

She lay in the tub as if she were some forgotten angel waiting for only His word to let her go and fly. The water was falling to her toes, then settling around, and she stared as it filled, seeing how her toes glittered in shape. She had threatened to kill herself if he didn't come back tonight. She called him at his home to say so. Though, it was his wife who first heard what *his little angel* was planning to do. He left his home straightaway, without saying a word.

When he entered the bathroom, the water now reached her neck. Her dark body seemed misshapen in the water. He stood over her. After asking her whether she wanted anything to drink, he had a glimpse of the mirror. Where his face should have been, he saw only smudges, fog.

Look who's here, finally, she said.

He gave an uncertain smile, You did call.

No.

Yes, he said. Earlier.

I promised to never break that rule, didn't I? I keep my promises.

He wanted to frown but kept it inside him. She folded her arms under the water. He loved that face she made when she didn't care but not now.

I didn't mean to call you—or anybody else. We shouldn't blame that on me, she said without turning his way or raising her voice.

There's no blame from either side, he said.

She would have found out, anyway, as if not hearing what he just said. I was being a little shit.

The man slid down the wall, and when he finally sat on the floor, he thought about stopping her, but he hesitated, half-amused at her maneuvering.

What did you tell her?

Nothing, I was drunk.

That hasn't stopped you before.

If I called, I must have thought you answered. That's all.

That's not it. And you know it.

No, and I'm glad I don't.

She rolled her neck, vertebrae popping in the movement.

Everything you're doing, he told her as he put his hands on his knees. I can't stand for, I just can't.

I wouldn't have it any other way, she said as she sank deeper under the water. Only the thin edges of her face now surfaced above. She stared at the ceiling and blew away water as she breathed.

What if my kids answered, what then?

I don't care.

Maybe, you should, he said. You're being such a child.

Fuck you, she said as she forced her best smile. You've already made your choice, didn't you. Nothing's going to stop you.

They avoided each other's eyes for some time. The man gnawed his lower lip, swallowing any saliva that pooled at the corners of his mouth. He looked uncomfortable in the quiet. But he knew there was nothing in the world to do.

I figured nobody would take it too well, he said at last. He put his hand in the tub, flicking the stale water between her legs, while he surfed on its soft wakes with his fingers. But even at your very worst, you're still my lovely, little angel. He grinned.

The bathroom, built in the decade before she moved in, had once had a look of elegance, but now had faded into disrepair. The tiles, once bright white, were now clouded into pearl. In the water, she was wrinkling and red.

Are you tired of your own filth yet, he asked looking to the water. If you don't finish sometime soon, I'm going to leave, you know.

Fine, go. You don't have to be here with me. You have her to think about, anyways, don't you? She sighed at her last question, and, at the same time, he put his rough hands through his graying hair, feigning a look that said that he was trying to think about what this question meant. He waited until she returned her eyes to him, I don't know. I'd like to stay the night, but I'm afraid this would trouble us.

Stay, I don't care, nobody can stop you.

After she dressed and poured liquor in their mismatched mugs, she went to her bedroom. Drinking his part, he followed her like a dog, finding a

spot at the foot of her bed. She sat at the opposite end and hugged a pillow between her arms. It was a cold night for the city. They stayed in their coats, dressed as though they were expecting company. Their breaths even floated upward. He stiffened, correcting his posture. He told her that he was deciding on whether to stay the night. She said nothing. After a while, she covered herself and faced the wall. He stilled himself there, listening to her breathing. He sensed that if he moved just then, he could hug her, but, as soon as he did, she spoke: No, sleep on the couch, please. Please.

In the night, the man drifted in and out of sleep. His phone had vibrated with messages from his wife, and he read each one for ideas to say when he returned home. His wife told him to keep his little angel happy, say whatever he must to keep her from doing anything stupid, then wrote, at the end, this poor girl has nobody else, remember that. Although he knew his wife had suspected his cheating, her words unnerved him. Whatever she had told his wife must have been serious. He drank the rest of the bottle they had earlier. The night came over him like a hood, and he was out.

Morning, he awoke slowly, aching from the drinks. The room wobbled from reality to illusion, blurring as he rubbed his eyes. Once everything fell into focus, he saw her at the side of the couch, standing over him, staring. He jumped a little. She was there without a sound, like a servant, or like a sleepless child.

I really hoped you left, she said.

He patted around for his shirt and his phone, keeping his eyes on her.

I dreamed that you did, too. You left and you never came back. I should have stayed asleep.

Enjoying your little dream?

