is healing. I found myself choking up—it was so goddamn beautiful. But I'd done enough crying for ten lifetimes. I needed to open my eyes and focus.

I scanned my surroundings. Streetlights cast a cold, white glow on the lonesome street before me. Parked cars lined the curb, their drivers likely tucked away in their warm apartments. Strip mall storefronts loomed dark, closed for business.

I spotted a gas station with an attendant leaning against the mini-mart, browsing his phone and smoking a cigarette. It could be my next stop—maybe there were clothes inside I could intimidate him into handing over. Maybe I could steal his. But there were bound to be cameras.

A further scan proved to be most fortuitous. Across the street, the dim fluorescent glare of a sign caught my eye: *24 HR LAUNDRY*. Thank the Lads!

Woop-woop. My body tensed at the curt chirp of a cop car siren as it pulled into the gas station. The attendant hastily stubbed out his cigarette, straightening as the officers stepped out of their vehicle. Shit balls.

Heart pounding, I ducked back into the shadows of the alleyway. From the darkness, I peered out, imagining myself as a

wild animal. Something intriguing, like a coyote. No—a wolf. A wolf sounded better. And, lucky for me, the wolf caught sight of a sheep.

Emerging from the laundromat, a young man in flannel lugged a large sack of laundry, a blast of smoke spilling from his mouth.

At the gas station, the officers strolled into the mart with the attendant, probably to gorge on free coffee and plastic-wrapped snack cakes. Lucky shits.

Bleep-boop. My ears perked at the familiar sound of a car unlocking. The flannel man was opening the door to his beater. My moment had arrived. Now or never. I slapped my face—once, twice—for motivation, then bolted. Debris stabbed the bottoms of my feet, but adrenaline dulled the pain.

Up ahead, a car idled at a red light. I pressed on, hoping the driver would assume I was just another naked, drugged-out whacko—not worth engaging with, even if there were cops nearby to arrest me.

I crossed the four lanes of street and sprinted across the parking lot just as the flanneled man tossed his laundry bag into the back seat of his car.

Without hesitation, I charged him, slamming him against his vehicle and locked my sweaty palm over his mouth. Earbuds popped out of his ears as his eyes widened with terror and his body trembled.

“I need you to get down slowly—silently,” I warned. “On three... two... go.”

We lowered ourselves out of sight from the laundromat, crouching behind his car. I never broke eye contact with my prey, watching his every slight move.

“Nothing’s gonna happen if you comply with my demands. Understand?” I said, my voice cold and steady.

The scrawny bastard nodded carefully.

“The demands are simple: a ride and clothes. Simple, yes?” I felt so fucking cool.

He nodded again, his face noticeably sweatier than mine.

“Good,” I said, leaning in closer. “Now, give me your clothes.”

*
**

COULD I TRUST THIS MORSEL OF A MAN? COULD HE BE RELIED UPON to get me to my destination? Should I take preemptive measures to ensure he won’t screw me over? Comparatively, I was bigger, but who knew what tricks were up his sleeves?

I took a hit off the lanky boy’s vape. It tasted of guava and pineapple. The mounted phone showed we were seventeen minutes from our destination. A crucifix necklace dangled from the rearview mirror indicating the flannel twerp must be of Christian denomination, and Christ, I was dressed like him.

Ill-fitted on my larger frame, I wore his faded red USC hoodie and purple sweatpants. Tube socks and sandals completed the ensemble. I was made to look like the dweeb supreme.

Familiar sights blurred past—fast food joints, their glowing signs beckoning midnight prowlers, beckoning me. My stomach growled mightily. I shifted my gaze and stared straight ahead. No distractions. I needed to concentrate on my mission.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, breaking the silence.

“Bite your tongue,” I demanded.

“I heard your stomach—”

“Bite it!”

“I don’t mind stopping somewhere—”

“Bite your fucking tongue before I bite it for you.”

I flubbed. An unintended innuendo. But I was grateful for the silence that followed. I had to get back to the task at hand. I had

to think. But what was my game plan, really? What were the details?

My brain was a scrambled mess. Sustenance could help me think, but I couldn't risk it. I needed to ground myself—remember who I was.

“J. Renoir.” The name bestowed upon me during my rebirth. A gift from the Lads Almighty. Professionally, I was Titus—or, to be more precise, “Titus the Gluteus, Senior Dance Friend, Class Adonis.”

The ad copy from Buff Boyardee described me as follows:

“The Slayatollah of Heat, Titus the Gluteus, isn't your ordinary hunk—he's an Adonis. A physical specimen blessed with primo genetics, chiseled abs, and a glorious metabolism. This Adonis channels his fitness expertise to maximize your strength and vitality, determined to make you feel like a breath of fresh air. His engine runs on your results.”

I found the description apt. I was quite the intimidating figure. At least, physically. I had to be—it was my livelihood. But that life was now gone. No more fake smiles. No more forced extroversion, lying to myself day-by-day. No more bagging old ladies.

Sinking deeper into my spiraling thoughts, I scratched absently at my thigh, a nervous tic of mine. I felt something rough beneath my fingertips. Glancing down, I noticed the fraying edges of a vintage Lakers logo stitched onto my borrowed sweatpants.

The Lakers! Duh! Fucking dolt!

“Pen!” I screamed.

“What?”

“A pen, damn it! Now!”

He fumbled around for one in the console, pulling out a dull-

tipped pencil. I snatched it from his puny paw. “Pad!” I shouted.

“What?”

“A fucking pad! A writing pad!”

