

“Your sister left the family. She decided she does not need us.”

Margherita was five. She could hear the words so clearly. The way her mom spoke to her. There was nothing else to say. Eleonora had left and behind she left little Margherita and infant Salvatora as well. Her big sister decided they weren't good enough at seventeen. She had wept for hours and stared at the things her sister left behind. The various clothes, the magazines and the drawings that Margherita had gazed at in admiration with the desire to draw people the way Eleonora did. Her paintings were terrible; muddy and weird, but Margherita had loved those too once.

“Where did you put your sister's old paintings and drawings?” her mom had asked when she walked in.

“I threw them away.”

Margherita stared at the naked walls with tears trickling down her face. She never wanted to see her older sister again.

Margherita was eight when she took over the house. She was to clean, cook, and take care of Salvatora. She loved her younger sister and thought her to be wonderful, but the pain never did really stop. She was only a child, still in Catholic school, and yet she had to speak to the neighbors when Salvatora ran outside naked and was the one who walked her home from school.

While other children thought her lucky to have a cellphone so young, Marghe didn't want it. She wanted a childhood. While she attempted to make friends, she never got the chance; she was always too busy watching over her sister and doing the chores.

Even then, in those fleeting moments of freedom, none of the other children liked her. They said she sounded too much like an adult. She was too weird. She was too something and everything that nobody would play with her and she was left alone writing at home because it was easier to lock herself away than try to make friends.

But the adults liked her she supposed.

“Oh Marghe is such a delight. She's so mature for her age.”

“She is so well-behaved, never running around like other children.”

“I wish my child was as well-behaved as yours”

“What a good mannered child. She's so adult.”

And for a while, she thought it well. She thought it was a good and that she was someone set apart. But the more the compliments from adults poured in, the more she realized how distant she was compared to other kids her age.

She hated Eleonora.

If it weren't for her, she wouldn't have had to have been adult. She could have been free to be messy and wild and the most disruptive child. But because her sister left them, because she chose to abandon her mom and her sisters, that meant all of the responsibilities in the house fell upon Marghe. 'Nora got to do whatever she wished and she saw her pictures when she sent birthday cards. She was partying, living life with her boyfriend, and doing what she wanted because she didn't have to watch them.

Because she got to leave them.

It tore Margherita apart.

She could not count the nights she spent sobbing and screaming into her pillow because no matter how hard she tried or how hard she worked, she would never be enough. She would always be the sister that Eleonora didn't love and she would be the one that took care of Salvatora because she was all that she had. She would be the one her mom yelled at and the one that had to smile and be the perfect child. She needed to be. If she was not the perfect child, that meant Salvatora would have to be and the stress and anger that came from her fight was something she never wanted her sister to feel.

She *needed* to be the perfect child because she knew there was nothing left to being Margherita but that. If she wasn't perfect then she was nothing.

She was the mature child.

It was for her own good.

That was what she told herself when her mom began to scream at her about her art career.

It was for her own good.

She repeated it as she cried at night, rubbing her bruised arm.

And when she knelt on rice after being bad.

And when her mom yelled at her and told her she was pathetic, a screwup, a fuckup, a million other things because 'If you did what I said, I wouldn't have to yell at you'.

It was for her own good. Because if Salvatora ever had to be subject to the things her mom did and said, she wouldn't be able to live with herself. If she ever had to hear that child say she was unworthy of all the love in the world, Margherita knew she would die. She deserved absolutely everything.

So she raised her into the beautiful and strong girl she became. She was so bold and ready to tackle the world. Nothing bad could touch her.

Eleonora would never touch her.

On her thirteenth birthday, Eleonora showed up with her boyfriend, some man named Antonio.

"I want to be your sister, if you'll let me."

Eleonora handed her a bouquet of primroses. Margherita took them and looked up at her sister. She tilted her head and threw the flowers to the ground. People went silent and turned only to see Margherita stomp on the flowers and crush them beneath her toes. Somehow, collected more than ever, she smiled at Eleonora and walked away only to cry when she reached the door.

