

The Affair at Mayview Avenue

The parade begins at 12:45 PM, at the exact time it was supposed to. First comes a procession of polished minivans covered in letters of smeared neon paint calling for action against climate change and celebrating the Earth. The drivers announce the start of the parade by repeatedly honking their horns, while the passengers stick their heads out of the rolled-down windows and cheer. The cars are followed by high school students wielding brass instruments and drums, on which they crudely play covers of songs about nature and humanity coming together.

I am exactly where I am supposed to be, seated at the edge of a booth in a diner preparing to end their weekend brunch service. Beside me, Dolly bounces in her seat excitedly as Beth, directly across from me, looks on fondly, and beside her, Brad is lost in thought. When the parade starts we all turn to observe through the glass window adjacent to our table. Even Dolly lays her half-eroded crayons to rest to investigate the spectacle.

As passers-by gather on the street to watch and the parade continues on its way, I move my eyes to Brad. He is watching the parade the same as any of us, but I can tell he is watching for a different reason. His gaze is hollow, almost as if he is hoping to be carried away by the parade, to be pulled through the glass and to fade away in the clamor of it all. The emptiness in his eyes isn't new to me; it had been there ever since the accident.

For a moment, I understand where Brad is. Despite the excited cheers of the crowd and the off-key bellow of trumpets, the entire table seems to become lost in the silence so clearly occupying Brad's mind. Maybe we are all lost like him.

The silence of the table is broken by the sound of squirting ketchup. Without even looking I know it is one of Dolly's incidents. She is an artist. She views the whole world as her canvas and anything she can get her small, but stubborn hands on is a paintbrush. I keep my eyes locked on Brad, hoping maybe if I wait long enough I won't have to be the one to fix it. I

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channel my concentration toward him in the off chance he will snap out of his funk and I won't have to take care of everything. He does not.

"Dolly, please." I say. My mind is immediately overwhelmed as I look at her. The chaos of her unkempt, frizzy hair is matched in intensity by the bright red puddle of ketchup she's smearing across the diner table. "You're making a mess."

I reach out and grab her wrists, pulling them from the puddle. She stubbornly resists, wriggling her arms in retaliation as a high pitched whine begins to emerge from her mouth. As I brace myself for the impending tantrum, I catch Beth in my peripheral vision smirking. I shoot her a glare as if to say, *a little help maybe?*

"Hey Dolly watch this," Beth says, picking up on my cue. Dolly temporarily halts her resistance to observe as Beth gathers napkins from the canister at the end of the table, scrunches them up, then slowly wipes them through the puddle of ketchup while imitating the sound of a garbage truck. Dolly giggles, and I sigh in relief. Sometimes I think Beth is good with Dolly only because deep down she is still a kid herself.

Beth brings more napkins to Dolly's hands, wiping them clean. Once all the ketchup is absorbed into a goopy mess of crumpled napkins and placed on the plates of leftover scraps before us, Beth turns to me and furrows her brow. Her eyes are fixated on my chest. My nerves swell and blood rushes to my cheeks, until I look down and discover the source of her concern: a few dots of ketchup have taken refuge on the neckline of my white blouse.

"Shit." I groan. Brad finally looks away from the window and raises his eyebrows at me.

Dolly giggles and chirps, "Mommy said a bad word!"

"Watch her," I say sternly to Brad, "I'll be right back."

His eyebrows fall and he looks back to the window. I contemplate repeating myself but decide it isn't worth it.

As I stand from the booth Beth rises with me. "I'll help you," she says.

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We make our way to the diner's single bathroom. Beth flicks on the fluorescent lights and I walk to the sink, where I bring my fingers up to my face and gently run them over the crow's feet lining my eyes. I don't recognize the woman who I see before me.

"Look at that hot mama!" Beth says with a smirk as she appears by my side, paper towel in hand.

"Oh please," I respond, "it's like every time I give a time out I get a tally mark etched into my face." It wasn't funny, but Beth smirks as she turns the sink's handle and wets the paper towel. "And look at this outfit. I look like the cover model for Suburban Mom Weekly."

