

Thanks

Emmaline turned the radio down and tucked her brown wavy hair behind her ear to address the whining coming from behind her. Apparently, much was still to be desired even after two potty breaks and a pit stop for food.

“I have to pee mommy”

“There’s no way,” Emmaline said under her breath to herself and her husband, who was driving their minivan for this leg of the trip. The hum of the car on the interstate kept her voice in the front seat between them.

“We just went potty fifteen minutes ago sweetie,” Emmaline said in her best *This is my child and I love him even though I might kill him before this trip is over* voice.

“I still have to go now”

“You can go next time we get gas, how’s that sound?”

“No! I have to go now!”

“Fine, David pull off at the next exit, he has to go *“Now”!*” Emmaline said with a sigh, putting the same emphasis on the word now, an inventive hybrid of wail and demand sometimes accompanied by arm flailing, that her four-year-old boy had learned to wield so well.

“He reminds me of your brother” David chuckled, the blink of the turn signal clicking in the background.

“Aren’t we lucky,” Emmaline said with a huff “My mom had her hands full with Willy until he was in college, we can only hope Jeremy grows out of it a tad sooner”

“Fingers crossed indeed,” David replied.

The front door squeaked open and the warmth from inside hugged her. Shrieks and hugs ensued as they walked through the front door of her childhood home, her Mom and Dad waiting in the entryway to greet Emmaline, David, and Jeremy. The house was cleaner than usual. Emmaline wasn't there for the tizzy she was certain her mom had been in before they arrived, but she had lived under this roof long enough to know the onslaught of chores that must have ensued before their arrival. She could picture her mom's green eyes wide with a deranged look while barking out orders about cleaning spaces she had never heard of. While dusting off the top side of the ceiling fan blades always felt pointless, the intensity of her mother's specificity paid off. The deep brown floors almost glowed, and the white walls almost looked freshly painted, the glossy trim at the bottom completely blemish-free. Her heart panged at the picture of her grandmother in front of an old Christmas tree, but the frame was sparkling and dust-free. She also remembered how long the Christmas decorations had taken to put up. While she didn't love her mother's insistence that they decorate on November first, feeling like they missed out on the orange and brown happenings of squirrels, leaves, and turkeys, she had come to associate Thanksgiving with twinkle lights and ornaments just as much as its December counterpart. She gave her dad a knowing smile as he gestured subtly around the house, sensing his raised eyebrow's meaning.

“House looks great Mom,” Emmaline said, earning a head nod from her father.

“Oh thanks, sweetie, see Honey, I told you guests appreciate a clean home, even if they're family,” her mom replied with an uppity half-glance in his direction, scooping a giggling Jeremy up into her arms.

“You were right, dear, my mistake as usual,” her father conceded sarcastically but warmly. Emmaline found herself laughing, looking up when she heard another snort from the living room.

“Was that Willy?” Emmaline asked.

“Oh yes, he got in about forty-five minutes ago, come come,” her mom said, shepherding them to the living room.

The fire didn't burn real logs, but the glowing flame still emitted a natural warmth and made the surrounding stones of the massive fireplace teeter between light and dark. Her brother was lying across the white sectional with his feet propped on the end. He gave them a soft smile before standing up and hugging them all, the embrace familiar but not quite familial.

“Willy put your shoes by the front door please, they're crowding the living room” their mother chided.

Willy glanced around at the very open white area rug with a look on his face that indicated he was looking for anything that could resemble crowding, but he got up to move the worn tennis shoes anyway. Emmaline tried to catch his eye to give him an apologetic shrug or share a smile and a head shake, but he didn't quite look in her direction.

Her mom began a long string of questions as Emmaline plopped down into one of the twin white arm chairs, David bouncing Jeremy on his leg in the other.

“Work's great, Jer's school is great, the drive was long and Jeremy's bladder seems to have shrunk, we ate about twenty minutes ago but just something light, and yes I brought the pie tin,” Emmaline replied, mentally checking off each question as she answered. They caught up and chatted, Willy joining them back in the living room once his shoes were safely out of their mom's line of sight.

