

If There's Anything I Can Do

“Padparadscha. It's lovely, isn't it?” Emily lifted the necklace gingerly from the case and sat it on a velvet mat in front of the woman. “A very rare sapphire, and one of my favorites. Such a treasure, one of its size.” Her heart wasn't really in it – her boyfriend, Eric, had left her three days before.

The woman frowned, her tanned skin creasing around her eyes. “Sapphire?” She held the necklace on the knuckles of her outstretched hands, as if any moment she was going to start playing cat's cradle, looping the chain around her fingers with her long, pointed nails. Emily tried to smile.

“Sapphire, yes. Not all sapphires are blue. In fact, rubies and sapphires are the same stone, just in different colors.” Emily felt an elbow in her back; she turned to see Julie striding by to the corner cases, her head tilted to reveal a bemused grin. Emily always got the ignorant and skeptical clients, the ones who insulted fancy yellow diamonds as “tinted” or spilled a strand of pearls onto the floor and blamed poor workmanship. “Let's go early,” Julie mouthed when she caught Emily's eye.

The woman had moved to squinting at the pendant, holding it firmly between thumb and forefinger, turning it in the light. The facets sparkled with fiery orange brilliance. “How you say it again?”

“Padparadscha.” The woman had a brusque accent, from somewhere in Europe, Emily guessed, but so many people at the auctions were from someplace other than Los Angeles. Emily herself was from Surrey; Jean-Renaud was Parisian. Even Julie, now bending to grab her lip gloss from her purse – tucked in the compartment under the case with Liberace’s bat rings – was from Minnesota of the long and rounded “o.”

It was after four in the afternoon and the woman scowling at the padparadscha was the only prospective bidder at the viewing for the upcoming auction. Emily shifted her weight in her heels. The day had been unforgiving, from the marble floors to the slow hours of one or two clients, drifting, peering, smudging her jeweler’s loupe with their fingers and mascara. And all the while she was surrounded by rings, engagement rings with bright, clear diamonds – glittering prisms crying out to be noticed.

She had fantasized about it sometimes: Eric, showing up unexpectedly at a viewing. It would be a day much busier than this, and she in her exhaustion would not even see at first that it was him until his voice – asking to see an art deco estate piece with a flawless old European-cut diamond – would stop her. She would look up from the case, too surprised to smile. He would pretend not to know her, his eyes not betraying so much as a knowing twinkle as he watched her lift the ring out of the case and stare at him amazed. He would hold it at first, his soft lips pursed in concentration, and then ask – *would she be so kind as to model it for him?* – still pretending they were strangers. She would be too dumbstruck to even speak. But she would slide it gently on her finger,

looking back at him with a tremble in her mouth and he would be her Eric, finally smiling, finally allowing her tears and showing a few in his own eyes.

This was definitely never happening, since he had moved out. Three years she had waited for a moment like that, and for three years he had gone on spending time and money on electronics, leather sofas, guitars in the apartment they shared. She had never let herself accept that he wasn't even thinking about such moments – that they had an apartment and a shared group of friends, but he wasn't committed to a future together. She knew that now.

It was silly to think Eric would have come to a viewing. He hadn't even come in the building on days they'd met for lunch, preferring to ring her from his cell phone outside the arched doorway into Christie's, or planning ahead to meet her at the grill down the street. She should have known right then: A man who won't even cross the threshold into your workplace isn't serious about you. She would have to settle for hindsight and the small distraction of selling Penny Marshall's jade brooch.

The woman dropped the necklace without ceremony onto the velvet mat. She dug into the sale catalog that sat on the counter, flipping pages with tedious rhythm. Emily carefully rearranged the padparadscha on its form in the case, the pendant a burning teardrop in her hands.

"Where is this one?" The woman pointed to a picture in the catalog of a striking necklace with branches of diamonds that fanned out to the wearer's shoulders.

"Ah, that one. It's right down in that corner case. Julie will be able to help you." Emily pointed to Julie, who had put Liberace's bat ring on her thumb and was making

Jean-Renaud nervous as she inched it toward him across the glass. Emily couldn't remember when things had been this slow.