"What's wrong with capris?" she asks, still smiling. Her amusement calms me; I feel my facial muscles loosen in the warmth of her smile.

"Nothing, I guess. I just feel like someone else sometimes." She furrows her brow at that, then brings the paper towel to my chest, blotting at the ketchup stain lightly but rapidly. The ketchup slowly fades, leaving only a few pale dots in its place, and her blotting slows. She looks up at me. I look into her innocent brown eyes, then to the freckles that dot her nose, then to her glossy brown hair, which falls to her shoulder. I reach up and take it in my hands.

"And you're the beautiful one here, by the way." I lament. "How did I get married before you?"

"You know that's way too much commitment for me." she says, turning to toss the paper towel in the trash. When she turns back to me, she places her finger below my chin and raises my head so my eyes meet hers again. "What's wrong babydoll?"

The nickname brings a small smile to my lips; she's been calling me that since the day we met in college, many years ago. It wormed its way into my vocabulary like a virus, so much so it inspired Dolly's name.

"Nothing, I'm fine. Really," I reply, shaking her persistent gaze. I turn toward the mirror and she follows, looking now to my reflection.

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“It’ll be okay.” she says, rubbing my arm. We both study each other in the mirror, until she speaks again, quieter, “Would you ever give it up?”

“Being a mom?” I ask.

She pauses. “No, all of it. Being settled. Don’t you ever want to trade it for something else?”

I look downwards, becoming lost in the frills of her breezy black dress. For a moment I feel safe; my lips begin to open as if prepared to let the truth out. I catch the urge, though, breaking my daze and turning towards the bathroom door to exit. “No, of course not. I’m very blessed.”

After leaving the diner we split up. Our plans to stand and watch some of the parade were foiled as Dolly’s chaotic energy reached a boiling point. She caught a glimpse of a boutique arts and crafts store and devolved into full meltdown mode, tugging on our pants and wailing about how her life depended on marvelling over colored fabrics and handmade ceramic figurines. Beth graciously offered to take her to visit some of the nearby shops towards the south end of the street, while Brad and I decided to take a walk north, in the opposite direction of the parade, to catch as much of it as possible. Secretly I am grateful to be able to avoid the southern end of the street. I am anxious to put distance between me and the building that lurks like a shadow in my memories.

Even the thought of that place quickens my heartbeat. As we walk through the crowds, surrounded on our left by an impenetrable row of brick shops and restaurants, and on our right by a constant stream of parade floats, we swerve around still observers and brush past other bodies traversing the street. I catch bits of their conversations as we pass:

“Looks like they cut the budget this year.”

“Can you believe she said that?”

“It’s not that I want to fuck him I just want...”

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“Did you hear about the girl who got abducted...”

My chest grows tighter. I slip my hand into Brad’s and grip it firmly. His rough skin feels alien, but it grounds me. My breathing slows.

“Remember how often we used to come here?” he says.

I give a short hum in acknowledgment; my clenched jaw won’t allow any more than that. I do remember. When we first got married many of the attractions of the area were new developments. Being an adventurous young couple imprisoned in the suburbs we flocked to places like this to bring variety to our twenties, which were bogged down by monotonous 9-5 jobs and the unknowns of being newly married. Ironically we eventually visited the avenue so often that it completely defeated our original purpose for seeking it out, but I didn’t mind. I still believed in the monotony back then. And when it got tiring, I found new ways to excite myself.

“Those were the days,” Brad continues. “Remember how you’d always get tipsy and lost somewhere and I’d have to come and find you?” He laughs briefly. It feels more accusatory than nostalgic.

“Are you testing me?” I ask.

