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Allon-Bacuth

Michayla Ashley

Three scoops of mint chocolate chip ice cream melted in a bowl on the closed toilet seat. A spoonful melted in my mouth, the chunks of chocolate filling the dips of my molars. I let it rest there until I could no longer taste the mint. Dolly sniffed at the bathroom floor, her torso moving past the threshold as she shuffled to where I sat naked on the tile with my back against the tub and a pile of discarded clothes tossed inside. She gave the first puddle one good sniff before her tongue lolled out of her mouth to clean up the blood.

Her bony elbows dug into the tiles before the door, but the rest of her white-and-black-body remained on the carpet. I sighed but made no motion to stop her as she crawled to the next puddle. After all, she was cleaning up my mess. Another pain in my lower abdomen forced my fingers to burrow their sharp nails into the soft skin of my palms. They stretched once more to grasp at the air, then closed again. When the pain ceased, I had already gulped down the lagoon in my mouth.

Far above my head was a faded green towel with spots of discoloration from an accidental cycle with bleach. It had been drying on the shower rod since yesterday morning, placed there long before my hospital visit. I reached for the towel, pulling a loose thread between my fingers, hoping it would meet me on the floor. Yet the stiff towel was stubborn, and I had to stretch further and pull until it collapsed beside me. I bundled it underneath my head and laid down on my side, my ankles digging into the unforgiving floor. Tears fell sideways to hit my nose and run along my other cheek. They fell prettily enough, so I decided to sleep without wiping them away.

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I knew he was home even before I could open my eyes. Midnight Train to Georgia played from the speakers in the kitchen and he sang along. His voice wasn't anything special, but Dante could always capture the emotion of Gladys Knight.

I wanted to call out, to make it known to him that I was now awake and wanting to be a part of the moment. However, my tongue seemed to have grown to fill my mouth and stuck to the inside of my cheeks. She knew, though. Dolly, my own seven-month-old mutt with her tail becoming a blur behind her and her muzzle and chest a bright, matted red. She knew and that was enough for me to stand on weak legs. Taking my steps mindfully, I grabbed the bathrobe hanging off the door. Tightly wrapping myself in the fabric, I picked up the empty ice cream bowl and braced myself on the granite sink. I need to remember to clean the mirror. My fingers poked at the patches of red on my cheeks. My hazel eyes only becoming greener the more I stared at them, thankfully

without revealing any of my guilt, which I hoped for. They merely looked distracted, but maybe that's something else I hoped for.

"Nina, you finally up?" Dante called, turning the volume of the speakers down until it was a soft hum. "I started dinner, but I wasn't sure if you were feeling it. It's your favorite soup, though; if that changes anything."

I moved towards the yellow light where his voice came from. The kitchen lights stung my eyes, having been sitting in the dark since the sun sunk below the horizon.

"It changes everything," I said with a grimace, entering the room. I meant to smile, but my tone must have been convincing enough by itself because he laughed under his breath.

The kitchen was outdated and full of my own sentimental knick-knacks that I refused to rid myself of, despite Dante's best efforts to convince me to. My kitchen is, single-handedly, the

most charming place in this ugly apartment, I would claim. He would disagree and complain about a headache due to the clashing colors. Then, we wouldn't talk for the hour before dinner. This became a routine in our relationship and felt domestic in every sense.

I dragged a wooden barstool out from underneath the counter and Dolly laid between my legs, my bare feet traced the knots of her spine. The L-shaped counter space allowed me the perfect view of his profile: thin frame, straight nose, an indentation from his glasses that now rested on his head, combed, and gelled hair. His posture was relaxed, shoulders slightly hunched, but his eyebrows were furrowed. Seeing this expression often when it came to Grandma Vines' handwritten recipes, I knew that he was trying to decipher her cursive. Usually, he would ask for my help. This time he decided not to.

Dante and I met in the fall. After riding the same bus on the same route for who knows how long, our paths had officially crossed on October 23rd. Ever since then, he had become a constant in my life. I had forgotten what that felt like to have someone in my corner, but it was a welcomed change and not one I felt the need to defend myself against. It was now March and we had been together for five months. Since then, we created a comfortable space for each other in our own lives. I cut him a key and cleared out a dresser drawer for him, which only contained a pair of dress shoes, running shoes, three pairs of boxer briefs, a pair of basketball shorts, three white t-shirts, his second favorite pair of slacks and a button-up shirt. Dante even brought his own ironing board and a bottle of mouthwash, but still no toothbrush. We were working on that, but he wasn't here as often as I would have liked him to be. He seemed to come

and go too easily, but he cooked me dinner when he could get away from work and took Dolly for jogs around the complex.

He turned his face in my direction, now looking at me from behind his glasses. His expression was one of suspicion and I met his gaze, unwaveringly, but I had been silent for too

long. “Are you going to tell me why Dolly has dried blood all over her?” he asked, stirring the soup. I wanted to laugh at the casual tone of his voice, despite what he was asking.

I stared at the shadow boxes to the left of his head, searching for the perfect answer. Five shadow boxes filled with my collection of thumb-tacked four-leaf clovers, marked with the dates that I had found them. I had three more of the same in a shoebox on top of the fridge, but I ran out of nails to hang them up. That had been two months ago, and I never bothered to buy any more. When did nearly everything I own become a shade of green? I thought to myself. Aloud, “Dante, I think I lost him.” I tried to put meaning into my words without speaking them into existence.

