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ANY OTHER NIGHT, UPON HEARING MY VIBRATOR'S GARBLED last gasp, I'd give myself a mental lecture on personal responsibility and shimmy back into my underwear. It's my own fault for having organizational practices that are more feral than feng shui. That charger could be anywhere. But I'd been depending on the familiar distraction—battery operated as it may be—to ward off my mental crisis—existential as *it* may be.

I swap out the lifeless pink silicone in my hand for the phone, but somewhere between the lock screen and my six emotional support streaming accounts, an errant swipe pulls up the hours-old notification that sent me rummaging through my nightstand in the first place. There's nothing for my landlord and me to discuss; he knows I can't afford the lease renewal alone. *I* know I can't afford the lease renewal alone. We just disagree as to whether or not that warrants a phone call.

I kick free of the bedsheets. No comfort watch is going to be enough to turn my brain off tonight. I'm still in need of an out-of-my-head *full body* comfort of sorts. So, biting back the bitter taste of preemptive regret, I swan dive into the seventh circle of hell, unpausing my *in case of emergency* dating apps. If silencing

this mounting quarter-life dread doesn't constitute an emergency, I don't know what does.

The bars on Mass Ave. close in thirty minutes, so there's no time for discretion. I've got to be quick if I want to get in on the desperate apocalypse now Tinder scramble that's already underway out there. So, bomb fishing it is—swiping right on anyone in this half-empty college town who looks like they might be up-to-date on their shots.

A flurry of new messages signals my success—a word I'm using *extremely* loosely at the moment.

Peter (28) comments on one of my mirror selfies: "Wife!" With a few heart emojis for good measure. No doubt it's meant to be a compliment, but with that hairline, the word reads more like a threat. Godspeed, Peter.

"Hey!" writes J (34). "You're absolutely stunning. Would love to take you out and get to know you." Sorry, J, but if you're only giving up one letter, I'd bet there's one word to describe your actual relationship status: married. Send my regards to the Mrs.

Carlos (32) wants to know, "Do you enjoy cooking? Do you like to dance? Do you enjoy a good film? Do you vote? What's the last book you read? Do you hope to own a house one day?" And without even pausing to confirm that I'm present and accounted for, or at the very least, human, he continues waving his red flags high. "I'm looking for my soulmate. Marriage, kids. Let's make sure we're on the same page."

Not even on my darkest day, Carlos.

"We're all energetic beings," says Marcus (30). "All matter's made up of atoms, with charged particles, that vibrate at a certain frequency, also known as energy." Damn. It's always the cute ones.

And Lawrence (25) can't even spare the thumb dexterity required to tap a question mark when he asks, "Wyd"

He's perfect.

Me: How fast can you get Downtown?

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I've watched enough *Dateline* over the years to know that giving Lawrence my home address may very well have just set the stage for my own one-hour special. Which is why I also know I have to do this next thing:

2:34am

Me: Hey, just in case

I send the text along with a screenshot of Lawrence's profile and my location (or last known whereabouts, should things end poorly).

If I'd known Zola was up, I would've texted one of the other ten million or so infinitely less judgmental people in the world. My sister's been reliably knocked out by sundown since that little pink plus on a stick changed everything, but I must've caught her mid-bathroom run or in the throes of a WebMD doom spiral, self-diagnosing rare birth anomalies.

Even the *ping* my phone makes when she responds sounds unusually shrill.

2:36am

Zola: Jesus Kai. You of all people know how dangerous this is.

She's not wrong.

I may have slightly understated my true crime-viewing habits. It's not just that "I've watched enough *Dateline*." It's that I've memorized entire seasons of crime scene evidence, could rank my top fifty episodes chronologically, and in addition to recognizing the actors in various dramatizations, I can also recite their past credits as jilted lovers, handsome bartenders, or hiker #3.

6 Adrienne Thurman

But I'm not trying to get into all that while I speed-shave in the bathroom sink.

Zola: me and Eliza use your "dates" as a scare tactic in client meetings now

Her text doesn't achieve its maximum impact since I could've scripted the exchange myself. Nothing in this world gives Zo more joy than talking shit on other people's life choices, and in Eliza, she found a boss who promised to reward her for it. I still can't believe professional matchmaking is actually a thing, but apparently Manhattan's elite are just lonely enough to liquidate retirement accounts for their shot at *happily ever after*.

Me: Shouldn't I have to sign a waiver for that?

Zola: Says the woman inviting strange men over without one.

Me: Valid.

Zola: if leveraging your dating fails gets me one step closer to a promotion, it's your sisterly duty to support that. I bet Eliza does it at my review this week when she hears what I'm working on next.

