

Aunt Katherine

It was Christmas Eve and my boyfriend's grandmother Silvia was hosting a party in her Great Neck mansion. I kept looking out the windows in each room hoping to spot a green light in the distance. My boyfriend, Ryan, laughed when I told him this.

He said, "As long as none of us ends up getting shot." I nodded, grapes sliding between the gaps on my small plate stacked with crackers and cheese. He said, "Did you see the den yet, with the fireplace?"

"No," I said, "I haven't."

He said, "There are two frames with the same identical photograph taken of my grandpa standing beside Trump right across from each other."

I asked, "Why are there two?" He shook his head.

He said, "Why is there even one?" We ate our seeded crackers and our seedless grapes in silence until an uncle pulled us apart, dragging Ryan with him and leaving me with the basset hound at my feet. I sat on a nearby chair and pet the dog's velvety head.

Ryan's mother Marianne spotted me across the room and rolled her eyes, pantomiming slitting her throat then shooting herself in the head. I nodded, letting my jaw suddenly drop and mimed putting a finger gun in my mouth and pulling the trigger. She wrinkled her eyebrows at me then turned back to the conversation she was having with a group of people, which included Ryan's father. I wondered if I had done something wrong.

"You're the only one who wants to be near me," I said to the basset hound. He slunk onto the ground so that I could no longer reach the top of his head. I set my plate on the side table and crossed my arms, fading further into the seat. I wondered if I looked too pretty, and if so, unapproachable. Ryan's fourteen-year old cousin came into the room and sat on the piano bench near me. She stuck her elbows on the closed keyboard and stared at the picture frames on top of the piano.

She said, "I'm so bored. Aren't you bored?" without looking at me but in a way that I could tell was meant for me. She had long shiny brown hair and these tiny pinpricked freckles the shade of a milky cappuccino spread over the bridge of her nose.

"You're very pretty," I told her.

"So?" she said. That's when Aunt Katherine entered in a gush of wind and sparkles. Her hair was dusted in a light sprinkling of ice like a halo around her head. She entered waving a bottle of red wine around in her right hand and in her left a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, its orange wrapper a cheery greeting. I heard Ryan's uncle sigh and say, "Oh great, look who decided to show up."

But I loved her immediately. She wore a green velvet vest over an eggshell blouse that looked like a pirate's. Her long red and green plaid skirt swept over the wood floors. She approached everyone exactly the same; she hugged you, held your arms out to the sides, and leaned back to take you all in and suddenly you were deemed special, you were somebody to Aunt Katherine.

I watched her disappear into the guest room where everyone had thrown their coats in a great heap on the bed. I could see the sharp glow from her phone like a floating crystal ball in the dark. I grabbed Ryan, pulling him away from his uncle.

"Who is that?" I said.

"Aunt Katherine," he said.

"Aunt Katherine," I repeated, nodding in a trance.

"Don't grow too attached, she'll end up getting into a fight with someone by the end of the night and disappear. Remember my great aunt from Ireland? She even managed to pick a fight with her. How could anyone get into an argument with sweet aunt Fiona?" he said more to himself than to me. I shrugged, unable to take my eyes off Aunt Katherine's back. She exploded back into the living room, walking straight toward Ryan and me.

“My favorite nephew!” she said, bringing his head to her chest and kissing the top of it.

“Hi,” he said, wriggling off her bosom. “Nice to see you.”

“Nice to see you,” she repeated in a serious, soldierly manner, mocking him.

He smirked and asked me, “Want anything to drink?”

“I’ll take some champagne, please.”

“Okay,” he said, walking to the kitchen.

“You must be his lovely girlfriend Tabitha,” she said.

“Everyone calls me Tabby.”

“I shall call you Tabitha as your parents intended,” she said.

“Oh, um, okay,” I said.

“So, how do you like the family?” she asked.

“Everyone’s been very welcoming.”

“You can tell me the truth. They’ve all got poles rammed up their...oh hi Kenny, how are you darling?” Kenny was her oldest brother. He wore a snowflake sweater vest pulled tightly over his pot belly. They proceeded to whisper-scream at each other while I walked back over to the basset hound and tried to feel the inside of his ear, which was light pink and velvety like the rest of his head.

“Sorry,” she said, running a hand over my hair which was curled in a childish and moronic way.

“You have fabulous hair,” I told her. She had long, coarse red hair. I found myself standing shoulder to shoulder with her gazing at the many photos she had taken of the individual strands, the ends splitting like frayed yarn, illuminated in various lights.