“Did you hear Willy didn't get the promotion?” their Mom asked like he wasn't sitting two seats away from her.

“Mom!” Willie half grunted, half shouted.

“I assumed you had told her.”

“No, you did not! You literally asked her if she had heard yet—”

“I did not know that,” Emmaline interjected glancing to Willy for elaboration. When he just leaned back into the sectional and closed his eyes, she took that as a signal to change the subject. She was surprised she had missed such an important life development, especially since she had called Willy two weeks ago and he hadn't mentioned it. They had even talked about work, him mentioning that he was pretty sure he was getting promoted soon. She had been picking Jer up from school and had been a bit distracted, but she was sure it had seemed like work was going well for him.

Emmaline and Willy didn't talk much anymore. She called on his birthday and he on hers, and they saw each other on holidays like this one. When they were younger, she and Willy had been pretty close. They used to drive to school together and vent about the mold growing in their high school classrooms and the teachers assigning work that was somehow overwhelming and teaching them nothing at the same time. They would take turns curating the music choice for the morning ride, and would often swindle their mom into letting them get takeout at the earliest sign of bad weather on the way home. She missed the easy closeness afforded by proximity under one roof. She knew their drift was the standard of siblings getting older, but it still made her sad. She found herself not knowing what to talk about when she saw Willy now, and their phone calls were characterized by Emmaline trying to pull conversation from him like pulling a milkshake through too skinny a straw. They worked in the same field, medical research, so

conversation often fell back on work talk, but his personal life was a mystery to her. There was no falling out or argument to blame, just the current of life carrying them apart.

After her family talked in the living room for about two hours, Jeremy started to nod asleep on Emmaline's arm, so she had David put him to bed upstairs in the bunk bed in the guest room. Now just her, her parents, and her brother, the silence in the room felt easy, no one needing to converse to fill it. Sitting there made Emmaline's chest hurt, she didn't come home nearly enough. Her mind wandered while staring at the Christmas tree with the flickering flames providing the perfect white noise for pondering, she felt uneasy at the shift in her life. She spent her whole childhood in this house, in these silences, by this fire, and now she hardly saw her family twice a year. Settling back into the crease of the couch, her blanket soft against her hands, she hoped to remember this feeling. She wanted to visit more, call more, talk more. She let the feeling sink into her mind so she wouldn't fall back into the pattern of placing her family on the back burner of her busy life. She hated the idea of her family fading to near strangers, swapped out for her husband and her child and her work. She could make time for both and hoped to start by making this Thanksgiving trip extra mushy. She could already picture her mom's delighted squeal and her dad's sigh of defeat if she suggested family pictures. Baby steps, but some family cooking was imminent, and surely board games could ensue as well. Feeling warm, Emmaline eventually hugged each family member, squeezing extra tight, and bounced upstairs to bed.

Nothing was going to plan. How could pie crust be so divisive? After breakfast, everyone had rolled up their sleeves to commence the preparation of tomorrow's Thanksgiving dinner. They worked in tandem for about fifteen whole minutes before tempers started coming out. Her dad had left the room an hour ago, throwing his hands up and pushing through the swinging

kitchen door— not to be seen again thus far. Her mom and Willy were arguing as only mother and son did, and every cooking instruction landed like some euphemism for life. “Dice the veggies evenly, dear,” came out sounding a lot like “Maybe if you were as put together as Emmaline, you would have a girlfriend by now,” and “What does it matter if they’re even, they get blended for the soup anyways?” carried distinct undertones of “I’m an adult now, treat me like one!” accompanied by both internal and external eye rolls. David was rolling cookie dough into balls, involving Jeremy by letting him transfer them onto the lined baking sheet. Jeremy had somehow dropped three balls onto the floor despite the comedically short distance between the handoff point and the baking sheet. There was flour all over Emmaline’s shirt, and it smelled like she was on her way to burning her second glaze.

