

Poor, Stupid Thing

Clara sits on the living room floor, staring at the blank television screen and wondering how she's supposed to feel about her dead husband. Sad, of course. And she does feel that, but there's something else. Something she can't quite face.

As she takes a sip of her coffee, wincing at the cold sourness on her tongue, her phone vibrates in her lap.

Chris has texted, *Want me to bring by dinner after work?*

Merely tolerable as her husband's best friend when Dean was alive, Chris has been helpful in an uncharacteristically unobtrusive way in the weeks since the funeral. It's only now Clara realizes she hadn't really known Chris before. He was always around, but Clara thought of him more like a loud, obnoxious puppy that belongs to someone else rather than as a person to have an actual conversation with. And yet, where everyone else has disappeared from her life, Chris makes the time to check in.

Sure, she texts back.

Preferences?

Clara wonders if Chris will bring Maddie, the only positive consequence of a hard and fast Tinder relationship that dissolved before the kid was even born. Maddie's got these cute little ringlets and big brown eyes that Clara hopes she'll grow into. He gets her every other weekend but hasn't brought her around lately. He's good with her, but Clara thinks he doesn't know what to do with himself most of the time.

Whatever, she replies.

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After wandering around the darkened house for most of the morning, unsure of what she's supposed to need or want, Clara steps into the bedroom she used to share with Dean. She's conscious of her light step, never pounding through the house like she used to do when Dean would jokingly—but in that way that makes you think it's less a loving tease and more annoyed scolding—tell her she sounded like an elephant tromping up and down the stairs. Now that it's only her, she's afraid she might miss something underneath the everyday vibrations of the house if she makes too much noise.

Clara once told Dean that if she died before he did, she'd come back to haunt him. Make sure there weren't any hussies encroaching on her territory in his time of need. Dean had rolled his eyes and said if he died first, he'd choose not to bother her, ethereally or otherwise. Sometimes she hopes he didn't get a choice.

Clara sits down on her side of the lumpy, yard-sale mattress where the red satin fitted sheet has come loose. It's all so much shit under a glitzy veneer. All of it. She picks up her heavy pillow—a silly thing filled with buckwheat that Dean saw on tv and thought it would help with her snoring—and smooths her fingertips across the enclosed husks. Her jaw clenches involuntarily, and she feels the burn behind her eyes as she brings the pillow to her face and begins to scream.

Into the dampening black satin that has sucked into her mouth, Clara screams to banish the tears she's so very tired of wiping from the dried-out, puffed-up skin of her cheeks. She read somewhere that this is cathartic for people experiencing grief, so she tries to work up a real blood curdler like in all the best B-horror movies. All she manages is a pathetic, guttural keening.

When her gritty smoker's lungs finally send up a series of scratchy, iron-tasting coughs, Clara imagines herself being strangled. She doesn't feel any sort of relief. She wants a cigarette, though she hasn't smoked since Dean died because he'd always nagged her about it when he was alive.

She feels stupid and self-conscious, though there's no one around to hear her. She can't stop imagining she's not really alone in their house. *Her* house. She can't stop thinking plurally; she doesn't know how to be an *I*. And she doesn't know what to do with her anger and fear and sadness because the comfort that comes with being an *us*, is gone.

Unless you count the cat.

The chubby orange tabby had darted from the room when the screaming started. Now, in that same kind of piercing silence left in the aftermath of an eruption, the cat jumps back onto the bed and stretches his neck to sniff at Clara from a safe distance. Clara wraps one arm around the pillow, clutching it to her chest, and with the other, lifts a trembling palm to his nose. The cat accepts this apology and allows her to smooth the raised fur on his back.

"That's a poofy tail you have," Clara says, trying for the same cooing tone Dean would use when the cat would spook at his own shadow. He stares at her for a moment before flopping onto Dean's pillow, where he begins his methodical bathing ritual.

The cat's name is Daryl, but Clara doesn't call him that. If she's feeling affectionate, she calls him little dude or buddy. Mostly she sticks to calling him cat. She's never cared for cats. She thinks they're weird and judgmental. She'd thought Dean had known that, but after he'd given the cat the kind of name you'd give a human baby and started carrying him around the house, murmuring, "Who's my sweet little man?" she hadn't wanted to hurt his feelings. He'd gotten the cat for her, after all.

Sometime after their first date in the karaoke bar across from the university campus, but before their engagement junior year, they'd agreed: no children. Or, Dean had decided, and Clara's silence had been taken as agreement.

Dean claimed he didn't see the point in having children, but Clara suspected he was afraid of turning into his mostly absent, always-drunk father. She hadn't been the kind of girl who dreamt of a hoard of kids running around a blissfully chaotic home, but she'd never been altogether against it, either. She'd figured, if it happened, it happened. Leave it to fate and all that.

