

Baby don't hurt me

I ran from the station. It has started to rain a bit. It is only a drizzle, but still.

I ring the doorbell again. I am not supposed to be here. I am supposed to be at home, having wine, and sex, and God knows what. The light is on, so I know she's home. The woman who visits my mind at the most inconvenient of times.

"Open the bloody door," I mumble and ring again.

I raise my hand to knock in the very moment she opens the door.

"What the actual fuck?" she exclaims as she does. The look she gives me demands an answer.

I push past her to escape the rain.

"You need to get out," I say, turning around to face her.

"This is my house," a puzzled look lines her forehead.

"What? That's not- Why are you holding a knife?" I look down at the large kitchen knife in her hand as she closes the door.

"I'm cooking. Another reason for me not to leave *my house*."

"I don't need you to leave your house. I need you to leave my head," I burst out before I have time to consider the full weight of my words.

Her face freezes in speechless confusion. Eyes wide, lips parted, all tension has abruptly left her features. She stares at me, and it feels like her eyes are grasping for an elaboration.

I assume I don't look all that different. I clutch my hands into fists to keep the sudden, inexplicable trembling at bay. The tension in my muscles is becoming unbearable, winding up like one of those old metal toys. I used to have one of those as a kid. You twist and turn the key until it doesn't go any further, and then you have to hold on to it with all your strength while setting it down, before releasing and letting the tension you have built up work its magic. We humans have a term for when our key is turned to the brim: fight or flight. I have no intention of doing either, so I stand there unsure of what to do.

"What?" she finally asks. It is barely audible, but still enough to break my seal.

"That did not come out the way I intended," I say quickly.

She laughs. A short, rough bark, sending a tremor through her body.

"How did you intend for it to come out then?" There is a sarcastic undertone in her words as she turns and walks down the hall. I kick my shoes off and hastily arrange them by the door before following her to the kitchen.

The oven is on and there is a pot of water simmering on the stove. She lays the knife on a cutting board on the counter, next to a pile of chopped vegetables, and turns the heat back up.

"You are terribly annoying, you know that?" I say, draping my jacket over the back of a chair.

"Likewise," she retorts without looking at me, reaching up into a cupboard. She is standing on

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her toes, jumping a little to grab something from a high shelf.

I step behind her, take out the box she is reaching for and hand it to her.

“Thank you,” she says reluctantly. “Did you really just come here to tell me in person how annoying you think I am?” she empties the pasta from the box into the pot.

“No. Well, maybe a little bit. You keep popping into my head and I need it to stop. I really think it would help if you were less annoying.”

“Sounds like a you problem, if you ask me.” she pulls a large pan from a drawer and sets it on the stove, “I don't see how I can actually be of help to you. Just wait for it to go away.”

“What do you mean?” I frown at her, but she does not look up.

“I mean wait for it to go away. This sort of thing just happens sometimes, but it usually isn't permanent. We just don't always control our brains as well as we think we do. It happens to me too,” she pours oil into the pan.

“How long does it usually last for you?” I ask.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On why I'm thinking of them. But I think you should be fine in a few days, although this conversation might draw it out. I really don't understand why you're getting so worked up about this.” she hands me a large baking dish, “Grease this.”

I put down the dish and take the oil and paper towel she hands me.

“What if it takes longer than that?” I ask hesitantly while drizzling the dish with oil.

“Why would it?” she dumps chopped onion into the pan, “You said yourself you're just annoyed by me. If you don't fixate on it, I'm sure it will resolve itself.”

“But what if it already has been longer than that?” I look down at my hands.

From the corner of my eye I can tell she's stopped stirring.

“How long?” Her tone is calm.

“A few weeks?” I look at her. I phrased it like a question, but we both know that it was not.

She is looking down at the onions, sizzling in the pan. She sighs, kills the heat underneath the pan and turns to look at me.

“Are you trying to tell me you have been thinking of me for weeks?”

“On occasion. Mostly when it's not very convenient.” I can't look her in the eye.

“Are you going to give me an example?” she crosses her arms and rests a hip against the counter.

“I'd rather not.”

She tilts her head and squints at me. The pasta water bubbles over, and she turns to stir it.

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“What time did you get of work?” she asks, pausing in her motion.

“Six. Why?” I am unsure how she has come to ask this question.

“It’s almost nine now. It’s about twenty minutes from your place to mine,” she says, but it’s not directed at me. “Today is Friday. You told me there is a bar near your work where you pick up women-” she gasps and turns her wide-eyed face to me.

“Did you think of me during sex?” The corners of her mouth tug upwards.

“No,” I lie. “Not exactly.”

“Oh my god,” she says, stretching the last vowel. There’s a spark in her eyes as she grins.

“So what if I did? It’s not a crime!” I try to defend myself.

“Never said it was. It happens. I just think it’s funny how upset you are about it.” She shrugs, grabs the pot and walks past me to drain the pasta. I turn with her.

“*It happens?* To whom?” My pitch jumps up frantically.