"Why did Eleonora leave?" Margherita asked while her mom brushed her hair.

She yanked her hair, causing Marghe to wince.

"She wanted to be with her father because she decided I wasn't a good enough mom."

Margherita nodded and let her mom continue brushing her hair. How ungrateful could she be? Their mom did so much! She sacrificed so much! She worked hard every day to provide for them and she did everything to make sure that their lives were as normal as possible. How could Eleonora decide that what she did wasn't enough? How could she leave them behind and leave Marghe to take care of everything that had been her responsibilities? Did she think she was acting adult walking out at seventeen? Did she think that she was proving a point by abandoning them? What did she think that she was doing by leaving a child behind to take care of everything so that she could be some free independent woman? Was it worth it? Was it worth it to throw away everything and everyone that loved her for her vain pursuits?

Her mom wiped her tears and kissed her forehead, "It's okay, my flower. You are strong without her. Even if she is realizing her mistake now, she has made the choice of who she wants to be. You will be stronger. You have me."

She hugged her mom, crying and praying that Salvatora would not hear her.

Eleonora had convinced their mom to let them spend the night with her and go to a Christmas party with her boyfriend's family. Margherita wanted nothing to do with her sibling. But she went because Salvatora wanted to go so she would too.

Her house was crap. It wasn't even a house, it was a basement and it was half built. The other half had all the metal, wires, and pipes visible. Margherita couldn't help but laugh a bit. This is what happened when her sister abandoned them. This is where she came to live with her boyfriend? Was she happy with her free life here? Puh! It served her right.

But something felt wrong.

Eleonora was happy.

Really happy.

She introduced the two to her boyfriend's family. She hugged them close and though Margherita tried to smile, she felt something heavy inside her. Eleonora wasn't unhappy at all. In fact, she was the happiest she had ever been. It didn't feel right.

"Look at you 'Nora, I haven't seen you this happy since your mom let you see them for the first time." Margherita looked at her sibling and her eyebrows furrowed. Why would she have been happy? She was the one who chose to leave. Salvatora looked at her just as confused.

"Yeah well it's not every day I get more than a few hours around them. Come on Margherita, Salvatora. I have gifts for you two."

She did not know this Eleonora. This Eleonora who was sarcastic but kind and got them gifts. She did not know a...a sister that smiled at them and introduced people to them. It was something so distant.

But she didn't want to be part of whatever lie she was spinning. She took the box her sibling gave her and opened it lazily.

"Mami told me you liked painting and I used to paint a lot too so I got you some of my favorite products." Eleonora was so quiet, not wanting anyone but Margherita to hear what she was saying. Margherita stared at the paints. Gorgeous oils. And they had the paint thinner and everything she needed to use to paint with them. They were so nice, nicer than anything she owned and judging by how her sister was dressed, she didn't have the money to be buying such things.

Margherita didn't realize that she was crying; nor did she realize Eleonora hugging her while Salvatora showed off her prank kit to everyone. The girls went home with bouquets of primrose.

"Do you think Eleonora means it when she says she wants to be our sister?" Salvatora asked one day. "Someone who hurt our mother could never be our sister." Margherita responded, eyes cold on the birthday card that their older sibling sent.

Salvatora frowned, "But Marghe, she is trying. She is taking us out for our birthdays. And she said that we could get anything we wanted."

Margherita did not reply. She just stared at the ground and continued to pull up weeds.

"You're so ungrateful! All I do for you and you are acting just like your sister! Am I not enough Do you think I am happy where we are or living like this?"

Margherita wished she hadn't said anything, "Mami, I didn't mean it like that-"

"Oh but I make you feel like you don't matter? Who pays for all of your art classes and art supplies? I guess if I don't care then I'll go ahead and sell those or give them to your sister!"

