

Plates and Other Broken Things

The plate was clean two minutes ago. Hands, raw and callused and somehow my own, scrubbed as the scalding stream of soapy water swallowed the plate whole. The glossy ceramic held a face hardened by something, maybe age, maybe loss, maybe by the sight of another day trickling away behind the trees.

But most likely it was by the sound of screaming in the living room. My son-in-law liked to spoil his son with gifts and kisses. It was to make up for the gaps, the days of “where’s daddy?” and dinners with an empty chair. Band-aids for bullet wounds, I tell my daughter. Derek had a habit of dancing between two extremes. Either he was too distant or too suffocating and it seemed like today he had chosen the latter.

“Jesus Mom, I told you to call me.”

A voice tore me from my thoughts. To my left, a girl too old to be my daughter. Nina wore the guise of a woman well.

“I was. I wash you dry. The way we’ve always done it.”

I grabbed a dish towel off the stove handle and tossed it to Nina. She caught it in one fluid swipe, a motion too familiar. After an agitated sigh, Nina joined me at my side. I placed the over-washed plate in front of her, wiggling it mockingly as if its weight wasn’t making my arthritis flare.

Nina took the dish and began to dry it. My fingers thanked her. Silence layered in the room in blankets, only broken by the fits of Elliot’s giggles and false promises hidden in those stupid Peekaboos. I could tell Nina was fighting the reflection in that plate too.

“You have another appointment with Dr. Barnes next Friday”

“I know.”

“You need to stop putting so much pressure on that leg. The oncologist said—“

“I know what the doctor said.”

“It’s only going to get worse—”

“Nina. Stop it.”

I stopped scrubbing the sauce-stained plate and turned to my daughter. Pools of purples and blues blossomed from under her eyes. Angry red lines from Elliot’s temper tantrums coated her arms. She gripped that poor plate the same way I did like it knew something she didn’t. *Ask her*, the plate pleaded.

“What is this really about?”

Nina’s whole body softened, like puppet strings gone slack.

This wasn’t about my cancer. This was about a different type of tumor.

“He doesn’t look at me anymore. But I don’t think I care, not really.”

I continue scrubbing if only to keep up the facade. Our movements were slow, lazy, almost synchronized. She knew I was listening.

“Sometimes I think he prefers Elliot over me. Is that bad? Am I a horrible mother for comparing myself to our own son?”

My eyes drifted to the window. Night bled from the east. The moon, alone in the sky, almost looked like a widow.

“I preferred the bed without him, you know. Your father, he snored like a bear, and not just your average bear, like a bear who had a fish stuck in his throat.”

I earned a snicker out of Nina and for a moment it was the only sound in the world.

“I felt so guilty. All the time. Because I thought once he was gone, I’d miss the sound of his god-awful snoring and the space he took on that bed. But you know what?” I turned off the faucet and turned to my daughter. “I had the best sleep of my life.”

Nina’s lips turned upwards into the hint of a smile and for a second she was nine again and the wrinkles on her face were just chocolate stains.

I laughed too, a throaty rough thing. “It took a couple of months, of course. And that guilt, it’s still there. I know I’m lonely now. But in a way, I’m also free.”

I placed the new clean plate in Nina’s hands and she gingerly took it. A woman stared back at her, and by the sudden straightening of her spine I could tell that she had finally realized that the reflection was herself.

“Sometimes I think I’m lonely. I hate the sound of an empty house but somehow prefer it that way. I don’t know what that makes me.” Nina’s voice was barely above a whisper.

I opened my mouth to speak when a tornado of toddler tore through the kitchen. Elliot, with his eyes wide as saucers ran into Nina’s side. The reflection in the plate flickered and in the space between two breaths the dish fell to the floor. The sound of ceramic shattering into thousands of pieces sent Elliot scrambling between his mother’s legs with a sob bursting out of his throat.

Derek came chasing after his son with an excuse ready. “Sorry, Elliot was right there and then I just lost him.” Surveying the damage, Derek sighed. “I’ll clean this up if you want to take care of him.” He left the room, presumably to find a broom.

Nina picked up her son and held him to her hip. “You’re okay, Ellie.” she soothed, placing a kiss on his forehead. “I’ve got you.”

Elliot's sobs turned to hiccups within minutes of light bouncing and whispered reassurances. Derek returned to sweep the broken plate into an old dirty dustpan. His motions were sluggish and I could tell the wine from dinner had yet to fully fade. "We should get going. My plane leaves early tomorrow."

Nina turned back to me apologetically, whether for the broken plate, the stack of dirty dishes she'd left me, or the tragedy that was the dinner altogether, I still don't know. But when she looked at me I saw the daughter I raised and I knew the sun would come up the next morning. And for once, those two things were enough.