I searched for something to write on when my foot brushed against a crumpled fast-food bag. Oh, sweet resourceful foot! I grabbed the bag, flattened it against the dashboard, and started scrawling furiously.

The rough paper resisted, but I told it to go fuck itself and pressed on, desperate to preserve what I could remember.

Get everything down.

The phone alerted us to take a left. I glanced at the screen. Less than a minute away.

Get everything down.

*
**

“YOU HAVE ARRIVED AT YOUR DESTINATION,” ANNOUNCED THE phone.

The vehicle came to a halt, but I kept scribbling until my hand started to cramp. I used my impediment to scan the neighborhood. Tidy, safe, suburban—

“Nice,” interrupted the pipsqueak.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Nice neighborhood. That’s all.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, it is.”

“Do you live—“

“I’m not robbing anybody, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No, I just—”

“Nothing. You just nothing,” I said, then took a hit from his vape and blew a tropical blast of smoke in his face. “This isn’t even the real destination. You think I’m that dumb?”

But I was that dumb. I didn’t consider inputting a false

address until the words came out of my mouth. I was about to prolong my lie when I looked past the twig of a man, and recognition kicked in.

I lunged over to the driver's side window as I spotted the rancher: clean, modest, with a Honda Prologue plugged into the driveway. The car appeared pristine. Brand new. Undamaged.

My throat tightened as I retreated back to my seat. I unbuckled my seatbelt and slumped, chest tightening.

Breathe, asshole. Breathe. In. Out. In—in— My head spun. I was woozy. Was this a heart attack? Panic attack? Effects of the—

"You okay?" flannel boy dared to ask. His puny little eyes blinked at me as I glared at him. "Sorry," he muttered. "It's just... you seem... not okay."

I grabbed the morsel's collar and yanked him close. "And you seem like you should mind your business," I said, shoving him back to his seat. His bony frame rattled against his door as I folded the fast-food bag into my sweater pocket and reached for the handle of my door.

But the prick kept going. "Wait a sec."

I paused, glaring at the twig. My fists clenched, itching to snap him in half. A second passed. Two. Strike the fucker. Punch in three, two—

"I know I should keep my mouth shut," he said, his voice quivering, "but whatever you're going through, it'll get better."

The knuckle sandwich was locked and loaded. But something about his words made me think of my father. Pops wouldn't condone such violence, especially not against someone who sacrificed their clothes and well-being to aid me even if it was done forcefully.

I loosened my fist and stuffed it into my pocket. "Thanks for the ride," I muttered. "And sorry."

I opened the door to leave, but the bastard would not stop.

“Just remember—time heals all wounds.”

“No, it doesn’t. Now, shut the fuck up,” I said, slamming the door in his face.

- 5 -

Pep Talk

I WOKE UP, BLEARY-EYED, TO A PING ON MY PHONE—THE GARAGE security cam alerting me that Tom’s car was leaving. I would’ve remained under my sheets, if it weren’t for the aroma of bacon and coffee enticing me to, at least, sit up.

Reaching for my glasses on the nightstand, I came face-to-face with a tray carrying a steaming cup of coffee and a beautifully wrapped sandwich in parchment paper. Tom’s #4 special, “The Good Mornin’ Mooney Spectacular.” Thick-cut bacon, soft scrambled eggs, classic American cheese, garlic butter, and mashed avocado on a buttery roll. A Post-It note stuck to the tray read: “*Stay home! Recover! Rest! Eat, eat, eat!*”

I felt like a goddamn princess—like Frodo waking up in Rivendell to the surviving members of the Fellowship after his return from Mount Doom. Unlike Frodo, I sipped my coffee and scrolled through the news. Workers at LAX were striking. Amazon had announced massive layoffs. There’d been a shooting at a mall in Oregon—was it a mass shooting? Random? Targeted? A lover’s quarrel? What even qualifies as a mass shooting these days?

Another headline mentioned a breakthrough in artificial

intelligence—something defense-related. Should I invest? Or was it too late? Could this be a bubble? What exactly is a bubble? I really should pay more attention, especially since we were starting the baby-making process.

We'd have to be more vigilant, smarter with the markets, wary of money traps, find side hustles. Children's entertainment was fragile business. Unstable. Especially puppetry. Would I need to find another trade?

My head throbbed at the thought of going back to school. All that money. All that time. I had to remind myself not to check the news first thing in the morning. But then, there was Tom's lovely sandwich there to remind me that not all was bad in the world.

I took a big bite, and the taste transported me back to my Hobbit-like state, snug in my big, comfy bed. Christ Almighty, I'd really hit the jackpot.

But I couldn't take it for granted. I had to pay it back.

*
* *

AFTER DRAGGING MYSELF OUT OF BED AND SLOGGING THROUGH MY morning routine, the day started about as well as it could. Properly caffeinated, I threw myself into work on the stork puppet in my garage workshop, fully immersed in constructing its hat.

But my focus didn't last long. As soon as I started working on the stork's cloth bundle—the one meant to carry the baby—babies crept back into my thoughts. I could not stop thinking about them—the repercussions.

My eyes drifted to the scattered remnants of my other puppets—pieces of unfinished personal projects stranded in various stages of completion. When would I ever find the time to finish them if I had to raise a child?

These abandoned projects were supposed to prove something

to me—to everyone—that I didn't need Tom's help. I could do it on my own. But here, I was, working from home yet again because I was married to one of the show's creators—one of the privileges of banging the boss. Was that it, then? Was I just a dumb, naive, gold-digging bimbo?

