

YELLOW DUCKS

A SHORT STORY

BY:

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It hadn't been the news we had been expecting. The morning was just like any other. The doctor had called the a few days before, telling us our results were in concerning having a baby. Janelle was so happy that morning; she wore a yellow and white dress with brown cowboy boots. I wore my usual flannel and jeans, blue today, just for good luck. Being a father, being a parent with the woman I loved meant more to me than anything, seeing her happy meant more to me than anything, and if she wanted to be a mom, I wanted her to be a mom. Heck, as long as I was with her, I was happy. But what had started out as such a great day, both of us finding out what we had to do to be parents, had taken a very dark turn.

“I'm sorry Mr. and Mrs. Cadwell, but you can't have children.”

Sitting there in the white room with the doctor, I felt my insides tightening. All I kept thinking was how Janelle was going to take this. She had pulled away from me, she had screamed at the doctor, demanding an explanation. Some of the blue strands in her strawberry blond hair flew in the air, like tendrils of smoke, as she jumped from her seat, slamming her hands on his desk. I felt like such an idiot, sitting there, not knowing what to do. She slammed on the table again when the doctor told her ovaries never matured, leaving her sterile. The plastic baby in the plastic uterus behind the desk popped out as she threw something across the room. All I kept thinking was, how can I fix this, how can I calm her down and make her feel better. The moment I had tried to reach for her hand was too late. Janelle stormed from the office, right as the doctor began to explain the alternatives. I took the pamphlets he had prepared and thanked him for his time, more embarrassed at myself for acting like a simpering idiot.

The ride back home hadn't been much better. Janelle had cried the whole way back. I tried to console her, I tried to take her hand in mine, to tell her it would be okay, to try and make her feel

better. Every time I tried though, she pulled away, told me not to touch her. After the third attempt, as we drove through the city back to Medford, I listened to her, keeping my hands at ten and two.

“Janelle,” I began, unlocking the door to our two-story house. She shoved passed me, letting me see that her purple mascara had left streaks down her cheeks.

“No, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Janelle, we have to please, the doctor said that there are alternatives—”

“Alternatives! I don’t care! I don’t want to hear about any alternatives. I want to have a baby, I want to be a mom! Why can’t you understand that?”

“No, I do, baby I do.” I tried to reach for her, to hold her, but she just shoved me back.

“No you don’t, how can you, you can still have children.”

“That doesn’t matter to me, if they aren’t yours then—”

“Than what hmm, you were just about to go on about alternatives, well guess what, if we have children, they won’t be mine.”

“Janelle please listen to me, I love you, we can still have children, you can still be a mom, you can be everything you want to be. Let’s just talk about the alternatives.”

“No Blake, no.” She sniffled one last time, wiping at her nose with her fingers with yellow and blue fingernails. “I don’t want to. I want to have children, I want to get fat and eat pickles and ice cream like my mom. I wanted all that, just so that I could have a baby with the man I love. Now I can’t.”

She walked up the stairs, and this time, I let her go up without a fight. I kept thinking, just a little time, if I just give her some time to breath, to relax and calm down, she will let me talk to her, let me tell her that her dreams of becoming a mom are still possible and that no matter what, I will always love her. I keep thinking this as I make my way through the dining area to the kitchen

to grab a beer.

Taking a sip, I sit down, thinking about the news, letting it sink in. The idea of children has always been prevalent in our minds. I mean, six years ago, that was where we met, at nineteen. It was in a daycare. We were both working there while we studied at college. She was an art major, I was, well, I was figuring myself out, trying to decide between art or contracting. It was Janelle who had told me to go into contracting. She said it would allow me to “express myself and make art my way”. I never regretted listening to her, building was my passion and art was hers. And yet, that was something else we had bonded over. Art. She easily got work at an art gallery, especially after all the internships she obtained during college, and broke protocol, opting for colorful hairstyles and tie dyed clothing rather than what she called “confirmed” uniform. I agreed with her. The black and white suite, the painful looking dress shoes, that never appealed to either of us. The pair of us liked color, to me it signified life, to her, it always seemed as though it signified freedom. Even to this day, I never understood what she was seeking freedom from.

