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Cleansing flames

"This is great, Em, really great."

Emma watches Tom as he eats, airlifting forkfuls of lasagne from plate to mouth, plate to mouth. The motion is hypnotic, mesmerizing. Tom doesn't stop to agonize over each bite. The fork goes in, comes out empty, dives straight back down for the next load. An efficient machine refueling itself.

She looks down at her own plate, half-eaten bits of courgette congealing in puddles of white sauce and pasta. It disgusts her, but she tries to hide her disgust and spears a piece of mushroom, forcing it down her throat.

"How was your day?" she asks.

"Really good," Tom says and starts talking about work.

As he talks his fork hangs mid-air, dripping melted cheese onto his plate. There's something olive coloured under the cheese and she keeps getting distracted by it. She wishes he'd just shut up and put it in his mouth. He doesn't notice.

She tries to focus on what he's saying but all she can hear is the drip drip drip of cheese hitting the plate.

"Tom," she says, when she can't take it anymore. "Tom."

He finally stops, startled that he's being interrupted. She doesn't usually interrupt.

"Yes, dear?"

"Your fork."

"What about it?"

Just put it in your mouth goddammit.

But she doesn't say that. She swallows back the urge to snap at him, forces her face into a neutral expression and fakes a smile.

"Nothing. Go on."



During the day Emma cleans, or watches TV. Once a week she goes to her local book club. She wanted to join yoga classes at first, but Tom didn't approve. It was too close to exercise, he thought. First yoga and then the running would start up again and that wouldn't be good for the baby, would it?

"But it's just stretching," she tried to argue. "Just a bit of stretching on comfy floor mats. What's wrong with that?"

He just gave her that look. The one that said 'do you really want to get into this now?' The one that said 'Emma, I don't have the time or energy to deal with you, why do you have to be so difficult?'

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

That look always meant the end of the conversation. So it was no yoga and book club instead.

They're talking about 'Wuthering Heights' today, about what it meant to be a woman in the 19th century and what it means to be a woman now.

"Feminism's shit," one lady says. "All it means is that we have to do all the housework we did before and make money on top of that."

"At least Kathy had the freedom to act like a bitch," Sheila, Emma's closest friend in book club, says. "Can you imagine? No, dear, go and pick your own hairball out of the shower. I don't see you trying to put two toddlers to bed. No, dear, go and do the dishes yourself. I'm just going to sit here and watch Netflix instead." She turns to Emma, grinning. "Go on, your turn. What would you say?"

She shrugs shyly. "Probably 'fuck off Tom, I'm pregnant, not dying'."

The other women laugh knowingly. They all have their own children and remember what those nine magical months were like, though Emma doesn't think it's magical at all. She thinks it's horrendous and can't wait for it to be over. She's not even sure if she loves the thing growing inside her, that feels more like a tumour than a baby sometimes. She can't say this to anyone. It's one bitchy fantasy that's too taboo even for book club gossip. It's a violation of the code, a violation of the maternal destiny she's supposed to fulfil, a role that's supposed to come as easily to her as breathing.

So why doesn't it? Why doesn't anything ever come easily to her?



"How's the morning sickness? Is it getting any better?" Sheila asks later on over an iced frappe. It's their weekly coffee date, where they mostly gossip about other women before the conversation turns, inevitably, to the subject of children.

"It's dying down," Emma says, taking a sip of her green tea.

"How many weeks has it been now? nine? ten?"

"Eleven."

"You'll probably start showing soon. For me it was thirteen weeks. What do you think of me throwing you a baby shower?"

She thinks it's a terrible idea, but Sheila loves organising parties, and what better excuse is there for a party than a new baby? She can't bring herself to completely crush her friend's hopes.

"I'll think about it," she says.

Sheila looks disappointed at her lack of enthusiasm. "I thought you'd want to celebrate, after everything you and Tom have been through to have this baby."

"I do, it's just..."

"What is it, Emma?"

She sighs. "When you were pregnant, did you ever have doubts?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

"Of course," Sheila says, and there's compassion in her sharp blue eyes. "I was terrified. I thought I'd be a bad mother and screw my kids up, or accidentally get them killed somehow. Taking responsibility for another human life is a scary thing and it's normal to be nervous. There's nothing wrong with it."

It's not just nerves though, she wants to say. It's so many other things too. How can I look after a child when I can barely look after myself?

But saying those things would require explanations, explanations that she doesn't want to give. So instead she says "thank you" and "you're right, I just need to stop worrying so much," as if saying it out loud will make the anxiety and fear vanish.