“Look at this one,” she’d say excitedly. “And this one, oh this one’s real bad.” I slowly reached a hand up to the end of her dying hair, grabbing a clump of it in my fist and letting it go;

I watched as it fell quickly, but softly, settling back into place against her body. She grabbed my cheeks in her palms and brought my face close to hers. “You have fantastic cheeks. I like you. I like this one,” she said. Then she slung her arm around my shoulders and ushered me into the kitchen.

“So,” she started, “anyone try to engage you in a political debate yet?” She poured us both glasses of the Veuve Clicquot she’d brought, ignoring the flutes for full wine glasses.

“Not yet,” I said.

“Where did Ryan go with your champagne?” she said. “I hope you won’t let him off easy, leaving you out there with the wolves drinkless, nothing to do with your hands. You don’t smoke, do you?”

I said, “No, why?” I wondered if I so resembled the type of person who didn’t smoke. What I really wanted was to resemble the type of person who did.

“Want to join me outside anyway? There’s this lovely spot around the back where no one will bother you,” she said, tossing back the champagne. I nodded, following her out the back door of the kitchen into the garden.

I said, “I can’t believe you grew up here. There’s ivy trellises for chrissakes. *Ivy trellises.*”

“I know,” she said, rolling her eyes. “So, how long have you been dating Ryan now?” I shivered outside with no coat.

“It’s been two and half years.”

“Two and a half?” she exclaimed. “I love the way you said a half. I just love it.” I watched the smoke curl in the air and disappear. She had one arm draped across her middle, running it over her hair every now and then.

“I heard you’re an actress,” I said.

“Ah, the rumors are true.” I asked if she was in anything then. She said, “I’m in a very intimate production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.” I wondered what *intimate* meant to her. Did it mean they were all naked? Did it mean the theatre was small and private, a little sound proof black box? I thought of Aunt Katherine with leaves and flowers and twigs in her hair, her long pale body like a single bone flitting around the stage.

“Can I have...?” I didn’t finish, gesturing toward the cigarette.

“Oh, sure,” she said, passing it to me. I inhaled and coughed, my throat suddenly a giant gaping dry socket. “There, there,” she said, patting me on the back and fingering the cigarette out of my grip. “We used to play hide and seek all the time around the house, back here, in the front yard. Ryan’s dad loved to hide. He was always the one hiding, which you know is the better position to be in, naturally. I knew where he hid; he loved this spot behind the giant freezer we used to keep in the garage. He fell in one time when he was about four and I found him when I gave up and went to get a popsicle. I saved his life, you know. I did, I saved his life.” The wind howled, screaming between the trees and the gutters on the roof.

“It’s cold,” I said.

“Not for an ice queen,” she said.

On the car ride back to the city, Marianne turned around from the front seat. She said, “So, how did you like Aunt Katherine?” She popped a piece of gum in her mouth and offered the pack to Ryan and me. We both turned her down.

“She’s...magnetic,” I said.

Ryan’s father said, “Oh no, Tabby’s got stars in her eyes.”

I asked, “What’s so bad about her?” but no one answered. We all stared out the windows, watching the outside world blur by in red and white lights as though we were on the inside of a dangling Christmas ornament.

While he was brushing his teeth and staring at himself in the mirror, I asked Ryan if we could go see Aunt Katherine perform in *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. He batted me away like a fly, then leaned over the sink to spit. We both watched as bits of chunky blue toothpaste swirled in the overflowing sink water. He asked if this was going to be 'the new thing' with me. I knew what he meant, but I feigned ignorance.

"There's still cheese rotting away in the fridge," he said. I groaned, sliding a socked toe back and forth on the bathroom tile. He was referring to the large assortment of cheese I'd ordered for a virtual tasting class in which I'd thought I'd participate, inviting friends over and sticking toothpicks in with the names of each cheese on the marble cheese board I'd failed to purchase. The cheese was starting to turn agate blue and malachite green on its edges.

"I'll paint the cheese," I said.

"With your easel and canvases and oils?" he said.

"Yes," I nodded. "That's what I'll do."

"I'll believe it when I..." he started, but I bit his lip before he could continue. He yelped like a dog whose tail has been stepped on, and backed away from me, tripping over the little ledge at the entrance to our bathroom. "I'd love to see you finish just one thing someday, Tabby," he called from the bedroom.

I walked to the kitchen and opened the fridge door, staring at the chunks of cheese with their chunks of rot and tried not to think of death or decay although it was staring right back at me. I turned the bedroom light off and crawled into bed.

