A hung silence filled the void between them. Matt shifted in his seat. He was uneasy. Her eyes were fixed on the exit. She must have been sitting that way for 30 seconds before he leaned forward, resting his hands on hers. She let go of the paper fortune she had been crumbling, and let her hands sit on the tablecloth instead. Her gaze dropped, then drifted to him. She realized that she was trying to break up with him – trying to find a reason. She had been scared, but as she looked at Matt in his wrinkled button-down, and his big green eyes, he looked genuine. Looking at him, she felt so calm, so comforted. Even if he didn’t mean it, she took her chances.

“Okay, I believe you,”

He smiled, “You sure Maddie?”

“Yeah, I am, because I love you too,”

Feeling her fiancé’s hand on hers as he got into the Uber reminded her of the warmth of that moment. She smiled at him again, and when he had gotten on his seat belt and noticed her, he smiled back, “You in a good mood?”

“No, but I’m glad you’re here,”

He nodded, “It’s good we’re doing this. I know it’s been a long time, but you’re much older now,”

“I know. You’re right,” She looked outside at the passing scenery. As some minutes passed it grew more familiar. “How’re you doing? Feeling alright for this?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah I think I feel fine. If I’m worried I guess it’s for you,” he squeezed her hand. He stopped himself short of making a joke about how expensive the uber ride was. Didn’t really feel right in front of the driver. Also if he did she’d probably offer to pay for part of it, and he was planning to take care of it. Soon, they were at the foot of a long circle drive, with a single house at the distant top.

While they were still a long way off, a figure stepped onto the porch. Maddie noticed this, figuring that her mother heard the car from in her house. The Uber stopped just before the porch, and the couple got out on either side, with Matt circling around. Hand on hips, Maddie’s mother waited for her daughter to come to her. Maddie stepped up the old wooden steps. Standing before her mother, wearing daffodil yellow flats, a bright sundress, and her hair’s curls over her shoulders, Maddie looked up, “Hi Mom. Thanks for having us over,”

She threw her arms around her daughter, and kissed her.

“Hi Rose, your house is beautiful.” Matt said, walking up behind them. Maddie stepped back from Rose, who turned toward him.

“Oh, Matt, welcome! Thank you for saying that; I’ll admit it hasn’t been so easy taking care of it all *alone*,” Matt’s fiancé rolled her eyes and stepped in the door, “Good timing by the way, the sauce is just about ready.”

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Dinner was shrimp alfredo, set in Rose’s dining room. Matt thought this was unexpectedly ornate. While her kitchen felt cramped even with just 3 people grabbing dishes and was floored with linoleum (‘easy to clean!’ Rose had noted), and Rose’s living room sported a well-loved recliner and sofa, their colors dull with overexposure to the sun, her dining room was elegant. Eight high-backed chairs sat comfortably around a long wooden table. A china cabinet sat on one end, and a window on the other let in golden sunlight that gave the crystal a warm sparkle. Their party of 3 sat around one end of the table. Rose’s usual eating table (a squat wooden piece in that small kitchen) wasn’t large enough.

“Maddie’s dad was in charge of this room. I compromised that he could have this room any way he wanted, if I could design the rest. It should’ve been obvious to me back then how different we were,” Rose scooped some white sauce over her noodles. Matt noticed his fiancé staring off out the window. Seeing the sunset’s rays reflecting off her eyes, he thought she must have taken after her dad. “Oh, I almost forgot the wine. Do you two have a color preference?”

This caught Maddie’s attention, “Actually, none for me, thanks though Mom.”

“Oh, okay, no worries darling. How ‘bout you Matt?”

“No, I’ll pass tonight too. Thank you for the offer though,” he responded.

“Oh alright, I guess I’ll stay sober too then.” Rose reached for her water.

Swallowing his bite, Matt asked, “So you got to design the majority of the house? Sounds like a good deal. Is that why you’ve stayed here all this time?”

“Oh, yes, that’s part of it. The area’s also nice. I get along well with most of the neighbors.” Rose went on the talk about the Beale’s, Robertson’s, and Adam’s. Anna Willis also lived alone, and had been in the area longer than her. Dave Greenlaw didn’t much like his wife, but they’d agreed to stay together until the kids were out, which they almost were. Rose liked the area because no one lived very far, but everyone preferred to live far enough away that you couldn’t see another house standing on your porch.