Margherita felt tears prick her eyes. She was being childish. Her mother had been rightfully upset about her grades and here she was throwing a fit. She would be just like Eleonora and then she'd try to come back and make Salvatora think she did nothing wrong. No. She wouldn't hurt her mom or sister like that. She wasn't Eleonora. She was better. She would be perfect. She had to be perfect. She would be perfect. She had to be...

She liked girls.

Fuck.

"Today we'll be talking about abusive relationships"

Margherita rolled her eyes. She knew how they worked. Who didn't? Perhaps it was a bit egotistical and prideful, but she knew abuse when she saw it. It was her girlfriend Julchen who had to leave because her dad used to beat her until she was coming to school bruised. It was the English teacher who cried during certain books because it got too much. It was not being loved. What teenager didn't know what abuse was?

She knew that.

"Abuse comes in many forms but today we'll be talking about emotional abuse."

That.

That was something Margherita had not heard about.

She sat up and watched as Julchen shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Abusers often use many different forms of manipulation like gaslighting to hurt their victim. It’s a way to gain control because loss of it seems terrible. For example, if your partner is yelling at you, telling you that you are worthless, and blaming you for how they are talking to you and treating you, that is not okay and that is abuse. Nobody should talk to you that way.”

It was Margherita’s turn to shift uncomfortably. Well, it was fine if a parent did this, right? That wasn’t the same as a partner.

“If your partner says things to you that you would never want your parents or friends to say to you, insulting you and putting down your interests, then that is not okay. If they get angry when you talk to other people and demand to be the only one that you talk to, that is not okay. You are in an abusive situation and if you do not get help immediately, it can become harder to as your partner *will* make it harder.” Margherita chewed at her fingernails.

“Things like random phone checks, demanding if you’re cheating or doing something you haven’t done, and blaming you for their unhappiness are forms of emotional abuse. When you try to talk about why you’re upset, they may call you names or get you to believe you are actually the one making them upset.” Margherita suddenly didn’t want to listen anymore.

She and Salvatora were spending the night at her sister’s place again. She was in a new apartment now and engaged too. She wanted Margherita to be one of her bridesmaids. She accepted only to be polite. Her relationship with Eleonora was okay.

They were nowhere near being sisters, but Margherita was grateful to have her around. She listened when she was angry and took her out to eat when she was upset. When she was crying to the point that she could barely breathe, Eleonora took her out of school and bought them sushi. They watched movies and relaxed.

She was a good person, she would admit that. But Margherita would never call her a sister. Sisters didn’t leave each other behind to bear the weight of the oldest child at only five years old.

“I know mom makes you do everything around the house.” she said while they snacked on popcorn.

She didn’t say anything.

“Marghe, you’re my sister. And I care. If you or ‘Tora ever need a break or a getaway, you can call me and I’ll tell Mom that I’m taking you for the weekend.”

“I will.”

Their conversation ended there, but Margherita started to feel as if she could consider Eleonora a friend. Salvatora threw popcorn at Margherita. Laughing, she threw some back. Eventually all three sisters were throwing popcorn and pillows and everything around them at each other. They collapsed on the ground an hour later, laughing ridiculously at what they did.

“Is this what happens when I’m out?”

They all looked up and there was Antonio at the door, laughing ridiculously and holding a bag with grease splotches.

“What do you have there, caro?”

“Churros. But I don’t know if I want to share with people who have pillow fights without me.” he stuck his tongue out at them and Eleonora looked at the girls. All of them carried the same mischievous grin and they ran over, tackling Antonio down and tickling him.

“Ah! I am being killed by three pretty girls! What ever will I do?” he gasped dramatically and flopped back.

Margherita looked over at Salvatora. She was laughing wide, braces glinting. She didn’t look angry at all and she couldn’t help but feel guilty as she tickled Antonio and watched Eleonora lean down to kiss him.

Maybe she had changed.

“I’m marrying the strongest woman alive.”

“You’re such a dweeb.” she laughed, hugging him tight. Salvatora laughed and lay on top of Eleonora since she was small enough to not hurt her. But Margherita just walked over to the couch and went back to watching the movie.