Four painful hours later, they finished prepping all the food that didn’t need to be cooked on Thanksgiving day and cleaned the kitchen without murdering one another, but it was dicey (pun intended). Things were looking up after everyone finished decompressing in their separate rooms and reconvened in the living room. There was a stack of pizza boxes, the topmost slightly open on the glass coffee table in front of the couch. The long day of cooking before Thanksgiving had started a family tradition of pizza for dinner the night before the feast. They were all chattering with random game shows on the TV, and the mood was jingly. Three glasses of champagne had their mother not noticing the pizza grease on the coffee table, or the red and green throw pillows strewn about the floor as Jeremy constructed a fortress from them. Even her brother was looking content, trying to shout the answer to game show questions before their Dad did.

Emmaline was feeling warm and fuzzy, and while she was sure the wine was helping, seeing her family together was helping more. Her parents got up to put the pizza in the fridge and

tidy up and David took Jeremy upstairs to get ready for bed, so Emmaline crossed the living room and sat down on the couch beside Willy.

“Once a week,” he shouted at the TV.

“Every other day,” Emmaline said.

“No way”

“Wanna bet?”

“10?”

“Deal.”

“And to determine tonight’s winner... how often does a normal single-person household run their dishwasher...” “And the answer is twice per week!” the host bellows, confetti showering the onscreen winners of some paradise vacation.

“Well I guess we were both wrong,” Emmaline said with a shrug.

“I was closer”

“I’m not paying you for closer”

“Typical,” Willy said, smiling, but his words seemed to have more bite to them than his expression suggested. Emmaline laughed and they watched the show for a beat, her brain reaching for hold to mount conversation.

“No promotion, huh?” Emmaline asked, trying to enter the conversation causally. She didn’t want to come off as too concerned or pushy.

“Yeah, don’t really want to talk about it. Nothing to do about it now,” Willy said not looking at her.

“How are you doing otherwise?”

“Fine.”

“Anything new besides that?”

“Nope,” he said proceeding to answer more trivia from the new game show on the TV as if they weren’t in the middle of a conversation. Emmaline prodded with more small talk, and his replies somehow got shorter than they already were.

Emmaline stewed in the silence she hadn’t wanted to exist. She was extending a hand, trying to make conversation, and he was putting in literally zero effort.

“God!” Emmaline eventually spouted, throwing her hands up and stomping back to the other side of the living room.

“What’s that for?” Willy said, deigning an uninterested glance in her direction.

“We literally never talk anymore Willy. I was just trying to catch up,” Emmaline started, the words flowing out like warm sparks. “God forbid I know anything about your life beyond the fact that everything’s *fine*.”

“I am fine, the promotion fell through” he snapped placing a weird emphasis on “fell through”.

“How would I have known that?” Emmaline yelled, throwing her hands up.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe if you decided to *catch up* with me more than just answering when I call, Emmaline. Maybe that’s how you would have known that,” Willy said, spitting out the words “catch up” like last year’s failed caramelized brussel sprouts.

“The phone works both ways, Willy! You don’t know what’s going on in my life, and you’re not even trying to know! At least I’m trying now,” she cut out at him.

“I always call first, but whatever Emmy, you’re right as always and I’m not doing this tonight,” Willy said, getting up from the couch entirely and stalking down the side hallway to his room without another word.

Emmaline felt tears form hot and sudden in her eyes. She felt like a rug had been pulled from under her. Not even a rug, she felt like someone managed to cut the carpet off the floor and yank *that* from under her. How had such an innocent attempt at reaching out been swatted down so fast? She sat with her mouth slightly open in quiet disbelief while the TV still racketed on. Wiping the damp streak from her face and chin, she curled into the couch and absently chewed the inside of her cheek. She molded a smile onto her face when her parents returned from kitchen cleanup and resolved to talk to Willy in the morning. He was probably just tired, and she had devolved to defensiveness with a quickness she wasn't proud of. She said her goodnights and went to her bedroom, easing the door open softly to preserve Jeremy's tentative restfulness. She let David kiss her on the forehead as she collapsed into bed and waved away his questions about her well-being. She was fine because she was sure tomorrow would go far better.

