

She woke up in Max's bed, curled around him like the next size up of a Russian nesting doll. He was out, hair pasted to his forehead with a night's worth of sweat, cheeks flushed, the room stuffy with that sweet, almost sour smell sleeping kids give off. Awake, Max could be a real shit; but like this, all peaceful and puppy-like, Justine worried less. He'd grow up and be a gentler, kinder version of himself when it was time, and for now she'd play wrangler, do her best to make sure, in his wildness, he didn't break any part of his sister or set anything important on fire.

Back in Justine's own room, Brian slept just as hard. He had a smell too, musky, animal. She grabbed her phone off the bedside table and texted mom her daily greeting: "GOOD MORNING! EVERYTHING'S GOOD!" It was important not to forget, because if some morning she happened not to, mom would know to call the neighbor.

"Max! Up! If you miss the bus I'm not driving you!" Justine hollered across the hall. The yelling didn't bother Brian, who slept like he was part of the bed. Downstairs, Natalie sat clean and small amid the culinary damage Brian did to the kitchen last night. She was fishing through the box of Lucky Charms with her tiny hand, picking out marshmallows and adding them to her almost entirely marshmallow filled bowl. "Mom, shouldn't the hearts taste different than the moons?" Justine made for the coffee maker without answering. Then, in a smaller voice, "I don't think they do."

Once the kids were off to school, Justine only had a tiny window before Brian woke up. It was getting warmer, and the kids' go-bags were filled with heavy sweaters and long underwear. As she switched them out she thought about how much Max had grown, even in the last three months. These pants would be too short for him now.

In Natalie's room, stuffed in the back of the bottom left drawer of her white lacquer dresser, was the old nightgown with the wad of cash hovering just below \$2000. Justine had to pull \$500 back in January when Brian's transmission went out and in just days, having him around the house constantly went from less-than-ideal to unbearable. Brian didn't know what to do with himself. He wandered between rooms as Justine vacuumed, made the kids' beds, paid a stack of bills in the dining room. "What can I help you with?" Brian would ask her, and Justine looked at him with a little ache, because even between the tasks so mind-numbing and tedious she couldn't believe they filled her days, she still didn't have a single chore she thought Brian could see through from start to finish. At least with his car working, he could drive to the rec center and play pickup with old high school buddies who had fallen on hard times or who were so void of ambition that since high school they really hadn't had any times to speak of. But having Brian in the house ALL day was irritating and sad, so even though it meant dipping into her stash, she counted off \$500 and told him to go fix his car. She'd been saving it for his birthday present, she said when he asked where she got the money. And whether he believed her or not, he hated hanging around the house as much as Justine hated having him there, so he took the money and didn't push the issue.

Probably all this sneaking around was silly, Justine told herself. Probably this was just one of those times, the kind you have to bite down hard on. You have to clench your jaw around these times until the sting starts to dull and your body can relax a little. Probably she could stay here, in this nice red brick house three in from the south corner on the east side of the block, until her two happy kids were too big for all their clothes and wanted to live their own lives. She could get all wrinkly with Brian and their little mutt, Rosie, who was so yappy that neighbors called regularly to complain. Once, in the middle of the night, someone crept down their driveway and

let her out of the backyard. Whatever the idiot hoped to accomplish didn't know Rosie, who was too scared to venture past the recycling they'd left on the street that night. Justine found her the next morning, digging up the hydrangeas they planted up and down the driveway the year before, which didn't matter since Brian ran over them regularly backing out.

It was a nicer house than she ever thought she'd live in, something she tried to remind herself of while she fished out the vacuum attachments to be able to get the top of the drapes. I'm lucky! She told herself in sticky-sarcastic mindspeak. How many women have drapes so nice they had to be vacuumed? But you have to keep yourself from getting worked up about stuff like that, really, or eventually you'd find a way to get worked up about everything. She was "choosing" to vacuum these hideous, hotel-looking drapes because the alternative was listening to Brian's mother not so subtly offer to pay for a cleaning lady. That would be out of the question. No more money from Brian's parents. Justine made that rule even before Brian left for Afghanistan. No more money even if it meant dipping into the secret emergency wrapped-in-a-nightgown escape fund for an amount of money Brian's mom probably padded her bra with. There'd been happy moments in this house. Happy moments with the kids, like when Max got his head stuck between two rungs in the banister. Justine came in from pulling up weeds to find Natalie rubbing butter on his neck to ease him out, like she'd seen on Scooby Doo. Eventually, Justine sawed through one of the rungs with a Williams Sonoma bread knife her mother-in-law had given her. Brian was on tour then, so she didn't have to stomach his nervous anger about messing up the staircase that really, if we're gonna be honest, belonged to his parents. Should she yell at them? She did have it in her. She just laughed and drew a bath for Max and Natalie to degrease themselves. And she thought as she fiddled with the hot water, maybe this is our family. Maybe it's better just like this.

