

Say It

I didn't return to my final year of college because I ran out of money and had stopped leaving the couch anyways. I was back in my parent's house. I kept a carefully folded blanket discreetly next to the couch during the day so I could unfurl them easily when it got dark. I never slept in my own bed. Initially, my family was gentle. They even accepted the marathons of wedding shows I watched because I always relinquished the remote and watched what they wanted until they left me alone. After that I could click back to the brides. They were squeaky and sexy and shining in white or blush pink and taffeta and tulle. They always said yes, they always cried. Weeks later I was trailing my mother on her errands for the day. I stayed in the car to study myself in the visor mirror in the sunlight and pluck my eyebrows with her tweezers from her purse.

"Monica is looking for a new assistant at the daycare," my mother said when she returned. I didn't say anything but plucked another stray hair.

"She'll pay you ten dollars an hour. You can start classes again, you know the quarter hasn't started at the junior college. It's with little kids, they're all sweet."

Monica was took care of my siblings years ago in a daycare she ran out of her home. My mother wasn't suggesting, she was telling. I thought about how I was making what looked like a permanent indent in her couch. I scheduled a TB test at a clinic, I filled out paperwork, and I took the job. The kids and I were suspicious of each other for the first week. I kept smiling but my lips were always cracked and chapped. I wanted them to like me so I sang songs and danced and showed them videos of penguins because they seemed like the most fun animal to look at. My favorite word was "again!" and I would sing or read or build the tower of blocks to be knocked over, again and again. My third week, I was slapped in the face by a little boy who was three. We both looked at each other, surprised. He waited and smiled. I could only think to say,

“No no, we don’t do that,” and took his arm and sat him on a chair in the kitchen. Monica scolded him while she prepared lunch. I returned to the others.

“Hitting is bad,” announced Pia, who was also three. I had secretly deemed her my best friend because she always politely told me to leave her alone when I offered to help her.

“That’s right. We don’t hit.”

I had started talking in we’s. We use our inside voices, we don’t hit, we don’t throw things.

Again, again. When I started working at the daycare, I had also signed up for two afternoon psychology classes at a community college like my mother requested. Everyone in my classes seemed so much cleaner and prettier than I was. I looked at every boy like he could have potential to love me. I did not talk to anyone except for Amelia, who noticed one afternoon that I was scraping crusted applesauce off of my jeans with my sweater sleeve.

She pulled out some napkins and dampened them with her water bottle that sat next to her purse. She handed me the bunch. I thanked her, grateful.

“I’ve been there. You got a kid?”

“No, I just take care of them. You?”

“Two.”

I was surprised. Amelia looked like she was my age. She smiled. “I got started young. You know?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Totally.”

I didn’t. After she helped me, I sat next to her every class. I learned that she had two children in middle school (if I looked at her closely, she did look less like my age but only when she frowned) and she was pregnant (when she stood up, I could see that, too). She showed me the baby strollers she was comparison shopping while I ate the candy she brought.

“I took it from my kids for Halloween. They don’t need it,” she explained.

Amelia always told me to go into nursing. “Good money,” she said. “You’re smart, so you’ll always have a job.”

I would always nod, like I was really thinking about it.

“You still have time, you’re young. Not like me,” she would say, and pat her belly. I always told her variations of “oh stop it, you are not old, you look great” and she would laugh, pleased.

Amelia adored hearing stories about Pia and loved to listen to me gripe about the parents.

“Parents are just crazy. And I can say that, I’m a mom,” she would say, waving her hands in the air. “Parents are what make me not want to ever work with kids.”

Amelia was studying to get her degree in hospitality instead. She was the only person I told about Patrick, Pia’s dad, who added me on Facebook. He sent me two messages I had yet to read.

“It’s weird, right?” I asked. I knew it was.

“Duh. Is he married?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I haven’t met his wife because he drops off Pia in the mornings, but look at her.”

I showed Amelia his profile. She clicked through and gazed at their smiling family portrait, then slid the phone back to me.

“So not cool. That’s really shady. Does he talk to you?”

“The most I’ve talked to him is about if Pia had any breakfast.”

