

*"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."  
- William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming"*

That one, there. The one with you looking down at the floor, fingers rubbing your stubble-covered jaw. You in the white t-shirt and faded jeans, your dark unkempt hair tumbling down into your eyes. That's the photograph that made me fall in love with you. I saw it two years before I even met you. The framed picture sat on Nora's dresser, a leftover relic from high school.

"Who is he?" I asked her.

"That's Will," she said. "One of my old friends."

"What's he like?"

She shrugged. "He's like Will," she said. "Who he is. I don't know."

Sometimes when she wasn't in the apartment, I would stand there and stare at the photo, until I had memorized the curve of your shoulder, the way only half your mouth was turned up into a smile, the small, crescent shaped scar under your left eye.

"I saw it and I knew, remember?" I told you. "I just knew."

"Yes," you said. "I know. You've told me so many times before."

The first one of us together. You in the charcoal gray suit, blue tie, yellow rose pinned to your lapel. Me in the purple dress, hair down in loose curls, bare feet. Ryan and Nora and Amy. Michelle and Garrett, the happy bride and groom, high school sweethearts.

I hadn't wanted to go.

"What else are you going to do?" Nora said, throwing my clothes into a bag that morning. "Stay here and watch *Friends* reruns weekend long? I've seen the way you look at that damn picture. This is your chance to meet Will. So you're coming. End of discussion."

When the flash went off, I remember the rest of them shrieked in feigned embarrassment. It was only us, you and me, who remained silent. You were staring at me, and I was realizing I'd never noticed before, in the picture, that your eyes were green.

We're caught in that moment. The two of us staring at each other, neither of us saying anything while all around us there is movement and frenzy, life all around.

You took the next one. We are propped up in bed, lazy Sunday afternoon, midday sunlight streaming in through the blinds. You in a gray t-shirt, me in my ratty blue sweater. You are staring at the camera, all smiles, eyes wrinkled up, teeth white and square. Perfect.

"Look at the camera, baby," you told me. "Show me how beautiful you are."

But instead, I just looked at you while you pressed down on the shutter. The sun made me squint, but still I could see you with perfect focus.

Our six-month anniversary. All dressed up with nowhere to go. A city-wide power outage, no chance to make our restaurant reservations. Instead, we stayed home and ate everything we could salvage from the fridge. To this day, I cannot eat another crab Rangoon. Just the smell of it makes me sick to my stomach.

You lit all the candles you could find, told me not to take off the dress I'd bought for the occasion. "We can't let that go to waste," you said. And you took my hand and slow-danced with me around your living room.

Later, I grabbed your camera off the coffee table and told you to look at me. "Don't you know?" you said. "I already am."

Your face, half in darkness, half in light, the candles flickering in the background. Your dress shirt, open at the collar, red tie loose.

"I love you."

I didn't realize I'd said it out loud until you laughed and leaned over to kiss me.

"Well, then," you said, "it's a good thing I love you, too."

Everyone again, this time Michelle's pregnant belly taking up most of the photograph. Every time I looked at her, watched her touch her hands to the stretched flesh there, I thought of a line I'd heard or read somewhere – *The centre cannot hold*. I told you about it as we stood outside her and Garrett's new house. You gave me a look I could not decipher.

"Why would you think that?" you asked.

"I don't know. I don't even know where it's from."

"If I were you," you said, "I wouldn't say that to Michelle. She was a poetry major. Something tells me she wouldn't find it complimentary."

Before I could ask you what it meant, they were all there, slamming out of the screen door, crowding around us, Amy exclaiming that we had to take a picture for posterity's sake, the last one of the whole group before the new addition.

You are next to me. Michelle is on my other side, her stomach pressed up against my arm. I remember how her body felt so warm against me, the way I felt a kick from deep within her just as the timer went off and the picture was taken. She is looking down at her belly, and me at her, and you at me.

*(The centre cannot hold.*

I never looked it up. I didn't really want to know. I just liked the sound of it, echoing around my mind. )

You snapped this one of me while I was sitting on the couch in my sweatpants, reading a magazine. My hair is unwashed, greasy, and my face is shiny.