Maddie was considering walking to the kitchen for seconds when Matt finally saw an opportune end of that conversation, “Rose, thank you again for having us over. We’ve, um, actually been looking for a chance to come over,” Maddie cocked her head and smiled at her fiancé. She reached out a hand to grab his on the table, “so we could tell you in person that we’re, engaged.”

A look of surprise flashed over Rose, “Oh, congratulations you two. Oh my,” Her eyes glanced quickly at her daughter. Resting on a napkin, Maddie’s left hand realized its nakedness and hid itself under the table. Her right started to get clammy holding Matt’s. “Well I’m so happy for you! Oh, I am glad we used the nice room for dinner now.”

Matt’s hand held Maddie steady. She set her eyes on it, and took a slow breath “Thanks Mom. I wanted to tell you sooner, but I also wanted to tell you in person. I’m sorry it’s so late now, but I’m really glad tonight worked out,”

“Oh, darling,” Rose got out of her seat to hug her daughter, “you don’t have to be sorry about nothing now, I’m just so happy for you.” After a moment, Rose said, “And, lucky us, I think I have some dessert as decent celebration, Matt could you find it? In the fridge?”

“Sure thing,” he squeezed Maddie’s hand again, gathered their plates, and found a pudding pie Rose must’ve saved from some event.

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Their dessert conversation was filled with talk about Maddie and Matt’s relationship: how they met and how he popped the question. The young couple also admitted that, while a fun feature, they didn’t much care for the alliteration of their names and would try to avoid drawing attention to that whenever possible. Lying, Rose assured them that would get better with time. While Matt was washing dishes in the kitchen, the mother and daughter talked on the couch in the living room.

“Oh, and, you know, I do still have my wedding dress,” Rose noted.

Her daughter raised an eyebrow, “You can’t be serious. Why?”

“I don’t like to remember the man from that day, true, but I do like to think about the girl. It was a big moment for her,” Rose looked down at her hands on her lap, “You’re welcome to use it, if you’d like.”

Maddie put her arm around Rose, “Thank you, Mom, I really appreciate it. From what I remember though I’d have to hem it? You were taller than I am.”

“Yes, true, the alterations you’d have to do would be expensive, but cheaper than a new dress.”

“I suppose,” Maddie laughed, sitting back in the couch, “maybe weird to say, but I haven’t put much thought into my ideal white dress. I’ll probably check out new dresses though, to see if anything strikes me. You never know.”

“Honestly I didn’t know what I wanted either, I took a lot of help from my friends and my mom,” Rose’s gaze again fell, “How would you pay for a new dress, honey?”

Maddie raised an eyebrow at this, “Um, I don’t know,” she decided to take it as an innocent question, “I guess I’d need to go to the store to see prices first, to see if buying one is even reasonable. Like I said, I haven’t really put a lot of thought into that part.”

Rose nodded, “Yeah, smart,” she paused. She adjusted to sit up tall and face her daughter, while keeping her feet planted on the floor, “Honey, where’s your ring? You don’t have one, do you?”

Maddie pushed herself up. She looked over at her fiancé, but he couldn’t hear or see them while he was washing dishes. She slouched, while her eyes fell to her knees. “No. I don’t,” Looking back at Rose, Maddie could tell this topic wasn’t going to be dropped, “Well? It’s what you’d expect. But so what if I don’t like him because he’s got money?”

“Sure, so what,” Rose mimicked, “So, what do you like him for then?”

Maddie’s brow furrowed, “What’s this coming from? What’s wrong with him?”

“Oh come on, nothing’s wrong with anyone, but that doesn’t mean it works with any two people either. Let me tell you marriage may be easy, but making it last is hard.”

“Well I’m not going to end up like you. It’s going to be a *catholic* wedding. I’m taking a vow.”

“Maddie, for god’s sake the ceremony isn’t going to be what matters in 10 years. You’ve got to love each other,”

Maddie took a second to find the words. She closed her eyes, “I do love him. Sure, I’m not like him, but maybe someday that’ll change, and that’ll be for the better. But for now when he’s around me – you can’t imagine the comfort he gives me. Things seem quieter, and I can see so clearly. No one knows what love is exactly, but you have bet on something, right? And this is a good bet.”