Of course, I support her, I just can't get excited about the same mythical promotion Zo's been chasing since I left for school four years ago. Being loyal to a job for this long without any upward movement is the saddest sort of *pick me* behavior. Zola stays pressed, professionally. I'm sure she has her reasons, but since none of those reasons are reflected in her paycheck, I don't ask.

Dating fails? I type instead. Who's dating?

Zola: Precisely.

This bravado is exactly why you shouldn't be allowed to stay with your high school sweetheart beyond high school. Zola's never been out in these streets, dodging the litter and oncoming traffic that is *men*. Picking a forever guy off the class roster in homeroom doesn't exactly constitute expertise.

At least, he was *supposed* to be forever. Smith comma Jason played us all. And after more than a decade together, his parting gift to Zola is a lifetime spent picking up the pieces of the thing he blew up from the inside.

Me: How's my favorite nephew doing in there?

Zola: Already using the baby to get yourself out of trouble?

Me: is it working?

The next *ping* to my phone is accompanied by Zola's latest ultrasound images. I send a flood of *heart eyes*, with the hope Zo's maternal instincts will override the hating big sister ones.

Me: Ah! He has my nose.

Zola: His face is currently smashed against my pelvis.

Me: His face is perfect and so is he. I thought you were gonna facetime me into the 3D one! can't believe I missed it.

Zola: You weren't the only one.

Her text bubbles have my full attention as they repeatedly appear and vanish, until finally Zola's face, not her words, fills the screen.

Before my phone completes its first ring, I'm already answering the incoming call.

"You okay?"

"Damn," she says through a laugh that's noticeably humorless. "Who's got you all eager in the middle of the night?"

“Right now, you,” I say, attempting to sound as earnest as one possibly can with a heel slung over a porcelain sink. “I can’t remember the last time you were up past dusk, and now you’re calling at”—I pull the phone from my ear long enough to check the time and ignore the OMW text from Lawrence. “Almost three a.m.”

I briefly consider, and promptly decide against, dry-shaving my bikini line. I’m working way too hard for a guy who communicates exclusively in three-letter shorthand.

“What’s going on?” I ask, plodding over to my underwear drawer.

“It’s nothing. I’m being dumb.”

But I already know she’s not. *Dumb* has never been Zola’s style.

“It’s just that scan,” she says. “It was the one thing I really didn’t wanna do alone. And Jason knew it. I set it for the ‘*only time*’ that worked for him. Had to call outta work and everything. But, of course, he still canceled. Who knew you could be a single mom before becoming a mom at all?”

Her words stop me in my tracks. Zo was never supposed to be a single mother. It’s not the kind of thing anyone plans on, but Zola didn’t just doodle boys’ names in the back of her notebooks, she brainstormed LLC’s. Her vision board didn’t end with “*I do.*” That’s where it began. But no matter how meticulous her five- and ten-year plans, Jason was Zola’s *X* factor. The one thing she couldn’t control for. And because his shit didn’t add up, Zola’s now the thing she swore she’d never become.

Before I can metaphorically cock back to light his deadbeat daddy-to-be ass up, Zola rushes on.

“And Mom’s being newly ghosted by some guy with terrible plugs and transition lenses who failed to mention he’s *unethically nonmonogamous*, and not looking for anything serious. So, of course, that’s her entire personality now.”

And I know *that*—not the Jason stuff—is where Zola wants

the conversation to remain. It's why she's led me to our forever favorite rabbit hole: Mom.

We've all got that friend who's more committed to her chronic fuckboy drama than anything else in the world, certain the key to her very happiness is singular and man shaped. She's got her breakup script down to a tear-filled monologue about how she's going to die alone, and you have to be all, "*He never deserved you. Ain't nobody checkin' for him.*"

That's our mom. At least that's who she's been since my freshman year of high school, when Dad ran off with his associate professor. Just another woman, walking blindly into the rip current of every *next guy's* empty promises. It's the same every time; she lets them pull her further and further from solid ground—from me, Zola . . . herself—until their dizzying tide breaks, and she's spit back out at our feet, waiting for us to fish her out and bring her back to life.

The only thing more inevitable than the breakups themselves has always been their aftermath. Mom's recovery process is a science. *Stage 1: fetal position. Stage 2: CIA level recon.*

She wouldn't exactly win any parenting awards for it, but Zo and I used to love when she'd put us on the case. We'd all stay up late, cracking passwords and monitoring credit card statements as husband number two flew his new white girl around for seedy hookups in three-star corporate hotels. And once we had irrefutable proof of what Mom had probably known all along, we'd listen to her rewrite a romantic history that never was and lament a romantic future that never would be.

