

## Only If She Does

Grace laughed to herself.

The boy kept sneaking looks at the skinny girl with long sandy hair. He had a dewy eyed look, like the young military privates Grace used to dance for.

He tried to look busy while his laundry dried.

The machines lining the walls whirred like heavy spinning clocks, and people hung suspended in time, sitting at the gray metal tables and chairs, waiting for their sheets and socks to dry.

Except for *this* boy, falling in love with *that* girl.

The kid looked 18, and the girl looked like life was exhausting her. Grace knew that tired look from the mirror.

The boy got up when his clothes fell still to the bottom of the washer. He pulled a metal cart from under one of the gray, plastic folding tables, and pushed it to his washer. The wheels squeaked as he took the long way through the room to walk near the girl.

He pushed his clothes over to the dryer and began digging through his pockets for quarters.

Grace watched him cross again in front of the girl's path and walk to the back of the laundromat.

Grace leaned her elbow on the counter watching him pull a 10 out of his pocket. "Can I get a roll of quarters?" he asked.

Grace took his money and exchanged it in the till. She nodded her head at the girl. "She's pretty, huh?"

"Who? I don't know what you're talking about." The boy looked like his face caught fire.

"Take a breath, kid. Jesus." Grace looked at him as he took the quarters.

"Nothing wrong with thinking a girl is pretty. Getting worked up about it doing laundry though, might not help your cause." Grace chuckled, and considered the boy. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm just giving you a hard time. What's your name?"

"Eli," he said, pocketing the quarters.

"You trying to get in her pants or something?"

"No." His voice startled people awake from their waiting. "It's not like that."

“But you like her?”

He looked down at his shoes. “That’s an understatement.” He looked up at Grace.

For a moment, she saw a quiet kindness in his gray eyes, like a gold fleck that goes unnoticed unless someone looks closely. He looked so uncorrupted by life she loved him like a memory.

“You saying you love her?”

Eli nodded. “Since third grade.”

Eli reminded her of a lover she’d had at 22. Back then George had been a smart kid from up at the college. He wrote her a love note. She’d laughed at first, but eventually accepted his virginity like a gift. It hadn’t been great, but he’d been sweet and gentle.

“So what are you doing at a laundromat, anyhow? Don’t you have a mama back home to do it for you? Aren’t you in school?”

“Graduated last year. I live with my grandma. I was going to go to college this year, but she got sick, so I’m taking care of her now.”

“Sick, huh? Well that’s awful noble of you.” And rare. Her memory of George resurfaced next to memories of men that came after.

“But it’s good, you know. I heard Lynn was sticking around town, too, but now that I think about it,” he said, cocking his head to the side. “She’s been living on her own for years.”

He put his hands in his pockets. “Anyway, we can’t do laundry at home - no washer or dryer - but I heard Lynn comes here, so --.”

“Lynn is that pretty one over there?” When Eli said yes, Grace nodded her head. “Well, we need to get her to notice you then. You ever tried talking to her before?”

“Well, no, but--”

“How the hell are you gonna be with her if you can’t talk?”

“I just haven’t gotten the chance. I’ve been waiting for the right time.”

“Eli, when you get to be my age, you start to thinking that your youth should have been spent doing, not waiting. You’re a handsome kid. You got nothing to worry about.” Grace pointed her finger toward the wall of dryers. “Now get over there, put your damn laundry in the dryer, and say hi to the girl.”

“But--”

“Don’t give me any of your excuses. Girls don’t like a coward, so if you want a chance with this girl, your bravery needs to start now. Go.”

Grace’s knee bounced up and down while she sat, remembering the last time she’d seen George, decades ago.

Eli walked over to his clothes, and as he passed Lynn he croaked out a “hello.” The girl tucked her hair behind her ear and smiled back before returning to her laundry. He put the quarters in the dryer and started it. He turned around as she picked up her basket and walked toward the door.

After Lynn left, Grace patted Eli on the back as he held his head in his hands. “You need to write her a love note.”

Eli looked up. “A what?”

“Don’t act stupid. A love note. You got yourself so wound up over this girl, so tell her how you feel in a letter. Tell her she's pretty, or nice, or -” she paused a moment, “tell her she looks like a butterfly when she dances. That makes a girl feel right special.”