My stomach churned. I felt itchy. I scratched my thigh—an anxious habit—as the sour, lingering smell of my empty coffee cup made my nausea worse. The damn thing was empty, why was the stench still there? Maybe I was too caffeinated. Tom's coffee was always so strong.

I dropped the empty cup of coffee in the kitchen, drained a glass of water, then hurried to the bathroom, convinced I was about to vomit.

Nothing came up, no matter how hard I tried—even with a finger down my throat. Defeated, I gave up and splashed water on my face, clinging to the hope of some relief. Then, I looked up and faced my reflection.

I was startled by the tired eyes staring back at me—the faint wrinkles around my lips that I hadn't noticed before. For the first time in my life, my face appeared wise, even if I felt too young to appear that way. But maybe, at 32, I was old enough to be a woman full of wisdom.

My reflection reminded me of how I remembered my mother's face as a child. But the terrifying thought was that my mother had already been well into her mid-40s when I was just a tyke. I looked so old. If I waited any longer, I'd only be that much older when I finally became a parent.

I dreaded the thought of PTA meetings, uncomfortable gatherings with parents—kids' birthdays filled with conversations about menopause and midlife crises—especially when there would always be that one parent we'd be jealous of

that was still going out to concerts. It was easy to forget that parents came in all shapes and ages.

Part of me liked the idea of being an older mom—imparting wisdom to my child, watching them grow into a self-sufficient, thoughtful individual who seemed wise beyond their years. An old soul in a young body. But I couldn't ignore the reality of the aches and pains that often came with being an older parent. I'd seen it in my parents.

I was lucky—strong genes, no allergies, no lingering ailments. But even that could take you so far. Every visit to my parents was a reminder. Each time, they seemed more forgetful, more anxious about their health. They took daily walks, hit the gym regularly, but the signs of aging were still there. Maybe it was because they'd been older parents when they had me.

And it wasn't just the physical toll. Getting pregnant takes time, especially as you age. What if there were complications? Could my parents even experience the joys of being grandparents if their grandchild was still just a baby?

They can't make Christmas lists or ask for birthday presents. Only children do that. Grandparents thrive on those moments—on giving rather than receiving. Giving brings hope and happiness, doesn't it? At least, that's what the mental health experts and Jesus say.

What would Jesus do? I wondered, staring at the pack of birth control pills on the counter. It was Monday's turn, looking at me, daring me to make a choice.

I had to look away. I gripped the counter and gave myself the pep talk I'd want Jesus to give me.

"You're gonna be a damn good mother. The best. This is the best you'll ever do. From this point on, wean off the old Sally. Here comes the new and improved mom version that will end

with a touching eulogy from your kids because of your legendary run as a mom.”

There was just one more thing to do. “Just do it. Like Nike.”

I tossed the pack of pills into the trash. My foot pressed the pedal, the lid slamming definitively just as I heard the front door open.

- 6 -

Second Chances

STRANGE HOW THE BRAIN PICKS UP ON THE SMALLEST SOUNDS AND patterns of the people we're around the most. It's a lot sharper than we give it credit for.

The front door slammed closed, but something about it didn't sound like Tom. It felt abrasive, aggressive, like how I'd slam the door to my room as a bratty teen.

Carefully, I cracked the bathroom door open and peeked out from the hallway. Every muscle froze when I saw a large man looming in the foyer. A strange-looking whacko, draped in skintight red and purple sweats, examining one of our framed wedding photos. I ducked back into the bathroom, feeling like I was about to have a heart attack.

How'd this fucker get in? How'd he get the passcode? Was Tom in trouble? I felt like I was about to be slaughtered and become the future subject of a true crime podcast. My nausea vanished instantly and was instead replaced by pure, uncut dread as I searched and tapped myself for my phone, but it was nowhere to be found. Retracing my steps, I remembered that I went to the kitchen to put my coffee away. Idiot. You should always have your phone on you. As I debated whether to lock myself in the

bathroom or grab my phone, inspiration struck as I laid my eyes on some beauty products.

Moving as silently as possible, I crept into the hallway, cat-like, wielding a can of hairspray and a big blue glass bottle of cologne, trying to ignore the rapid pounding in my chest.

The foyer was empty. The living room—also empty. I held my breath, listening intently. Then, I heard it: cabinets opening and the distinct clink of bottles shifting on the fridge door shelf as it swung open.

Edging closer to the kitchen doorway, I stayed low, each step calculated and deliberate. I found my phone on the island, partially hidden behind a fruit bowl and just out of the intruder's line of sight.

I peeked around the corner and spotted him. He stood at the counter, his back to me, casually pouring milk into a bowl of cereal like he owned the place. It appeared he opted for my Honey Nut Cheerios instead of Tom's healthy brand.

I tightened my grip on Tom's cologne bottle, ready to hurl it at the intruder if he so much as flinched. My pulse was racing. What had I done to deserve this? My dumb, lazy ass should've gone with Dana to that stupid "self-defense and wine" class. I should've bought mace. Maybe I'd been too harsh on guns. Someone had to defend the home, protect the kids. I needed to channel Sarah Connor. It's only a matter of time before killer robots come for us anyway.

But I did nothing. I just stood there, paralyzed by fear, watching his every move. He wasn't doing much besides eating my Cheerios and reading the back of the box. It was the perfect opportunity to smash him in the head and run off with my phone. If only I had the guts. If only I—

It didn't matter. He acted first. He stiffened, freezing in the

middle of bringing a spoonful to his mouth. His arm, still holding the spoon, hovered mid-air. After a brief pause, he tilted his head slightly and sniffed the air. My eyes shot to the cologne bottle in my hand. Stupid, overpowering cologne.

