

Losing Jessie

Victoria stands with her arms folded, the sleeves of her green silk robe grazing her daughter's desk as she takes a drag off her cigarette. Jessie's stuffed animals watch her intently, and she feels almost guilty, as though she owes them an explanation of what she is doing in her own daughter's bedroom. Jessie's shelves are a kaleidoscope of books, photos, fossils, enamel boxes and small carved animals from Africa or Southeast Asia or wherever her father sent them. Victoria shuffles through the papers on the desk, noting briefly the A- on the upper right corner of an American History quiz. She examines a framed picture of a boy and thinks he looks like a moron, this Matthew or Michael or whatever his name is, but then teenage boys usually do and as long as Jessie doesn't do anything stupid, like get pregnant, then she doesn't care. She puts the photo back and picks up another one, of Jessie at seven years old perched on top of her father's shoulders. Victoria returns the picture of her daughter and ex-husband to the shelf. With a longer, deeper drag of her cigarette Victoria notes that not one of the half-dozen framed photos in her daughter's room are of her.

“If you're looking for something in my room, all you have to do is ask, you know,” Jessie says later, leaning in the door frame of Victoria's room.

“What are you talking about, darling?” Victoria replies, sitting on the edge of her bed, pulling on a pair of black pantyhose. “I haven't been in your room.”

“There’s cigarette ash all over my desk. The least you could do is clean up after yourself if you’re going to snoop around.”

“Don’t be silly, dear. I never snoop. I was just looking for a pen.”

“Right. Whatever.”

“Don’t say “whatever” to me. Here, help me zip up my dress. How do I look?”

“Fine.”

“Really? How about from the back? Does it make my butt look big?” Victoria turns around and wiggles her hips in a little dance. “Come on, you’re not looking.”

“I don’t want to look at your butt. God, Mom.”

“My, you’re helpful. Go get dressed, please. We need to leave in twenty minutes.”

“I am dressed,” Jessie retorts. She is wearing a long black tank dress which drapes closely against her sixteen-year-old figure. A belt embroidered with cowrie shells hangs at her hips, and a collection of bangles adorns her upper arms.

“No, you’re not. I hung the pink Lily Pulitzer on your bathroom door.”

By way of reply, Jessie makes a vomiting gesture.

“I’m not in the mood, dear,” Victoria says. “This is a conservative crowd, and right now you look like a hippie.” Jessie has already turned and walked away. “Change. Do you hear me?” Victoria calls.

“Whatever,” Jessie calls back.

Wearing the pink floral dress her mother chose, Jessie enters the kitchen. She finds her stepfather Walter on the phone, ordering a pizza for her nine-year-old half-sister, Katie, and the

babysitter, Mrs. Bowden, a middle-aged neighbor who throws birthday parties for her dogs and who will fall asleep within an hour of their departure, leaving Katie free to watch *The Walking Dead* and other off-limits television shows.

“You look pretty,” Katie says. “I wish I was going too.”

“I wish I was staying,” Jessie replies. “I don’t even know why they want me to come along.”

“Mrs. Howard specifically invited you, which was very kind of her.” Victoria explains, sweeping into the kitchen.

“We won’t stay long, anyway,” Walter says. “We’re just stopping by for a drink. Our dinner reservations are at eight-thirty.”

“We’ll see,” Victoria says.

As Walter pulls the car into the Howards’ drive way, Victoria turns over her shoulder toward Jessie.

“Don’t say your father shoots documentaries, say he’s a *filmmaker*. You didn’t go to Florida for spring break, you went to *Palm Beach*.” A valet appears at Victoria’s side of the car and opens her door. “Don’t say your grandparents live in Yonkers, say they live in *New York*,” Victoria hisses at Jessie before she steps out of the car. Jessie can’t wait to say, “My stepfather works in construction” within earshot of Victoria, rather than “my stepfather is a real-estate developer.” Or “my mother straightens up other people’s houses,” rather than “my mother is an interior decorator.”