Would have.

He found his phone: his wife was afraid for him, asking whether she should call the cops. You got to get out of there, one text said.

Haven't been there all night have you?

A few moments, that's all. Don't get your yourself worried. As she said this, she went to his lap. Being only inches from her, he could smell her washed hair. Also called your wife while you were asleep, she smiled and laid her lips on his—waiting for him to speak without yet kissing him. After he kept silent for a some time, she bit his lower lip with the edges of her front teeth to prod him.

It wasn't kind, what I told her. She shrugged. I thought you should know it before going back, she undid her bra and put her chest to his face.

He turned his cheek to her bare skin, his eyes closed. He could hear her breathing.

Take it out, honey, she said, feeling his pants.

He ignored her, What did you tell her?

Nothing.

He imagined her smiling as she felt for the buttons at his waist.

I guess, she wanted to know when we started fucking. So I told her only the truth, expecting her to appreciate it. To her credit, she didn't say a single ugly word. I kept saying to myself: he's found himself a real decent woman, a real good one, so like him. Then, she asked whether I was pregnant. I said no. She asked whether I was diseased, just like that, diseased. I told her you're the only man I've fucked in my life.

That's not true.

But it is.

It's not true, he said.

To her, it is, I thought I'd do you this last favor. She looked him in the eye, Last night I loved you more than ever.

He directed her body back with his hands, pushing her away a little so that he could look at her. He had never seen her as he saw her now, her shirt falling from her shoulders, her eyes in a soft, thin light, her dark body baring itself for only him. He saw again a single line of verse tattooed on her chest, a line from Macedonio, etched for her dead brother, that he went over with his fingers a long time ago— when they mumbled about destiny and rebirth and divorce.

You don't recognize who you are until somebody catches one of your open secrets, sees how you hold yourself to eternity, every fucking day, she said. When I called her I said that I was going to kill our baby. But we both know there's no baby.

She was rubbing his hand with her thumb, slowly, and in small circles.

She doesn't know that, and I knew she didn't. Yet there I was doing what you said I do. I knew it, too. But I kept at it. I told her that I was going to abort it myself. To fuck with her, you know. Since she probably thought I was one of those girls who would fuck with a clothes hanger. Silly, right? Thing is, she didn't raise her voice or say a damned thing. Her voice was just so strong and caring, the whole fucking time. She was speaking in complete, solid circles, nothing outside them or within, entirely unbreakable. I was fed up, so I told her I would kill myself if you didn't return, and hung up.

She stepped off him and walked to the fridge, her shirt completely gone, her straight, black hair falling to her hips.

I'm not crazy, Javi. I promise.

She handled him another mug full of liquor when she sat on his lap again.

You know, for a time, I thought you would have given up everything for me.

That's what I thought, too.

Shut up. She squeezed his face, making anything he said sound like a cough or a whimper.

She let go of him and waited patiently. They were quiet.

Tell me, Javi, what is she like? Does she fuck like I do?

No, in this regard, nobody could match you.

They smiled, knowing they both played a part in their story.

What do you think she is doing right now?

My wife?

Of course.

I don't know.

Really think about it.

I can't say, I can't imagine her right now.

Do it for me. I want to know her, too.

What is she doing right now, he repeated.

Yes, yes, right now. Please.

He looked at the girl in front of him, staring. He was quiet until he said, She's probably turning a knob for hot water. Yes, she's taking off her shirt. Now, her underwear. She's preparing a shower.

The woman was grasping him now, like a young kid, her ear to his heart.

The water's steaming. Because she likes it blistering. She's putting her hand in it, feeling the temperature. She wants each drop to prick against her skin, stimulate something. She's thinking about me, stepping in. She's now nude, still, silent, allowing the water to hit her. The sounds remind her of California, where we met one night, because her friend knew me. She smells the night, sees the stars we named.

Then?

She grabs a shampoo bottle she recently bought, one she always buys.

What else?

She finally sees the plastic as it is. He stopped and swallowed a breath. A flood of memories had hit him. He was held up. He then remembered something that he had forgotten he knew.

One day she will pass too, and that bottle, although it wasn't anything like her, not beautiful or alive, will keep this world. The bottle will just stay there as long as nobody touches it, and she realizes nobody will. It will sit there, gathering mold, and, maybe, during some dry spells a few specks of dust will fall on it.

She gently slid off him and walked to the kitchen, where she kept a .40 Smith, one her brother gave her a long time ago. Now it was loaded.

And, for the last time, they were quiet together.