She pushed in a few chairs under the tables, straightening up the waiting area. “Now don’t tell me no. Just do it, and bring it in next time. But don’t say that butterfly bit.” She paused.

“Only if she does.”

—

A week later Eli walked in.

“Did you write it?”

He handed her a small triangle, made from a folded piece of paper.

“What the hell is this?” She saw “Lynn” written on the front.

“It’s a love note, just like you said.”

“And you decided to learn origami as a symbol of your love too? How the hell is she supposed to open this thing?”

Eli pulled back a flap that had been tucked into a slantwise seam, and gently unfolded the piece of paper. Grace saw blue handwriting filling the page, so neat and precise that each letter was unmistakable. Before she could read what it said, Eli folded it back up.

“What happened to a piece of paper and an envelope?”

“Will you keep it and give it to her when you see her? I don’t know when she comes here and it’s best if I’m not here when you do. I don’t want to see her face when she reads it. What if she thinks -”

“I’ll give it to her, but on one condition. You gotta talk to her first. An actual talk. A conversation. Not this hi and then panic crap.”

“But, when?”

“Next time you see her.”

“Yea, but, I don’t know when that will be. For all I know I might not see her the rest of summer.”

Grace looked up when the bell on the door rang. “You better put on your big boy panties, Eli. Might be sooner than you think.”

He looked and saw Lynn walk in with her hamper of clothes. She walked to the wall of washers and started her load and sat down in the waiting area, reading the newspaper left on the table.

“I can’t do it now. Are you kidding me?! I’m not ready. I don’t know what to say. What do you say to someone like her?”

“It’s not damn rocket science, Christ. Hey. How are ya? How are your folks? What’s happening in the paper? Just talk. She’s a person like anyone else. You talk to me. Talk to her.”

“But I’m not in love with you.”

Grace flinched. “No shit, I could be your damn grandma. Look, you got her to smile last time. That’s a good sign. Next step is talking. That, or I’m not delivering your love triangle.” Grace nodded her head toward Lynn. “Look, she just put her clothes in. You got about an hour to work up the nerve. I’ll be in the back.”

Grace sat in her chair and watched Eli take a breath, then put his clothes in a machine, piece by piece.

George used to come into the diner every night and order a slice of apple pie and a glass of milk, and eat it bite by bite, reading his college books. She would ask him what he was reading to pass

the time. Usually she had no idea what he was talking about, but she liked feeling his eyes on her when she worked. After closing, he put quarters in the jukebox to watch her dance. He would ask her what song she wanted to hear, even though it was the same every time.

She watched Eli sit down at a table near Lynn's. Just relax, kid. He took a breath. She wanted to go over there, help break the ice, but he had to learn to do it, if not for Lynn . . . No. She needed it to be for Lynn.

The first time George had come into the diner, he sat at a chair at the counter. Each time she came over to take his order, he'd ask for another minute hiding behind his menu until finally, an hour later, asked for pie.

God, just talk already. Her knee bounced up and down as she watched the two. She saw Eli moving around, opening his mouth, just to close it again.

"You ever read the funnies?" Lynn asked.

"The funnies? Uh, yea. Sometimes. Yea I do, sometimes." Eli shifted his chair closer to Lynn's.

The phone rang and Grace got up to answer it. By the time she hung up, their laundry was tumbling in the dryers and they were talking at the same table together.

The phone rang again. “God dammit. Today of all days. Gotta be shitting me. Hello, this is Grace.” As she took the call she tried to sneak looks at Eli and Lynn.

They took their clothes out of the dryers and rolled their carts over to the folding tables.

They stood on opposite sides, sorting their clothes. Eli was trying to keep the smile off his face, and kept sneaking looks up at her, and quickly looking down at his clothes when her eyes met his.

“What are you doing the rest of the day?”

Lynn tucked her hair behind her ear. “I don’t know yet.”

“Well, I was thinking it would be cool to maybe, you know, after we’re done folding our --” he stopped when he saw her pick up a pair of boxers.

“Our clothes?” she asked smiling at him as she folded a faded blue t-shirt, putting it in a stack on top of the boxers.

Grace watched Eli’s face turn red. No, no, no.

“Maybe we could what?” said Lynn, starting a separate pile of her own clothes.

“Ya, know. I just remembered. I was supposed to drive my grandma somewhere.” He started grabbing loose socks from the table.