"It's going to be fine, really," Sheila says again, as if sensing that her assurances haven't worked. "We've all done it. We've all been there. And you're going to be a brilliant mother. So go home and get some proper sleep. If you're still worried about it tomorrow, talk to Tom. I'm sure he'll say the same thing."

She knows he won't. Tom already thinks she's a terrible mother. It's why he watches her like a hawk, why he tries to exert as much control over her daily routine as he can. He doesn't trust her at all, and secretly she knows that he's right not to trust her. She's not a very trustworthy person.

"Yeah, I'll do that," she says, smiling weakly as she drains the rest of her tea.

Sheila's attention has already shifted; her forty five minutes are up and she has to go pick the kids up from nursery. She rushes out the door and Emma just sits there, squinting down into her cup, watching the dark olive leaves at the bottom swirl and swirl and swirl, a kaleidoscope of futures staring back at her from those murky dregs.



That night Tom is in a bad mood. He broods silently over the noodle stir fry she's prepared while she twirls long stringy beansprouts around her fork and makes soy sauce whirlpools in her bowl. The subtle undertone of nausea, which has become a constant in her life, rolls her stomach and sends bile crawling to the back of her throat.

Eventually, he snaps at her.

"For fuck sake Em, just eat it."

She obediently shoves some noodles in her mouth, chews slowly, and forces herself to swallow. The taste is acrid, there's too much salt in it. She has to gulp down water to wash it away.

After dinner they sit and watch TV, old reruns of 'Friends' they've both seen a thousand times. The familiarity is comforting. She curls into him, feeling his warm and steady heartbeat, the heavy weight of his arm around her shoulders. It takes her back to those early days before they were married, before there were babies and hidden resentments between them.

They met at university. She was studying English, him Business. They

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

lived in the same hall in first year, becoming friends first and then something more. They kept it a secret from their other friends for a long time and the rebelliousness of it, the danger of being caught, was intoxicating. Being with Tom was a thrilling game; it was a whirl of student houses that smelt of weed, drinking and dancing, nights spent talking and sometimes fucking outside in some hidden grassy alcove they'd found, his much larger frame looming over hers as she lay spread-eagled on the ground for him, the shape of his head blotting out the moon above them.

What changed? How had they let that go, that beautiful fleeting happiness they'd nurtured together like some rare desert plant, watering it and caring for it and keeping it safe from the overbearing pressures of the world?

Those memories, the good ones, have been blotted out now by long nights spent arguing, accusing, defending.

'You can't expect me to spend all my time taking care of you, you're not a child!'

'I know that, so stop treating me like one.'

'What do you want me to do? Force-feed you? Take you back to the hospital?'

'It's not because of that. We just need to keep trying. It'll happen when the timing's right.'

'Bullshit, Emma, that's bullshit.'

She closes her eyes and thinks, you got what you wanted, didn't you? I was right. It's finally happened but the timing isn't right, the timing's never right.

Next to her Tom twists around as if he can hear her thoughts, the shadows flickering across his face making his features seem sinister. The laugh track and the tinny voices from the TV set become menacing.

Without words he kisses her softly, then more urgently, tangling his hands in her hair and tracing the jutting ridges of her collarbones down into the hollows of her throat. She melts into him like she's always done, but there's a part of her that isn't in the room anymore, a part of her that's watching everything happen from far away.

Afterwards they lie naked on the sofa under a blanket, her body overlapping his. Tom is already asleep, his deep breathing lulling her into a state of calm. A shaft of moonlight turns his hair silver. She gets up and pads to their shared bedroom, stands in front of the full-length mirror and stares at herself for the first time in months.

Her face is still hot and flushed, her bare skin glistening with sweat. Her ribs are undulating hills, poking out below pert breasts. Sharp hip bones taper down into slender, athletic legs. Her stomach looks bigger than it used to, less concave, more convex. She tries a sideways profile and she can see the slight bulge, the little human growing inside her. Will it look more like him, she wonders, or her? Will it have her honey brown hair and blue jay eyes, or will it be strong and tall like Tom is?

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

She remembers him saying once, only a few days after she first found out she was pregnant: 'let's hope he doesn't turn out crazy like his mother, eh?'

He meant it as a joke and she was supposed to laugh along. They used to tease each other all the time and she always won in their verbal sparring matches, but it's different now. They aren't on common ground anymore, pretending to play-fight. They're on opposite sides with a baby in between, growing bigger everyday in neutral territory, preparing to one day pick a side itself.

And how is that fair? How is it fair that this baby could either turn out like Tom, or worse, like her?