Something crashed on the floor above. Instinct took over and I ran. I called to Janelle and got no response. I ran faster. The door to the already prepped nursery was open. Pushing the door open, I heard her tell me to be careful, that there was glass on the floor. I didn’t care. Why was there glass on the floor to begin with? Moving inside, I saw the bat first. It was obvious by the broken frame and glass that she had taken a bat to one of the painting that hung in the room. It was cheesy, depicting a bunny curled up to a bear, but it was colorful. She hung it up because I wanted it there, not her. In her hands, was my favorite silver bat, the one I used to use when I used to play ball with my dad before he died.

“This room was stupid. We got ahead of ourselves.”

“No, it wasn’t. It isn’t stupid.” I understand her anger, or at least I’m trying. This had been

the third time we tried to have children, the first time we went seeking professional help.

“It is now.” Janelle turned to leave, her blond hair, colored with shades of blue and green, flew over her shoulder as she spun on her heel to leave the room. No, I thought, grabbing her arm. The look in her green eyes flicked to my hand, telling me to let go. Not this time.

“It isn’t stupid. This room means a lot to both of us, please don’t destroy it.”

“There isn’t anything here that is worth keeping.” Spit flew from her mouth, hitting me on the face. Didn’t she care as much as I cared?

“Don’t say that, please don’t say that,” I begin, bending down to grab her legs. “Please, tell me Janelle, tell me what I have to do, tell me how to help. I love you, I love you so much, don’t shut me out, please.”

“Blake.” Her voice is small, like she’s going to cry again. No, I didn’t want to make her cry again. “There isn’t anything you can do, so please, let me go.” She pries my hands off her, leaving me there alone. I can hear her crying as she runs and locks herself in our bedroom and stay there, staring at the blue wallpaper covered in yellow ducks.

Nothing got better. I tried. I brought home flowers every day, bouquets of gardenia, dragon snaps, anything colorful to get her to smile. They didn’t. Every time I handed them to her, she would mutter a quite thank you and put them in the vase without water. I had to keep checking if they had water, day after day. After about a week, I stopped when she yelled at me. Where the hell was she supposed to put all the flowers, she asked me, there wasn’t enough room. So I switched tactics, alternating between chocolates and stuffed animals and dinner out to her favorite places. After about two weeks of that, she got tired, making up excuses, saying she was going out clubbing, saying she was going to be staying late at the office, making up any little excuse to not be around

me because I apparently “only made matters worse”. At least, that’s what she said one night.

One week later, coming home from a contracting job I finished early, I heard her crying. I tried not to make any sound around the house, just made my way to her. Janelle was locked in the bathroom, crying. At that moment, I felt like I was such an oblivious idiot for not noticing that she was still in such horrible pain by the news a few weeks back.

The door opened and I jumped. I tried to mutter something, tried to hold her, but she just glared at me, as though everything were my fault.

“How long have you been here?”

“Uh, just a few minutes. Janelle, please talk to me?”

“Talk to you about what? You only care about making yourself feel better.”

“No, no, no, no. Janelle, I’m sorry if I made you feel like that, I’ve only been trying to make you smile. That’s all I want, for you to smile.”

The way her face contorted, with her nostrils flaring and eyes widening while her brows furrowed made it seem as though I just shot someone close to her. “Are you kidding me? How can I smile? How can you even think I would want to smile? Go away Blake, don’t you have walls to put up or something.”

“Janelle, please breath, I love you, but I need you to talk to me.”

“Except,” she said, rubbing her eyes, “I don’t want to talk to you Blake. Leave, or I will.” I grabbed my briefcase and went back to the office. I slept there that night, in the dinky trailer like office that only a contractor could love, with my head on my drafting table.

Time passed, it went on as it did, I stopped buying her things, I even started to stay late at work just to give her space. I called a few of her friends, to make sure she wasn’t alone. Her co-workers

were equally worried about her, and some of her girlfriends from both office and college promised to stop by. They kept telling me not to take anything personally, but it was hard considering whenever she did see me, she would make a point to degrade me in some way, either by telling me how stupid I was for not understanding, or how much I messed everything up. I'd put the dishes away wrong, I'd pick the books and magazines and put them in the wrong place, I forgot a coaster here and there. All those silly little mishaps apparently made me incredibly stupid.