Before I could react, he turned around, and our eyes met. We both stood there, neither of us daring to move an inch, the tension mounting.

“I can explain—” he started to say, his spoon-carrying arm relaxing as a single Cheerio spilled.

The cereal collided with the floor and activated my fight mode as I launched the cologne bottle at him with all my might. It shattered against the cabinet, narrowly missing his head. Glass shards exploded everywhere accompanied by a burst of fresh, crisp, aquatic fragrance—the smell of my love.

“Ow! Fuck!” he yelped, throwing his arms up to shield his face. In the process, he knocked the glass milk bottle off the counter. It smashed against the floor, milk splattered everywhere and glass shards mixed with the broken pieces of the cologne bottle already scattered across the kitchen.

Fortune struck as his foot slipped on the puddle of milk, and he lost his balance. His head smacked against the counter as he fell onto the pool of broken glass.

I seized the opportunity to snatch my phone off the island and sprayed his eyes with my can of TRESemmé while he was down. He howled in pain, and I howled back, “Get out! Get out!”

He scooted back against the sink cabinet, covering his eyes, dragging broken glass on his ass. “I’m not gonna hurt you—”

“No shit you won’t!”

I flung the can of hairspray at him and ran out the kitchen toward the living room—to the entrance where I could escape. Adrenaline running sky high, my mind went blank, but I felt a

brief sense of pride incapacitating the large intruder. I could defend my home—my family! I was Sarah freaking Conn—

And then, I was swept under—my own clumsy doing. My foot caught on the rug and I went down hard, my phone sliding across the floor. I scrambled toward it on all fours, hoping to reach it before the man had a chance to recover.

Behind me, I heard the crunch of glass. Wobbly, uneven sounds. I turned just in time to see the man staggering into the living room. His eyes were bloodshot, his face cut fresh, and each step was followed by a pained wince.

I had to move fast, but my body was not cooperating. Adrenaline had failed me. I could feel every throb of pain, every ache in my limbs.

He slowed his pace, leaning against the wall by the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, and asked me a strange question in a strange, concerned manner: “Are you okay?”

“Stay away!” I shouted, scrambling back as far as I could from him.

He backed off, raising his hands out to me as if he were under arrest and kept his distance.

“What do you want?” I demanded. “Money?”

“No—“

“Then go! Please.” Since it was already on my mind, I came up with a fitting lie. “I—I’m pregnant, okay? I’m pregnant, so, for the love of God, leave.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I am! My husband and I went to the doctor, and, and, and the doctor confirmed, ‘Yes! You’re pregnant. Positive!’ So, please, for the love of God, leave me alone!”

“You can’t be. You can’t!” He was inches from punching a hole in the wall when he pulled back. The man continued his odd

behavior, crumpling to the floor with a crestfallen expression on his face. Whatever his deal was, I got my second wind and used the opportunity to scurry over to my phone.

“Go ahead,” he said, staring at the floor. “I won’t stop you.”

Surprised and perplexed by his submissive behavior, I hesitated before making the call.

“Nine-one-one,” said the emergency operator. “What’s your emergency?”

I held the phone tight against my ear, trying to stay calm. “I’d like to report a crime. There’s a, a...”

I don’t know why, but something about seeing him so broken and defeated made me feel for him. He looked like a wounded, discarded puppy. I had a sudden urge to wrap him up in a warm blanket and make him a cup of hot chocolate, especially with all those scrapes on him.

“Ma’am? Ma’am, are you there?” asked the operator.

“Sorry,” I said. “I thought there was an intruder. False alarm.”

Before I could second-guess myself, I ended the call and faced the sad puppy of a man. “I’m offering you a second chance. Please, take it and go.”

“You don’t get it. This was my second chance.”

He pushed himself off the floor, each movement weighed down by exhaustion. I watched him trudge to the front door, his shoulders slumped like Charlie Brown. His hand twisted the doorknob, opening it just a crack, before stopping. Uh-oh. What now?

“Jesus,” he muttered to himself, shaking his head. “You gullible, gullible fool.” He gave his head several impactful smacks—each one harder than the last.

I swallowed hard, regretting my actions. Along with guns, I’d have to reconsider my policy on cops, too.

“You lied.”

“What?”

“On the phone! You lied to the operator,” he said turning toward me. “Did you lie about being pregnant because you thought I was gonna hurt you?”

“No! Jesus! Why do you even care?”

“It concerns me.”

“It’s none of your business!”

“It is my business! It’s why I’m here.”

My chest tightened. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“If you’re pregnant, that would be me you’re giving birth to.”

“What?!”

He closed the front door shut, the soft click of the latch amplifying the silence that followed. His voice was calmer—focused.

“I’m your son.”

I blinked, stupefied, trying to process his words. But annoyance took over. “What’s the matter with you? It’s eight in the morning, and you’re high?”

“I assure you, I am not high,” he said, his voice firm. He paused, searching for the right way to explain the absurdity of what he was about to say. “I come from the future.”

I stared at him, my head spinning. “That’s it. Second chance over.”

I opened my phone to my recent calls, but he continued, “Your name is Sally Mooney. Born Sally Abigail Lee in Layfield, Illinois. Your birthday’s January 8. You met your husband, Tom, my father, on the pilot shoot of *Dr. Warbles’ Laboratory*. Your wedding song is ‘Hasta Mañana’ by Abba. For God’s sake, I entered your home! The passcode of the door lock is ‘28401.’ The number has no meaning. Just a random set of numbers you guys came up with. I am telling the truth. It’s as crazy as it sounds. I am from

the future.”