Jessie follows her mother and Walter inside. Victoria whispers to Jessie, “That’s a real Degas over the chair in the corner.” Then, with an impatient click of her tongue, she adds, “Are

those white candles on the mantel? Have I taught Barbara *nothing?*” In the next instant, Barbara swoops over to greet them and Victoria is smiling and kissing the air beside her hostess’ head, cooing over the beauty of the flower arrangements. With Barbara’s arm around her waist Victoria drifts into the party as Walter and Jessie follow. There is nobody, but *nobody*, even close to herself in age here, Jessie notes. She decides that the second she gets the chance she is going to slip away and try to find a library.

Victoria excels at party conversation. She browses the Washington Post every day, the Sunday magazine of the New York Times cover to cover every week, and page six of the New York Post on the sly. She can quip about political gossip and current affairs with anybody in Washington, and right now she has the rapt attention of a gentleman who is running for congress and wants to talk about health care. Victoria smiles and hopes she doesn’t have lipstick on her teeth. After introducing Jessie to a dozen or so of her acquaintances, she has lost sight of her, but she is not worried. She is pleased that Jessie is not the kind of child who clings to her side. They have been here for nearly an hour, and Walter gives Victoria a signal from across the room, indicating that their dinner reservations are looming. Victoria maneuvers herself to block Walter from her line of vision. The dinner reservations will keep, and if they don’t, she knows how to get the maitre d’ of every restaurant to seat them, she does it all the time. She notices Barbara looping her arm through Walter’s and introducing him to the wife of a Jordanian diplomat, a pudgy brunette with too much jewelry, and Victoria knows Walter will let the woman keep him in conversation indefinitely.

Jessie sits on the edge of the swimming pool, gently swishing the water with her bare feet. A large pot on the edge of the pool holds a tall frangipani vine, and Jessie watches an emerald-hued hummingbird hovering beside the yellow flowers, darting through the air before it disappears. The smell of the frangipani brings Jessie back to the summer she spent in India with her father five years ago. She has never forgotten India, its vibrant colors and thick, sweet, spicy smells.

A very different smell from the frangipani flowers draws Jessie back into the present moment. She looks up and sees a young man smoking a joint approaching around the side of the pool. He has high, sharp cheekbones and pale blue eyes, and is very blond.

“Man, I hate these Washington society parties, don’t you?” He says. “Nothing but politics and social climbers.”

“Why are you here, then?” asks Jessie.

The boy raises his eyebrows, then grins. “Barbara Howard knows my mother,” he shrugs, “and she asked me to come. Besides, I didn’t have anything better to do.”

“Same here.”

“You’re Jessie, aren’t you?” He asks, and Jessie nods. “I’m Erik.”

“Hi,” Jessie says.

“I just met your mother,” Erik continues. “She told me to keep an eye out for you. She’s very beautiful, your mother.”

Jessie never knows what the correct answer is to that remark. “Thank you” seems silly, because as far as she can tell her mother’s looks have nothing to do with her, and “I know” seems arrogant, so she doesn’t say anything.

“I hope this doesn’t bother you,” he says, waving the joint.

“I don’t care,” Jessie shrugs.

“Want some?” He offers it to her, and Jessie shakes her head. The only time that Jessie ever tried to smoke pot was at her friend Catherine’s house with Catherine and her older sister, and Jessie dissolved into a convulsive coughing fit that lasted for ten minutes and culminated in her throwing up. Jessie would rather not repeat the experience. They are interrupted by Walter, who calls to Jessie from the porch.

“Jessie! There you are. Come on, honey. Time to go.”

Jessie stands up and gently shakes the water from her legs. She staggers on one foot as she tries to slip on a sandal, and Erik holds her under her elbow to help her balance.

“Thanks,” says Jessie, and she turns and follows Walter inside.

Late the next morning Victoria emerges from her room, and calls down the hall for Jessie. She has such exciting news.

“She’s out running,” Walter informs her as he comes up the stairs, carrying a cup of coffee and the mail. “You’re in a good mood.”

“I just received the most interesting phone call. What’s this?” She takes a postcard from the stack of mail in Walter’s hand. It is from her ex-husband, addressed to her. Nick is probably the only person in the world who still send postcards, Victoria muses. She leans against the banister and reads it.

“Dear Vick, change of plans. I won’t be able to take Jessie sailing next month after all. Shooting in Iceland, must be here during the solstice. Will you tell her? Love, Nick.”