Tom comes to the hospital with her. He comes to all of her hospital appointments and her friends gush over him for being such a 'caring husband.' They tell her how lucky she is to have found such a good man, that there isn't anyone better suited to fatherhood. She tries to curb the bitterness she feels. Being a 'good dad' is easy, whereas any mistake she makes will label her a 'bad mother' for the rest of time.

'You should only have children when you're ready to be unselfish' Sheila told her once, and at the time she didn't think much about it. She wanted it to happen because Tom was desperate for a child and she would've done anything to make him happy back then. But now she's beginning to realise that she isn't quite ready to be unselfish yet.

"The baby's healthy," the doctor tells her after the ultrasound check-up. "Good, strong heartbeat." He peers at the records on his computer and frowns. "I'm concerned about you though, Emma. Your latest blood test shows that you're a little low on iron. It's not unusual in pregnant women, but you'll need to start taking some supplements. Your weight is lower than I'd hoped too."

She stares determinedly down at the floor, not daring to look up. She can just imagine the look on Tom's face. "I'm trying my best," she says.

The doctor gives her a sympathetic smile. "I understand it's difficult. Are you still attending your weekly sessions?"

"Yes."

"Good. On top of that I'd like you to speak to a nutritionist and put together a new meal plan, okay? Your BMI is normal at the moment, but we don't want it falling any lower than that."

She nods obediently. What else can she do? She knows she doesn't get a choice in this situation. She never does.



For days after the appointment there's a tense, suffocating silence in the house, like the building is holding its breath with her. Even the baby is kicking less often. Emma loses the little appetite she has left.

This is the last straw for Tom. One night, as he watches her pretend to eat her dinner, he snaps.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he hisses, expression livid. "After everything we talked about, all that progress you made...I thought you were better!"

"I am," she says feebly. No matter how many times she tries to explain it to him though he'll never understand that she can't be 'better'. The concept of 'better' is always relative to her: better than last month, better than last year, but never just 'better' on its own.

"How can you do this to us?" he continues, caught up in his own rage. "How can you be so fucking selfish? Don't you understand you're killing our baby-"

"Tom," she pleads, her eyes stinging with tears. "You're overreacting. The baby's fine. I just need a few extra vitamins. He said it's normal."

"You always say that," he spits, and worse than anger there's disgust in his eyes too. "You smile and lie to me so that you can go straight back to your old habits."

"It's not like that-"

"You think I don't know you, Emma? You think I haven't already played this game with you a thousand times?"

"I'm telling the truth," she whispers. "I'm trying my hardest. What else can I do?"

For a moment there's stalemate, silence punctured by Tom's heavy breathing and her quiet snuffles. When he speaks again he sounds utterly drained. "I don't know what to do anymore," he murmurs. "I want to trust you but I can't. I don't know how to help you."

"You don't need to help me. There's nothing wrong."

"There is, though. Everything's wrong. How can you keep denying it?"

Because denying it makes it more bearable. She closes her eyes and when she opens them again she sees him through a watery veil, rippling and shimmering before her like a mirage.

"I'm trying my best," she repeats, because it's all she can say, the only defence she has left.

He sighs, turns away from her. Your best isn't good enough. She can read it in his hunched shoulders.

"What do you want, Emma?" he asks, and there's a pleading edge to his voice. "What do you want so badly that I can't give you?"

A feeling of *deja-vu* comes over her. They've had this conversation before, so many times in so many different ways, and they all lead to the same place.

"I don't know."

She does know. She wants everything in the world, but even if she had it, it wouldn't be enough. She'd still crave more because there's a black hole inside her where things keep mysteriously disappearing and she doesn't know how to find her way out of it. She can feel it in her stomach, a gnawing ache spreading outwards, becoming more and more intense

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

until she wonders why it hurts so much to have nothing inside you, why emptiness can breed pain like this.

She looks down and gasps because she swears she sees a flash of dark red, scarlet where there shouldn't be, but she doesn't trust her own mind anymore.

Suddenly Tom's in front of her, grabbing her shoulders, his mouth moving even though the world's on mute. She blinks up at him, her mind fogging over with pain, flashes of reality slipping by. His eyes are overflowing with concern and fear. Why does he look so scared? She must be dying. Why else would it hurt so much?

She closes her eyes and sees this thing, monstrous and semi-formed, bursting out of her, splitting her stomach open like a ripe peach. It's not a baby at all, it's not even human-shaped, it's just a mass of half-limbs and half-faces, decades worth of toxic sludge rising and rising, breaking the surface of her in half.

For a single moment everything pulls together and clarity strikes her like lightening: her baby is dying. Then the thought is washed away by a new tide of pain, burning through every part of her, compelling her to submit to the cleansing flames.