Soon enough though, things changed. I came home early again, I missed her and I didn't care what she called me. Looking for her, I found her in the bathroom where she was coloring her hair. Sucking the life from the vibrancy and painting it a deep brown. It looked like she was rubbing melting chocolate in her hair.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like," she snapped, as she massaged the dark liquid into her hair. A drop fell onto the white marble counter.

"Please don't snap at me Janelle."

She rolled her eyes, looking back at the mirror. "I'm dying my hair, it's time I start complying with work policy."

"You don't care about work policy Janelle." I didn't intend for my voice to rise.

"Don't you dare raise your voice to me. I want to follow damn policy." She shoved me out of the bathroom, smearing dye on my clothes, before promptly slamming the door in my face. I decided to stop coming home early.

From that day forward, she continued to change. She got weekly manicures and tore up all her tie-dyed clothing, with scissors, like a mad woman. At the time, she had looked mad, sitting there on

the floor of the living room, in the middle of the night when she thought I was asleep. When she was done with that, she went out shopping at Macy's and DSW, buying those black plain suits I thought she disliked as much as me. They made her look like a different person, darker, colder, a stranger.

Late one evening, when I got home, I dropped my briefcase, closing the door behind me as quietly as I could. I needed a beer before I headed to the bedroom to see her. I had not expected to find her in the kitchen waiting for me, drinking a cup of wine. She used to hate wine, that's what she always told me, now she had us stocked.

"Hello dear, how was work?" I wondered if she was drunk, but I could tell by how fixed her dark green eyes on me, that she was very lucid.

"You're up late." Cautiously, I made my way by her to get the beer I was beginning to think I would need more than I initially thought. Her eyes followed me like a hawk, and she just stared at me, as though I were a bug. Leaning against the counter of the kitchen staring at her as she leaning on the island in the center, I popped the top open, waiting for her to talk. Her lip curled up on the left, making her look more menacing than beautiful.

"Well, I feel like I barely see you anymore."

*That's the point.* "Yeah, well this couple wants to add rooms to their summer home but they keep changing their minds," I lied, trying to smile. "It's been busy."

"I bet." She took a sip of her wine, tapping her maroon nails against the table with her other hand, continuing to study me, as if I were an ant. No, ant is too kind, like a worm. That was usually how she made me feel now.

"So, what's up love dove," I say, using her old nickname. Bad mistake, her eyes widened,

flared with anger I could no longer understand. Bracing myself, I looked away, prepared for her to yell at me.

“Clear your schedule for this weekend, love dove, we need to go shopping.”

“What for?” A part of me already knew what for, and I was dreading the answer.

Finishing off her wine, she placed the cup in the sink, moving like a robot. I think I would have laughed if the situation didn't seem so dire to me. “There is a room upstairs that needs to be redone and since we both live here, as a married couple, we should decide what to do with it, together.” Janelle's mouth tensed up as she finished, her lips, once again curling, into an artificial smile.

“Yeah, okay. I'll make sure I'm free.”

“Great!” Her hands clapped together, her fingers intertwined together like snakes in the dark. “I mean, it's about time we make a guest room or office don't you think?”

“Sounds good Janelle.” Standing there, stiffening as she made her way to me, I thought if maybe it was my entire fault, that she was being this way. It seemed that way. Lifting herself on her tip-toes, she kissed him on the cheek, leaving a globby sticky imprint of her plum colored lips. Before her world fell apart, she would have never worn such a dark color. She would have said, “dark colors signify conformity, I like being an individual”. Looking down the hall, the way she had gone, I began to think that all her individuality had been washed away, and the Janelle I knew was gone. This weekend would be my last chance to make her see that this wasn't her, not the real her. I was beginning to think this would be my last chance of convincing her that she can still be a mom, that we can still make a family, even if it isn't our.