“The flower you have outside is the one you always give us, what is it?” “Primrose.” Eleonora replied, “They mean eternal love.”

Margherita’s stomach flipped.

Maybe their mom was wrong about her.

“Eleonora is taking me to buy a dress for the school dance. Do you want to come, Marghe?”

“No, it’s okay. I’m fine.”

Salvatora walked over to her and sat down, frowning a bit, “You know she loves us, don’t you?”

“I guess.”

“Marghe.”

“I promise it’s okay. I just need a bit of time alone right now. Go get your dress and tell Eleonora I said hi.”

“Okay.”

She watched as Eleonora and Antonio kissed. It was nice to see them married. They really did love each other. And it was refreshing to see love.

Margherita looked at the other bridesmaids and at Salvatora who was sitting happily in the crowd.

Was it bad that she didn’t particularly care?

It wasn’t that she didn’t care about Eleonora, she did. She had done much for her and she trusted her like a friend. She was proving herself an important part of her life. With her ridiculous laughs and dumb teasing and constantly being a mother hen, Margherita was happy to have her around. Yet, when it came to now, she felt nothing, absolutely nothing. She looked at her sister and she felt nothing. She looked at Antonio and she felt nothing.

She just stared.

Somehow, even now, her heart couldn’t bring her to love her enough to call her sister.

Would that ever change?

Their mom was screaming. She was threatening to throw the couch out. Margherita could see Salvatora hiding away and trying not to cry. No, she wasn’t doing this.

“You stupid ass kids never clean up and then wonder why I’m angry! Maybe if I throw everything away then you won’t make a damn mess all the time!” Margherita texted her sister.

‘Mom is throwing stuff. She’s calling us names. I can’t do this.’

Within minutes, Eleonora was there.

“You can’t be calling them idiots or stupid or all these names!”

“Then tell me *what* am I supposed to call them?”

“Their names!”

The room fell silent and Eleonora was crying with a face redder than the roses that were thrown across the room, “You call them their names and nothing else.”

Their mother turned and looked at Margherita. Her face fell and Salvatora grabbed her hand tight. “Come here, Margherita.”

She stepped forward, looking and seeing the pain in Eleonora’s eyes.

“You’re so ready to call your bitch sister when I yell at you but you don’t have the same energy to clean your damn room or anything else. If living with me is so terrible how about I send you to an orphanage? Huh? Maybe you’d be grateful then.”

“Don’t talk to her like that! Stop it! Stop it already!”

Her throat closed up and her tears poured down her face. She couldn’t breathe, things were spinning. She could hear her mom screaming at her about her “stupid panic attacks”. She could hear Eleonora yelling something at their mother, but she didn’t know what. She didn’t remember much else.

What she did remember was Eleonora carrying her and Salvatora out with the strength of ten men and driving away while her phone blew up with their mother calling.

“You guys are staying with me for a week in the break. We’re going to Spain with Antonio. Okay? I’ll buy you guys some clothes, don’t worry.”

“I don’t like it when Mami makes Marghe cry like that.” Salvatora whispered.

Eleonora choked on her own sobs and had to pull the car over, crying into her own arm and hitting the wheel weakly, “I don’t either. But it’s gonna be okay. I promise you both it will be okay.”

That single week was the best week that they had ever had. Antonio was so excited to show them around and Margherita laughed when he fell down the hill trying to do a backflip to impress them. She wondered if this is what it felt like to live in a world where parents didn’t scream and yell at you. A world where Salvatora could do magic tricks that involved her ruining her new skirt or tangling her hair in a branch. Eleonora laughing at something Antonio did and the two of them holding each other’s hands tight. Is this what love was?

She wondered if Julchen felt sorry for her. After all, she told her about what went on and treated it like it was normal. She knew how abusive Marghe’s home was and she couldn’t do anything. How sorry did she feel for her?