There'd been happy moments with Brian in this house, too. Don't forget that, Justine, she told herself. That summer night, five years ago, before Brian left for his tour when the two of them lay in bed facing each other, still young and still good-looking and still surprised how cosmically well-plotted the world was that two people prepared to care about each other exactly as much as they did could meet and bear to love and be loved. That was the night Brian told her wanted to adopt Natalie and Max, that if anything happened to him in Afghanistan he wanted to make sure they were taken care of. He told her he loved them like he was their real father, which made Justine cry because there was a big dad-shaped hole in both of her children where a grown man's love should be. That was the night she thought, I love this man because he is a good man and how hard those could be to find, she could say with certainty after searching for and not finding one for her entire life up until Brian. Max's father left her for some sixteen year old kid five months after they got married, and Natalie's dad, who bartended back when she was still waiting tables at Shandy's, was sweet but stood Justine up enough times toward the end that her pride kept her from ever telling him she was pregnant. Brian was a good man to be taking in this stray young-but-didn't-feel-young mom and her two stray kids. Like they were kittens in a bag he'd found off the highway. And Brian was a good man because what should be simple pity for them was real love. He came along and loved her at the moment she'd resigned herself to being strong enough to live without stupid, disappointing, crazy-making love. On the worst days she tried to remind herself that this was part of Brian too.

“What are you doing?” It was 10:45am and Brian wandered into the kitchen in his boxers, running his hands over his protruding belly. It was paler and doughier than when he'd enlisted, mainly, he insisted, because of the meds. She tried not to study his body in the light of

day like this, something that had changed so much, turned into a cliché of how men age. He used to be all muscle, the way you see muscles in a painting or a marble statue. The perfect math of his torso used to make her shy to undress in front of him, imagining the two of them from above, her imperfect body more pronounced next to his. But he'd make her do it: strip down, stand in front of him, listen to him tell her everything he saw and liked. The natural perkiness of her small breasts, the solidness and strength of her wide hips. Listening to him made her so happy to be particular, to look the way she did instead of looking like any other woman. And poor Brian, who'd made her feel so beautiful, now she tried not to look at him, embarrassed and angry his body had the nerve to go and show its weakness.

“What does it look like I'm doing?” Brian watched her blankly. “I'm cleaning up your mess. Look, if you're going to fry ham or whatever in the middle of the night, at least wash your friggin dishes when you're done. The whole house stinks.” It scared her, this new habit Brian had of slipping out of bed at all hours and inevitably finding his way to the stove. Weeks ago, he'd boiled down eggs to a hard charcoal after wandering into the living room and nodding off on the couch. He couldn't boil an egg these days. But maybe with time, probably he'd be able to. “Ham? Seriously? Man, that's so crazy. I don't even remember doing that. Getting fat sucks even more when you can't even remember the food that's doing it to you.” He tried to give his own joke an awkward chuckle and wrapped his arm around Justine's waist, pulling her ass against the front of him, resting his hand lightly on her stomach.

“Don't!” She squirmed away from his touch out of habit and then felt sorry for it. “You know I don't like it when you touch my stomach,” She tried to soften her tone. “You're not the only one who's getting fat.”

“Jesus, Justine. Don’t treat me like a fucking idiot.” Now he was mad, which made her nervous but worse it made her mad right back.

“Yeah why would I treat you like a fucking idiot? Now go play with your PS4 or your Xbox960 or whatever you to use for the games Max got tired of six months ago.” It was a cheap shot to take, especially because she knew that’s how he WOULD spend the morning into late afternoon. It made him happy and kept him busy so why would a good wife, or any kind of good person for that matter, make him feel bad for it? He refused to play any of the violent games, which they were all better off for, so that left him with hours upon hours of “Animal Crossing”, “Mario Kart” and “Toy Story”. Dirty plates piled up around him, empty cans of Pepsi, until the sun set and he’d stumble bleary eyed to the dinner table. He hated that video games were the only thing that kept his attention, held his focus. Some days he’d get so sick of himself he’d shower after dinner and take off to the bar. She should have left the video games alone. It was the least she could do.

“You know what, Justine? There’s only so much shit a guy can take before he snaps.” When Brian talked like that, Justine knew it was best to unbristle and comfort him. She reached for him, placed her hands on his pasty shoulders, and gave him a few squeezes. She could not take him in her arms. He scared her, disgusted her, like a wounded, wild animal you find and cannot bear to wrap in a blanket and drive to the vet. Something that scratches at the air with its sharpest parts, and gives off the odor of wild and rotting. No, she could not hold him, even against all her softest instincts.