“No. Sometimes I just wonder...” he says, his voice trailing off and leaving the sentence incomplete. I pull my hand from his. The northern end of the street comes into view and the crowds of parade watchers and shoppers thins. We stop and stand, him facing the parade with a hand above his eyes to shield the noon sun, which had free reign of the cloudless April sky above, and me facing him with my head cast downwards, eyes caught in the glistening black surface of his prosthetic leg. It reminds me why I don’t feel the same warmth of nostalgia for the days of our early marriage as he does; those times are too far away now, separated in my brain by a concrete barrier of the memories that came after, the memories of months of being his caretaker, of washing and changing and feeding him, of having to watch him retreat into himself. Most good memories were extinguished in the darkness of that period.

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“Why do you think we stopped?” he asks. I move my head upwards, past his cargo shorts and grey polo, until I see his shadowed face, which is still focused on the parade. His eyes look past me.

“I don’t know.” I close my eyes and suddenly I am in the past, looking out at Mayview Avenue from a second story window. It is late at night, and the street is dark, the pavement glowing a deep blue in the moonlight. I can sense every detail just as palpably: I feel my hair scooped up by a hand behind me, I feel my neck being kissed, I feel my hands reaching backwards and grasping at silky fabric.

I open my eyes and let the oppressive sunlight wash the memory away. Brad is now studying my face. I blush, hoping the memory didn’t expose itself in my facial expression.

“We’d better start heading back,” I stammer, turning to walk back down the street. Brad silently does the same. “Poor Beth is probably losing her mind right now.”

When we reach Beth she is leafing through dresses hung in front of a clothes shop toward the south end of the street. My heart sinks before I can process why: Dolly is nowhere to be seen. Beth grins widely as we close the distance to her. “How was your stroll?” she asks.

“Beth, where is Dolly?” I say breathlessly. I hope she will laugh about it and point to a spot on the sidewalk where I’ll find Dolly sitting down, stacking rocks or making pictures with torn blades of grass, but instead, the smile disappears off Beth’s face. It is replaced with an empty and confused expression. She turns her head one way, then the other, as if trying to retrace her steps in her mind.

“Beth?!” I repeat, my voice both louder and higher pitched. Brad places his hand on my back.

“Okay, let’s stay calm,” he says, then, to Beth: “Do you not remember where you had her last?”

“She was right here...” Beth mutters.

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I shrug Brad's hand off me and bring my face close to Beth's, forcing her to focus on me. "How could you lose her?" I ask, my voice now more of a growl.

Brad places his arm around me and gently leads me back again. "It hasn't been that long, you can't have gone to many shops. Where did you guys come from?"

"We've just been going shop to shop..."

"So how could you lose her?!" I exclaim.

"Well standing here won't find her," Brad interrupts, "nor will getting emotional." I shoot him a glare but he continues, "Let's split up and look. Beth you retrace your steps, Charlie you look in the nearby shops, and I'll see if she could've crossed the street or something."

I inhale deeply, ready to interrogate Beth further, but my anger fades and I put the argument behind me. I break away from the two without another word and proceed towards the last few shops on the southern end of the street. With each store I hurriedly enter and ask the nearest cashier or employee if they've seen a small girl; there are only a handful of shops to check, and with each my prospects grow more grim, until finally I am left with only one store. The store.

I linger in front of it, looking up to the second story window I gazed out so many times in my memories. The brick facade of the federal style building seems to loom over me and propel me away, making each step I take toward it increasingly more difficult. Finally, I reach the door and enter.

I am greeted with refuge from the avenue's chaos as the store's interior is dim and quiet. A shade is pulled down over the store's windows, making its only source of light a few orange antique lamps. The blocked window and corner position of the building must have prevented other pedestrians from exploring the shop, as I am its only customer. To my right are a series of aisles hosting shelves of worldly souvenirs and artwork. Directly in front of me is a small desk where a woman stands, reading a magazine. She has copper brown hair, long black fingernails, and a skintight, sequined silver dress, which shimmers in the store's orange lamp light. Sylvia.

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She looks up as the door swings closed behind me and her eyes narrow. "Charlotte?"

"Sylvia...hi," I respond, my voice reduced to a whisper.

"It's been so long," she says, her voice sultry and slow. She stands from the desk and beckons me to her. "Come here. Let me look at you."