She sat on the grass, looking out towards the sunset. Eleonora sat next to her.

“She’s wrong about you. All those things she says, that isn’t you. You’re so strong Margherita. So so strong. You are not weak, or pathetic, or any of the things she says, okay?” She was crying again, holding Margherita by her shoulders, “You are strong. You are a fighter. And one day I know you are going to get out of there and be okay.”

Margherita nodded.

“Why did you leave us?”

“What?”

She looked up at her sister and wiped her tears, “When I was five and Salvatora was a baby. Why did you leave us? Were we not good enough?”

She didn’t answer and Margherita wiped her tears, “Don’t tell me actually. I don’t want to cry anymore. Let’s just pretend like I never asked and ignore it.”

Eleonora didn’t say anything.

On the last day, Antonio’s family had a party. Everyone was dancing, laughing, eating, and enjoying themselves. Margherita was fiddling with her thumbs. Was she really about to do this? She hardly considered Eleonora a sister and this was such a personal and important thing. What if she rejected her again? She didn’t know if she could bear it.

But she had to. This is how she would know.

Salvatora was playing with the kids so Margherita knew that she could do it and be okay. She wouldn’t see her crying if Eleonora rejected her.

They were sitting there, eating cupcakes in silence. Shyly, she slid a picture of Julchen over to Eleonora. She looked over in surprise but then saw Julchen and smiled, “Is she your friend you tell me about so much?”

“Julchen, yeah. But uhm, she’s not my friend.”

Eleonora cocked her head in confusion before her eyes widened.

“She’s my girlfriend.” Margherita spoke clearly, “I uhm. I like girls.”

This was it. She was going to reject her and that would be it. There would be no hope for things. There would only be rejection and sorrow and tears.

“God, me too.”

Margherita blinked and looked up at her sister. Eleonora was looking at her with an amused grin, “I thought you picked up on the fact I was bisexual, Marghe. I’m pretty sure straight girls don’t talk about Salma Hayek the way I do.”

Oh.

“I haven’t told mom. She’s...yeah. And I don’t want to get kicked out yet. I’m not ready for that. So I hid it I guess. But I wanted to tell you since you are my older sister after all.”

Eleonora looked at her and sighed, nodding knowingly, “That’s Mom for you. She never grows out of her extreme ways. But I promise you that you will always have a place in my house if she tries. Even if she makes everyone reject you, I will always take care of you and Salvatora. You know that don’t you? I want you guys to be safe. And if she ever tries to change you from who you are, I will always take you in. Fuck what she thinks, you are my sister.”

Margherita started to shake and wiped her face, “Then why did you leave?”

Eleonora frowned and grabbed Margherita’s hand tight, “Marghe, look at me. I didn’t leave.”

She did just that, looking up. What did she mean she didn’t leave. Her mother told her what happened and she wasn’t at home. What was she trying to say?

“I came home and she packed my things for me. She told me to leave and never come back. I didn’t want to leave but she kicked me out, Marghe. I tried to come back but she wouldn’t let me. I never wanted to go and leave you behind to go through what you had to go through.”

No.

She was lying.

Eleonora’s eyes began to water, “I wanted to adopt you two. But I knew that was a fight I would lose. Margherita, I never wanted to see you have to grow up this way. I wanted you happy but you had to go through all of that and I’m so sorry that I couldn’t come to you two sooner. I tried, I really did.”

Her mother..

She lied?

She lied about Eleonora?

Margherita felt herself grow ill. Anger boiled up and the last twelve years began to pile up inside of her, overwhelming her and filling her with unstoppable rage. She lied to her for years and made her hate Eleonora. Her sister had done nothing but try her best to be present for her and she lied to her to make her hate her. And Margherita, like a fool to her mother’s deception, believed her.

She fell miserably in her sister’s arms. She was sobbing terribly, broken apart and unsure if she could be put back together. Her mother lied to her and Salvatora and Margherita like a complete fucking idiot believed everything she said. Eleonora never did anything wrong and Margherita pushed her away.

