

“Crank the sun,” her boyfriend said.

She reached a pale hand toward the circular light switch and turned it. Above them a dome-shaped lampshade burned brighter; she’d painted it a riotous swirl of blonde and orange and crimson.

“Thanks.”

“You feel better? How’s the eye?” she asked as she sat on a wooden chair, in the corner. It had Egyptian glyphs painted on each slat of the backrest. She’d done that during a break between two finals, her senior year of college – only a year ago in real time, a lifetime ago in every other kind.

“The eye feels weird,” he said. He was lying on his back, in a tuxedo, on the living-room floor. Black hair parted neatly on the side, bow tie skewed. He lifted his arm and took a bag of frozen cauliflower off his right eye, which had swollen and now looked like a nebula. Veins of blue threaded through a puff of purplish black.

“Oh holy smokes, no kidding it’s weird,” she said, then glanced from his face to his dapper clothes, and pinched her eyebrows, analytically. “But it *does*, sort of, match your tuxedo. The black parts, anyway.”

“At least I got a Halloween costume.”

“Halloween’s like six months off, kid.”

“I know that, Maddy,” he said. “I’m sayin’ my eye’s gonna be like this till then.”

“It’s just a black eye.”

“And blue and purple and green. And I think there’s some mauve in there, too.”

“You don’t even know what mauve looks like.”

“Not when I’m half-blind, I don’t.”

“Give you eagle-eyed vision and put you in the paint section of Home Depot for three hours, and you’d walk outside with a can of lime-green and say, ‘This it?’” she said as she raised an imaginary paint can.

He snorted, touched his eye with his fingertips, gingerly.

“If we’re going to this party, we don’t got time to lay around,” she said.

“The hell makes you think I’m going?”

“They’re throwing it for you.”

“It’s a surprise party.”

“And?”

“And it’ll be very surprising if I don’t show up,” he said. “I’ll fulfill the objective.”

“You’re coming.” She stood up and went to a key rack she’d painted with twisting vines and white orchids. Grabbed the car keys. Held them up by her face and rattled them. “C’mon boy, you wanna ride? *Wanna ride?*”

While still lying on his back, he curled his knees up and bent his wrists down, poised like a dog basking in a meadow. He started panting.

“C’mon! C’mon, LeeLee, let’s go for a ride!”

He tossed away the bag of frozen cauliflower and scrambled up, trotted toward her on tiptoes, the individual grains of his beard stubble coming into relief, and then he veered and loped up the staircase.

“Where’re you going?” she called.

“Just checkin to see if you have makeup that’ll make it look like I’m not growing an eggplant out of my eye socket.”

She heard bathroom cabinets squeak open and clap closed.

“*Check for concealer,*” she called, fiddling with her dark-blonde strands of hair draped over the strap of her blue dress.

More slapping cabinets.

“*Third shelf.*”

The cabinet above the sink slid open, some moments passed, the cabinet slid closed. She saw a flash of him as he strode across the landing.

“*Now* where’re you going?”

“Lucky cufflinks.”

The door to the master bedroom whined open.

Everything in the house squeaked. It had since they’d moved in two months earlier, drinking mimosas as they did so, which made the process much more difficult but much more fun.

Moving the couch had been a muscle-straining, step-stumbling disaster. They’d finally dropped it on the front lawn, then flopped on it. They’d talked, went inside to make more mimosas, came back outside. They had fallen asleep (i.e. passed out) nestled against each other,

two empty glasses lying in the summer grass, a symphony of crickets serenading the neighborhood, their eyes closed under a blanket of constellations.

He came down the staircase, adjusting his silver cufflinks, each shaped like an angel wing. The concealer had warmed the darker tones around his eye, though it didn't look much better. It seemed as though he'd taken frozen cauliflower from that bag, poked a hole through a piece, and pushed it behind his eyeball. Tinges of the purple/blue bruise still showed.

"You look good," she said, swinging open the mewling door.

"Don't lie to me."

Midsummer sun fell warm on her skin. Scents of cut grass and sun-kissed soil floated through her head.

"You look ridiculous," she said.

"Thank you."

She stepped out onto the cobblestones, then paused, looked back, suspicious. "If you *weren't* planning on going, why were you wearing the tux when I got home?"

"In case I changed my mind and decided to go."

"So you changed your mind," she confirmed.

"*You* changed my mind."

"All I said was, 'You're coming.'"

"That's all I needed."

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She clenched the steering wheel with both fists. Loosened her fingers. Tightened, loosened, tightened. Kept them tight. Glanced in the rearview mirror, at her eyeliner creating a slim black shoreline around her oceanic irises.

They were driving to a mutual friend's house, where a bunch of people would emerge from furniture and demand he feel surprised, as if he were not allowed to select another emotion from the spectrum. She'd still be more anxious than him. Her left leg began bouncing on the ball of her toes.

"Nervous?" he asked, with a sly, mocking smile.

"I suck so much at these things," she sighed. "I'm only going to try getting outta my comfort zone." She tossed a hand through the sunlight. "All that crap about *that* being when you grow most. Sometimes I'd rather just *not* grow."