“What? Oh, yea. Of course. I get it.” Lynn’s eyes dropped down and settled on her laundry, while Eli used an arm to shovel all his clothes straight into the hamper.

“I’m sorry, I gotta go.”

Lynn nodded, not raising her eyes. She stood with her hands gripping the camisole in her hands, her knuckles turning white.

Grace watched as Eli hurried out. The bell jingled as he left.

Lynn stood immobile for minutes, her hands gripping the laundry.

Grace waited, hoping Eli would come back, but he didn’t. She tapped her fingers over and over on the countertop. She got up and walked to Lynn.

“Hey. Look, I know you don’t know me, but I’m a friend of Eli’s. He wanted me to give you this.”

Lynn flinched at Grace's voice. She slowly reached for the paper triangle and her sleeve slipped down. Her thin arm made the flannel shirt look even bigger on her. The bell rang as someone else left and they were alone in the laundromat.

Grace saw the stack of men's clothes. "I reckon by the looks of it, you've got some assholes in your life, making you do their damn laundry."

"Oh, no," Lynn said slowly. "These are my brother's." She tugged at the sleeve of her shirt. "He's living at my place right now. He's working today so I'm washing our stuff."

"Your place? Aren't you a little young to be on your own?" Lynn's body tensed. Her fingers on the triangle turned white as she squeezed.

"I've been living alone for awhile," she said, gazing out the window. "I moved out of my Dad's house after he . . ." Her voice trailed and she tucked her hair behind her ear. "Well, anyway, my brother was finally old enough to leave too. My Dad's a drunk." Her voice hushed. "He can't help a lot of things."

She set the triangle on the table and started folding again. Her face grew tired, as if all the sleep in the world couldn't help.

Grace remembered when she had looked like that. After the diner with George, she'd started dancing at night to make more money. She lived that life for years, until late, after a bad night, she walked down the dark streets alone on her way home, with a black eye and busted lip, her clothes torn to hell.

The next morning, she leaned in close to the mirror to look at the black eye. She touched her lip with her finger. She heaved a sigh into the mirror and then stood up, raised her chin and pushed her shoulders back.

Grace paused, and felt herself grow quiet. "I know Eli's kinda . . . unique, and awful nervous, but he loves you something terrible."

Lynn tucked her hair behind her ear. "Eli is great," she said, looking down at the triangle. "He's too good for someone like me." Her eyes glazed.

Grace touched her arm. "Your old man teach you that?"

Lynn looked at her, and Grace saw her chin tremble.

"Lynn, I --"

Grace saw the quiet tears, and moved to wrap her arms around her.

“You’re good enough if you say you are baby” Grace whispered. “Lord knows Eli is head over heels thinking you’re good enough, but that don’t mean shit if you don’t.”

Lynn’s gaze was down at her feet, but she nodded.

“Now look,” Grace held Lynn’s head in her hands. “Eli isn’t gonna fix your son-of-a-bitch dad but let me tell you. I lost my own Eli before I realized I was worth a damn.”

Lynn wiped her face with her sleeve.

“His name was George and he loved me crazy but I wouldn’t ever let me believe it.” Grace patted Lynn on the back. “After I left him, it took one hell of a beating for me to stand up straight for myself. I haven’t met another man like George until Eli walked in here.”

Grace saw a half smile creep onto Lynn’s face.

When the phone rang, Grace went to the back. From her chair, she saw Lynn unfold the triangle, tucking her hair behind her ear as she read the blue ink.

She left holding her hamper to her hip with one hand, rereading the letter with the other, her face the youngest Grace had seen it.

“See you next week.” The bell jingled as Lynn pushed the door with her backside and left.

Grace walked to the door and locked it, all alone in the laundromat. She closed the curtains on the front window and straightened up a few chairs.

In the back, she thumbed through her vinyl collection, sitting in a wooden crate beside her record player. She pulled out the one George had given her and brushed the dust off the jacket. Her fingers ran over the note etched on the front. Gracie, dance like a butterfly.

She set the needle on the record and closed her eyes. The music flowed like warmth around her.

The melody swirled in her hips, and her feet were light on the linoleum. She twirled, her arms reaching high overhead and stretching to the sides like wings. She tossed her head back, and let her hair brush her shoulders.

For the first time, she danced for herself.