Willy held himself back from a full door slam as he stomped into his room. "*The phone works both ways*" *my ass*, he thought trying to will his heart to slow back down. How totally hypocritical and entirely typical. He'd bet she didn't even see the irony. His thoughts swirled by too fast for him to hear any one of them, but he knew none were positive. He felt like his blood was shaking and he needed to sprint or throw something or cry. He punched a pillow a good few times until he felt a bit silly and then splashed some cold water on his face. Both the temperature and the sound of splashing onto the smooth ceramic sink helped him settle. He took a pointed deep breath and banned any thoughts about the encounter from the forefront of his mind. He shoved down his frustration and tried to rehearse what he might say he was thankful for at dinner tomorrow that wouldn't cause any quips from Emmy or headshakes from their mother. He landed on "getting to spend time with family" and hoped it didn't come out too sarcastically.

The table was set, the turkey was done, his family was seated at the table and the cherry pie was in the oven. The conversation was polite but clipped, everyone trying to preserve the forced peace. Emmy had spent the morning trying to catch his eye and he had spent the morning training his eyes to find great interest in the plain white walls every time she looked his way. They all went in a circle sharing what they were grateful for, his rehearsal paying off as his turn passed by without incident. Emmaline went last, and Willy turned his interest from the walls to a fascinating examination of his hands in his lap. He only half-heard most of her speech but he gathered she had *so much* to be thankful for. She ended by saying she was thankful for the holiday season allowing her to catch up with everyone, and Willy found himself snorting without meaning to. Emmaline's face fell, and his mother's eyes snapped to him, but no one said anything, so he reached for the mashed potatoes.

The multitude of ceramic dishes and scattered decor felt crowded now that they were actually eating and not just admiring the beauty of the spread. He strategically sat on the same side of the table, but opposite end from Emmy to minimize interaction and contentedly chowed through turkey and stuffing while talking with his dad.

"I think I would have to be *actually* high to experience runner's high" Willy joked spooning another bite of mac and cheese into his mouth.

"No, no, anyone can feel it, you just have to get consistent with running first, that's the key," his dad waved his fork around, eyes bright. "I used to think it was a myth too, son, but now here I am a true believer in the damn thing!" he chuckled, clearly amused with himself.

"Well, I guess it must produce some kind of high because no one in their right mind would keep running for longer than an hour mentally sober," Willy teased.

“Indeed, thankful for the mental distortions that carry us through life!” his father joked, raising a glass in toast.

“Cheers to that,” Willy laughed, clinking his glass to his father’s.

“Oh a cheers! What a good idea!” Emmaline squealed from her end of the table. With Willy’s own mental distortion that he was eating a quiet dinner with solely his father ruptured, he pointedly restrained his eyes from rolling.

“Cheers to this time spent with family, amazing food, and the holiday season bringing us together,” Emmaline trumpeted with a head nod of self-satisfaction. “And cheers to Gram’s mac and cheese recipe, wishing she was here to make it herself,” she added, with a hand on her heart.

“Cheers,” everyone echoed after one another heartfelt clink as they cheered each other in turn. Willy’s glass happened not to wander towards Emmaline’s end of the table; he sipped from it and set it down.

“You missed me, Willy,” Emmaline said still holding her glass aloft.

“Oops, my bad,” he replied, not raising his glass back up.

“No worries, there’s still plenty of time.” She raised her eyebrows and her glass in his direction.

“I’ve already sipped from mine, I think it’s bad luck or something to cheers again after you sip– but I think our glasses touched earlier,” Willy said.

“No they didn’t, and it’s not bad luck, let’s just cheers now,” her voice wearing a mask of merriment with an edge of frustration poking out from under.

“I’m good, let’s just get back to eating,” he said, completely comfortable with making the dinner uncomfortable.

“What’s your problem?” Emmaline bit out leaning around David to look at Willy fully.

“Don’t have one” he replied waving his hands.

“Clearly you do,” she snapped, her patience visibly fraying.

“Emmaline,” her mother warned, dragging out her name.