I stared at him, bewildered, my brain going through things it's never experienced.

He stepped closer to me, desperation in his voice. “Jasper! My name is Jasper.”

I couldn't believe it. My throat was too tight to speak.

“I hated the name, but you wanted to name me in honor of your brother.” He stalled, trying to find his words. “He passed away before you were born. How the hell could I know that if I didn't know you?”

My mind went blank. He crouched down to meet me at eye level.

“I know I look like crap right now, but people say we have the same eyes. I never thought so, but do you see it?”

I stared at his face, searching for any sign of familiarity. There was something—an uncanny resemblance that made me fail to register any semblance of reality. I tried to speak, but no words came. Just a nonsensical grunt. The edges of my vision blurred, the room spun. I lost the room. Everything went black.

The last thing I heard was his panicked voice. “Shit.”

- 7 -

Special #4

SWOOSH, SWOOSH.

Jasper... Jasper Mooney. Son. Poor Jasper. Dumb, silly dream.

Swoosh, swoosh.

What's that damn sound? Shuddup.

Swoosh, swoosh.

"Shut up!" I shouted, jerking myself awake. My head was pounding, the remnants of that strange, silly dream still present, but as I massaged my temples, I could still hear that repetitive swishing sound.

Sitting up, I couldn't believe it. The large intruder man was moving about in the kitchen, a broom in his hands. *Swoosh, swoosh.*

A foreboding feeling bubbled in my stomach. Acid reflux, perhaps. Or perhaps, it was just the body's response to seeing its adult child before they were even born.

I hauled my dazed ass off the couch and shuffled into the kitchen where I found the man carefully dumping broken glass into the trash. But I refused to acknowledge him. Not until I grabbed a glass from the cupboard and drank it down in one go.

"Sorry about the break-in," he said while I poured myself a

second glass. “I heard the car leaving. Assumed you left with Dad—Uh, Tom. Figured I’d rest inside, you know, prep for the big reveal.”

Noticing the first-aid kit on the counter, I finally attended to the big man in my kitchen. His face was patched with bandages and the bloodstains on his hoodie appeared darker and crusted.

“Sorry I attacked you,” I said.

“Don’t be,” he replied. “You saw an intruder, you acted accordingly.”

I spotted his bowl of soggy cereal near the sink. “You must be starving,” I said.

“I’m fine.”

“Sit,” I said, opening the fridge. “I’ll make you some eggs.”

“You don’t need to—“

“Sit.”

As I pulled out the carton of eggs, I heard him shifting uneasily onto a stool at the island.

“Tom made his breakfast sandwiches, didn’t he?”

“How’d you know?”

“Smelled them when I came in,” he said. “‘The Good Mornin’ Mooney Spectacular.’ Special #4, right?”

My hand tensed, crushing the egg in my hand.

“If it makes you feel better, yes, you’re technically my mother, but you’re not the one I grew up with.”

I nodded slowly, wiping the yolk off my fingers. “Well, I think my brain’s too fried to cook. You want the special?” I offered.

I led him into the garage where I had the other half of the sandwich. As he stepped in, his eyes scanned over the shelves and containers holding the supplies for my puppet-making projects.

“Oh, my God, Captain Mikey!” He made his way to one of my creations, an eyepatch-wearing puppet that resembled a mix

between a wolf and a parrot.

“Mikey?”

“It’s what I named him,” he said, taking the puppet off of the shelf. “If I remember correctly, you made him for a show—“

“*The Monster Guild’s*—“

“—*Chilling Workshop*,” he finished with me. “You turned it into a stuffed doll after it got canceled.”

“It gets canceled?”

He looked down, embarrassed. “Uh—”

“We didn’t even film it yet.” I couldn’t believe it. All that work for nothing. Maybe I was only capable of being employed by Tom after all. “Careful what you say,” I warned.

“I’m sorry. Won’t happen again.”

He put my failed puppet back then noticed the half-eaten breakfast sandwich still sitting on my worktable. He moved cautiously towards it as if it were a rare, exotic animal.

“I can warm it up—“ I started, but before I could finish, he took a bite.

His expression changed instantly—almost as if he were transported somewhere else. I could see a shift in his eyes—they softened, like he’d been struck by a powerful memory. Then it vanished. He spat the bite into a napkin and wiped his eyes.

“Are you okay?” I asked, unsure if I should even press the issue.

He set the sandwich down and stared at the floor before straightening up, his tone dead serious. “You mind if we go someplace else? I’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

“Sure thing,” I said. “I’ll call us a ride.” Upon seeing the bloodstains on his tight-fitting attire, I suggested, “Maybe you should change first.”

//Jasper chapter with him in the shower? Smelling the body

wash of dad. Trying on his clothes?

//They are interrupted by the doorbell as Dana arrives with pastries and ask to come in to change Charlie real quick where she spots Jasper somehow...? Or does she catch them on their way out? If so, Sally would probably be too nervous about Tom knowing and getting the wrong idea?

“Smells like cologne in here!” She could say and goes to the bathroom to change the baby and finds Jasper’s clothes? Or he’s hiding in the closet?

We can then have a scene in the Lyft where they talk about Charlie and Dana:

“Was that Charlie? Wow. It’s so weird seeing him so young.”

“What did she want?”

“She just came over to drop off some pastries from Deluca’s.”

“Deluca’s? Cookies? I love Deluca’s!”