“Me, sometimes. More when I’m alone. I’ve talked to friends about it, so I know it’s not just me,” she says calmly, shaking the sieve.

“Well I can’t say this has happened to me before,” I retort without thinking.

“What flattery,” she quips, walks past me and turns the stove back on.

“Believe me, I am not doing it on purpose.”

“Yeah, no shit. The bursting into my home and frantically babbling about your intrusive thoughts like I put a curse on you did give you away, I’m afraid.” She glances at me with a raised eyebrow as she dumps the vegetables in the pan. “I don’t care if I’ve popped into your head once or twice, so no need to get all fussy about it.”

I look away and nod. I would love for her to be right, but I’m not convinced. I sigh. If I don’t lay it all out in the open now, it might come back to haunt me at a less pleasant time.

“That’s the thing though.” I barely get the words out. “It hasn’t been just once or twice.”

I’m still not looking at her, but I can see her move in my peripheral vision.

“Come again?” I can hear her put down the spatula, “How many times?”

I look up. I inhale, audibly. I hesitate. I exhale, audibly. I say nothing.

“How many times?” she repeats insistently.

“eight,” I mutter.

“What?”

“Eight.”

“*Eight?*” She laughs in disbelief, “What was it about this one that made you tell me then?”

“Nothing. I just thought that maybe you’d have an answer.”

“But why come to me? Why not ask one of your mates?”

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"I'm not sure. I think I was worried they would say something dumb. Make it into more of an issue than it is. That's not you, so I thought coming here was better," I admit, not just to her.

"You put too much faith in my bluntness," she huffs, and starts stirring again.

"That's not it. If I told them about this, they might get the wrong idea. They aren't a part of *this*." I wave my hand back and forth between us, "You are. So I know you're not going to come up with some outlandish theory," I look for signs of understanding on her face.

"Like what?" she looks at me and tilts her head, a faint smile on her lips.

"Pardon?"

"What do you think would be so outlandish to assume after listening to your problem?" I can hear the amusement in her voice, "You want to know what I think?"

"Yes," I say. I'm nervous, but I do not hesitate.

"I think it sounds like you're in love with me."

"No, that's not it." I shake my head.

"Why not?" She's strangely calm now.

"Because that's not for me. I don't fall in love."

"Just because it hasn't happened, does not mean it can't," she says with a serious face. She turns off the stove, puts the spatula down and turns to face me fully.

"You just annoy me, and those events play on my mind, that's all."

"What events?" she furrows her brows.

"You remember the night we met? You told me in no uncertain terms that you would not sleep with me. Thing is that later that night you told Kelly that you would happily shag the barkeeper," I say. She opens her mouth in protest.

"Furthermore, the night they dragged us along to Roger's party you spent hours talking to that dental hygienist-"

"He was nice," she interrupts.

"He was a *dental hygienist*, for crying out loud!" I pipe up.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing's wrong with that. But you deserve better than a dental hygienist. Especially one that you won't even look at me for," I burst out.

Her eyes widen, and she shakes her head with a laugh.

"Are you hearing yourself right now?"

I'm sure my face must display my confusion

"You're jealous," she says.

I laugh and open my mouth to say something, but she beats me to it.

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“No, my turn. Firstly, let me clarify something about the night we met. Me saying that I would sleep with the bartender was a hyperbolic way of saying I thought he was attractive. I would not have slept with him, had the opportunity arisen.” she raises a finger when I inhale to interrupt, “I don't sleep with people I don't or only barely know, that's just not something I'm capable of.”

“You mean unlike me,” I say with a bitter undertone. I regret it immediately.

“What you do, is your business. I cannot dictate what you ought to feel comfortable with.” she shrugs. “Which brings me to a different issue,” she frowns at me. “Even if I did feel comfortable sleeping with someone right off the bat, I am still under no obligation to choose you. Additionally, I am free to talk to whomever I choose no matter how boring or unfit you think they are. I am my own person and you do not get to decide for me.”

I sigh. She's right of course. Another one of her annoying traits.

“I'm sorry. I should not have assumed it was a given,” I say. She sighs.

“Thank you for your apology.” We lock eyes for a moment, then we both look away.

“Just my luck,” I say to break the tension.

“What?” she gives me a puzzled look.

“My first time falling in love and it's unrequited,” I laugh nervously.

“I never said that,” she looks right at me. Nothing in her face indicates dishonesty.

“Come again?” I don't know what face to make or where to put my hands.

“I never said it's unrequited.”

“But you said you wouldn't sleep with me,” I say. It is first thing that pops into my head.

“When we first met,” she answers calmly.

I pull out a chair and sit, staring into space. I think I can hear my heart. I look up at her.

“You love me?” My voice sounds strange.

“I like you. I have a crush on you. I would be willing to give things a try.” She flashes a small smile. She has dimples.

“Oh,” I say and stare into space again. She chuckles.

“Why don't you think on that while I finish up with dinner?”

I nod, and she turns back to the stove.

As I sit there staring ahead, a smile spreads across my face.

She loves me.

More importantly, I think I love her.