

New Year, New Me

Sam stood by the window, thoughtlessly dragging her cigarette as her little brother stood beside her. Through the slight sheen of rain and wax she could see her mother yelling at the driver, her brows furrowing and her lips forming a wide ‘O’ as the driver grasped both his hands in quiet dignity. She snorted, rubbing her finger over her forehead as if the action would take her mother out of the picture. She took another drag, holding in the smoke so long her vision began to blur; this pain was worth it to her.

“Smoking’s bad,” her little brother Josh pleaded with her, judging her ever so slightly. He was only six but he’d learned enough through commercials to know what his sister was doing; she was giving herself cancer, not that he *really* knew what that was. He remembered his mother telling him how his grandmother had died of breast cancer, but he didn’t understand it.

Sam knew it was probably their mother that made him speak out against her then. Mother always talked about how bad smoking was and how all her friends had been doing it when she was her age. She was old enough now to see both the merit of her mother’s concern as well as the ability to go against her anyway: Josh didn’t. Soon enough, he’d learn how to think without having mother breath the thought into creation first.

“I know,” she said in return, trying not to pass any judgement on him as she did. “You don’t have to stay here with me, you know?”

He knew. “But I don’t want to be downstairs alone.”

Alone with dad was what he really meant though she didn’t correct him. She watched her mother fall into a decided calm as she walked back inside, her hair now plastered in rain. The driver looked no different than before, just horrified as always.

“Well, looks like you won’t be.” She turned toward him, realizing once again how much he looked like their mother. Part of her despised him for it while a greater part, a more forgiving part, realized how little of that was his fault. “I’ll be down in a second, Munch. Go find Mike.”

He bowed his tiny head in a silence that made her feel bad for shooing him away. But he couldn’t be here watching her smoke the only cigarette she could get her hands on. She cared enough to know that seeing her like this wasn’t good for him; still, that didn’t stop her.

“Okay.” He walked down the rickety stairs, into the long forgotten play room. He ventured into every room, looking under the furniture and between the sheets, hoping that his brother was hiding like Sam always did. What he didn’t realize in his quest for companionship was that his brother had the same draw to the attic as Sam.

As her little brother left, Sam grew to the size of the attic, clinging to the cobwebs and putrid dust as she took a drag of the cigarette, clinging to the sting even as her throat begged her to stop. She was getting dizzy now, reminding her that she was alive as well as breakable all at once: weird how those two things were always the same when it came down to it, she thought.

“Aunt Jan’s here,” Mike said, crinkling the dress pants their mom had most likely laid out for him that morning. “She’ll want to see you.”

She tipped her head back as if she could already feel the effort of getting through a conversation. Unceremoniously, she blew out a long trail of smoke, “Great, looking forward to it.”

Mike rolled his eyes, knowing his sister had a flair for the dramatics and complaining was her greatest achievement in life. He walked up to her then grabbed the cigarette out of her hand. “You really don’t need to be smoking. Look at dad, the man can barely laugh without coughing

up his dinner.” He stomped it out, the embers clinging to the dusty air for only a second more. Then dead.

The rain began to cease as their aunt handed her keys to the driver. Sam chuckled beside him as the driver fumbled her keys and tried to get her to walk back to the car. Their aunt came back only to frown, her face folding into itself naturally. They could almost hear her say, “what do you mean you can’t park my car?”

“Oh, she’s furious,” Sam said, crossing her arms across her chest. “Next she’ll be asking for the manager and that *never* goes well here.”

Mike laughed with her, rubbing away the condensation so he could get a better look only to reveal himself as a captive audience to those below. “Fuck- “

She cut him off, looking over her shoulder with superiority. “Now we both have to talk to Aunt Jan.”

He knew she was right though he hoped she wasn’t.

More guests were entering as they both went down, folding up the stairs to the attic as their mother caught up with them. “What are you both doing?” Her intonation was familiar and calculated as always. She was already wearing a black dress that fell respectively below the knee and her mother’s pearls. Her hair was put into a French twist with only a few blonde pieces falling against her cheekbones. She was beautiful, Sam thought before pushing such a compliment right back down.

“Watching the cars drive by. Why?” Sam said, too quickly for anyone there to believe.