It was Dean who'd made up her mind to rattle off all the reasons she definitely did not want kids whenever the subject was brought up. Once, when her mother asked for what felt like the hundredth time in the span of a week whether Clara was ever going to give her a grandchild, Clara snapped, "I don't want a kid in the same way you don't want shit in your water heater." She hadn't even known what she'd meant by that. Her mother's persistence was like a chronic burning in Clara's chest. A pain that words alone couldn't cure no matter how hard she tried. Eventually, she'd given up explaining altogether, and whenever the baby question came up, she'd announce, "My body, my choice!" and walk out of the room.

She'd thought she could make herself believe all this. She *had* believed it. But two years ago, as Dean was finishing his MBA and preparing to take over his uncle's pet store—specializing in luxe toys, gaudy outfits, and gourmet foods (all of which Clara thought excessive and sure to not bring them continued financial stability)—Clara felt that something was missing. That they could use something else to love. She didn't say this to Dean. His mother, having ignored the lump in her breast until it was too late, had died around the same time, and Clara hadn't found the words to renegotiate the issue of children.

When Dean presented her with a scraggly, mewling, three-month old kitten the day after his graduation, she'd taken it as a sign that there would be no renegotiation. Though the kitten was his gift to her for supporting him through grad school, the damn thing promptly chose Dean as Lord and Savior of Felines. She tried to love it. Despite her attempts at bribery and what felt like constant playing and grooming, the little shit would curl up on Dean's chest every night as they settled into bed and swat Clara's hands away when she tried to cuddle up with them.

She's still trying to love the cat, who is now purring as he licks and chews at the pads of his front paws, the unexpected break in his perfectly silent afternoon nap forgotten.

"Hey cat," Clara says. "I guess I'm stuck with you." He pauses long enough to give her a slow blink. "Poor, stupid thing," she says.

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Clara wakes some time later, her tank top twisted, the bottoms of her sweatpants bunched up around her knees. She doesn't remember falling asleep; she does that a lot lately. She squints at the bright edge around the gray blackout curtains and assumes it's afternoon. The cat is gone again, holed up somewhere less restless.

Struggling upright, she swipes at the matted hair on her face and neck with one hand while pulling the greasy tank away from her chest and stomach with the other. Her head is pounding, her tongue thick and furry like she'd been sucking on antibiotics. She knows she's dehydrated. The sink in the master bathroom is right there, but she thinks of taking care of herself as a kind of betrayal.

Glaring at the thought of her own emotional instability, she grabs the pillow from Dean's side of the bed and crashes back down. She doesn't even know what she's grieving for anymore.

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Although her parents have upgraded to motoring around in an RV and living part-time in a small, stylish bungalow in Puerto Vallarta, they used to be avid—albeit amateur—campers, dragging Clara and her sister Mallory all over the southwestern United States and on up through the Pacific Northwest. They were never particularly outdoorsy in the hike every weekend and sleep directly under the stars kind of way. They didn't hunt, but once in a while, someone would catch a fish. Her father could build a decent fire as long as there was enough leftover newspaper and lighter fluid. Her mother refused to camp anywhere that lacked a body of water deep enough to swim in, lest she become inconsolably bored. Clara and Mal—younger than Clara by two years—fancied themselves explorer-scientists, sneaking home specimens of rock or bone or live insects which they were sure no one else in the whole world had ever discovered before.

It's one of these family trips that serves as the basis for Clara's recurring dream, which started the night Dean gifted her the cat. At least once a week, the entire experience plays out in her subconscious and, despite the experience having a happy ending in her memory, dreams have a funny way of twisting reality.

In her memory of the event, ten-year-old Clara and her family are camping on the beach of some small lake in a rocky, wooded area in California or Nevada or Wyoming. Mal wants to splash around in the water, and their mother is dipping bright orange floaties into the lake so she can tug them up to Mal's armpits, even though she knows how to swim. This is where the dream always starts.

Clara doesn't want to swim; she wants to explore. She stamps her feet and tries to coax her sister out of the water, but Mal starts up that high-pitched whine that has always irritated their mother.

"Chrissake, Clara, leave her alone," their mother says as she towels off her legs and feet. She looks down the beach to the girls' father, who is fishing, sitting in a woven folding chair with the pole propped in the sand in front of him, and paying attention to nothing but the beer can in his lap. Their mother sighs and says, "Just watch your sister, okay. I'm taking a nap."

Clara tries to tell her mother it isn't fair, but her mother ignores her as she unzips the bright red four-person tent and disappears inside.