“What?” she snapped, head darting in her mother’s direction, “I’m not the one acting insufferable!” “All I’ve done this trip is try to talk to him and he’s acting like I’m some annoying stranger that can’t take a hint!” “I’m your *fucking sister*, Willy—I’m just trying to catch up!”

“Language Emmaline,” their father cut in, gesturing at Jeremy. His low warning not diffusing the moment in the slightest.

“Well, a good *fucking sister* wouldn’t *need* to catch up because she wouldn’t have pushed me out in the first place!” Willy said with mocking inflection.

“Pushed you out?” Emmaline sputtered in confusion, “How did I push you out?”

“Emmy how the hell do you not know the issue here?!” Willy shouted, pushing back from the table.

“The only issue here is that you won’t talk to me!” she shouted back, standing as well. David shook his head and picked Jeremy up to take him into the other room. His parents followed them, shutting the door behind them to give them the room.

“Please, Willy, do enlighten me on the issue here,” Emmaline said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“The fact that you don’t know *is* half the issue,” Willy replied, his voice rising again in frustration.

“What is there to know?” her voice rising to match his.

“Emmy, I got laid off,” he said, punctuation the last two words with hand jabs.

“Yea, Mom had the courtesy to enlighten me to that fact already. I still can’t believe you didn’t tell me yourself”

“What are you talking about it was your fault, Emmy!”

“How would it possibly be *my* fault that you got laid off?” Emmaline asked incredulously.

“The phone call was two weeks ago, Emmy, your memory can’t possibly be that bad,” he said.

“Willy I *clearly* don’t know what you’re talking about, just spit it out,” she half-shouted.

Willy’s head was spinning and he was trying to stay mad to contain the heartbreak he felt rising through his throat. The mashed potatoes felt like lead in his stomach and he was mentally begging her to remember. At least then he could just be mad she had cost him her job and not so disappointed that she had done something so large in his life that was so inconsequential to her own that she didn’t even remember doing it.

Two weeks ago Willy had been about to get a promotion. He had aced every interview and his research report had been leagues above the other applicants. High school had been rough for him, but finding his passion for medical research in college had transformed his work ethic. College, and now this job was exciting to him in a way high school had never felt before. He was finally making a difference and this promotion would let him finally conduct his own research. He was in the field of cancer research and while he was sure he wasn’t bright enough for any major breakthroughs, finding clues that would advance the field felt like what he was meant to do. Emmaline was in medicine too. She was always smart so of course she went to med school. She became a doctor and their parents wouldn’t stop gushing about it. They were far less impressed when he did the same as if following in her footsteps made the path any easier. His

sister dabbled in cancer research too. Of course she did, she had the same reasons as him. Their “Grams” had died of lung cancer when they were in high school. It hit the family hard, as their grandmother had lived with them at the time, her laugh echoing through the halls on the daily making her absence that much harder to deal with once she was gone. That was the shift in Willy’s– and Emmaline’s–life that led them into the medical field. Willy had been ecstatic at the prospect of this promotion finally letting him get his hands dirty, feeling like research of his own could help fill the hole Grams had left. All he had needed was one solid recommendation. He had a few options, but he thought it would be sweet to consider his sister. She was already an accomplished researcher, and a letter from her would look great. They wouldn’t really care about the close familial tie for the recommendation letter, as the basis was more on research quality than character. He had called, debriefed, gushed, and rambled all about the position and what it would mean that he and Emmaline could both do their own research now. He told her about the recommendation and she agreed. She didn’t seem as excited as he had thought she’d be, but he didn’t care, his own excitement bubbling enough for the both of them. He told her the review committee would call her Tuesday at 6 p.m. He made sure she repeated the time back to him “6 p.m. yea got it, congrats Wills, I’ve got to run, call you soon!” she had said, hanging up the phone. Tuesday 6 p.m. came and went and she didn’t call. He assumed the recommendation call went well, and she was just busy, so he tried to put the promotion out of his mind, relatively certain it was a lock.

It wasn’t. They called the following week, letting Willy know the promotion had gone to his coworker, Mike. Willy was shocked. He shouldn’t have been so cocky. Mike’s research had been solid and Willy supposed he must have interviewed incredibly well. Willy was heartbroken,

but he knew there would be other promotions, he just had to keep working and his time would come.