“Hey baby, I’m sorry. You know how I am in the mornings. I didn’t sleep well and Natalie was – ”

“There’s only so much, Justine...”

“I know, I know. Come on now.” Still holding his shoulder, she guided him into a seat at the kitchen table. She poured a cup of black coffee into his Semper Fi mug, popped two Eggo waffles in the toaster, and switched on the old TV set above the table. They would not speak again that morning, reruns of Animaniacs and Looney Toons filling the silence too big for the two of them to make a dent in.

Three hours later, Brian emerged from their room, where he’d gone to try to nap off his anger. He made his way down the stairs in his basketball shorts and ratty old marine corps shirt, his gym bag slung over his broad left shoulder.

“Gonna go play with the guys?” Justine could hear her own voice, higher, tighter, than usual.

“Yeah I gotta get out of here. I’m going crazy.” Justine shifted awkwardly. “I’m sorry if I was, I guess, maybe a little fired up this morning.” Justine shrugged. “I just can’t tell. Are you afraid of me? Or disgusted by me?” Justine traced the grain in the hardwood floor with one socked foot. “Or both. Seems like both.”

Justine saw the way other women in her situation held things together, the wives of guys Brian served with and still made an effort to see. They took care of everything in graceful swoops. At a backyard barbeque: tuck napkins in kids’ collars so they don’t drop mustard down their shirts. Swoop. Make sure the beer can in husband’s hand is never empty. Swoop. Discreetly re-apply fading lipstick and wipe away any grease that might have accumulated under eyes. Swoop. She understood the how they kept their kids together, how they kept themselves together, but how did they sit next to their husbands, bodies lovingly close, the man’s arm casually draped around the woman’s shoulder? How did they make that part look normal? She wasn’t friends with them, so she didn’t ask.

“Jesus, Justine. You’re a real bitch sometimes.” He paused, staring her down. “You’re fucking cruel.” And then he stormed past her, out the front door. She listened to his car peel out of the driveway, a crunch of twigs as he took out the last surviving hydrangea bush. She let the new emptiness of the house smooth itself over her. It felt warm, like a towel at the beach. And then calmly, she did what she always did when he left the house. She made her way to their room, into their closet, fished her hand behind Brian’s winter pullovers to make sure the beat-up cherry wood box was still there, that Brian hadn’t taken its contents, a 9mm and the box of Lugers with him. Everything was in its place. She went downstairs to make herself a salad.

By 4pm, when the bus dropped the kids home from school, there was no word from Brian. She didn’t particularly expect there to be. He stayed away with his buddies as long as he could push it, and when he was angry at Justine, longer than he could push it. Max stomped up to his room and holed up inside, Natalie sat on the carpet of the living room cutting models from catalogues into paper dolls. Dinner time came, and still no word.

“Dinner! Natalie, help me set the table! Max, get the plates down for Natalie!”

“Does Brian need one?” Max asked as he handed Natalie three blue plates.

“No, dad’s gonna grab something while he’s out.” Justine’s voice was flat, washed-out.

“Good.” Natalie waited for her mother to react. “I mean, not always. But on meatloaf nights. He eats too much meatloaf.” She dramatically rolled her eyes.

If a stranger, some creep lurking around in the backyard, looked in through the dining room window, he’d see a happy family on mute. Inside, Natalie chatted about the braid her classmate wore her hair in, “It’s called a fishtail! Can you give me one, mom???” And Max taught them about Komodo dragons. But there wouldn’t be a stranger out there, thought Justine.

Not with the security system Brian installed, not with his nightly walks around the perimeter of the house like he was back patrolling again. That someone could make her feel so safe and also scare her was something Justine wanted to push to the way back of her mind. Natalie and Max loaded the dishwasher while Justine washed the pans, then it was homework time, then into your pajamas, then off to bed. Bedtime, still no word.

In the darkness, Justine could just make out the ceiling fan above her. Maybe Brian wasn't coming back. Maybe he found someone new to fuck, who wasn't cold or condescending. She wouldn't blame him. She knew they weren't partners anymore. They were sense-memory triggers, the roughness of Brian's hands, the smell of Justine's shampoo, conjuring the feeling of loss itself. Looking at each other was a reminder that they were both worse, somehow, than what they used to be.

Or maybe he just decided to take off on his own. That thought worried her. There were so many men out on the street, hair matted, breath boozy, trying to stay warm in filthy camo and old combat boots. He needed someone to help him. He *deserved* someone.

Or maybe...

Somewhere below, she heard the gate swing open. Rosie starting yapping her happy yap, the way she yapped for people she loved. Justine could hear a few "shhhhh" "shhhh"s, then the thud of a boot and a whimper. The back door opened and slammed shut. The stairs creaked. Justine listened to the ceiling fan whir, whir, whir. She had all day. She should have left when she had the chance.