Mal laughs, but not in a malicious way. Later, she will tell Clara how sorry she is and that they should have gone exploring together and she will never, ever let Clara go by herself again. But right now, in the dream, she's only playing, leaping up out of the water, swinging her arms toward Clara, who stands with her arms crossed, glaring at her little sister. The splash soaks Clara's boots and the tops of her socks, and she gasps, taking an exaggerated leap backwards.

"You can watch your damn stupid self," Clara shouts.

'Damn' is the worst swear she's ever said in her parents' hearing, and she isn't supposed to call her sister 'stupid' anymore. She storms off toward the trail they'd walked the day before, shaking, and sure one or both of her parents will be right behind her to swat her butt and demand an apology. But they don't come after her, and Clara keeps walking.

When she feels the first few drops of rain on her head and shoulders and turns around to run back to camp, she realizes she's gone off the trail. She'd been muttering to herself about how mean and stupid everyone was, stomping through the trees, paying no attention to where she was going or to the sounds of the woods. As she spins around, searching for the clearly marked path back to her family, she understands how alone she is and how loud the air is with the rustling of leaves and growing rain and whatever else might be out here watching her.

Clara doesn't think to call out. She runs with her arms outstretched, slapping away low-hanging branches that poke and scrape. She slips only once when the rumblings of distant thunder cause her to lose her footing and tumble into a dry creek bed. She stands, shaking in her wet clothes, and totters to a low overhang that shields her from the rain. As she crouches to check her scraped knees, she begins to cry, believing she will never, ever be found.

In her memory of this event, Clara is soon stirred by her father's frantic and excited shouts of, "I've got her! I've got her!" She'd been gone a little over an hour when her mother emerged from the tent and realized her oldest daughter was gone. Once she is brought back to camp, she keeps her eyes down, pressing a finger into the hard lump of a mosquito bite on the inside of her elbow while her parents lecture her on the perils of being a child in the woods alone and warn her to never, ever do that to them again.

In her dream, though, she is never brought back to camp. Never reunited with her family. Never saved. In her dream, as Clara stands to run toward the sound of her father's voice, she doesn't recognize the body she inhabits as her own; it is not the body of a scrawny ten-year-old girl, but the tired, misused body of a woman. Her father's cries draw closer, but the sound of his voice, too, is wrong. It's a voice she knows, but one that doesn't belong here. It is Dean's voice.

His tone is a menacing coolness that slithers down her spine. She crawls back under the overhang, her hand clamped over her mouth. She's not afraid *of* him, she realizes. She's afraid of *being seen* by him.

Every time this dream recurs, it is at this moment of awareness when Clara jolts awake, panting, her trembling hand still holding in her voice.

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There's a thumping from someplace far away, and Clara groans. She'd been having that dream again. She remembers waking up next to Dean after having this dream and shrinking away from him, making herself as small and quiet as possible, balancing on the edge of the bed so he couldn't reach out and stroke her back in his sleep.

Her eyes close tighter, but her phone pings, and she gropes around on the bed before realizing it's plugged into the charger on her nightstand.

Chris's message, *You home?* glows at the top of her notifications. He knows she is. He has a key, too, but she knows he won't barge in.

She unlocks her phone and types, *No*.

Chris replies before she can put the phone back down. *Yes you are*. And then, *Hungry?*

Is she? She doesn't know. Her tongue is still swollen, but the pain in her head has dulled. She wonders if she's been sleep-drinking from the sink, her body unconsciously driven to survive despite her ego's attempts to make it suffer. She crawls to the foot of the bed and tests her balance before lurching into the bathroom. She tosses her phone onto the counter, turns the cold tap on full blast, and sticks her whole face under the faucet, lapping at the stream like the cat sometimes does.

Her phone pings again. *I'm coming in okay?*

K.

Clara hears the creak of the front door as she's changing her stale, damp clothes for something only slightly less dingy, ignoring the overflowing hamper in the closet.

By the time she makes it downstairs, Chris has fed the cat and set up Styrofoam containers of Chinese takeout on the coffee table. He opens a package of chopsticks and sets them on top of one of the containers.

When he notices Clara, he gestures toward the food and says, "Hey." The cat is watching from the tv stand, licking his lips.

"Thanks," Clara says as she sits cross-legged on the floor in front of the food. It smells spicy and humid. Like bile. She's never really hungry anymore and hates to admit it when she is. Mostly she's nauseous. The way you are when you're sick to your stomach but nothing's moving in either direction, and you're afraid to put anything in your mouth. She doesn't know if she can eat, but she knows she should try. People expect that.

She picks up the chopsticks but can't figure out how to hold them. It's not like she's never used them before; they used to get sushi every Saturday. Well, every Saturday they could afford to, and Dean always insisted she not use a fork or her fingers. But now her stupid fingers don't know what to do with the two slender sticks in her hand, and Clara feels her throat clench, swallowing a sob. Or a gag.