I approach her, weightless, as if in a dream. When I reach the desk she begins to open her arms for a hug, but I move to the front of the desk, keeping it as a barrier between us. She smirks.

"Gosh, how long has it been?" she sings. "Three years? Four? You still look stunning."

A smile sneaks its way onto my face. I look down at the counter, trying to remember my purpose for entering the shop.

"How have you been?" she asks.

"I've been...fine, life's good." I reply, lost for words.

"You still married to that guy?"

"Brad, his name's Brad--"

"And your baby, well, I guess she's not a baby anymore, how is she?"

"She's great, you know toddlers," I reply with a laugh. My baby...Dolly...the urgency of the situation resurfaces in my mind. "Well, actually--"

"I'm so glad." Sylvia says, tossing her hair behind her shoulder. She leans forward onto the desk with her elbows, resting her head on her fists and drawing me in closer. I keep my neck stiff to prevent falling and getting lost in the shadows of her cleavage. "I'm still the same I guess..."

"Living free?" I say, the words exiting from me automatically, as comfortable as an exhale; it was a mantra my brain was trained to repeat.

Sylvia laughs, this time showing her teeth. "That's right. I can't be tied down. Well, I guess the shop is an anchor for me, but only in between journeys."

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My mind wanders, replaying a well-worn fantasy reel from the deepest corners of my consciousness. I see myself sitting next to Sylvia on an airplane, resting my hand in her lap as she looks out into the clouds. I see her holding my hand, leading me through the streets of a city with signs in a foreign language. I see the two of us wandering through a street market in search of the perfect treasure to bring back to the shop.

The shop. Dolly. I reenter the moment and pull back. “Actually, Sylvia, I’m looking for my daughter. We lost her.”

“Oh you poor thing,” she says. She drapes her hand over mine. Her smooth skin shoots electricity up my arm.

“Have you seen her?” I ask, my voice losing its determination again as I catch wafts of her perfume, which is somewhere between orange blossom and vanilla.

“No, the shop’s been empty today.”

“Oh, okay, well--”

“I’ve been packing up actually. I’m headed on a new adventure tonight. You could come with, if you wanted.” She looks into my eyes coyly, making me lose my train of thought. As I hold our eye contact I find myself being lured in closer, until my arms are resting on the desk as well. “We used to have a lot of fun,” she whispers.

“Why did we stop?” I ask, fully entranced.

She traces her fingers over the back of my hand. “You couldn’t handle it. You said something about too many lies. But if you ask me...” her hand begins to brush past my wrist and up my arm, “the lie is what you’re living now. Isn’t it time you accepted yourself?” She smiles warmly toward me. “Who you really are?”

*The lie...*my brain tumbles her words around and tries to make meaning of them.

*The...lie...is what...*Sylvia’s nails brush back down my arm. *Yourself...* My head inches towards Sylvia’s. *Who...you...are...*I close my eyes. *Dolly...*

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As our lips grow steadily closer, my mind races. I remember the first time I entered this shop, years ago, while Brad waited outside. It didn't feel like a lie at first. That day, when Sylvia's eyes met mine for the first time, it awakened feelings in me that had always been hidden deep inside. I had pushed those feelings down so many times: when Beth pushed me to go on a date with a mutual friend named Brad, when Brad proposed and I didn't want to hurt him, when I had second thoughts about our marriage, but my parents pushed me to go through with it. In the moment our eyes first connected, those feelings were set free and I was too. But every time I snuck to Sylvia's shop, a little bit of that jubilation was eroded, and nothing replaced it, leaving me feeling hollow, afraid, and confused. By the time Brad had his accident, it didn't feel right anymore.

Yet as I stand here, so close to Sylvia I can feel her breath graze my lips, I can't remember what that emptiness felt like. Suddenly it feels right again.

Just as the gap between our lips is about to close, an array of screams from outside pierces the tranquility of the shop and severs my lust. I open my eyes and step backwards. Sylvia looks up at me.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

I look to the door, heart racing, then back at Sylvia. "I should go." I mutter. I begin to walk away from the desk. When I'm halfway to the door, I turn my head and say, "Thanks for...the help."