Victoria crumples the post card in her fist. Tell her yourself, you bastard, she thinks. She knows how the scene will play out. Of course she will have to tell Jessie herself, following which Jessie will descend into a chasm of seething teenage rage, all of which Jessie will take out on Victoria. But for now Nick's news can wait. She has something much nicer to tell Jessie, and there she is now, Victoria can hear her entering the foyer with Katie, who has been accompanying Jessie's run on her bicycle. She hurries down stairs to find her daughter in the kitchen, pouring a glass of water.

"Jessie," Victoria says. "You'll never guess who called me this morning."

"Probably not," Jessie agrees.

"That young man from the party yesterday. Erik Weiss. He called because he wanted to know if it would be all right for him to take you on a date."

"He called you? To ask *me* on a date?"

"Yes. Isn't that exciting?"

"No, it's weird. What is this, Victorian England?"

"Not at all, dear, it's very proper of him. I told him you were free tomorrow night, which you are because you promised me you'd babysit Katie but I can have Paloma stay overnight."

"That was really presumptuous of you, Mom. I don't even know if I want to go on a date with him. I don't know anything about him."

"Well, he's nineteen, very well mannered, and of a very good family. His father is an ambassador here in Washington, and Erik is going to be working for Goldman Sachs in New York, starting next week, before he goes back to Harvard in the fall."

"I have a boyfriend, remember?"

“Who, Matthew? You aren’t really serious about him, are you? I’m just suggesting you go on a date, Jessie, I’m not asking you to marry him. Anyway, there’s no need to limit yourself to those silly high school boys.”

“I hang out with high school boys because I’m *in* high school. And as far as I can tell the only reason Erik is so interesting to you is because his father is an ambassador and because he goes to Harvard, and none of those things are very interesting to me.”

“Jessie, don’t be so childish,” Victoria sighs. “I’m only thinking of you. I want you to cultivate the right kind of friends. They’ll be very important one day.”

“God, Mom, why do I always have to act out your social-climbing fantasies for you?”

Victoria silently counts to ten.

“I’ve already told him you would go out with him tomorrow,” she says, composed. “If you want to cancel, call him yourself.” She starts to leave the kitchen, then turns back to her daughter. “You should be flattered that a boy like that is paying any attention to you at all.”

The following evening Erik picks Jessie up at seven o’clock. He’s not bad looking, she has to admit. He runs his fingers through his hair too often, tossing it back every two minutes or so, and Jessie’s not crazy about the cashmere-sweater-nonchalantly-draped-over-the-shoulders look either, especially because it is eighty degrees outside, but she has decided to give the evening a chance.

When they arrive at the small French restaurant their table isn’t ready, to Erik’s obvious chagrin. The maitre d’ apologizes and promises them a table in ten minutes.

“This is really annoying,” Erik mutters.

“It’s okay,” Jessie says. “I don’t mind waiting.”

“That’s not the point,” Erik says, loudly enough for the maitre d’ to hear. “It’s just so incompetent.” Jessie keeps quiet. Shortly they are seated, and as they peruse the menu Erik orders a bottle of wine.

“Really?” Jessie whispers. “I mean, you’re under age, aren’t you? How come they don’t card you?”

“They know who they’re dealing with,” Erik replies. “My father comes here all the time.”

“Oh, I see,” Jessie says. “I better not, though. I’ll just have a coke.”

“Oh come on, just a little bit,” Erik says. “Nobody will say anything.” When the wine arrives, she lets him pour her a glass.

They talk about New York, which Jessie loves. She tells Erik that she usually spends part of her school holidays with her father, and describes his loft apartment in Soho and the little restaurant on Thompson Street where they go to breakfast and play backgammon over coffee and chocolate milk.

“I’m not a fan of SoHo,” Erik says. “Too gentrified.” Jessie raises her eyebrows, because Erik doesn’t strike her as exactly bohemian. “I mean, it used to be cool, full of artists and musicians, but now there’s a Gap and a Starbucks on every corner.”

“My dad’s girlfriend Cassandra is an artist,” Jessie says. “She’s a painter.”

“Really? What does she paint?”

“Big, abstract multimedia stuff. She shows at the Rosenfeld Gallery in Chelsea.”

“Huh. I should check out her stuff some time. I need some new stuff for my suite at Harvard.”

Jessie gives a sniff. Cassandra’s paintings sell for tens of thousands of dollars, hardly dorm-room art, she thinks, but she doesn’t comment.