Her mother was concerned but not about the smell of smoke. “I thought Josh was with you, where did he go?” Silence was her only answer. She could smell the smoke on her children the moment they came back down but attributed to her husband or the attic. Their mother was

naturally suspicious but far too trusting when it came to them. “Okay. Michael, go find your brother. He’s probably looking for you.” He left accordingly, his suit jacket folding around him like a box as he did.

Her mother was beautifully furious then even as she tried to enjoy the evening. “You were supposed to keep an eye on him.”

She was cut off by Sam rolling her eyes. The action was offensive enough to have her anger bubble over. “Samantha give me your phone.”

So few things were as demeaning as her mother asking for her phone like she was fifteen and had forgotten to do all her chores. “No.”

The interaction continued in the same fashion until Sam gave in, dropping it carelessly into her mother’s hand. She looked dead set at her mother, the brown crisp of her eyes burning into her skull. “Don’t blame me, blame yourself. Next time I ask you to watch your brother, do it” That was that.

Mike never found his brother but he did find his dad’s study: open and unattended. Rarely was his room ever so attainable to anyone outside of himself and a few of his buddies from work. When Mike was young, his father would always come back from work with a stuffed briefcase and a few of his coworkers, laughing as gas pricing were the most interesting topic. He wasn’t a deeply secretive man, he never had anything to hide. His dad was simple, watching everything happen before him in the seat of his La-Z-y-Boy, having no real stake on anything that came before him outside of work. He envied his father for that privilege but he also despised him for it.

He walked in, running his finger along the edge of the mahogany desk until his path was stopped by a crystal cage full of scotch or what he assumed was scotch. One of his two glasses

had already been used while the other waited to join. On his shoulder, he could feel his sister telling him to take a sip, dad would never know the difference. The rational part knew it wasn't worth the trouble. The crystal was still under his fingers becoming more real than consequence and more lasting.

“Hey,” someone said, coming up behind him.

“Jesus, Mary!” He said after almost jumping out of his skin.

“And Joseph?” She smiled, lighting up even the darkest corners of the study. “Sorry, didn't expect you to freak out.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly forgetting about what he was doing. “It's okay, I wasn't doing anything.” It was almost true.

Mary lost her footing as the conversation became a familiar form of awkward. Every New Year's Eve, it was like a reintroduction to each other that was both comfortable and terrifying all at once. “So, how've you been?”

Mike tried unsuccessfully to lean against his father's desk without losing his balance. He saw her every New Year's Eve and, even now, he was surprised how beautiful she was. Her black hair was longer falling into careless strands around her face and covering the top of her white dress. She was still wearing her coat overcoat and her bright blue socks were peeking out her boots. Her eyes stayed trained on him with only a bit of humor to them, her mouth caught in a smile. In a house full of women who were borderline insane, she was always a breath of fresh air.

They exchanged niceties, moving slightly closer with each interaction both of them noticing and neither one of them commenting on. Her smile stayed, clinging to her like the smell of smoke on him. How could anyone like her survive in a house like this?

“So, uh, do you want to go?” She asked, the end of her sentence staying open-ended.

He nodded far too eagerly. She smiled and they walked out of his father’s study, having completely forgotten about his little brother and the discarded scotch.

Sam saw her brother walk in with Mary, both talking nonstop to the other. Well, she thought, at least someone was having fun. In fact, plenty of people were having a great time. The guests had already gone through a year’s worth of small talk as well as a rousing game of heads up. Her mom was so distracted she couldn’t even bother to remember she had three children and only two were present. She scoffed, knowing her mother wouldn’t remember until the champagne had left her system. They were smiling and cheering for a New Year that wasn’t even here. She was overwhelmed with how full the room was, how lively a place could become even as so much was missing. She was bitter, of course, and bitterness turned even the loveliest celebrations into heinous activities.

Her brother sat next to her, Mary following as his shadow. “When did it get like this?”

“Almost instantaneously,” she answered dully “Where’s Josh?”

His face cracked into realization before he folded into himself.

“Where did you last see him?” Mary asked.

“The attic,” Sam said.

Her brother said at the same time. “This morning, fuck.”

His sister sighed, assuming the responsibility of the older sibling for the first time since middle school. For a moment, he saw the sister he had in grade school who beat up anyone who called him a wimp, the sister who stared people down when they tried to call him Richie Rich in the hallways. She was still that sister in all the little ways that no longer mattered. In far too many ways, she wasn’t that person at all.