He eats some Deluca’s cookies...

“I was just at Deluca’s to pick up a cake for my sister’s birthday, and I thought I should grab some stuff for you on the way—to cheer you up.” “More like fatten me up.” Hardy har har. “I figure you were on the way, so...”

“Thank you so much. That is so sweet of you.”

“My pleasure.”

There’s the sense that she wants to come inside, or expects to be invited, to hang.

“It’s nice to see a friend and not the baby. You busy?”

“Yeah, loads to do, unfortunately.”

“Oh, I see. Well, then, it was great seeing you, and oh, no Charlie! Do you mind if I come in and change him? Looks like he shit himself.”

“Uh, sure. Just one minute.” Closes the door, checks in with jasper, to make sure he’s hidden.

Then the Lyft could come. Honk, honk.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I was just leaving.”

“Oh, my God. Sorry, sorry. Charlie can hang out for a bit with some poop pants. No worries! We’re not too far from home. I can change him in the car.”

“I’m so sorry, Dana.”

“Well, I’ll see you around.”

“Thanks again for the Deluca!”

Dana leaves.

Sally closes the door. Sneaks a look to make sure Dana’s out of view before getting Jasper to tag along in the Lyft...

Dana drives off.

Sally apologizes to the Lyft driver. “Had a bathroom emergency. I’ll be sure to tip you well.”

- 8 -

Tom Jr. Jr.

ARTHUR? ARTIE? ART. ART MOONEY. OR OTIS? OH, LOOK AT AT THE tits on this guy. He could be fat. Tom Jr.? Tommy?

Wait, no I can't do Tom Jr. Tom Jr. Jr. I'm Tom Jr. A treacherous name. Named after a treacherous bastard, the maestro of assholes. Maestro of lousiness.

"Hiya, Junior, how was school?" No, no, that's awful.

Stella. Margaret. Paulina. Paula. Sally Jr. Or, hey! How about gender-neutral? Alex is not bad. Sal. Sal is good! We can do Sal for Sally or Sal like a salami! Salami Sal. Fat Sal. No, that's no good. You gotta keep the bullies in mind. Sam? Sam! Oh, my God, I love Sam! Sam Mooney! What a name! Simple, strong—versatile! Sam or Sammy or Sam-Sam!

I was a mad man, cycling through an endless list of names, mixing and matching this-and-that with "Mooney"—in my head, out loud in my car—so many beautiful naming possibilities for my future kid.

(I'm going to be an annoying prick to poor, old Sal. Indecisive. Too many names. What names will she think of?)

Oh, joy of joys, what a lucky shit I was! I was over the moon! "Joy Mooney!" Another one!

I could barely sleep last night—I was so jazzed up. It was

nearly impossible leaving the house watching my beautiful wife sleeping so soundly. She looked like a goddamn masterpiece painting. I wanted to weep—it was such a touching sight. If only I were a painter. I should've taken a picture to commemorate the morning after one of the most important decisions of our lives.

*It felt like yesterday I asked her out, and to this day, I can't believe she said yes to me. I mean, me! I'm a sack of shit! But, boy, she's it, mister. The mother of your goddamn kids. You fucking did it, bucks. My God. I'm the goddamn king of the world.

I keep thinking life can't get better than this, but life finds a way to surprise me and make me want to cum all over the goddamn place. What the fuck is wrong with me?! Nothing! I'm just the happiest camper of all time.

But I had to push that down just a tad. Rehearsal was in full swing, and the team needed me, and I wasn't about to let them down. I couldn't. Nothing could take me down. I was the goddamn king of the planet.

The backdrop—a painted field with giant flowers—set the stage while a swarm of the cutest damn kids in bee costumes buzzed around me.

I was drenched in sweat, trying to keep up as I circled our oversized papier-mâché blooms. Sweet old man Warren stood off to the side, in his white lab coat and his floral shirt, observing with his usual deadpan expression unfit for his Dr. Warbles persona.

“When we circle this yellow flower,” I said, raising my voice over the sweet sound of giggles and buzzing, “that’s when we cue in... the pollen buddies!”

I pointed to the puppeteers standing just offstage, holding their pollen puppets ready for action. Grabbing Warren by the elbow, I guided him to his mark on the floor.

“All right, Dr. Warbles! Here’s where you talk about

pollination,” I said, demonstrating the next bit. “Blah, blah, pollination-this, pollination-that, mid-sentence, ah-choo! Sneeze, blow your nose on your coat, pull your goofy face, and bam, we’re done. Got it?”

Warren nodded silently.

I turned to the kids, giving them all high-fives as they swarmed me. “You guys were awesome! Keep it up!”

“And smile, Dr. Warbles,” I added. “Smile! Look happy! Show them how to look happy, kids!” The kids swarmed Warren giving him a hard time trying to make the grouchy bastard look joyful. How could you not look joyful when you’re surrounded by kids in bee costumes?

Giddy, I tell you. I was giddy as all hell. I wanted to grab everyone and dance with them. I was a goddamn maniac. I could not be contained. I felt like this was life, man. I swear to God, this was life—what all that pain and suffering is all for. It’s this coat of ecstasy—of jubilation—of shining beauty. I felt like a goddamn gem. A glowing beam of joy. Heaven was here on Earth, and it was all for me! I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs and sing my tits off.

I’m getting a buddy! So many memories to come. It’s insane knowing that this is just the beginning and that this joy I feel is just going to explode into further bits of joy. A rain—a downpour of joy. Drenched in droplets of joy, joy, joy.