“I would kill my husband if he pulled that,” she said, eyebrows raised. “Shady shit. Delete him.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

I read Patrick’s message that night on the couch in the glow of the television. I kept it on mute, watching the brides shimmy in sparkling ecstasies of ballgowns and beaming mothers. Patrick sent a psychology article about child development because he noticed my psychology textbook at the daycare, if I was interested in pursuing it, he was a sociology professor at the university

and would love to answer my questions over coffee. Of course he was, I thought. I wondered if he knew that I used to attend that university before I took care of his child. His second message had typos. He didn't think I felt the same way but he felt drawn to say something, even though he knew how wrong it was, even if I found it repulsive, if only because if I felt the same way it would be a thousand times better than him never knowing. He just had to say it, he just had to. I read the abstract of the article next, but it was boring. I looked at his pictures, one was of Pia smiling at daycare. I could see myself clearly taking the picture in the reflection of the window behind her. Monica sent dutiful emails to the parents of pictures I took of the kids. I reread the messages, typed "thanks!" and sent it. I kept returning to the picture of Pia. I thought about Amelia, so confident that it was wrong, and her husband who I knew would pick her up from class so she wouldn't have to take the bus. I deleted his request and slid under my blanket. I woke up the next morning to infomercials for acne medicine, showing again and again scenes of before and after. At work I sat alone with the little boy who slapped me, pointing at different crayons for him to tell me the colors.

"Blue," he said. He snapped it half from coloring too hard. Pia strolled through the door with her mother. I distractedly pointed at another crayon. "Blue," he repeated, impatient. "More blue." I heard more snaps. She folded herself down next to me at the table. It was squat and meant for children.

"My husband has issues with boundaries," she said firmly. "I apologize for making you uncomfortable. I'll be picking up and dropping off Pia from now on."

I felt like I was slapped again. I said, "Thank you."

She lifted herself gracefully and left. Pia sat next to me and started scribbling swirls of pink while telling me a story about a pig. In class I greeted Amelia with peanut butter cups (her favorite) and the story. She gasped when I told her about Pia's mother.

“Did you think she was going to beat your ass?” she asked.

“I thought she was going to say that he was dead or something.”

“He should be. What an asshole,” she said, shaking her head. “Bet you that’s not the first time he’s done that.”

“What?”

“She apologized for him?” Amelia reminded me. “Honestly, girl. She didn’t even come after you, she knew it was all him. I can’t believe you thanked her, either. You should have told her to leave his ass.”

“It’s not really my business. Maybe they’re open? That’s their own thing to deal with.”

“He made it your business,” Amelia said, eating the last peanut butter cup. She crinkled the wrapper. “Even if they’re open, he’s way inappropriate. And you’re too nice, say something. Oh!” She grabbed my hand and pressed it to her belly. “Feel?”

“When I get worked up about things, she always kicks around. You should have felt her last night when I was hassling the kids to do homework.”

On my drive home I stopped one block from my house and gave into the mouthwatering ache I had held since feeling the baby’s fretful kicks, the heaving kind of cry that hurts and leaves an embarrassing stream of liquid and mucus. I felt like a sticky baby as I fumbled for napkins and settled for my sweater. I thought about how I helped my friend in high school egg her ex-boyfriend’s car after he left her for another girl (it’s impossible to remove the dried egg without removing the paint). In my third year at the university I helped another friend write a letter to the girl in another dorm her boyfriend was cheating on her with (You don’t know me, but as a woman I would want to know...)

I drove back to the freeway. I hadn’t been to my school since I left. I drove through campus and parked in front of the humanities building. I found his office and saw a glow of light under the

closed door. I heard low voices and laughter. Outside there was a whiteboard with his office hours listed. Leave a note, it announced with a cheerful happy face. I swiped a permanent marker from another office, scribbled lightly, and walked away. In bed later that night I pictured him opening the door for student in there he invited out to coffee, or maybe it was another professor he invited out to drinks. After all, he didn't need to pick up Pia anymore. He was too busy escorting this beautiful woman to notice anything wrong. I liked to think one professor who didn't like him noticed and left it up for everyone in the department to see. I imagined someone taking a picture of it and posting it online, where it would spread and eventually sent to me from one of my past classmates. 'Did you see this,' it read. 'He had it coming.'

I showed the picture to Amelia. She read it silently, her lips mouthing part of it, "inappropriate, liar, disrespectful, always has excuses" and then fierce, protective Amelia laughed. People in class looked back to watch us snort and laugh and hold our bellies. We were asked to step outside and she took me to the gas station to get candy. She kept repeating "disrespectful!", and dissolving into laughter.

"You said it, girl," she said, wiping happy tears from her eyes. "You told him. You told everyone."