

The front door crashes into the wall while two grown men stumble up from the stairs. The noise assaults. I clutch my belly with my right arm just like a pregnant woman on TV, as if this gesture could grant anyone protection.

Jason, my husband, supports Brendan, his brother. Brendan is drunk and clumsy and crashing on our living room couch. Brendan, Jason, brick wall names.

Ever caring, ever pliant, Jason makes a quick escape to our room for an extra pair of sweatpants. I want to serve, too, so I offer Brendan a glass of water.

“Too bad you guys didn’t make it out,” Brendan says in a way that suggests *I* am the bad thing. “We were disappointed.”

Oh I wish I knew how to make it out, make it out, make it out.

Water placed on the end table. He leers at like he’s trying to decide where the knife goes in the Thanksgiving turkey.

“Your tits got huge though,” he says. I want to think it’s because he’s drunk but this is hardly the first time, never the last. “Jason must be happy about that. I’m fucking this girl Joanna and her tits aren’t as big as yours, but I bet they’re nicer. Smaller nipples.”

“What about nipples?” Jason asks as if this is the silliest thing in the world. Not commonplace or expected.

“Silly drunkie,” I say, and it’s a song. “Take me to bed.”

Bed is king-size and downy. High-thread count sheets and a heated mattress pad. Eight pillows, or ten. Bed is warm and bed is safe.

Jason wants to know Am I OK? I’ll just pretend to sleep.

Brendan has never once stepped inside this room. Maybe if we don’t say his name, he never will.

Next day, brunch is a must. I am morning-sick and heavy. Brendan only visits twice a year. Brunch is a due to pay.

Hip spot, knit beanies and tattoos. A horde of smokers at the door. I take a deep, deep breath before walking their gauntlet. Inside, fire places and rustic brick.

10 a.m. and Brendan takes three shots, downs two beers. I hear they have a juicer and think about a beet juice, but worry they’ll put *too* many beets in. I stick to water.

Brendan tells us we’re boring and goes to mingle with the 20-somethings at the bar. He turns his head whenever a woman walks by, alone.

Yes, he was always like this. The first time I heard Brendan talk about a woman I was drunk and told myself I misremembered. Surely he wouldn’t tell a stranger (and also his brother’s girlfriend) the ways to convince an uncertain girlfriend to try a threesome. He wouldn’t describe a woman’s neck to me like that—like she’s prey. Would he? Oh, those cold eyes, too open, too hungry. I’d shiver but hide my doubts.

Then I fell in the grinder. I’d been with Jason a year. He was almost my fiancée. One night Brendan recited my stats: my hair color, height and weight, compared to every one of Jason’s ex-girlfriends. Why couldn’t I be funny like the one Brendan missed? Wasn’t it awful how I talked and dressed, so sad and poor?

That night, I was galvanized. I firmly asked Brendan to stop talking about me like a thing, and to stop comparing me to Jason’s exes. Jason backed me up. That one night.

Family gathering the following day, from which I was expressly banned. They hid Jason’s car keys and his phone. *How dare she dictate what I say. I am a feminist, you know. The*

*most feminist thing she could do is to hear me out.* The oven was stoked and rose. Every tender Jason spot was poked: *bad brother, bad son, disappointment.*

We were living together. When Jason came home he stacked all his things in boxes and told me he was moving out. I was already struggling to pay my half of the rent. I couldn't swing it on my own.

When you're poor, money is mortar.

I groveled. I excused Brendan's comments. Of course I was mistaken. The intentions were good. Everything about the Iozzia family is good. Designer clothes and expensive cars don't come to people who don't deserve them, right? Only goodness follows them (or gets swallowed up by them).

It was cemented from there. Today I do not talk to my family. Ever since our wedding, when Brendan showed up with one of Jason's exes as his date, insisting he wanted her there. Jason's defeat. My parents' horror. My sister's drunken accusation. I loved her in that moment. I loved her for she was funny and fierce. I was grateful but I had to betray her, had to tell her that everything was just fine. She still won't forgive me for shouting her down. But I had to do it, had to tell her Brendan was good.

I know the word *sociopath*. I can define it. But I have never found the word for the family that protects a monster. *We don't have that in our family.* The word for the excuses made and the attacks on anyone who would call it out. Well, of course, the money to cover things up, too. The mortar.

Scores scroll across a TV screen at the bar. Then a flash of big earrings and leather fringe boots. I see a young woman stalling by Brendan’s bar stool. His hand on her shoulder. She jerks her body away.

She heads toward the bathrooms. I watch her close—she’s pretty and messy and maybe 22. I admire her unbrushed, long-stringy hair. I wore my hair like that for years, until Brendan helpfully told me that every woman Jason ever loved had short hair. I chopped mine off before the wedding and never looked back.

Brendan flips a coaster once, twice. He’s up and stalking toward the bathroom himself.

Would he corner a woman in the dark hall? Could he break in to her stall? I’ve heard so many stories of his conquests in bar bathrooms. All lubricated, he insists, by alcohol. Drunk girls are up for *anything*, Brendan likes to say.

Or maybe they just can’t stand up.

I rise without a word to Jason and notice each bathroom is unisex. Damn, this doesn’t help. I pick the room farthest from the wait staff, farther from other *people*, and wiggle the handle. Nothing. Pound the door.

“Pregnant lady potty emergency!” I chirp. I’m funny, so funny, see?

She’s statuesque when she steps out. I don’t mind her towering over me. A jangle of earrings, a sound that says *free*. No one walks out behind her. I can breathe.

“Watch out for that creep behind you,” she says to me.

I turn and see—why am I surprised?—my wide-mouth, spaced-eyes brother-in-law, in line behind me.

“This asshole won’t back off,” she says, digging through her clutch. Before either of us can react she’s in Brendan’s face with her phone. *Click* of a camera. Then she’s out the door, a group of friends around her.

Brendan returns to the table with me. I’d like to pretend he seems chagrined. Really he’s just angry.

Thirty-six hours later and Brendan’s visit is long past. He’s back in Silicon Valley where he reigns as a prince. Developer rights, apps, start-up capital: all jewels in a crown.

Yet Jason has been on the phone with his distraught mother all morning.

“Do you really think you have a case?” Jason asks once again. “Who would you even sue? If Brendan ran this app, you know he’d have airtight protection.”

That image from just outside the bathroom at brunch, a close-up of Brendan’s face, has come back for a haunt. It began with some volunteer-run, crowdsourced site about standing up or hollering back. It was shared and re-shared, and sparked long winding threads about harassment at bars and men who won’t hear “no.” Other women said they’d been followed or forced by the man in the picture.

Of course there’s no way to verify any of the comments, and I have to believe this powerful family will find a way to scrub all traces of them from the Internet. But for one anemic moment I’m proud of the scraggly-haired stranger. Even envious.

“Ma, I’m at the doctor’s for the sonogram,” Jason sighs. “You knew it was today. Tell Brendan to sit tight, we’ll work something out.”

He squeezes my hand to say it’s all OK. He turns off the phone to be with me in a paper gown and world of monitors.

We’re thinking Anthony, Jonathan. Brick wall names.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Iozzia. It’s a healthy baby girl.”

Brick wall fractures. Something in me splits. Will they believe these are happy tears, if I  
insist?

No, not a girl. Just another victim.