"And why'm I going? I don't suck at these things."

"You suck at saying 'No.'"

She looked down and saw his own leg bouncing as he stared out the window. "And if you *don't* suck at these things, why're *you* nervous?" she asked.

He turned to her. An incredulous little grin spread and mashed his puffy round eye into a more abstract shape. "*Look* at me."

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She leaned her elbows against the balcony railing and looked up, searching for satellites she knew she'd never find in a pale-black sky. Streetlights had hazed away stars.

She looked back down and saw Lee getting on one knee and holding out a tiny, black velvet box. Her breath disintegrated and her heart pushed against her ribs and her nerves shocked into benevolent white lightning. She clapped a hand to her mouth and nearly stumbled back over the railing, down fifteen stories, onto the midtown street.

Around them the fluidity of the party had stalled. All those sparkling dresses and gowns – once flowing and gliding – now motionless. All those suits and tuxedos – once shifting and

crinkling – now unmoving. A man had been sitting on a hearth and strumming an untuned ukulele. Now he was just sitting on a hearth.

With trembling hands, Lee opened the box.

She lowered her hand from her mouth and put it to her sprinting heart. Then raised an inquisitive eyebrow. She looked closer, inspected the ring, and saw it was just black plastic. A little shard was stuck to the top, where he'd obviously chipped something off.

“It’s one of those plastic spider rings they have at Wal-Mart,” he said. “You’ll see the real one if you say ‘Yes’.”

“You didn’t think I would?”

“No – well – I mean, I thought you would – but I know you hate doing things like this in public, and I thought you might run away. Or jump off the balcony. So I didn’t wanna buy a real ring until I was sure I wouldn’t have to return it.”

Her eyelids fluttered rapidly, trying to hold off the inevitable overflow of embarrassed tears. “You know I hate doing things like this in public, so you’re *making* me do it in public.”

“Why did you say you were coming here?” he asked.

“To get out of my comfort zone.”

“And?”

Her voice quivered. “And I’m way effing out of it.”

A breeze cooled a tear trail on her cheek. The whispering of guests mingled with pulses of hip-hop bass vibrating her ribs.

“I can’t believe you wanna spend the rest of your life with me,” she said. “You’ve known me five months.”

He shrugged. “Some people just know what they want.”

She looked out at the skyline, at the glittering buildings cutting their architecture from the horizon.

“Wanna go even further out of your comfort zone?” he asked.

“That you asking me to say ‘Yes’?”

“In a roundabout sort of way, and I mean, could you hurry up because my knee hurts and people are staring and it smells weird out here.”

She tried to swallow and couldn't. “I'll say yes on one condition,” she said weakly.

“What's that?”

“I get to keep that ring. The spider ring. I don't care about the other one; I want that one.”

“Deal.”

The man with the ukulele played a hectic flurry of untuned cords. The party resumed. She slid the plastic ring on her finger, and felt joy twisting so hard with anxiety she kind of wanted to throw up.

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They walked back into the creaky quiet of their hardwood-floored house and flopped on the couch (a.k.a. the Lawn Couch). He put an arm around her shoulders, drew her into his chest. She fit well there. He reached down to twist the plastic ring around her finger. It spun, but with resistance.

He looked up and said, “Set the sun.”

She smiled and got up and turned the dimmer down. The room faded to a delicate red/orange light. She slid out of the dress which puddled in the soft crimson air.

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“You won't leave, will you?” she asked, a few hours later, after they'd gone upstairs.

“What, like, to go to the store?”

“I mean in general.”

“What kind of question is that?” he asked. “Why would I?”

“It’s just a fear.”

“It’s an irrational one.”

“That’s the most common type.”

She was lying on her back in bed, fiddling with the ring. He was on his side, looking at her with one good eye while the swollen one half-vanished into his pillow. She ran a hand down her flat stomach and let it rest there. A floor lamp in the corner lit the walls white.

Her eyes strolled around and settled on the ceiling. She had painted a giant glow-in-the-dark moon in the center, but with the lights on, the moon had a dull yellow color. You couldn’t see it well.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said. “Now bring out the moon. Get some sleep.”

“You’re sure you’re not.”

“Sure as sure can be,” he said, scooting closer and settling his chin on her shoulder.

“Wouldn’t have bought you a fifty-cent engagement ring if I weren’t sure.” He tipped his head forward against her temple. With fatigue-roughened vocal cords, his voice practically inside her ear, nudging the edges of her brain, he said, “You don’t have to worry. Bring out the moon.”

She didn’t move, at first. She lay there and felt his warm breath against her smiling cheek. Then she dipped a shoulder out from underneath his chin, got up and turned off the light. Darkness came. The phosphorescent moon on the ceiling glowed a bold aquamarine.

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Some months later, she stood alone at night in the creaky house, staring at the sun-painted lampshade. She ran one hand down her round pregnant stomach. She used her hand with the plastic ring to crank the sun, set the sun, crank the sun.

Every time the light burned brighter, she imagined he would see it, and he would come home, from wherever he was. And every time the light dimmed, she doubted he ever would.