“Him?” Dante questioned.

“‘Him’ sounds better than ‘it,’ wouldn’t you agree?” I said.

“Were you pregnant?” he asked. His voice sounded peculiar—detached—and his words sounded premeditated, despite me having only confirmed our fears moments before.

I nodded. Dante placed the ladle on the counter, even though we had a perfectly centered ceramic spoon rest that sat between burners. He turned his body until he was completely facing me. I stared at the ladle as the puddle formed beneath it.

“You sound unsure of yourself.”

“I’m not unsure.” I began to cross my arms, but I knew how much he hated that. So, I straightened my back and sat on my hands until they went numb under my thighs. My fingers then moved to tie strands of my copper hair in knots. When the knots fell away, they tied them up again. “The doctor said I was five weeks along, but I had no idea what was happening, Dante. It’s my own body and I had no idea.” The sight of him standing in front of me, thin and once singing with

Gladys Knight, was becoming unrecognizable as tears gathered near my waterline. Instead, all I could see were speckles of sage and the ladle still on the counter.

I could hear the clinking of him putting the lid on the pot, the sound of the soup boiling mollified to a simmer as he moved to my side. “You had no idea, Nina. So, you couldn’t have done anything to stop it from happening.”

I shook my head. “But I should have known, that’s the point. I should have known.”

“You didn’t even know for sure if you were—”

“But there was a ‘maybe.’ And that still didn’t stop me from going out for drinks with Jaime and Katrina three days ago. Or when we celebrated your birthday two weeks ago.”

Dante rubbed at his nose. “Yeah, not the best decision,” he muttered.

I wanted to break that nose. I wanted him to be angry and sad for me. For him to throw the fits and scream until his screams became gulps. Taking on all the blame, instead of making vegetable soup in my kitchen and questioning me as if I were another one of his patients and him my therapist. I wanted him to talk to God behind my back and tell Him that I didn’t deserve this. Rather, I wanted him to make it all okay. Or, at least, lie to me.

Instead, I sat there. Stamping out bouts of rage that threatened to spread. I cautiously admitted to myself that between waking up on the bathroom floor and this conversation, the columns holding my chest up pushed inward. Between it all, my stomach somehow crawled its way up and latched itself to the walls of my throat. Yet, it had no problem growling at me when it could smell the hearty aroma of the vegetable beef soup when Dante turned away from me to lift the lid off the pot.

“Go sit down at the table; I’ll bring you a bowl.” He said. I follow directions well, choosing the seat that was closest to me and facing the wall in case I would need to excuse myself. Shortly after, he joined me.

We sat in silence, eating our soup at the small table shoved in the corner of the room. Our plates nearly touched, and our knees would brush ever so often, but nothing was said. Midnight Train to Georgia was playing on a loop, neither of us standing to play the next song. Dolly would come and go, begging for scraps by pushing her head into our thighs and huffing. Occasionally her matted chest would stick to the skin of my leg and I would squirm in my seat. Dante would then catch my eye and I would stop. And when the weight from my thigh had gone, I knew she was begging on his thigh. Somehow, I missed her when she would leave, but that feeling would be replaced by annoyance as soon as she came back.

“You know I love you, right?” He sighed, reaching for me across the table. I pulled my hand away, grabbing my glass of water and taking a long sip. This was the first time he

had ever said those words to me, and I didn't realize that it was the last thing I would want to hear, until now. He blew hot air out of his nose. I turned my head to the side to catch the heat on my cheek.

"Isn't that what you wanted to hear? That I love you and I would have stayed, even if you were able to keep the baby?" He asked, his collected demeanor beginning to crack. I shook my head. Again, again, and again.

He sniffed and rubbed at his nose. The skin around his nose was pink. Perhaps he was coming down with something. He was already halfway through his second bowl of soup and I had barely touched mine. "I think I'm going to stay the night on Colin and Amy's couch, instead. That might be what's best for both of us right now." Somehow the spiderwebbed cracks in his façade had been melded together, his voice sounding calculative once again.

I continued to sit with Dolly's head in my lap. The spoon cradled in my hand targeted a shorter green bean and guided it between chunks of beef and carrots as I listened to him throwing open his one dresser drawer to shove his stuff in a trash bag. It didn't take long before he came out of my room, trash bag in hand, to stand behind me. He placed a brief kiss on my hair before grabbing his keys and leaving through the front door. He locked the door behind him. I waited, guiding the green bean around a golden potato, as his footsteps left the metal staircase to stomp on the sidewalk to his car.

I finally stood up, Dolly's head falling away from my thigh. After leaving the bowls to soak in the sink, I changed the song before it could play again. I searched for a bottle of red in the fridge and a glass from the cabinet. A warm tongue licked the exposed skin of my calf, as I pulled out the cork and poured a half-glass of wine. Realizing which song had begun playing, I gave a short laugh. I've Got to Use My Imagination, how fitting. Leaving the wine opened, I turned up the volume. I danced into the living room and around the couches, picking up the discarded pillows from the floor and organizing the magazines on the coffee table. I spun in a circle, breaking into a sloppy glissade, and twirled once again. Dolly barked at my side as I danced around her, ignoring the doctors' order of no strenuous activities as I wait for the placenta to pass naturally.