This sofa, or that one, that is what Janelle, was asking me again. I tell her either would look great,

but I do not really mean it. She knows it. Her brow furrows, her green eyes slant down. I think the maroon would look better she says, pursing her lips, covered in layers of plum. It gives her a cold beauty. I shove my hands into my pockets and look around the department store as she mutters about how there is never anyone around to help when they're actually needed. I mumble, suggesting that we should probably go look for someone. She scoffs at me, rolling her eyes. I hate this habit of hers, rolling her eyes, scoffing at anything I say, pretending like everything in the world is okay. Janelle tucks a strand of hair that has fallen out her of too-tightly wound bun, behind her ear, but it falls in front of her face again. Again, she tries to tuck it back, telling me that I have to make a choice this time. I agree, saying the maroon would work out. It's a stupid sofa, going in the wrong room, I don't care. In fact, I hate looking at the damn thing. She remarks, apparently pleased with my response, with a comment about out it just so perfectly fits the decor. Her newly manicured nail taps against it, feeling the leather. I look around, feeling my hands growing sweaty as I hold them in fist. I hate furniture stores. This was the third one this weekend.

And every weekend since we discovered she was sterile, she had changed. Her wild brown hair was now tight, and her colorful clothing and makeup had warped into clothes similar to the suit she wore at work. Ever since the news, it was as though the life had left her. She turns to me, saying we'll come back and drags me from the furniture section over the wall paper section. No, not this, anything but this. I try to say that we should look for a salesperson, to avoid this, put this off, this moment. Maybe talk to her again, get her to see some reason, but the words come out as a jumble. But no, it's not working. She tells me to calm down, that it's just walk. Her tone is stern, cold. She's avoiding the subject again, and all I can keep thinking about is the wallpaper. I say I'm getting a headache, she tells me she has aspirin in her purse. I take the purse and tell her that we can just get the sofa; she tells me that the walls desperately need to be changed, the sofa

won't match the stupid wallpaper. Stupid? She ignores me, which is no different than usual, but this time, this time I need to say something. But it's too late, we're already here. The colors fade and merge, my heart races. She asks me to pick a color. I shake my head. She rolls her eyes and sighs, looks at the navy blue wallpaper. She continues to talk, going on and on about how the problem with maroon is that it's hard to match. I hear a kid cry, I turn my head, there is a little girl with her mom. Her mother picks her up because she had apparently fallen, and tells her that it's just a little bump. The little girl is holding a rubber duck, making me think of the wallpaper in the room. The room that my wife was determined to change, pretending like she never wanted kids.

"Blake, are you listening to me? What do you think, blue or forest green?"

Crossing my arms, I stare down at her. "Yeah, I won't do it. I won't change the room,"

"We have to."

"No." I feel my voice rising, "no, you want to, I don't. I think I'll take a cab home."

"And what, leave me here?"

"Do you even want me around? Hmm, do you."

"No, I don't. You're an embarrassment. Look at the way you dress for heavens sake. You look like you should work for me, not be married to be." She pauses and smiles, genuinely smiles at me for the first time in weeks. "You know what, you stay, I'll leave." Snatching her purse back from me, she walks off. Let her go, I keep telling myself, just let her go. Stuffing my hands back into my pockets, I stare at the wallpaper.

"Can I help you sir?"

Shaking my head, trying not to laugh at the irony of "Mark" showing up, I tell him no, that I'm just looking. I head out of the department store, catching sight of the little girl and her mother,

wondering what they're shopping for.

I stopped wearing my wedding ring, she didn't even notice. As we cooked dinner together, silently, awkwardly, I noticed hers was gone too. I wonder if she took hers off before or after I became an embarrassment to be seen with. Janelle bosses me around like I work for her, like I'm an underling at the art gallery. She switched departments, she said, to the photo gallery. Apparently photos are "real" art, not the mesh of colors. Photo's enlighten and show truth, colors paint lies. To me, that's all bullshit. Photos are reflections, colors are truth. At least she's talking to me again though, even if it's just to boss me around.

Janelle has hired an interior decorator, I'm supposed to collaborate with him. She gave me a pointed look with that order. It basically meant, "let him make all the decisions", I'm just there to do the heavy work. As least with the sledgehammer I can tune out her yelling.

Week after week, as she sends me to the furniture store, I see that woman and her daughter again, and every week the woman looks distraught like she has no idea what she's even doing in a place like this.

"Um, excuse me, do you need help?"