Chris, whom Clara once described to her sister as aloof and utterly oblivious, places one calloused hand on Clara's shoulder, lays a fork on top of her napkin, and removes the chopsticks from her open palms. He doesn't say a word, and his touch is like a knitted shawl on a chilly night. A whispered tenderness that reminds her that she's still alive.

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It wasn't until after Dean died that Clara realized how few people she'd stayed in touch with over the years. Her closest friends really only work acquaintances good for a cocktail once in a while after work and the usual bitch session about what what's-her-face did that pissed off some other so-and-so. The people she knew from high school and college had all gone their separate ways, and she'd always had convenient excuses for avoiding reunions. Clara can't help

but wonder if she's even remembered when the only connections she's maintained are brief birthday wishes on Facebook on the rare occasions she bothers check her feed.

When everything was happening so fast after the crash and the hospital, it was Clara's sister who'd materialized by her side, dropping everything to catch the next flight out of Dallas. Mal helped make funeral arrangements, make calls, make sure Clara slept, ate, showered. But not long after, Mal had to return to her own life. To her husband. Her children. And Clara was alone again. Mostly.

Her parents came up for the funeral to stare at her with watery eyes and hug her over and over as words continued to fail them. At the reception, held in a respectable banquet room and decorated by Mal in crushed velvet blues and greys, Clara watched her mother taking nervous gulps of chardonnay as people—only some Clara recognized as old friends or relatives—gave their condolences. It was all strange and unnatural, and Clara still hoped she'd wake up and realize it was all a nightmare. She had trouble hearing the "I'm so sorrys" and "If you ever need anythings." She said the usual things she thought a widow was expected to say.

Dean was such a good man. He didn't deserve this. She didn't know if she could go on without him.

And she hid inside herself, waiting for the moment someone would call her a liar.

Toward the end of the reception, Clara's mother stood from a faux marble bench embossed with tiny, trumpet-playing cherubs and wobbled toward her. She sloshed her stemless wine glass as she bent to whisper-shout in Clara's ear, "It's too bad he didn't freeze any sperm." Then, blinking, "Did he freeze any sperm?"

Clara could only stare at her mother, a scream trapped inside her head and vomit in her throat, until her father gripped her mother's elbow and directed her toward the half-empty food trays.

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Letting out a jagged breath, Clara picks up the fork and opens the food container, which is overflowing with spicy lo mien and white rice. She wants to thank Chris for being here, for continuing to be here, but she is afraid her body will betray her. Instead, she pokes at her rice and attempts a smile in his direction.

Chris nods and turns on the tv. He spends some time choosing a channel with sounds suitable to filling the space, to blanketing their shared sorrow. Nothing too serious or too funny. But as he scrolls through On Demand, he begins to laugh. It starts as a sort of chuff. It's barely a sound at all. He looks at Clara, and when their eyes meet, he loses himself. He holds his chest and doubles over with laughter.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Clara asks.

Chris can only laugh harder, falling onto his side, into Clara's shoulder, tears streaming down his cheeks. His face is contorts with disgust, and the wails of confusion she's been denying herself pour out of his mouth. She cradles the head of her dead husband's best friend in a kind of numb terror.

When he starts apologizing in a breathless, little boy's hiccupping whimper, she shushes him like he's a sick toddler, rocking him, telling him it's okay. She tilts her face to the ceiling and blinks so her own tears won't fall into Chris's messy brown curls.

They sit like this for a long time. Long enough for the food to go cold and the room to go gray. When Chris sits up, the air feels lighter, wrung out.

He says, "I didn't mean for that to happen. I just can't." He doesn't say what he can't, but that's okay because neither can Clara. She isn't ready. Doesn't know if she'll ever be ready for that.

"Remember that time," Chris says, "when I got Dean to hold Maddie?"

The first time Chris brought his daughter over, she was only a few months old. He hadn't wanted to put her down and said things like, "You never realize until she's right there, man. She's beautiful. I'd do anything for her." Dean had shaken his head and put his palms out, but Chris had plopped Maddie into Dean's arms as if to force the sublimity of fatherhood. Dean had gripped the baby at her armpits and held her at arms' length, grimacing in psychological pain, until she spit up on his thumb and Chris took her back.

"Yeah," Clara says. "I remember."

She goes into the kitchen and pulls a pack of Camel Lights and a lighter from where she'd hidden them in the junk drawer. She lights up right there and slides up onto the counter. She watches Chris pick up the remote and continue his channel surfing. The cat creeps onto the couch and headbutts Chris's shoulder. Clara can hear the damn thing purring as she ashes into the sink.

End.