I turned to the kids, giving them all high-fives as they swarmed me. “You guys were awesome! Keep it up!”

Finally, I headed for the craft-services table, to grab some juice and snacks to keep up my energy. Before I could get to a carrot stick, Benji intercepted me.

“Hey, you got a minute?” he asked, his voice low.

“I’ve got plenty of minutes, my boy. I’m on the goddamn moon!”

I said, wiping my forehead with my sleeve. I should tone it down.

“Dana just called,” he said. “She went to drop off pastries for Sally, see how she was feeling, and... I don’t mean to ruffle any feathers, but—” He hesitated, like he didn’t want to finish the sentence.

“And what? Is Sal okay?” I asked, nervous.

“She saw her leaving with some guy.”

“What?”

“I don’t know if you had someone over or—“

“No... You sure she got the right house?”

He nodded.

I stared at the floor, trying to process what he’d just said, still perplexed. “Wait. What are you saying right now? What guy?”

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On a Need-to-Know Basis

I SAT ACROSS FROM JASPER IN THAT DINGY DINER. DINKY'S GREASY Spoon. I twirled a spoon in my coffee just to do something as I watched Jasper wolf down a dripping chili burger like a ravenous animal. I sipped my coffee.

I was shocked how handsome he looked in Tom's clothes. His father's clothes. I could see Tom in him.

"Are you sure you don't want to go someplace nicer?" I asked.

He didn't even look up from his chili burger. "What's nicer than this?"

He shoveled chili cheese fries down his gullet. I stole a fry. It was quiet.

"So," I said, breaking the silence, "what brings you here?"

Jasper swallowed and gave me a look. He did not seem too keen on answering. "How about we let me digest first? I'm quite famished."

"Yeah, of course," I said. I twiddled my thumbs and anxiously twirled my spoon in my coffee again, needing something to do.

"How about time travel then?" I asked. "How far's it go?"

He shrugged.

"I mean, if it really exists like you say it does, why hasn't

anyone done something like kill baby Hitler or teach him to be a decent human being?"

He washed his food, slurping his glass of Orange Fanta.

"It's heavily regulated. Think of it like a glorified field trip—chaperones watching your every move while you peruse Apple products in a mall from the 2000s."

"Hard to believe nothing's slipped through the cracks."

"Maybe something has," he said, mysteriously. "Maybe Jesus didn't die on the cross until someone interfered."

My eyes widened at the thought. I leaned in, intrigued.

"Honestly, I'm not the right person to answer these questions. This is actually my first time."

"No way."

He nodded, wiping his hands on a napkin. "All I know is, soon after time travel tourism was approved, it was banned. The usual B.S. about travelers futzing around, making unintentional changes to the future. Too much paranoia. Too much headache to keep them around. Time machines were impounded and decommissioned."

"Then how are you here?"

"Let's just say not every machine was accounted for. Stragglers remain. Unmarked, primitive machines built before time travel was open to the public."

"Sounds illegal."

"You could say that."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means exactly what it sounds like," he said.

"Jesus," I said, lowering my voice barely above a whisper. "Is that why you're here? Are you on the lam?"

"Relax," he said, shaking his head. "You don't raise a criminal. But I can't stay. Even if I wanted to."

He pulled up his sleeve to show me the scarred imprint on his

wrist. "This chip sends me back. In order to travel, you were required to get a chip installed. Like a passport. Made to ensure you don't overstay your welcome." He pulled his sleeve back, eating a fry. "When I reach the end of my designated time, this chip signal the machine to zap me back to my time."

"And when's that?" I asked, nervous to know when that might be.

"Tonight."

"Tonight?! So soon?" I couldn't believe it.

"Like I said, these chips were made, so we don't overstay our welcome," he said. "And honestly, it's all I could afford."

"Oh, wow. Well, then, are you gonna be okay when you go back?"

"Well, that's the thing. If everything goes according to plan, I won't have anywhere to return to."

"What do you mean?"

A silence followed as he set his burger down and wiped his mouth. Clearing his throat, he said, "I don't mean to offend you, but truth is: I traveled back in time to prevent my birth from happening."

I stared at him, the words not sinking in. "What?"

"So, I have to ask again," he said, his voice steady. "Are you pregnant?"

I shook my head, sullen. He sighed, relieved.

"But... why?" My voice cracked as I asked.

He didn't mince words. "I want to die on my own terms. In an instant. Like it never happened."

My face grew hot, my mind racing.

"I—I don't understand. Are you sick?"

"To put it simply, I've been here a long time, and... this just wasn't for me."

"What?" I asked. "Life?"

He nodded. A silence followed as I was trying to grasp what I was hearing. My voice started to crack. "Does this mean... Do I fail you as a mother?"

But he couldn't answer. The tears came before I could stop them, and everything burst out of me. I knew I was making a scene, but I couldn't help it.

"I knew I'd blow it. I fucking knew it."

"It's not you," he said quickly. "It's me."

"No shit!" I shot back. "I don't even know you!"

People were staring, but I didn't care. "Sorry, Jesus, I don't mean to shout. I know mental health is important, but— Fuck! How do you expect me to react when you tell me you want to kill yourself when I haven't even given birth to you?!"

"I didn't say I want to kill myself," he whispered. "I just don't want to be born."

"Stop! I shouldn't be knowing this!"

I buried my face in my hands. This was too much. Too much to process, too much to carry. "You shouldn't have told me this," I muttered, more to myself than to him.

"You're right," he said, softer now. "But let's take it down a notch. Need I remind you I'm from the future?"

