

Emptied

The screaming kettle, like a child's prolonged shrill, startled Evelyn back to the present. She shook her head to clear the mental fog, trying to chase away the fatigue. Slowly, she rose from the kitchen chair and stepped gingerly towards the stove. Even alone in the kitchen, she walked with a straight back, her head up. She was trying to will away the exhaustion she felt in every bone of her body. Mind over matter, she could still hear her mother's voice reverberating in her head.

It was already Saturday; the days had flown by at an insultingly fast pace. She had promised Jemima and Mya weeks ago she would meet them for dinner. Glancing at her Apple Watch, her insides groaned: 8:32 AM, only nine more hours. She could feel the dread creeping in. Agreeing to dinner meant she would have to put her mask on and sit in public, a fake half smile plastered to her face as she listened to them talk about recitals and practices and how busy they were. She felt guilty for how her jaw tightened as they blathered on.

Pouring the hot water into the stained teacup, she absentmindedly glanced out the window. The leaves in her backyard were dancing their death spirals to their final resting place. She sipped and watched as one lonely leaf slowly twirled through the air, spinning and looping, its last graceful exit. This time of year was always the hardest.

With a sigh, Evelyn turned away from the window. Even in the fleeting moments of the present, these minute moments, the twinge in her belly would inevitably come back. Some nights after her third or fourth glass of wine, her mind would pause for one second in between numbness and pain; this is where she felt the best. But consistently and without fail, her body would acquiesce to a persistent and pervasive sadness.

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Tying her runners, she mulled over the Rolodex of excuses she kept in her head for last-minute ditch efforts. "Just go," Cam would say. He never outright discouraged her from these outings with friends. Still, Evelyn could not shake the feeling that it was not so much that he wanted her to get out and have some fun but rather his weird sense of responsibility and commitment to not breaking your word when you tell people you will do something. His black-and-white view of the world had worn Evelyn thin after twenty-two years.

Just beyond the halfway mark of her morning run, the descending death chime sounded from her left earbud. Her blaring music came to an abrupt stop.

*"Great, just fucking great. Just me and my fucking thoughts."*

She continued her homeward route, trying not to acknowledge the silence, concentrating intensely on the rhythm and sound of her feet as they hit the ground. Sweaty and annoyed, Evelyn kicked her shoes off as she entered the garage and placed them neatly on the shoe rack. The back entryway greeted her with a wall of warm air.

"Cam, it is too freaking warm in here; turn the heat down."

She kept the, *for fuck sakes*, in, but it lingered at the roof of her mouth for a good fifteen seconds. Her mind shot back to the young mom who galloped past her fifteen minutes ago, pushing her jogging stroller and blanket bundle with one hand,

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so full of energy and the lone human Evelyn had bothered to glance at. The house was unusually quiet.

Cam must have gone to his office. His oasis of escape from her, Evelyn knew. She turned her wrist over; it was 10:21 a.m. Only seven more hours. She had announced to Cam that this year, she would do the fall gardening again. After weeks of inaction, Cam had politely asked her if she wanted him to call Jenny, their usual gardener, to get the yard work done. He had his ways of asking but not asking. Her house felt hot and stuffy, suffocating.

*Fine, I will do it.*

Begrudgingly pulling on an old pair of gumboots and armed with pruning sheers and a shovel, Evelyn headed to the front flowerbed. Cam's subtle hints about the yard were insulting; she knew she had left the flower beds longer than usual this year, ignoring the increasingly limp and languid foliage every time she pulled up to the house. Clip, pull, discard. She played the mantra over and over in her head. Clip, pull, discard. Her pruning sheers methodically clipped the drooping stems from the overgrown Lilly. The exquisite white blooms had gone by irritatingly quickly this season, dropping their beauty abruptly.

Earthy smells of dead plants and dank, freshly turned dirt reached her nose. It made her feel nauseous—an uncomfortably familiar odour. She took several deep, calming breaths; a flash of red caught her eye. Perched on the corner fence post was a Red Bellied woodpecker. The slight little bird glanced around in a bellicose manner before commencing to enthusiastically hammer

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its tiny beak into the side of the post. Evelyn could not help but smile at the comical performer.

Her attention drawn, she stepped back to observe her progress. The flower bed stared back at her coldly. The wilted brown perennial flower clumps looked less than glorious. Her watch showed 1:17 p.m., only four hours and thirteen minutes. Her stomach turned as she headed back into the house.

*Over the threshold. It is one step at a time.*

Emerging from the shower, she glanced in the mirror, taking in her full form. Middle age had shrivelled her once supple skin. The skin had started to sag and pucker around her armpits like sloppy frowns. Her belly echoed this sentiment. Gravity was fighting for the upper hand. Defiantly, her shoulders were still broad and strong. Pushing them back, Evelyn lifted her chin, square jaw and high cheekbones crowned by thick auburn hair. She was still a handsome woman; not traditionally beautiful but striking. She reached for her watch where it had been resting on the charger. 4:27, one hour and three minutes.