She hated her mother.

To say that she screamed was an understatement. Margherita rampaged. She threw things and tore things and sobbed on the floor of the room she built her hatred for an innocent person in. She threw things to the wall and screamed, hitting things, and never stopping. She was furious. Though their mother was out, she wanted to scream at her until her lungs bled with her fury.

Why did you take her away from us?

Why did you lie to us?

Why did you hurt us so much?

She wanted to throw her books at her mother and spit on her. She robbed her of Eleonora and now she and Salvatora suffered because of her. They suffocated in ten years of lies and Margherita has burned in ten years of anger and resentment only to find that the woman she abhorred for so long and said she could never call sister had never abandoned them and had fought to be around them once more. It was unfair and she wanted someone, she wanted her mother to pay for her damage.

When Margherita grew tired and collapsed to the ground, knuckles bleeding and face splotched from all her tears, Salvatora stood and shattered a vase to the wall, watching it break into a million pieces. She screamed and punched the wall and when the two tired themselves out from their heartbreak, they held each other close and fell asleep on that tattered bed.

It was Margherita's first art show. She had worked hard on her paintings and was excited for her family to come. She chatted away with the art teacher who was talking to her and had helped her get her work in an actual show. She was very proud.

"When will your mom be here?"

"My mother doesn't come to these things. But you'll get to meet my older sister, Eleonora."

As if on cue, she walked in. It was like a million twinkling lights became one person. She was absolutely beautiful. Antonio was next to her, looking pathetic in his cargo shorts, bedazzled cross shirt, and crocs compared to Eleonora who wore an elegant coat and a velvety black turtleneck. She was the show.

She walked around and looked at the paintings, smiling at Antonio and pointing to different parts of each one, invested in Margherita's work in a way nobody had ever been. Salvatora showed her others and Eleonora still carried the same adoration on her face, the same love that Margherita and Salvatora had craved for years and often still vainly craved from their mother.

"That's her." she nudged the art teacher and just smiled. Once upon a time she would have scowled and looked for any way to avoid seeing her. She would have pushed her away and given her a false address for the art show to avoid having to introduce people to her sister that she neglected to mention for the past years.

And Margherita wondered, as her sister walked towards her with that traditional bouquet of primroses, how she had ever thought that she didn't love her.

"Any reds?"

"Go fish."

Salvatora groaned and grabbed one of the cards in the middle, lighting up momentarily and putting another pair down.

"Any clubs?"

"God dammit."

"Watch your fucking language." Eleonora called from the kitchen
"Shrek fucking dammit" Salvatora shouted.

"You little shit." she laughed, walking out with some cannoli, "Want some?"
"Duh!" the two younger girls got up and took some from the tray.

They all sat down and bit into them, laughing when Salvatora spilled hers all over the floor. This was the way life was meant to be. She was around her sisters, laughing, eating, and pretending that home and their mother and the things that she did wasn't real. Soon they would be away from her and Margherita would be free. She would live a life that didn't cause her grief and she had both of her sisters. She had Eleonora. She had Salvatora. Life would be okay.

Margherita looked at her sister for a bit before taking a deep breath and reaching for the stuff hidden away in her bag.

"Hey 'Nora?"

"Hm?" She turned and looked over at Margherita curiously, surprised when she saw the card and bouquet of pink carnations and primroses she was holding. Salvatora pulled a small cake out of her bag and held it out for her.

"Happy Mother's Day. I know you're our sister, but you've done so much for us and you've been there for everything. You've been here and done more in one year than mom has in seventeen. So, Happy Mother's Day, thank you for being the best one that I could ever have."

Eleonora stared at the objects before her, covering her mouth when she started crying. She laughed a bit, hugging her sisters close and kissing the tops of their heads.

“I love you both so much.” she whispered to them and neither said anything.

They simply let themselves enjoy the moment with her, letting all that love seep in and all the negativity wash away. It would plague them no more.

They were free.