"It's the economy," Jean-Renaud had said at eleven, when the place had been empty for a full twenty minutes. "When the economy is slow, jewelry is slow." He had smoothed his goatee pensively with his fingers. "If you need to leave early..."

"No, not at all," Emily had quickly assured him. The last thing she wanted was more time at home to look at all the empty places where Eric and his leather sofas and electronics had been. Jean-Renaud had smiled and walked back to his usual spot by the Cartier watches. He was there now, standing out in front of the case, his hands clasped behind his back, grinning like a maitre d' at the door in case someone should come in. He loved it when they had Cartier watches; he would take them out of the case and drape them across his wrist, his quick Parisian voice whisking the name into two syllables: *Cahr-tyeh*, the "r" folded into the "t" before it really began.

The woman had the diamond necklace wrapped around her throat and was standing in front of one of the mirrors, teasing up strands of her hair. Julie was looking in Emily's direction; Emily tried not to make eye contact in case she might give in to a laugh. Julie had been trying to cheer her up all day by doing Liberace impressions and making faces when the clients weren't looking.

"This necklace is the only one like it?" the woman asked, and Emily was able to release her bite on her lip and let out a smile.

"We believe so," she heard Julie say. "It's been dated to the 1890s; it's not likely that another one like it would have survived. It's delicate."

"I saw one in Butterfield's, last year."

“One similar.”

“No, the same.”

“I don’t think.”

“I have the catalog. I bring it to you. The very same.”

Jean-Renaud was quickly beside the woman, his hand clasping her elbow as if they were old friends. “It looks very beautiful on you,” he said, as if he hadn’t heard the woman raise her voice or what she had said.

“This necklace was in Butterfield’s,” the woman began, and Julie slipped away carefully as Jean-Renaud began his assurances.

“What a trip,” Julie muttered from the corner of her mouth, pulling out the Windex and a roll of paper towels from the compartment beneath the paparadscha.

“So sulky,” Emily agreed.

“You watch; she’ll be back here tomorrow with her husband, pointing to what she wants.”

“And he’ll be not a day under eighty-three.” Emily took a paper towel from Julie and began scrubbing at the glass.

“See? Now there’s the cynical, jaded Emily I know and love.”

“Oh, please, I’m all the more cynical and jaded.”

Julie spritzed Windex on the case with Penny Marshall’s brooch beside an autographed picture. “Just as long as you’re not gloomy and blue.”

“Not too.” Emily didn’t sound convincing, even to herself.

Julie stopped, Windex bottle on hip. “Come on, Emily. You’re so much better off.”

“I know,” Emily sighed. She found the wastebasket under the Penny Marshall case and tossed her paper towel.

“Why don’t you come over for dinner tonight. I just went to the store and I’m fully stocked.”

“That’s alright.”

“No, c’mon. It’ll be fun. We can stuff ourselves and watch the new *Sex and the City*.”

“Really, Julie.”

“Come on.” Julie’s eyebrows bent with frustration. She had an owlish look about her, Emily thought: bushy brows and a short, straight nose. Eric had said once that all women looked like either birds or horses. Emily should have been more appalled at the time; instead, she found herself classifying women this way herself sometimes.

“All right, I’ll come,” she said, partly out of guilt.

The scowling woman was handing the necklace back to Jean-Renaud. “Thank you,” Emily heard her say as she turned and strode out the door. She did not thank Emily or Julie.

Not a single client came in after that, and Jean-Renaud sent them home at quarter to six. Emily followed Julie in her own car down to Julie’s house in Carthay Circle. It was a sweet, palm-shaded bungalow wedged into the middle of a long block just south of Wilshire, complete with speed bumps to slow the miles of surrounding traffic. Emily couldn’t afford a house in L.A. on her salary and she had been amazed the first time she saw where Julie lived. Anywhere else it might have been an average home, but if you could own a two-bedroom bungalow in your thirties in Los Angeles, you had to have

money. It seemed that all the Americans who worked at Christie's came from money, that it was their qualifying feature for employment. You either had to have money or be European, which suggested money to the clientele.