That was all fine, disappointing but fine, his world shifted when his boss brought his coffee the next morning.

“Heard about the promotion Willy, how ya feeling?” his boss had asked.

“Not thrilled, but what can you do?” Willy had responded with a shrug.

“Good attitude, I heard the committee thought your proposal was stunning and your interviews went well, you’ll get it next time. Bold choice to leave off a recommender though, I would find someone for next time,” his boss continued, “if you struggle with finding someone for your recommendation next time just give me a call, I’m sure I can help you find someone,” he finished, patting his hand on the desk and walking back into his office. Willy’s heart dropped. *No recommendation?* He thought, beyond confused. *I submitted a recommendation.*

Formatting a frantic email trying to figure out what happened with Emmaline’s recommendation, his hands started sweating hoping he was jumping to harsh conclusions. She knew how important this was, surely something just got mixed up on the back end.

Receiving a reply a few hours later, Willy got to the bottom indeed. The committee let him know that Emmaline had missed every call and email she received about the recommendation. They were forced to assume no recommendation was coming and consider Willy’s application without it.

She lost him the promotion entirely. He knew he should be mad at himself for not following up. He should’ve made sure she was on top of it. Should have reminded her daily and left no room for error. He really just found himself mad that he thought he should be mad, he shouldn’t have had to check in, she should have cared enough to stay on top of it on her own! He

hasn't called her since, assuming she would sit up in the middle of the night realizing her forgetfulness, and call him apologizing profusely. A call never came, she had forgotten the only favor Willy could even remember asking for, and then had forgotten she forgot. She cost him a promotion and broke his trust all while not seeming to care enough to notice. Willy had been dreading Thanksgiving ever since, and all things considered, felt it was going quite politely compared to how his feelings would have him react.

“Willy...” Emmaline trailed off, her mouth hanging open as he finished spouting his frustrations at her and explaining exactly how much she had messed up.

“Save it, Emmy, it's done,” Willy said making for the door.

“Willy, wait, I am so sorry, I was busy when you told me about the call and I just totally forgot,” she rambled, grabbing his arm to stop him from walking out the door.

“That's kind of the point Emmaline, you forgot,” he said, his voice low.

The conversation continued with her flowing through apology after apology, Willy just standing there. Hearing her finally apologize for what she had done mended something in him. He was still horribly angry with her, but there would be other promotions. At least now she saw him.

Thanksgiving dinner ended there and Willy went up to his room as fast as he could. Willy had let her hug him, but he didn't say a word after she finished apologizing. Emmaline felt completely pathetic. She knew she had been skimping on her attention to her family, but had no idea what it was costing people. Wanting a Thanksgiving of togetherness, she left dinner feeling further from her brother than she ever had in her life. She cried herself to sleep and hoped it didn't wake Jeremy.

The next morning Emmaline was completely determined to fix things. She would write to the committee and beg their forgiveness. She would tell Willy how sorry she was a million times over and even do all his dishes at their parent's house for every holiday for the rest of time. She crept towards the living room taking deep breaths.

"Emmy come here" Willy's voice rang out, carrying down the hall.

She glanced down the opposite hall towards Willy's room, where his voice indicated he was.

"What's up?" she said tentatively, pushing open his door.

"Look at this," he said holding up an object in his hand.

Hoping the calm in his voice betrayed his opinion on her potential forgiveness, she moved closer to make out the object. It was a Christmas ornament. With a silver snowflake frame surrounding a circular picture, the ornament was the kind that served as a mini picture frame to hang in the tree. The picture was of her and Willy in front of the fireplace, Grams beaming from between them. Willy's hands were shaking slightly, and Emmaline felt her throat tighten.

"I miss her," he said quietly.

"Me too"

"We should go hang this on the tree, huh?" Willy asked, reaching his hand out for hers.

"Absolutely we should" she smiled, taking his hand. Her heart dared to float lighter in her chest. She had much to amend, but she would make the most of Willy's holiday forgiveness.