“Go find him,” he said, hoping the call to action would be enough to bring back that person her. “Please.”

Sam’s eyes looked at every corner of the room as if the champagne and cheers would give her the closure of finding her brother. Then she nodded, getting up with unnatural force before catapulting out of the room. Somehow, she knew exactly where her brother was and she knew she alone could find him. This was something she had to do.

It was only a few moments later, after the party had calmed down ever so slightly, that Mary tapped on his shoulder. “Michael,” Mary said. The only other person who called him that was his mother, saying it as if he were her assistant, punctuating every syllable with disappointment only a mother could know. Now was one of the few times Michael truly loved the sound of his name.

“Yeah?” He replied belatedly, not really paying attention to what she was saying but how she looked at him.

“Isn’t that your brother?” She pointed across the room to his mother. Sitting right beside her at the dining room table was Josh his hands dripping with candy and fudge. He was having the time of his life watching the countdown as he grasped onto even more candy, his mother never even batting an eye. She just smiled and he knew this was his one chance to get away with it.

“Well,” Mike said, deciding whether or not to tell his sister that her ventures were useless. Mary stared at him thoughtfully as he did, her smile growing as she realized what he did. “She’ll figure it out eventually.” With that thought, he took a can of soda from the cooler and enjoyed the evening.

Sam didn't figure it out, actually. She looked through every room, twice, and managed to convince herself in the process that their brother could realistically be anywhere on planet earth. She was halfway driven to putting his face on milk cartons, putting up flyers across the neighborhood: Have You Seen This Kid? 4'11, Brown Hair, and Will Probably Jump In a Van at the Very Sight of Candy? Her thoughts ran from crazed to decided: her brother was gone and chances were, if she didn't find him, she would be gone soon enough. Her mother was already mad at her but losing a full-on child was a bit more serious than just having a phone taken away.

She was the last person to see her brother, as far as she knew. Sam couldn't help but think how close he was then, how fragile he was now. He just wanted to spend time with her, wanted her to give him any form of affection: that was all. Even that was too much for her to give, she thought bitterly. She would rather waste her lungs on a stolen cigarette than look at her brother for more than a second. What a waste.

"Who knows? Maybe he's here," she said to herself as she busted through the door of her father's study.

Her father looked up at her as if she were a fly. "What do you need?"

She looked at him intently. He was wearing brown slacks and a purple button up, in one hand holding a glass of scotch and the *Wall Street Journal* in the other. "It's New Year's Eve and you're reading the news?"

He shrugged. "Why not?"

She snorted. That was his answer to everything. "Whatever, have you seen Josh?"

He shook his head, but his eyes were already trained on the movie review section. It was enough to defeat all her efforts. She plopped down onto a leather chair across from his desk and decidedly poured a glass of scotch for herself.

Her father looked up at his paper for a moment as if something were telling him to object to her. Then, just as soon as he had looked at her, he was back to reading as if it had never happened at all. Sam shook her head, thinking about how two completely different people could ever be married. Her father hated parties, barely left his own house if he didn't have to and, here he was, watching his own daughter drink a glass of scotch and all he cared about, probably, was the money it would cost to replace the bottle. Her mother would've stopped this in its tracks, removed any and all alcohol from the premises (save the champagne) and rebuked Sam. But her dad didn't care, barely even noticed.

She took a sip, the bitterness so familiar to her now and the warmth of it trailing from her throat to her stomach. And yet, for the first time, it revolted her in a way her father did then. There was so much for her to say, so much she didn't even know how to admit to herself but had to. She decided maybe it was time to have a resolution for the first time in her life.

“By the way, dad,” she started, setting down his glass as she did so.

He looked up again, his grey eyes no livelier. “Yes?”

She watched her feet make their way to the door, too scared to look up and far too afraid to take responsibility for her own movement then. “You can tell mom to let up on the driver, he wasn't the one stealing your cigarettes.” The pause left between them was all her dad need. Still, she had to say it. “It was me. It always was.”

Her dad's face broke into something close to wonder, a look she could never forget. Before she could find out what he was going to say, if anything, she hurried out of his study knowing she would probably never set foot in their again.