Julie made them a quick dinner of salad with rotisserie chicken from her fridge, and poured them each a generous glass of pinot grigio. The wine was sweeter than Emily liked, but it was cold and made her head buzzy and light. They sat in Julie's kitchen, talking about work and how slow it had been, how the few visitors to the jewelry viewing had been so critical.

"I swear, I don't think I saw a smile all day," Julie said, pouring them each another glass. "How can so much gorgeous jewelry make people so unhappy?"

"Because it's going to cost them so much to bid on it," Emily suggested, and Julie waved her off.

"I think they secretly find it all very boring," Julie said.

Emily thought of the woman scowling at the padparascha. "Maybe not so secretly," she added, and she and Julie laughed again.

Emily was feeling lightheaded from the wine and dizzy from so much talk that avoided mention of her breakup. It felt taxing but good, like running a few miles on the treadmill. "This was nice," she said, thinking she should sober up enough to drive home.

"Wait! My lemons are just out," Julie said excitedly, pulling her to her feet. She led Emily through the sliding doors into the back yard. "We'll have to have tea with fresh lemons! It'll feel like home." Emily didn't have the heart to tell her she took her tea with cream; instead, she smiled weakly and stood where she could admire the tree.

"You've got lots of them," she remarked.

Julie put a hand on her shoulder and motioned to a wrought-iron lawn chair. “Sit. Relax. I’ll go make some tea.”

Emily sat. The sun was beginning to set behind the lemon tree, and the evening birds were singing softly. It would be dark soon, and she would have to drive back to her apartment and sit there alone, with the space where the couch had been and the space in her chest. She turned her ankles in small circles against the grass.

“Nice and hot.” Julie came back out with a tray, sitting it on the table beside Emily.

“Thank you,” Emily said. “For all of this. I really needed some time to be distracted from everything.”

“I’m so glad you could come,” Julie said. “You really need to go out and forget all about him.”

Emily stared at the steam escaping from her tea into the air, melting away. “My mother said this is what I get for living with someone. That I spent four years of my life with someone, three years living together, with nothing to show for it. She said that if we’d married, at least I would be able to say, *I was married once*. But now I’ve got nothing.”

“Oh, come on.” Julie threw her head back with a laugh. “Then you’d just have a bunch of legal crap to deal with now, on top of everything.”

“Maybe.”

Julie sat beside her, clasping her warm hand over Emily’s. “You know it’s not true, Em.”

“But it’s sort of a badge of war, isn’t it,” Emily said, gazing out across the grass and the trees. How amazing was it to be in such lushness in Los Angeles? Julie had to have sprinklers in her garden. Emily’s apartment had only a paved lot for parking in the back. “Divorce, I mean. Being able to say *I was married once*. It makes it more real than *I lived with someone*.”

“More real?” Julie took a sip of her tea, considering.

“Without it, no one knows what I had,” Emily said softly, but even as she said it, it didn’t feel right. What was it she’d had, exactly? How much of it had only been meaningful to her?

“Emily.” Julie’s owlish eyes softened, shadows of the palm trees crossing her face. “You may not want to hear this but, you deserved better.”

Emily nodded, and the rational part of her knew this was true – was starting to see it, finally. But the rational part of her seemed so small compared to the part that was hurt and lost and lonely. “I just... miss him,” she admitted. “I don’t know how to stop missing him.” She began to wipe a tear from her cheek, and Julie reached over and grabbed it first.

“He never appreciated you, Emily,” Julie said gently, and Emily nodded and sniffed at the same time.

“Maybe I’m not that... easy to appreciate,” she said, looking down at her feet in the grass.

Julie looked puzzled. “What? No. Em.” she set her tea down and took Emily’s hand. “It wasn’t you. That time he came to the polo match and looked at his phone the whole time?”