“So where’s your dad now?” Erik asks.

“Iceland, or Greenland, I think. Somewhere near the North Pole.”

Erik knows of a party they can go to after dinner. Some of his Harvard friends are in town and they’ll be there as well.

“Just do me a favor, will you? If anyone asks, don’t tell them you’re in High School. Tell them you’re a freshman at Georgetown.”

Erik has finished the rest of the bottle of wine, but Jessie’s glass is still half full.

“Finish your wine,” Erik says, as he signs the credit card slip. Jessie thinks he is leaving an unfairly small tip, but she feels uncomfortable telling him how much to spend.

“You can have it,” Jessie says. Erik downs the rest of the glass, then leads Jessie out the door.

At the party, Erik has switched to whisky. When he offers Jessie a drink, she declines.

“Don’t be a baby,” says Eric. “Just have fun, will you?”

“Fine, I’ll have a beer,” Jessie snaps. She hates beer. She plans to carry it around for a little while and dump the contents into the first houseplant she finds. She has had about enough of Erik, and as soon as she can make a discreet exit, she is leaving.

“C’mon, let’s dance,” Erik says when he has downed his second glass of whisky. His voice has changed to a slurring growl, and he has stopped flicking his hair back. Now it just

hangs in front of his eyes, which look cold and dull. “Let’s see what you can do with that little body of yours.” Jessie lets Erik lead her to the dance floor. At least there she won’t have to talk to him. He dances clumsily, his eyes fixed on Jessie’s breasts. She tries to keep him at arm’s length, but he grabs her by the waist and gyrates his pelvis against hers. She shoves him away, but he doesn’t notice. He pulls her hard against him, clutching her bottom with one hand. He presses his face into her chest, shoving his tongue between her breasts. Jessie wrestles herself away in horror.

“Stop it! What’s your problem, asshole?” she cries. Erik laughs like it’s the funniest thing in the world.

“Lighten up, will you?” he says. Jessie turns to leave, and he pulls her back by her by arm. “Look, I’m sorry, okay? Don’t make a scene.”

“Go to hell,” she replies. “I’m leaving.” She hurries to the bedroom where she has left her purse and digs it out from a pile of bags and pillows on the bed. She finds her cell phone and is about to call Walter to come and fetch her when Erik grabs her by her upper arm and yanks her around to face him.

“HEY!” she yells. “Let go of me!” His breath, thick with alcohol, is nauseating, and his heavy-lidded eyes seem lifeless.

“What are you thinking, little girl?” he snarls. “Trying to make a fool of me? You think you can just walk out on me?” He holds her by her arms, squeezing hard, and pushes her against the wall. Jessie tries to duck under his arms but he catches her, pins her wrists together, and lightly smacks her face, twice. She kicks him, hard, trying to land a a blow to his crotch, but she misses and he forces her to the floor. He straddles her, holding her wrists above her head, and

Jessie screams, but no-one can hear her over the music. He covers her mouth with his sweaty hand and presses down hard.

“Shut up,” he hisses. “You think you’re something special, don’t you? You’re nothing. You’re nobody.” His hand is blocking her nose, and Jessie can’t breathe. She arches her back and bucks like a colt, fighting for her life. He lets go of her face and Jessie gasps for air. She feels him pulling at her skirt, working it up over her hips.

“No,” she gasps. “No, please don’t. Please.” She starts to cry. He fumbles with his pants while he presses her thighs down with his knees, his hand grasping her wrists like a talon. Jessie screams again and he squeezes her mouth so hard that her teeth cut the inside of her cheeks. Kicking, she frees one of her legs from under him, but her ankle collides with the metal foot of the bed frame and a searing pain surges through her ankle. This is eclipsed by the sharp pain inside her as he thrusts himself into her repeatedly.

Finally he stops. He rolls to the side and sits slumped against the wall, panting, his forehead dropped in his hands. Jessie scrambles past him, grabs her purse, and limps to the door.

“You bastard,” she sobs as she turns the doorknob. “You sick, pathetic creep.” He doesn’t look up as she leaves the room.