There was a missed text from Mya. "I will be there to pick you up; see you soon."

She pushed down the rising panic.

*"Stop it. Just stop it."*

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Seated at her makeup table, she carefully laid out her items—moisturizer, brushes, coverup, liner, mascara, bronzer, and blush. Slowly and methodically, she combed her hair. The blowdryer's welcome hum echoed through the room. Placing the blowdryer on her table, she stared at her naked face in the mirror, completely still, then reached for her moisturizer.

Spinning the lid off the pot, she dipped her middle finger into the cool white and delicately dabbed her face. Leaning toward the mirror, her fingers deftly and evenly distributed the cream, enjoying its cooling effects. Dark circles gleamed under her eyes, contentiously advertising years of sleepless nights. Pumping the coverup in generous dollops onto her makeup brush, Evelyn worked from her forehead to her décollet, painstakingly concealing every blemish and age spot. She took special care to obscure the darkness around her eyes. As she surveyed her work, her muted face challenged her in the mirror. With quick movements, she brushed the top of her cheekbones with rouge, adding life to her matte palette. Her shaky hand drew a wild line on her lower lashline. She cursed softly. Several attempts later, an acceptable semblance of a liner outline appeared. In the final act, Evelyn swept the mascara brush over her lashes, carefully coating each single lash. 5:20 pm, it was time. She was ready.

*"Just fucking open the door."*

Evelyn stared at her hand as it rested on the door handle. She pushed the lever halfway down, hesitated, and slowly compressed the lever all the way; the tongue of the latch bolt

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retracted with a resounding click. She thrust the door out of the way and stepped forward. The bedroom was completely emptied.

She sank to the carpet, the room's emptiness hitting her like a gut punch. Her eyes went immediately to the wall where the bed had been. The letters she had 3m taped there all those years ago were gone, but the faded outline could still be seen: D-E-I-R-D-R-E. Evelyn said her name softly, allowing herself to speak it out loud into the silence. She rarely spoke Deirdre's name, refusing to refer to her in the past tense, trying to preserve her presence.

They buried her exactly seven years ago tomorrow. She would have been nineteen this year.

Deirdre's body had looked perfect on the hospital bed. The doctor had to explain to them repeatedly over the course of several weeks that her traumatic brain injury was too much; there was no life. Deirdre's deep red hair was shockingly colourful, vibrant and defiantly lifelike against the stark white sheets and faded blue blanket.

Feisty was the word Evelyn heard the most when others described her. The second she grabbed her first lungful of air, Deirdre was a force. She was all hair-flowing, crazy, out-of-control hair everywhere, her personality embodied in a crowning glory of red.

She had been wearing her bike helmet. It did not matter. Deirdre had shot out of their driveway without warning, her soft skull no match for the oncoming truck. Her small blue bike went right under the cab, taking her little body with it.

Evelyn could not accept her loss. Her whole world had devolved into an absurd and meaningless performance, one that she could no longer connect with. Some of her friends had tried

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to keep in touch, but her withdrawal into a private cocoon of grief had severed almost every relationship. The remaining circle of four or five friends Evelyn had pushed to arm's length; perhaps it was mutual. There was only so much secondhand grief humans were willing to tolerate. Evelyn felt bitter towards everyone, and Cam was not the exception. Deirdre was her only child; Cam had two older children from a previous marriage that Deirdre rarely saw. Her only child, her daughter, was gone.

Last June, amidst the inundation of grad pics and graduation celebrations, Evelyn had retreated to Dierdre's room for hours, sometimes days on end. She would lie on the carpet, falling asleep amongst Deirdre's untouched things, unable to move. She was paralyzed by pain. This past summer, Cam had insisted it was time. The room should be emptied. He had already lost a daughter, and his wife was slipping away piece by piece; together, their loneliness was killing them. He wondered if clearing the room would help give them a cleaner starting place; not to move on, Cam pleaded, but at least move forward. Finally, Evelyn gave in, and Cam planned a trip to the city. It had actually been a nice weekend; Evelyn and Cam spent the weekend eating and walking, talking about work and the latest books they were reading. They very carefully skirted around the fact that the movers were packing up Dierdre's things to take to storage. Their eyes automatically shifted away from any child they happened to pass on the street. Both knew the other was looking away for the same reason.

Now, here she was for the first time in the emptied space. She stood and looked around. Her breathing had returned to normal. The nausea had somewhat subsided from this morning. aggressive thumping broke through the silence. Evelyn smiled.

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*"That darn little woodpecker!"*

Evelyn heard Mya's car in the driveway. Her phone vibrated; it was Cam.

*"I love you. I hope you have fun tonight."*

Heart and smiley face emojis were added for good measure—a twinge of lightness mixed with affection moved in her chest.

*"Love you too."*