I whispered, "Please," to Ryan's back to which he replied, "Fine."

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At Ryan's parents' apartment on Christmas the next day, we ate ham for dinner and banana cream pie for dessert and I sat with big, leathery photo albums spread open on my lap

looking at photos of Ryan as a baby and then we watched *It's A Wonderful Life* and fell asleep on the pull-out sofa and woke to snow.

I whispered, "It's a winter wonderland outside," and Ryan said, "Shhh." The radiators underneath the windows whined and clinked. I tugged on the hot flannel, plaid pajamas Marianne had bought both of us in matching sets. I sat up on my knees, staring out at the falling snow.

Ryan said, "Come back here," and reached out for me with open arms into which I folded.

On New Year's Eve, Ryan's friends stared at me with wide eyes, and their heads slightly tilted. I got so sick of watching their heads cock to the side that I'd begun pushing them back to center on their necks with my fingertip.

"There," I'd say as I righted them.

"You did what?" they'd ask.

"Well, I've always wanted to be the kind of person who could fit all their belongings inside a backpack so I'm ready at the go, so I got rid of everything. I'll show you next time you're over," I said. "The closets and dresser drawers are completely empty." They'd nod and ask if I needed a refill, not bothering to wait for my answer before running to the kitchen.

We were at Ryan's friends' sprawling apartment in Gowanus. The backyard was strung in fairy lights and dotted in snow. Someone was standing, smoking on the back porch. I opened the door and joined them, a great whoosh of cold air smacking into me.

I said, "Can I bum one off ya?" in my best attempt at a Cockney accent. He had thick curly hair that tufted out at all sides and reminded me of the Truffula trees from Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*. I had the sudden urge to yank on his septum piercing.

He said, "Uh, sure," handing me one and lighting it. I sucked on it and exhaled like I'd watch people do in the movies. I wondered if this made me a smoker now. I felt flushed and

itchy from all the gin and tonics I'd had. I told him that I'd always wanted to be the type of person who grew their own herbs and vegetables and made seasonal stews and crocheted blankets for their friends. He turned to me and asked what sort of person that was. I said I didn't know and watched the smoke puff in front of me. Ryan suddenly burst onto the porch.

He said, "There you are. I've been looking for you everywhere. It's almost midnight. What are you...are you smoking? Seriously Tabby?" I shrugged and looked at my co-conspirator, who shrugged back at me.

"Gowanus," I said, raising my hands. Ryan pulled me inside and closed the door shut.

"What has gotten into you?" he said, careful not to act *too* exasperated, as there were other people standing around in the kitchen.

I said, "Do you even like me, Ryan?"

He said, "Of course I like you. I am in love with *you*, Tabby, not this innocuous person you've been trying to be for the past six months." When he said 'six,' everyone else said 'six' whilst counting down to the new year.

I said, "It's been hard," over the cheers and poppers and trumpet-sounding blows.

"I know," he said. "We'll get there, though." He held my cheeks and kissed me and said, "You taste like smoke."

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I dreamt of Aunt Katherine's wiry red hair and her skin, pale and soft, wrinkled as though it was in a fixed state of wilt, pruned from bathing in water too long. I dreamt that we sat in her living room in Greenwich Village. The floors were waxy and the whole room was framed by overflowing bookcases; they looked seconds away from toppling over onto us. I could feel my face lighting up red, my chest, neck, cheeks, and the tops of my ears like the glowing ruby color from the strips inside a toaster. My pulse ricocheted between my temples.

I took a cookie shaped like a maple leaf from the small porcelain dessert dish on the table and although it didn't say *Eat me*, I grew small. I glided along the lines in the linoleum floor tiles, the scuff marks and skid marks and dog hairs. The cool winter air wafted through the windows, ruffling the loose pages of books scattered all over the floor.

I rode the breeze. I floated up and out the living room through the open window. I flew over all the city lights and the Hudson river, the bridges and parks. I watched people peeling orange skins, picking up fallen change, calling their parents on their walk back home because they felt lonely, because they liked hearing their own voices, because they missed the tethered pull of home.

Back at her apartment, Aunt Katherine called for someone named Bunny. She said, "Bunny, you can come out now." Bunny was a younger version of myself. She slunk out of a hidden room like a house elf. She sidled up to Aunt Katherine and laid her head on her lap. Aunt Katherine stroked her hair. She sucked her thumb and stared up at me. I felt dizzy watching from the corner of the room.