“Don’t,” I told you when I noticed you standing across from me, camera in hand. But you’d already taken it. “I’m still pissed at you, Will.” (I don’t remember why I was angry – you’d left your dishes unrinsed in the sink, maybe, or had forgotten to buy more milk.)

“What else is new?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“It means you’re usually pissed about something.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is.”

You hadn’t waited for my response. One second you were there, standing in front of me, the next, you had left the room. Not long after, I joined you in the kitchen. We prepared dinner together, neither of us saying anything. After a while you kissed me. I kissed you back, believing it was just a disagreement, a one-time bump in an otherwise smooth, uncurving road.

Now, look. We can go through these ones a little faster. Michelle and Garrett’s homecoming after the baby was born. You holding Lila for the first time. Nora’s twenty-fifth birthday party – and then yours, and then mine. Amy and Ryan’s engagement party. Their wedding. You holding Emmett for the first time, Amy smiling up at you from her hospital bed, Ryan hovering in the background, trying to assemble a car-seat. Thanksgiving. Christmas. Halloween. Sunday night football games, potluck dinners, BBQs, ill-fated ice fishing trips. All of us together, and you and me in the middle of it all, sometimes them watching us, but usually us watching them.

Linger for a while over this one with me. I don’t even know who took it. Some waitress, who emailed it to me later, wishing us the best of luck.

Our four year anniversary. I’m wearing a wine-colored dress, sitting in a booth of our favorite Italian restaurant, the one we only go to on special occasions. You are in your one suit –

black, with the red tie. You are kneeling in front of me, holding a black velvet box. My hand is at my throat, and you are grinning.

“I can’t imagine a future with anyone else,” you said.

Amy had told me once that Ryan had been shaking like mad when he proposed, his palms so covered with sweat he had a hard time slipping the ring on her finger.

Your hands were warm and solid.

Of course I said yes.

Of course I did.

I wore my mother’s wedding dress.

“I know she and your dad would have wanted to be here,” my aunt told me as we waited in the dressing room before the ceremony. “Can you believe it’s been eighteen years since their accident?”

“No,” I told her. “I can’t.”

“I did an okay job raising you, didn’t I?” she asked. “You were so young, and I didn’t have a clue, but... we did all right, you and me, didn’t we?”

“Sure,” I told her. “We did okay.”

“Well, I know at least Will can take care of you now. He’s a good man.”

The lawn was filled with your relatives on one side, our friends and their families on the other. “They’re all ours now,” you told me, kissing my forehead. “Not mine. Not yours. Ours.”

And that is the most candid moment our photographer caught that day. You, giving me your family. You, lending so easily what I’d never had, what you’d always taken for granted.

On our honeymoon. Taken just before our first fight as a married couple. We’re sitting on a yellow beach towel, white sand beneath us, sparkling blue sea behind us. Both our faces are red

from sunburn, our eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses. You held out the camera and grabbed my shoulder, pulling me close before snapping the picture. I look a little surprised – uncertain smile, slight frown, head cocked to one side.

“I wasn’t ready,” I said. “Take another one. I look like a moron.”

“You look like you,” you replied.

“So I’m a moron?”

“What? That’s not what I said.”

“In a way, it is *exactly* what you said.”

“Don’t. Don’t start with this now.”

“Start with what?”

“This thing you do. Needing to make an argument out of nothing.”

“I don’t do that. Don’t laugh at me! I hate when you do that.”

“So I’m not allowed to laugh now?”

“That’s not what I said...”

“Well, actually, in a way it is *exactly* what you said.”

And around and around – the kind of argument that is pointless and exhausting. The kind that never really ends, just pauses. The kind that lingers, hidden, for days, months, years, and then one day comes boiling back up to the surface. The kind in which there is never a winner. Just two losers.

You, Michelle, and Garrett posed with Lila and Violet, Lila wearing a sweater proclaiming the words *BIG SISTER*. Nora’s courthouse wedding to Shane, you standing with Nora on the steps and holding up her hand up in a *Rocky* victory pose. Me holding Amy and Ryan’s second son, Nathaniel, you standing next to me, grabbing his foot and making a silly face at him. You, Ryan, and Garrett red-faced and grinning, drunk at your brother’s wedding. Lila, Violet, Emmett, and

Nathaniel, all dressed up in Halloween costumes, holding buckets of candy and grinning. Nora and Shane's baby shower, the arrival of Henry. His welcome home party, you and Nora perched on a sofa, your arm thrown over her shoulders.