I took a moment to breathe, calm myself down, and blew my nose. When the tension settled down a bit, he continued. "It's not as bad as it sounds."

"Oh, please."

"I'm giving you an opportunity to see how it ends, and believe me, you don't wanna raise a fuck-up like me."

"I don't need to hear this."

"I'm saving you from a lifetime of disappoint," he added.

I looked at him, disturbed by his comments, of the future I was being robbed of.

"And to help you, I have this," he said. He pulled out a fast-

food bag and slid it across the table. "This is for you." I opened it and saw a list—stocks, sports results, things I couldn't even begin to understand.

"Don't lose that. Ever." He glanced around, making sure no one was listening.

"That contains a list of stocks to trade and sport results to bet on. Your Lakers—"

"Wait, no, no. I can't take this."

"It's the least I can do. As your son, as my last offering, take it. Please."

I saw the desperation in his face. I took the brown paper list.

"This, too," he said.

He pulled out the pack of birth control pills I threw out. He slid them across the table in front of me like a peace offering.

"You do this for me, and you live the rest of your life never having to worry about money. So, how about it? Don't have me?"

I stared at the pack, conflicted. My head spun. I couldn't think. And then my phone rang. "Dancing Queen." Tom's ringtone. Our eyes lit up, panicked.

"Don't tell him I'm here. Please," he said, worry in his eyes.

I stepped outside the diner to answer Tom's call. I took a deep breath and cleared my throat. His voice was sharp, suspicious.

"Hello?" I said into the phone.

"Hey. How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"What are you up to?" he asked.

"Working," I said. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

There was a pause.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Are you feeling okay? From yesterday?"

"Oh, yeah," I forced a laugh. "I'm good. No need to worry. Just

a small fainting spell.”

“Great,” he said, letting a silence build. “So, everything’s good?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Good. I guess I’ll see you later then,” he said. “I love you.”

“Love you, too.” I was just about to end the call when Tom came back on.

“God damn it. Sal!” he shouted. “I’m really not trying to overreact here, where the hell are you?!”

“What do you mean? I’m home,” I said.

“Bullshit you’re home, I’m home!”

Fear struck me. I froze.

“I know you’re with some guy!”

“I’m not—“

“I’m staring at his clothes on the bathroom floor! Who is he?!”

There was fury in his voice, like I’ve never heard. I turned toward the diner where I found Jasper staring back at me with fear in his eyes.

“Sal!”

“He’s nobody,” I made up. “He’s— he’s family!” I said, truthfully.

//and why the hell does it smell like cologne throughout the house?”

“Oh, bull crap.”

“He is! You gotta believe me.”

“How can I when you just lied to me?”

“I know, and I’m sorry, but it’ll make sense. He’ll tell you everything.”

There was silence on the other line. I tried to call out to him, “Tom?” But the call ended. I stood there, clutching the phone to my ear, in complete disbelief.

I hurried back into the diner, grabbed my things and threw

cash on the table.

“We’re leaving,” I told Jasper.

“What happened?”

“He knows.”

“You told him—?!”

“He thinks I’m having an affair,” I said.

“With me?!” Jasper’s eyes nearly popped out of his head.

“Yes, with you!” I snapped.

“Oh, God. Did you tell him about me? Who I am?”

“No,” I said while checking my phone. “But you should figure out how you’re going to. Ride’s coming.”

“Wait, no, no. Cancel it.”

“You need to tell him.”

“No way.”

“Why not?”

“It’s gonna kill him! I know how much he was looking forward to having me.”

“Jesus, Jasper. You need to clear this up.”

“I’m not about to spend my last day showing my dad what a failure he raised.”

“Enough with the self-pity!”

I plopped down into my seat, massaging my head, completely depleted. “So, what, you expect me to tell my husband that his son from the future does not want to be born?”

“Or say you don’t want kids. I mean, do you?” he had the gall to say.

“No. We’re not doing that.”

“Look, I just figured I’d catch you alone, tell you what I had to say, and spend the rest of my time at the beach, maybe grab a drink,” he said before adding, “By the way, it would be really awesome if you could spare some moolah.”

My phone buzzed as I looked outside and saw our ride-share.

“Do we have a deal?” he asked.

I shifted my attention back to Jasper and the pack of birth control pills. I was too overwhelmed, though, and buried my head in my hands.

I looked at the pack of pills Jasper had slid across the table. My mind buzzed with too many thoughts, all colliding and ricocheting off each other. My throat felt tight, and before I could stop myself, I buried my face in my hands.

Jasper’s voice cut through my spiraling thoughts. “It’s for the best,” he said softly, like he was trying to convince me.

I raised my head and stared at him, my voice sharp with frustration. “You have the luxury of doing something people have dreamt about throughout human history—actual time travel—and this is what you do? Couldn’t you have done something, I don’t know, altruistic?”

“You see what a selfish piece of shit I am? You don’t want me born.”

“You don’t need to remind me,” I muttered, exhaustion creeping into my voice. I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. “Look, I know you’re struggling, but I can’t let you leave without Tom ever meeting you. I can’t do that to him.”

His jaw clenched. “Do it for your son.”

“Not until you see him,” I shot back.

The table fell into a tense silence, heavy with everything unsaid. And then, my phone buzzed again. It was quickly followed by the sharp honk of the ride-share car outside.

Jasper’s eyes darted to the window, and then back to me, his face pale. Time was running out.

“You’re the one who gets to go tomorrow. I’ll still be here.”

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Dr. Warbles' Advice

"I'M GONNA KILL THIS BASTARD!"