But we didn't mind, because it meant we'd survived another *stage one*. That Mom had scraped herself up off the kitchen floor enough to get to work—even if the work was wildly inappropriate peewee reconnaissance. It still meant she could see us again, that she needed us. And that's all we ever really wanted.

Unfortunately, no matter how much time we spent playing

full-time therapists and part-time detectives, it wasn't enough. Mom would eventually find her way back, but she'd do it hand in hand with another guy joking about her teenage girls calling him *Daddy*. In the end, *he'd* be the only thing worth coming back for.

Then, one day, Zo and I grew up. And that meant realizing we should've been charging Mom by the hour all along.

"God, she's exhausting," I offer, teeing Zola up for our usual go-round.

"And I'm pregnant. I'm already exhausted! I don't know why I thought Mom would take care of *me* for once."

Our familiar cadence changes when she says it. Because *this* isn't our usual go-round. Not anymore.

I start cautiously. "Zo. I remember what it feels like to try to resurrect her alone. Those few years after you left for school were heavy. You shouldn't have to do this on your own."

The gentle suggestion that Zola may not be able to handle something erases all signs of her physical and emotional fatigue. Or perhaps it's the intrusive buzz from my intercom that does it. "Maybe instead of worrying about us, you should help yourself first," she says, sounding like my big sister again. "The world doesn't need another missing Black girl."

I smile at her righteous superiority, knowing that at least for tonight, balance in Zola's world has been restored. Hopefully enough that now, she'll sleep.

"Don't worry," I tell her. "I'll keep my Taser under the pillow."

I practically hear her eyes roll. "You don't get points for saving your life, if you're the one risking it in the first place. Just keep your location on. We can fight about the rest tomorrow."

I buzz Lawrence up without verbal confirmation that it's him. No use feigning regard for personal safety now.

"If you still need me later, I should be free in like an hour."

"Ew," is all she says.

"You're the one growing a penis inside you," I say, laughing as I end the call and open the door to meet my next great decision.

The best thing about having sex with men you'll never see again is that you don't have to wonder if it's good for them. The worst part is that it goes both ways.

Lawrence, I realize too late, is the kind of guy who has sex *at* you. I know he's not up there reenacting his favorite porn scene right now for *my* benefit—at least I seriously hope not. A singular focus on his own sexual experience? That, I can respect. Him living a quarter century under the impression that this rabbit pounding has anything to do with pleasing a woman is a prospect too grim to consider.

To stave off an outburst about how the patriarchy is to blame for the strategic vilification and ultimate disregard of female pleasure, I allow myself the briefest moment of dissociation—mentally restructuring my budget to delay having to sell a kidney, or worse yet, start another roommate search.

"I never do this," Lawrence grunts as he thrusts into me again with so much force, I wonder if my vagina has wronged him somehow.

The movement is enough to bring me back to my body and Lawrence's blond curls tickling my ankles wrapped around his thick neck. He's got the neck of a linebacker. Everything about this guy screams *athlete*. Though between his age and the fluff at his midsection, his glory days are likely a thing of the past.

Still, as a former athlete of sorts, I'm willing to bet Lawrence *does* "do this." And if that's not evidence enough, there's always

the fact that he's been at my place a full eighteen minutes, and inside me now for at least three and a half of them.

I don't mean to laugh, but I don't exactly try to stop myself either.

"Says the guy who probably has a Costco-size variety pack of flavored condoms on his nightstand."

Lawrence stills, and the tightness that had begun to coil around my belly subsides.

Confusion twists his dense brows and decently attractive face. "Huh?"

I don't know if he's offended or just trying to sort out how I know he buys in bulk, but I need his head back in the game.

I toy with my nipple while my free hand digs into his hip, urging him to regain his momentum.

"Nothing," I say, my voice purposefully breathy and wanting. "I never do this either. It's my first time."

Who's to say if he takes it to mean it's my first time on the apps or my *first time* first time? Either way, I'm lying and he likes it.

"Shit," he groans, finding his rhythm once more.

Lawrence pulls out of me abruptly, before expertly flipping us over, so I'm on all fours with him at my back. He enters from behind and a smirk plays at my lips. Real comfortable tossing me around for someone who *never does this*.

By my second failed attempt to coax his hand between my legs, it's clear that tonight it's every man for themselves.

I back into him to stay fuller a bit longer as my fingers get to work. The familiarity of my own touch is a welcome departure from the night's series of disappointments. Focused only on tending to my own budding tremors, it doesn't take long to find release. It's guttural, and primal, and probably nothing like the girlish sighs Lawrence is used to from his video girls.

With all my senses fully spent, my brain is finally blissfully quiet. So quiet, in fact, that I could almost forget I'm not alone in the room if not for the "Oh fuck" my final pulses draw from Lawrence as he finishes too.