Emily remembered. About a year ago, there had been a charity polo game at Will Rogers Park in the Palisades, and HR had given her and Julie tickets. Julie had brought a friend, Cassie, who was in town from Minneapolis, and Emily had come with Eric. It was a breezy, sunny day with a perfect blue sky. Waiters had walked around with trays of champagne as the guests stood at the edge of the pitch and cheered on the match, the majestic horses cantering across the grass with their coats glossy in the sun. Emily felt like she was in a movie, or a book like *The Great Gatsby*, standing there with her champagne flute as the players rode by.

Eric had nodded at Julie and Cassie, but he didn't really talk to them. He had his phone in one hand, scrolling with his thumb, a glass of champagne in the other. When it came time to "stomp the divots," the three women had all walked out onto the pitch to do their part, laughing as they kicked the tufts of upturned grass back into place.

"You're English, you must've done this before," Julie said as her toe reached for a mound of grass beside a bare spot left by a polo mallet.

"No, I swear," Emily laughed, "My family is not of the polo watching variety." Eric had stayed on the sidelines, reading something on his phone. "I think I'm better at making divots than stomping them. I'm wearing heels!" Emily had joked as she, Julie and Cassie walked back.

She remembered Eric had looked up for a moment. Maybe he had smiled at her? Emily couldn't remember. She had remembered that day as a lot of fun, but thinking of it from Julie's perspective, she could see where her opinion of Eric had come from.

"It wasn't you," Julie repeated, looking her in the eye.

"Thanks," Emily said. "You've been such a help. I mean it."

“If there’s anything I can do. Anything,” Julie said, her hand tight on Emily’s.

“Tell me your secret,” Emily joked, and Julie released her hand. “I mean, you seem to know from the first date to write someone off.” In the four years they had worked together, Julie had told her of many dates, but none of them were what she’d called “keepers.”

“I’m not much better,” Julie admitted.

“But you haven’t wasted years of your life in a relationship that wasn’t going anywhere,” Emily said, and Julie laughed a little. “Right?”

“Not exactly,” Julie said, taking a sip of her tea. Emily looked at her friend expectantly, but Julie set her teacup down and shrugged. “But it’s not that much fun to go on first dates and know you’re not interested in a second, every time.”

Emily reached across and squeezed Julie’s shoulder. “You’ll find someone,” she said reassuringly. “Someone worthy.”

Julie laughed at the way Emily emphasized “worthy,” as Emily had hoped she would. She took another sip of tea, considering, then rested her hands in her lap. “It’s not that,” she said after a pause.

“Not what?” Emily asked.

“Maybe I am in love,” Julie said after a moment. “Maybe I’ve also been hoping and waiting, and nothing is ever going to happen.”

“You never told me there was someone…” Emily began, and then her eyes met Julie’s. Her friend’s face wore a sad, confessional smile. “You mean—” Emily began, and Julie leaned in and kissed her. It took Emily by surprise, a soft and cautious mouth, not Eric’s, firm and searching.

In one quick movement, Emily pulled away, jumping from her chair, his head still dizzy from the wine. “Julie, I—”

“Don’t say anything.” Julie’s voice was stern but betrayed the tremor of a tear. “Just don’t.”

Emily held her hand on the back of her chair to steady herself. The wrought iron of the chair was cold, unyielding in her grip. What could she say? That she loved her dearly, but as a friend? Was she going to lose Eric and Julie all in one week? “I…” she began feebly.

But Julie was already on her feet, brushing past her. “I forgot the lemons!” she cried, clapping her hands together.

Emily watched as Julie pulled lemons from the tree, the setting sun piercing through the branches like the radiant glow of a paparadscha. She should find a way out of this for them, a way to make a joke and carry on, a way for Julie to save face. But all Emily could think was that there was someone who wanted her, someone who told her she was special, and as much as she wished and prayed, it was not Eric. It would never be Eric again.

She watched Julie’s hand reach up and coax the lemons down from the branches, the rinds giving gently under the pressure of her illuminated thumb. A mockingbird stirred from a higher branch, taking flight across the yard. *I can be loved, I can be loved*, it sang into the growing darkness, and Emily sat, and waited.

End.