Sylvia giggles. "I'll see you later."

I force myself to turn away and proceed out of the store.

Outside, the clamor of the festivities is replaced by a different kind of chaos. The parade has halted. Another pack of painted minivans sits still in the street. A crowd of hushed onlookers is gathered a couple of buildings north from where I am, trying to get a glimpse of the street, where space is cleared around one car. From where I stand, I can see a teenage girl sobbing and several adults with panicked faces crouching down.

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My heart sinks, but my feet carry me, one step at a time, toward the commotion. With every step I reassure myself it isn't Dolly. It can't be. I reach the crowd of onlookers and push my way through, keeping my nerves at bay by repeating in my head that it will be a stranger, that Dolly and Beth will emerge any minute and pull me back.

I break through and the first thing my eyes see is the blood. Dark red liquid is smeared across the front of the minivan, dripping between the bars of its grille. I track the blood to its source only to find Brad lying on the asphalt. His face is stained with a stream of blood which emanates from somewhere on the side of his head. His eyes are closed, but his chest moves slightly upwards and retreats, producing a raspy, nearly inaudible breath.

"Brad? Honey?" I say quietly. My hands begin to shake.

The teenage girl glances at me out of the corner of her eye. She's holding a phone and between her panicked breaths she speaks, her words jumbled and hard to make out. My mind reels, only catching fragments of what she says: "Out of nowhere...ran in front...he wasn't paying attention...gas instead of the brake...so sorry...please hurry..."

I stand over Brad waiting to break down, but no tears come, and my pulse remains steady. I slowly kneel beside him and place a hand on his waist. "Brad..."

I hear the wail of an ambulance in the distance. Cars pull to the side of the road to make room and soon it arrives. I stand and turn, scanning the crowds for any sign of Beth and Dolly. They aren't anywhere to be found. They've disappeared.

I look back at Brad. Two EMTs are kneeling besides him, asking him questions in hopes of arousing him. His eyes are closed. Behind the blood that veils his face I barely recognize him. The movement of his chest slows as the EMTs wheel a stretcher towards him. He's disappearing too.

Suddenly my body feels light and untethered. I turn towards Sylvia's shop. *Living free...* my words, Sylvia's words, echo in my head. I think of Beth's question and the lie I responded with.

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“Yes,” I whisper the real answer as I walk away from Brad and the ambulance.

“Ma’am.” A hand grabs my shoulder but I continue moving forward. I picture myself falling into Sylvia’s arms and her embracing me. The image was wrong, it was fantasy, but I allowed it to block out everything else.

“Ma’am,” the voice came again. Fantasies pour into my mind. I picture myself cutting my hair short and dyeing it, erasing every remnant of my past self. I picture myself and Sylvia on a beach, feeding each other sips of mimosas. I picture the two of us laying in bed, our hair now grey, our wrinkles plentiful, but her eyes just as soothing.

“Ma’am!” The hand grabs my shoulder more firmly this time, and I finally turn, all the details of the accident breaking through the barricade of fantasy in my mind. The teenage girl is standing with her hand on my shoulder. Her voice is more calm now. “Aren’t you supposed to go with him?”

She points to the ambulance, where Brad is being loaded in the back. I nod to the girl, then go to the ambulance, step up into it, and sit on the cushioned bench across from Brad.

“Charlotte!” a voice calls out. I look out and see Beth and Dolly. Dolly’s small hand is gripped firmly by Beth’s. “What happened?” Beth hollers.

“Stay here,” I choke out. “I’ll come back for you!”

The engine of the ambulance purrs through the floor. The second EMT walks around the back of the vehicle. As he swings one door closed, I look out one last time at the brick building on the southern end of Mayview Avenue, and picture Sylvia standing at its door, staring back at me. “I’ll come back for you...” I whisper, just as the second door is swung shut and the ambulance pulls away.