I followed Aunt Katherine outside to Washington Square Park, her red hair glowing in the dark like a mermaid's. She danced underneath the shaded trees to banjos, undressing and climbing into the fountain, kicking up water, spouting poetry like scattered jewels I scurried to pick up before the ground swallowed them whole again. Back in her living room, Bunny spied me once more. She purred and twisted in Aunt Katherine's arms, twirling up to face the ceiling.

Bunny danced by the door frame as I left. She smelled like warm milk. I waved goodbye. She marched as she slowly, slowly closed the door behind her.

It was the middle of the afternoon when I woke. I heard Ryan's voice from the other side of the bedroom door.

"Yeah, it's been really hard. Some days are better than others. I just think she needs to go back to work. She tried a few months ago, but it didn't go well. What do I mean? I mean she

just sat at her desk unmoving like a mannequin for days. She really scared everyone. I just don't know what to do for her anymore. I mean, she can't go on like this forever, right?"

I watched the curtain flap against the window. I heard Ryan hang up and turn on the tv in the living room. I stumbled out of the bedroom, sitting on the couch beside Ryan.

I told him, "If I made a paper chain of all the sorry's I've heard, I'd have enough to string across the state of New York."

He tucked my hair behind my ear and said, "And it still wouldn't be enough."

"No," I said, shaking my head, "it still wouldn't be enough. Your friends are scared of me. I could see it on all their faces at the New Year's Eve party."

Ryan said, "They just don't want to upset you."

"Ryan, I don't know how to be in this world anymore."

He said, "You just do, you just *be*, Tabby."

As though it were that simple.

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"You were brilliant tonight," I said. Aunt Katherine grabbed my hands over our plates of steak frites and beamed at me. When the waiter stopped by to refill our glasses, she said the steak was too well done. She looked at Ryan and me in a way that signaled she wanted ours to also be too well done, but mine was fine. I shrugged. Ryan looked down at his lap.

"Very well," Aunt Katherine said. Ryan tentatively dipped a skinny fry into the puddle of ketchup on the corner of his plate. I watched the lemon wedge in my glass of water peeling, its pulp like waving arms. A child at the table beside ours began to scream. Aunt Katherine complained loudly of its insolence.

"How dare they take their child here," she said as though the very act were a personal affront. Ryan shifted in his seat.

“I thought Mustardseed overacted a bit,” I offered. Aunt Katherine continued glaring at the child’s parents next to us. She stood suddenly, banging her fists onto the red cloaked table, and exclaimed while keeping her steely gaze straight ahead, “How dare you bring your child to a fine dining establishment!” The restaurant quieted.

Ryan leaned over and whispered, “Get your coat.” He scraped his chair back and ushered me out of the restaurant like a bodyguard trying to fend off the paparazzi. We waited outside for Aunt Katherine, who came minutes later with our meals in to-go boxes and bags.

She said, “Ice cream?”

We ate our cones standing outside in the freezing cold, watching the slow lull of the river rush over the packed sand. My teeth chattered violently. Ryan kept his arm around me. Every so often a loud roar came from a train barreling across the bridge overhead. To our left, the glass box where a glittering merry-go-around usually thrummed with cheerful music and screaming children stood empty and bleak in the dark.

“I’m having an affair with the man who plays Puck,” Aunt Katherine said suddenly. Ryan and I were too cold to respond, so we simply nodded our heads. “He likes to practice our lines in the bedroom.” Ryan choked on the piece of cone he’d just bitten off.

I said, “Yes, I could see that.” We circled back around to St. Ann’s Warehouse, where the play had been performed. Aunt Katherine hugged us both goodbye. Ryan and I walked in the opposite direction toward the subway station.

“She’s a terrible actress,” Ryan said.

“Yes,” I said.

“She was so abrasive at the restaurant.”

“She’s...particular,” I said, not fully knowing why I was standing up for her or when I had decided to take her side.

“She was so rude to that family, to the whole restaurant.”

“She was right,” I said, “they shouldn’t have brought their toddler to the restaurant.”

“Do you really believe that?” he said.

A rat the size of a pomegranate ran along the tracks below us. When the train finally arrived, the windows were steamy and the car smelled putrid, like rotten eggs.

“Is your illusion still intact then?” Ryan asked me. I shrugged, silently. Our knees bounced, hitting each other. “What’s next?” he said. “Calligraphy? Tie-dying? Guitar playing?”

Grieving, I thought. I’ll carve out some fruit, a papaya perhaps, and I’ll nestle myself like a seed inside the long boat and wait. I’ll just wait.