Shaking, Jessie stumbles through the crowd of strangers. As she slips outside, no one pays her any attention. Outside, she digs through her purse, looking for her cell phone, and realizes with a sob that it is still inside. She hobbles for several blocks through the unfamiliar neighborhood, past expensive houses and well-manicured lawns. Finally she sees the traffic lights of a busy avenue, and the pale yellow light of a diner. Jessie uses the pay phone in the

diner to call a taxicab, and half an hour later the cab drops her off at her house. Jessie pays the driver, then hurries inside.

In the bathroom Jessie strips off her clothes. She doesn't want to run the shower because she is afraid of waking Katie, whose bedroom adjoins the bathroom they share. With a cool, wet washcloth, Jessie gently washes herself between her legs, along the inside of her thighs, her bruised and bleeding ankle, her arms, her breast, everywhere that Erik touched her. She washes her face, letting her tears mingle with the water. When she is finished she wraps herself in a bathrobe and quietly goes downstairs.

In the kitchen, Jessie pours water into a teakettle. As she shuffles through a basket of teabags in the pantry, searching for chamomile, the front door opens and her parents enter.

"Jessie, darling, you're home," says Victoria, swaying slightly as she stands in the kitchen doorway. "How was your date?"

Jessie, startled, almost drops the basket.

"You scared me," she gasps.

"Well? Wasn't I right? Isn't he a nice boy?"

"Oh, Mom," Jessie replies, clutching her forehead and fighting back tears. She hears Walter say, "Goodnight ladies," as he goes upstairs.

"What? Didn't you have a good time?"

"No, I didn't," Jessie says quietly. "He's not a nice boy, Mom."

Victoria crosses her arms and leans against the doorway.

"I should have known," Victoria says with a sigh. "Must you always make an effort to be miserable? Does it give you such pleasure to be able to prove me wrong?"

“Mom, he’s awful. Listen…”

“Oh please. You had a rotten attitude about this date from the start. You were determined to have an unpleasant time.” Victoria’s words stun Jessie.

“You don’t understand,” Jessie begins. “You don’t know what happened.”

“Fine. Tell me then,” Victoria snaps. “What happened that was so terrible? What, he eats beef? He votes Republican? He didn’t read your favorite book?” Jessie pushes past her mother and heads upstairs to her room. Victoria follows her. Jessie tries to shut the door of her room, but her mother blocks it.

“I don’t know why I even try, Jessie. All I want is for you to have the best of everything, and you act like I’m your worst enemy. Why are you always fighting me?”

Jessie curls up on her bed, her face buried in her pillow.

“Go away, Mom. Leave me alone.”

“Well. If you won’t talk to me, then fine. Go ahead and feel sorry for yourself and pretend the whole world hates you. I just hope you didn’t behave like such a brat with Erik.”

Jessie has no answer. It’s too late to say anything anymore.

“I suppose you never gave any thought to how this makes me look,” Victoria says before she leaves the room and shuts the door.

Victoria wakes up late the next morning, the dull throb of a hangover pulsing inside her head. Walter has gone to his gym, she knows, and the house is quiet. She vaguely remembers arguing with Jessie, and immediately feels a pang of remorse. She really shouldn’t have taken the failure of this date so personally, she thinks. After all, it was Jessie’s date, not hers. It’s just that

she cares too much, she tells herself. Oh well, never mind, she'll go and talk to Jessie and apologize.

After Victoria has showered and dressed, she goes to Jessie's room. Jessie is not there, and the bed is made. She has probably already left the house to see her boyfriend or meet a friend, Victoria thinks. But something about the room bothers her. The bed looks not so much made as simply not slept in. Jessie never makes her bed on Sundays.

Victoria remembers seeing Jessie lying on the bed, crying, and suddenly Victoria is afraid. Why had Jessie been crying, anyway? Victoria realizes she doesn't know, and for the first time she thinks that something may have gone terribly wrong.

Victoria hurries into the den, where Katie is watching cartoons.

"Katie, have you seen Jessie this morning?"

"No. I went to her room when I woke up, but she wasn't there."

"What time was that?"

"I'm not sure. Seven thirty, or eight, maybe."

Victoria hurries back upstairs. She grabs the phone from the nightstand and calls Jessie's cell phone number. There is no answer. She finds her address book and flips through the pages, looking for Matthew's telephone number. Dammit, she thinks, what is that boy's last name anyway?