Though she was proud of her response, Maddie sat hunched forward, clutching a couch pillow so tightly that her knuckles were losing their color. Rose maintained her posture, but her eyes narrowed. “Don’t say you don’t know what love is,” she said under her breath, as Matt was walking in.

He stood in the doorway, “I finished with the dishes, but wasn’t sure where they go… is everything alright?”

“Yes, it’s all fine, thank you for doing that,” Rose said, “Matt, has Maddie ever told you the story of her first crush?”

Alarmed, Matt set a towel back down on the counter, “Um, I don’t know. She’s told me about some guys from high school, but I don’t know if any of them were the first.”

“I guess she hasn’t then, because Maddie found her first love early. She was in second grade when she started playing with a boy named Nick after school,” Rose got up and walked to the pitch black window. Matt quickly replaced her on the couch. He tried to exchange a worried look with Maddie, but she didn’t raise her face, “She’d sit at the window, looking for his bike at the foot of our drive, then she’d take hers out. They’d stay out the whole afternoon, sometimes hardly making it back before our streetlights came on,” Rose turned from the window, and Matt returned her look, politely following the story, “I wondered what they were up to, but didn’t bother with it much; this was happening shortly before I filed for my divorce. If my child was out of the house and happy, that was probably the best place for her to be. Besides, I knew the parents, and I knew my girl; she could handle herself. And it turns out I was right! One day, this Nick character got too frisky, and Maddie knocked his lights out,” Maddie reached for Matt’s hand, “He spent that night in the hospital recovering from the whupping he got,” Maddie felt Matt’s interest in the story shift from polite to serious, but she also felt warmth returning to her hands, “She visited him the next morning, but that ended their relationship pretty quick,” Maddie heard her mom chuckle, and her fiancé start to tense, but she just lifted her gaze and stared straight ahead of her, “anyways, whenever I think of that story, I smile a little. It reassures me that my girl knows good from bad, and will stand up for herself when she needs to. That’s why I love her.”

*That lying bitch.*

Maddie sprang up, threw down Matt’s hand with her right hand then landed a punch with her left. Rose staggered. Her right hand struck. Rose’s shoulder hit the recliner as she fell. “You lying bitch!”. Two more blows landed. Blood stained the carpet. Seeing this, Maddie’s fists skipped a beat, and they trembled.

“Let’s go,” She picked up her phone. Two steps toward her man. She held out her hand. But Matt did not grab it. Hands over face. He sat back in the corner of the couch, and his once pretty green were eyes afraid. ‘Oh, no’ Maddie breathed, and her trembling worsened.

Leave the house. 10 quick steps. Step out on the porch. Reach for phone. But she was trembling too badly to use it. She paused, and turned as she heard footsteps behind her, “Matt, I’m so sorry, but please, help…”

*Bang*. The door slammed. *Clank*. The bolt jumped. *Thud*. Her fist pounded wood. She turned, leaned back against the door, and slid down until her knees were at her head. Tears welled in her, and she was sniffling.

The night was silent, but she expected she’d hear sirens before long. Maybe the police, maybe just an ambulance. But either way someone with questions. She stood, and ran into the night.

Standing there, Maddie had spent her violent anger. She didn’t feel anxious now, just level-headed, “Consider yourself lucky I don’t have a ring,” Maddie saw though that the carpet was starting to get stained red where Rose had hit the recliner. At this she took a step back, and her eyes widened. She reached a hand out to her fiancé, “could we go?” Maddie’s breath quickened, and her hands started trembling.

Maddie’s hand remained empty though. She turned, and saw a figure pushed back in the corner of the couch. Two hands covered a face, open palms facing her. The green eyes behind them were afraid. Maddie’s breath quickened, and she choked out an ‘oh no’ as she stepped away. She looked back at Rose, who hadn’t moved.

Maddie ran out the door into the night, but stopped on the porch when she looked out at the darkness. Hearing slow footsteps behind her, she turned. Matt was walking toward her, “Matt, I’m so sorry, but please, I really need you now,” *Bang, clank!* The door slammed shut, and the bolt followed as fast as Matt could. Maddie pounded on the door, “Matt!”