"Do you work here?" she asks, pulling her daughter close to her. Her caramel colored hair is loosely braided on her shoulder. It's cute the way feathers are sticking out of it.

"Um no. I don't mean to make you comfortable or creep you out, by all means, I just wanted to help."

"How could you help me?" Her eyes are grey, and study me warily. I had forgotten what it was like to be looked at like I mattered in a way.

“I’m a contractor, I know some things about decorating. Not a lot, but I like art so I could help, if you want it.”

“Do you have a card Mr. —”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Cadwell, Blake Cadwell.” I fish into my wallet, pulling out a bent and rather unflattering looking blue and green business card with my name and firm I was a part of on it in silver lettering. Hesitantly taking it, she studied it as her daughter pulled at arm, asking if it was time for lunch yet.

“Yes Julie.” She met him in the eyes, looking much kinder than before. “If I call, can I set up an appointment?”

“Of course,” I said, extending my hand. “Just ask for me Mrs.—”

“Ms. Kates, Elizabeth Kates.” Taking my hand, she shook it with a firm grip and placed my card in her purple and green knit purse. It didn’t match at all with her pink and soft orange, but I still think it looked nice on her.

“Can I help you sir?” said the salesperson, Mark again, scaring the daylights out of me (at this time, I was beginning to think he was stalking me – every time I came, there he was). This time I said yes, and looking back once more, I caught her studying the card. Maybe she would call, maybe not. I could only hope.

She called a few days later, while I was drafting up plans for another job, my wife’s job, the new “home project”. Two months now, and she still won’t talk to me, seems happier when I’m not around, when I come home from work early, I notice how quickly her demeanor changes. Her lips always purse into a firm line. It’s hard to be in the same house with her, I prefer sleeping in my office hunched over my drafting table, waking up with the back pain is more bearable than having her stare at me like I’m the anti-Christ, or Hitler, something along those lines, I can’t really

figure it out, I only really ever see hatred nowadays.

I still love her, even if I can't stand being in the same room with her. I'm just so confused about what to do and how to act. Even making chit chat with her at dinner is awful. We'll sit at either end of the table and she'll be drinking her wine while I'm there with my beer. Her responses to anything I ask are shrugs, mumbles, incoherent "I'm fine". I feel like she's throwing a tantrum have the time, trying her best to put on a brave face and act like nothing is wrong. The whole façade is backfiring, and as much as I hate to admit, she is pushing me away. I hate it, I love her, and I hope she knows I'm trying to understand what she's going through.

"Elizabeth right?" I asked, taking a seat across from her at the coffee shop, the smell of coffee grounds fills the air as I make my way to her with my order. The jazz music in the air calms my nerves and I think, "yeah, I can close this deal". She nods, and I see the sunlight glint of her nose. A silver star is imprinted there like a mole. It's nice.

"Yes, thank you for meeting me."

"No problem," she takes a sip of her creamy white coffee, it's a little darker than mine.

"I call it adventure."

"What?"

"My coffee, when it's dark I say adventure."

"Oh, um, okay."

"I noticed you staring at it."

"Right, yeah sorry about that. Um, why adventure?" I don't know why I'm asking that, seems silly to me, but I do like to get to know my clientele before I start drawing up plans, maybe this

would help me get to know her.

“It’s darker than yours. Yours is romance. It’s a thing of mine. The lighter the coffee, the more romance, the darker, the more adventure. I’m a teacher and I’m a big fan of those pick your path books. I have been since I was a kid.”

“You’re a teacher?”

“Uh huh, kindergarten.”

“Oh, that must be great.”

“It’s okay, the children get to be a handful, but at the end of the day, I wouldn’t trade it in for the world.” She smiles up at me, above the adventure stewing underneath her lips, lifting tendrils of heat fly into the air.

“That’s good, I always wanted children.” Instantly, I want to bite my tongue. Why did I say that, I’m here to find out about her, not tell her my life story. God, Janelle is right, I am an idiot.