It was usually me taking the pictures.

This one. I'm sure you remember. Our third anniversary. Taken at the oceanfront cabin, at the insistence of the owners, who swore they did this with all vacationing couples celebrating their anniversaries.

We're on the front stoop, you standing behind me, your arms around my waist in a stiff embrace that reminds me of a prom picture. My hands are tucked into my coat pockets. It was unseasonably cold that day, and had begun to rain minutes after the picture was taken. My face is flushed, so pale it's hard to define my features against the white siding of the cabin. You are smiling, but there is a vacant look in your eyes.

"Why do you keep this one?" you asked me.

Because. It was the last time we went away together. The last time we ate leftover takeout in our underwear in bed. The last time you let me surprise you with shower sex. The last time we had a true ease of conversation, an understanding in our silences, in the spaces between our words. The last time of a lot of things.

This one looks like it could be an alien. A shapeless, spineless thing, swimming in a blurry sea of gray waves. I've kept this one hidden away for a long time.

"A miscarriage," I told you.

"We have to try again," you said.

So we did. Every test afterwards was negative.

I wonder if you knew, if you suspected the truth all along. That motherhood was never a vocation I aspired to. That when I saw the blood that day, the second feeling after fear was even worse: relief.

One year, two – sometimes I lose count. All these pictures look the same after a while. Nora pregnant with twins, Michelle, Garrett and the kids at Sea World, Ryan and Amy celebrating his job promotion. Holidays, birthdays, kindergarten graduations, weddings. We begin to appear in them less and less, the frames reserved for the rest of them. We're on the outside, looking in.

This one of you makes me feel like I'm drowning, but you're so damn beautiful, I can't bear to throw it away. You came home from work late. You smelled different – something warm and slightly bitter. Without thinking, I snapped your picture as you stood in the bathroom.

You're standing with your back towards me, shirtless, dressed only in jeans. You're facing the mirror, eyes cast down, leaning on the sink. The muscles in your arms and back are tensed, easily traceable, lovely.

"Enough with the damn pictures," you said when you saw the flash go off. "For Christ's sake."

"It's the only way I can get you to look at me," I said.

"I look. I've been looking. But you... Sometimes when I talk to you, it's like you're not even there. Or you talk to me and you could be talking to anyone."

"That's not true."

"You don't see me," you told me.

*But I do, I do*, I wanted to say. But instead I said nothing, choosing silence once again. It's like a place – the act of not saying anything. Once you're there, you get comfortable. You settle in. You don't leave willingly.



Lately I can't stop staring at this one. Your office holiday party. We're standing with several of your coworkers, some of them wearing Santa hats, most of them drunk. I am on your left side, pressing myself against your arm, giving the camera my best white-teeth grin. On your other side, one of the new hires is standing beside you. If I'd been looking at you when the picture was taken, I would have seen it: you are looking at her, and she at you. Your hand is brushing hers, so lightly it could just a blur from the camera.

Except that I know it's not.

"Do you love her?"

"Don't make me do this."

Wanting, needing to hurt you back, I confessed. "I've been taking birth control. I lied to you. I've never wanted kids."

"Now I don't feel so bad," you told me, "for not loving you anymore."

Before you left, I snuck a picture in your suitcase: you and me when we were happy, smiling at the sun, the sky wide open before us.

I saw you two the other day. I couldn't help it. Making sure you didn't realize I was there, I snapped a picture of you.

Your eyes are wrinkled up in a grin, your hair shorter than it's been in years. You are leaning toward her over the table outside the café. You've lost weight, the muscles of your arms and shoulders more defined than I remember.

She is covering her mouth with one hand, head thrown back with laughter, her hair loose and wavy over her back. Her other hand is holding yours. Skin glowing in the midmorning sunshine.

And her belly – so round it touches the table. I wonder if she felt it even as I sat there watching – life moving beneath the surface, waiting for the light.