He collapses back onto the far side of the mattress to catch his breath and gently rolls the condom down before tossing it indelicately onto the hardwood.

I don't read the new Tinder notifications on my lock screen when I grab my phone, but I do open the app just long enough to pause my account again before texting myself one simple reminder: *buy spare charger.*

10:37am

Zola: And then what happened??

As I finish recapping the night for Zo, the promise of leftover lo mein propels me through the half-empty apartment. For years, this place felt like it was *mine*, but when the sleeper sofa and both roommates were carted off after graduation, I finally saw it for what it's always been: temporary.

Me: He asked if it was lame to invite me to breakfast.

Zola: Wait, that's actually cute.

Me: Don't squint too hard trying to see what's not there. I'm not paying for your professional delusion.

Zola: Even if you wanted to, you couldn't afford me.

An incoming call interrupts our conversation, and I drop the phone like my landlord can see me through it. I can't believe I let it come to this.

I should've been planning for this ending all along—it had all

been right there in the University of Kansas brochure: four years. That's what they promised and that's what I got. I just thought by the time they handed me my degree in early education, I'd be transformed into someone new. Someone with a job, a 401(k), and a clue what they were supposed to do next.

All I've got is cold Chinese takeout and the acute awareness that I'd rather do almost anything but teach.

When the ringing stops, I come back into view of the phone and Zo's text.

Zola: I'm afraid to ask if there's more.

Me: He wanted my number, but I said I'd rather keep things on the app til we know each other better.

Zola: this is what you said AFTER you fucked him?

Me: correct. Then I closed the door and promptly unmatched.

Zola: How romantic.

I mindlessly clear the voicemail notification from my screen, as if that alone negates the inevitability of whatever my landlord's been trying to tell me for days.

Zola: You shouldn't be allowed to do life without adult supervision. If you were my client, I wouldn't let you out of my sight.

Me: if I was pathetic enough to use a matchmaker, I'd deserve whatever I got.

Zola doesn't spend as much time as usual reading me for filth or defending the virtue of her professional pursuits. She's more focused on discussing the depths of Mom's latest depressive episode.

It briefly feels like cause for celebration that I hadn't been forced to learn another new guy's name till he was already past tense, but when I hear the strain in Zola's voice, the thirteen-

hundred-mile buffer I've built myself suddenly feels all wrong. If anyone deserves to fall apart right now, it's Zo, but she's on her own out there. Pretending to have *her* shit together so Mom can lose hers.

My phone rings again, but this time when I see the number on the screen, I pick up.

"Hey, girl!" Jess says, wielding the word like a weapon. I already know what's coming next.

"Hi, Jess."

"Girl—"

I bristle, wondering what Reddit post advised her to talk to her Black employees this way. Like I'll be so disarmed by her forced familiarity that I won't notice she's a career bartender turned manager, who's never successfully worked a full shift in her life. Like I'll forget she's never helped me when I needed coverage. Like I'll forget I'm her begrudging employee—and not her *girl* at all.

"What's up, *girl*?" I say, entertaining myself.

"Girl, are you busy today? I am trying not to stay here till four."

I'm currently alone. Taking this call in my vacant living room. Where the coffee beside me is tepid, and the floor below me is digging into my ass. I'm in a bra and sweats, with no plans of showering, and my curls are still matted from being smothered beneath Lawrence earlier this morning. But am I too busy to pick up a daytime bartending shift for a boss I can't stand, on the first weekend of summer that everyone's off campus? I want to say I am.

I'm about to drop my next sarcastic *girl*, when my phone pings in my ear. I check it reflexively.

Rich: Hi Kaia. Been trying to get a hold of you. As you know, the renewal window on your lease has passed. I haven't heard

back about scheduling time for our prospective tenants to see the unit. But the twenty-four-hour notice of entry window has also now passed, so please consider this final notice that we'll be on site to show the apartment at 2pm. Thanks.

Homelessness has now officially been added to my growing list of grievances. Fuck.

"Hellllo?" Jess calls, through the speaker impatiently.

"Ya know what?" I start, a decision forming on my lips along with the words. "I actually can't. I'm getting ready to head back to Connecticut for a while."

"Um. Did you submit for this time off? Because I don't recall approving anything and you're on the schedule in two days." Curiously Jess is all business now.

"I know, *girl*," I say, buoyed by the escape plan taking shape. "But family duty calls."

I don't listen for Jess's response before hanging up, and I don't check one-way flight prices before texting Zola, who must be closer to her breaking point than she'd let on, because she doesn't poke a single hole or demand every granular detail I don't have.

She simply says: YES!!!