“They can be a handful, that’s why I called. I need someone to help redo my second floor but no one is ever around when I need them. Except for that guy Mark, I try to avoid him though. His eagerness to help scares me, I think he followed me home one day.” She shivers expressively, her mouth crooking into a look of displeasure, her hands gripping the sides of her green and white coffee mug. Above the noise of the people, I hear the jazz music in the air, I reflect on it, try to focus on it. Jazz music never did suit me, but right now, it seems to be calming me down, easing my unsettled nerves.

Pulling out my notepad and pencil, I take on a pose to let her know that I know what I’m doing, sitting straight, my legs crossed so that she can only see my green sock and not notice my other is purple, my lucky colors.

“So, what exactly is it you want to do?”

Listening to her intently, I take it all down. She wants to expand the three rooms off her house, make her daughters room the same size as hers, make the bathroom bigger, let out the closet in her room, and create more natural light in the guest bedroom. It's an easy enough do I tell her, but it will cost a lot. Waving it off, she says money isn't an issue right now. The way her eyes cast off, and how her body swivels left shows me that the topic is off limits. I take the hint, get her address and make an appointment to come check out the place. This weekend she says, which is perfect for me, gets off the home project.

"I need you to go pick up some wood samples I ordered," Janelle orders me, as she hikes up her thigh high pantyhose's under her chocolate pencil shirt.

"No," I say, gratified with being able to say it, "I have to meet a client today about some expansion, the wood samples will have to wait."

"You did this on purpose," she hisses, glaring at me. Slipping her feet into her new black pumps, she stares at me, her hands on her hips in fists, ready to hit me.

"Don't Janelle, she set this up, she's a teacher so she suggested the weekend. This isn't my doing."

"Yeah, right, like I'm supposed to believe that."

"Why would I lie to you?"

"Because you don't want that room re-done!"

"You're right, I don't. I still believe we can be parents—"

"So keep deluding yourself!" she screams. "We can't. If I can't have a child, we can't."

"Janelle, please, I only want what will make you happy."

"Then get it through your head, I am happy. I don't want children, I never did. The notion of

children was because of you. It's your fault, and I hate you for making me think I wanted children." Snatching her blazer off her dresser, she stalks from the room, her high heels clicking on the wooden floor as she stomps away. I've lost her I think, the woman I loved. I look down at my wedding ring that I actually put on today, and promptly take it off, setting it next to hers. I wish I could say I was sorry, but I don't know what exactly I should be sorry for. Taking a breath, waiting for her car to leave, I head down to my own.

The house was up in Dorchester. It was a nice little brick house that had a screen door right outside a white one. Going past the wire fence, I make my way up the concrete pathway, to the door, ringing the doorbell. Elizabeth opened it, welcoming me inside, past the screen door. She's different than she was on Tuesday. Her hair still had the feathers, but she looked lighter today, as though she were in a better mood, sporting pink glitter nail polish and a light yellow polka dot dress. I've noticed, she really likes pastels.

"Thanks for coming. I'm sorry the house is a mess, my daughter is a messy girl and I didn't have enough time to clean up."

"That's fine, I make a bit of a mess myself." It was a lame joke I admit, but it made her laugh anyway, so I didn't feel like a complete fool. She called her daughter, who ran down the stairs, nearly tripping over a pair of Barbie's. My heart skipped a beat, but her mother caught her easily, scolding her, telling her that if she had just picked up her toys she wouldn't have almost fallen. The little girl nods and sucks on her lower lip. In her hand, I notice a little rubber duck. There are ducks on her dress as well.

"Julie, do you know who this nice man is?"

"Not daddy."

“No, not daddy.”

“When is daddy coming back?”

“Not for a while Jules, I’m sorry, he’s doing a lot of business, but he’s going to be paying this nice man to do a lot of work around the house, especially in your room.” Poking Julie in the stomach, she giggles and skips to me.

“Hello.”

Bending down, I look over at Elizabeth. She’s avoiding my gaze, and I think I heard something I wasn’t supposed to. There is no wedding ring on her hand either.

“Hey there kiddo, I get to redo your room however you want.”

“Did my daddy tell you that?”

“Jules, daddy told me so I told him.”

“Okie!”

“Yup, you’re one lucky kid. What’s your favorite color? Pink?”

She giggles. “No silly, I like blue.”

“No way, so do I. It’s a great color.”

