

The craned neck of the faucet peers at him mockingly, but Ethan obliges its offer. He turns it on and allows his plastic comb to soak water between its teeth in a film-like layer. In the corner of the bathroom mirror, Ethan spies his wife's feet peeking out from under the duvet. He gazes at them solemnly, taking in their scathed, yellow patches. Nearly half a year ago, she'd given up on slathering her feet with Vaseline as a nightly ritual. The fluffy pink socks that she'd wear over her Vaseline-doused feet have disappeared since, along with her makeup, hair products, and other tools of self-maintenance. Ethan, on the other hand, healthfully increased his means of looking presentable as he watched Meredith fall into careless abyss.

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From that point on, each dinner party presented Ethan's duty of privately apologizing to the host on behalf of his wife's disheveled state. The phrase, "Sorry about Meredith, she's not feeling too well," had become a staple in his social exchanges. The person on the receiving end usually met Ethan with the perplexed, scrunched brow of a supposedly understanding expression. Every time he resurfaced, he'd catch Meredith waiting for him, smirking through wine-stained lips. He resented her self-satisfied attitude; especially after all the energy he spent making excuses for her. As the party progressed, he always kept her in his line of sight, careful to disengage any outburst on the verge of eruption. Tonight, she had attempted to please him by applying makeshift eyeliner from the burnt end of a toothpick. This had to do until she started buying make-up again. As the two approached the doorstep of tonight's dinner party, Meredith joked about pinching her cheeks prior to entering for a "Medieval Glow". Ethan smiled apprehensively, more worried about the state of her hair. It looked especially frizzy; her natural state in the absence of modern hair products.

Once the door opened and they exchanged greetings with the host, Ethan could not ignore the creeping feeling that the other guests were staring at his wife. He flushed embarrassedly, hoping that the indoor lighting would hinder her facial features from appearing too wrinkled. As the party progressed, Ethan situated himself within the conversation of two other men.

Taking small sips of chardonnay, Ethan glanced towards Meredith's pitiful figure on the couch. Her breasts rested on her knees as she hunched over, diligently studying the details of the mahogany coffee table. A wiry blonde woman had been attempting to initiate a conversation

with her, but it was clear Meredith was ignoring her advances. A feeling reminiscent of empathy took over Ethan as he observed Meredith's utter boredom. Excusing himself from the men, he headed in her direction. While Meredith half-listeningly nodded her head to the blond woman's comments, he sat himself beside her. Feeling the weight of the couch submerge, she turned to see her husband feebly return a smile. She gave a surrendered sigh.

"What are you, my caretaker?" she asked, turning back towards the coffee table. The blonde woman had already taken the hint and moved to another area. Feeling a sudden surge of generosity, Ethan replied,

"Wanna get out of here?" Meredith slowly lifted her head, trying to determine a way to react calmly, even though he could already sense her restlessness. Their bond temporarily resurfaced during these few seconds of a shared knowingness. He took her hand and led her out of the house, saluting their friends goodbye before shutting the door.

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Ethan rolled down the windows of the car as he drove. The cold air stung the husband and wife's faces as the night sauntered on. Meredith hung her arm outside the window, hugging the car door like a metal coat. From the reflection of the side mirror, Ethan could see a child-like grin stretched on her face. After a few more seconds of bliss, she broke the silence,

"We should do that more often. Actually, we should do that all the time." His hands firm on the steering wheel, Ethan took a fleeting glance in Meredith's direction,

"Do what?" he asked.

"*This*. Leaving. Getting away. Whatever you call it. I can't stand those people anyway."

It was Ethan's turn to sigh deeply. Clearly, Meredith had misread his intentions. Sensing his grumbling mood, Meredith snatched her arm from outside the window as if scolded. With her face directed away from the streetlights, it was nearly impossible to see her expression, apart from the clock's display etching a soft outline of her form. Ethan measured out an impressionable amount of time before responding, especially once her disappointment had subsided.

“What I did for you was meant as a favor. It had nothing to do with me. I thought it best to leave a situation before it got worse.” He cleared his throat, hoping that the mature disposition of his response had time to take effect.

“You’re balding,” Meredith retorted.

“What?”

“*Bald*-ing. I was looking at your hair the other day when I noticed a bit more flesh peeking through than usual.” She pushed a mass of frizzy hair from her face and faced the window.

“That’s impossible.” Ethan answered stoically, but he made a quick glance in the rearview mirror just in case. An exasperated huff was heard from Meredith’s side.

“Look, there’s no escaping it. Life is just waiting for you to submit. You’re body moves forward in ways that your mind cannot accept-”

“Yeah, well that doesn’t mean I should give up entirely-”

“Hey, who said I’ve given up?” Meredith was sitting up now, her body in a combat-ready stance, “Indifference and resignation are entirely different things.”

“Look, Meredith, I appreciate your strong sense of principles, but I think you are being unrealistic here. As adults, we carry the responsibility of appearing in...a certain way. To be honest, it’s rude-almost barbaric-how you choose to appear before our friends, family, the Public. It says to the world, ‘I have no self-respect’. Is that how you want to appear?”

This long-winded response granted Ethan time to heal from his wife’s “balding” comment. He was just about to take a breath to further his answer when he heard a stifled sob. Though filtered by her unruly hair, Ethan was able to spy the gleam of Meredith’s tears. The pause in their conversation presented an opening for her response, but she could not find the energy to answer. The verbal embers embedded in her throat had already diminished into thick ashes. With each sob, she watched her breath rise before her in small clouds, only for them to escape out the window in sharp streaks. They flashed past her eyes to join the outer world.

The car ride continued in this silence. During this silence, Ethan reflected the their relationship, and what it had come to. He always felt he had to take care of her; finding strength by correcting, at times even exploiting, her shortcomings. Before, this mentor/student complex was as secret source of his pride, but had lately taken on the form of duty. He swallowed and drove on.

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Ethan takes in the sight of his face in the mirror. Flashbacks of himself in his youthful prime swarm his mind; aunts pinching his cheeks, girls giggling in hushed circles as he strode by, countless flirty gestures from faceless women dissolved in memory. One more blink, and he is back in the present. He runs his hand through his once luscious hair and sighs deeply, taking in the aroma of nearby colognes and other products used to reinstate his masculinity. *It is my duty to tell her what we are.* Man and Woman. Husband and Wife.

Taking the wet comb, he slides it through his hair. The Comb-over, a hairstyle his father was endlessly ridiculed for, now hung heavily upon his own head.