NOTES:

I think this story will work better framed. That will give the reader someplace to jump back out to when Maddie starts to lose them. I’m thinking Maddie telling the story to someone, maybe that’s because that’s how Hallucinogenics and Cringe are framed. I’m thinking she’s telling the story to Nick, but maybe it’s a friend of her. I like Nick though, because he’ll have and offbeat relationship to her story, like he weirdly knows what’s going on. Like he knows the future, but he’s forgotten? Like he’s got gut feelings about the future, and we get the story because he wants to confirm those gut feelings. I’m going to start a new document though, because I may want to keep this for posterity’s sake.

A shiver went down Maddie’s spine, and she

looked at her and listened to the story. He figured that if he couldn’t reach Maddie, the next best thing was to be polite to Rose

Rose was sitting up straight on the couch. Both feet planted on the floor, but she was facing her daughter. Maddie sat hunched over her knees, clutching a pillow tightly so that her knuckles were getting white. Rose pursed her lips, “Don’t say you don’t know what love is,” she said under her breath, as Nick was walking in.

Maddie’s brow furrowed. She opened her mouth, then closed it. The ‘rings-as-an-antiquated-tradition’ argument worked fine on her friends, but she couldn’t pull it off with her mom. She took a breath too, “Well, it’s what you’d guess. He doesn’t really have the money. And I know, you and dad were both pretty well set before you got started, but so what, right? It shouldn’t matter so much.”

“No, and clearly money doesn’t guarantee a happy marriage, but it’s difficult no matter what. We thought we were giving it the best shot we could. Do you really think this will work out? That it could last?”

“Yeah. Of course I do,” Maddie’s heart quickened, and her hand was squeezing a couch pillow. Her fiancé was in the next room but couldn’t hear her over the sound of the sink, “It’s not going to be like yours Mom, it’s going to be a *catholic* wedding. I’m taking a vow.”

“Oh really? Well, do you think those words will be worth much if you realize one day that you don’t really have much in common anyway?”

Maddie’s hand was starting to get clammy, and she paused before she responded. “Okay, sure, we seem different. But I like the ways he’s different from me, I’d like to be like that. And you never get to be sure before making a decision like this anyway, right? You can only go on what you know. And I know that everytime he holds me, my mind quiets. I feel comfortable, and it’s like I can focus better. Maybe

Dinner was shrimp alfredo. Three plates, forks, and spoons were set around one end of Rose’s dining room table. Matt and Maddie took opposite sides of the table, and when her mother entered with the entrée, she took the end of the table between them. She left the noodles on the table, saying, “Feel free to help yourself to more, and don’t feel bad adding seasonings,” pushing salt and pepper their way, “I can never tell how it will turn out.”

Dinner was shrimp alfredo. Rose remembered it was a favorite of her daughter’s. Maddie remembered her mother wasn’t very good at cooking it.

That house was quite a drive for the Uber, but Matt was expecting an expensive ride. Once there, he took in the house for a moment.

As Maddie was talking and subconsciously looking for an exit, Nick put his hands on hers. She let go of the paper fortune she had been crumbling, and let her hands sit on the tablecloth instead, with his on top. Realizing she was staring at the door, she dropped her gaze, and her eyes drifted toward her man. She was about to break up with him, and that is what really struck her. Maddie had been trying to tell Nick why she thought he didn’t really love him, but really she was trying to find a reason. She was scared, but then she wasn’t. Looking at Matt, she felt so calm, so comforted. He meant it. Even if he didn’t, she took her chances.

“Okay. I believe you,”

He smiled, “You sure?”

“Yeah Matt, because I love you,”

They were at a dinner Matt had planned a few weeks ago; he’d been talking about it longer than that though. It was Maddie’s first time trying sushi. She used a fork at first, but, after some of Matt’s prodding, later found out that chopsticks were even more difficult than she thought. Matt laughed as Maddie gave up, accidently dropping one on the floor.

“Ugh, forget it, they’re trash anyways. And you’re paying enough that they won’t mind picking up a twig.” Maddie picked up her fork again and tried to stab the roll, which fell apart