“Uh huh!”

“How old are you Julie?”

“I’m this many,” she explains holding up five fingers.

“Awesome! High five then!” I hold my hand out to her, asking for her palm. She hits to back, giggling like she won a prize. Maybe she did, getting your room re-done is no small fee.

The next few days were like that. I would get to their house with my co-workers and move stuff out of Julie’s room. I couldn’t blame the kid for wanting a new room, it was an incredibly plain

with its white walls. If you ask me, everything needed a splash of color, which was no big fee is Elizabeth wanted me to paint it too. She told me no, saying it would give her an excuse to paint. The routine of picking them up after Elizabeth got off work was an accident. We accidentally blocked her in so I drove her there. That was where I found out, with a little prying, about Julie's father.

"I filed for divorce after I found out he was having an affair," she said, picking at her nail polish. "It hadn't been the first time apparently, five years together, I guess we married young," she told me. College sweethearts and when he found out he knocked her up, he asked her to marry him.

"I think he felt obligated more than anything, especially coming from a wealthy family. I want to hate him but I can't. I knew back then that going into it was a big mistake, but I was scared, I didn't wan to raise a kid alone."

"Now you do," I said, pulling into the school parking lot.

"Now I have loads of experience with children." She leaned back and tapped her daughters' leg, telling her to pull out her headphones and put her music player away. Her father bought that for her apparently, he spoiled her. After that, I started driving her and picking her up. It was nice to talk to someone who was willing to listen and not debase every thought I had.

One day, I thought I'd surprise her, when we were nearly done with her daughters room, I figured I could afford to take the time off. I memorized how she had her coffee at the house in the mornings. Half coffee, half milk, two sugars. I remember the look of surprise on her face when I arrived.

"Hey."

"Hey, I figured I'd surprise you."

“Thanks.” She lifted the lid and stared in.

“I gave you romance.” She laughed and took a sip. In turn so did I. Sitting there together, I asked her why she chose this profession. Her mom, she said. Her mother was a teacher, so she wanted to be one too. She said that babysitting had helped her make the choice between teenagers and little kids.

“Little kids are more fun, a bigger handful, but certainly more fun. And there is that added enjoyment of them not talking back.”

“They don’t stay little forever.”

“True, but that doesn’t matter. I hope I’m doing a well enough job to ensure that Jules doesn’t talk back to me when she reaches those years.”

“At least you get to enjoyment at the moment.”

“That’s true, wouldn’t trade it for the world.” I think that was the day I realized I loved her. When her head touched my shoulder, my heart fluttered. The moment the bell rung, she jumped up, calling the kids to her. I watched her round the children up, like a mother deer, and lead them inside the haven of the cave. She looked back at me, and waved goodbye. Maybe it was imagination, or maybe it was the sun, but I think she was blushing.

It was the final day of the job, and I was dreading it. This meant no more excuses to see her, to spent time with her in the car and at recess. After two and a half months of bringing her coffee and laughing, hearing her stories of kindergarten mishaps and my on the job mishaps, I realized that I was probably never going to get to see her again, unless I asked her out. Despite how Janelle and I acted, we were still married...for now.

I carried the divorce papers with me. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to give them to Janelle and

end that part of my life completely. In spite of how she treated me, I still loved her. I would always love her. That didn't change the fact that these six months with her had been hell and that these past few months with Elizabeth had been wonderful, even if we hadn't done anything. I wore my wedding ring today, thinking that if I wore it, maybe it would make me feel something more than anger at Janelle. It only served to remind me that she stopped loving me, stopping caring about us, and that I couldn't handle being with her anymore.

I shoved it in my pocket and drove up to the house to see the other guys leaving. They waved at me while they loaded their trucks. There was no excuse today to drive Elizabeth and Julie to school. Just one last day, I told myself, one day to be with her.

“Hey.”

“Blake!” Julie ran to me, which was a little unexpected, and hugged my legs. Looking to Elizabeth, I asked for an explanation.

“She thought since the job was done you wouldn't drive us to school today.”

“Oh, well, I guess I can make one last trip.”

“Really? You mean it?”

“Sure kiddo, we need a proper goodbye I think.”

“I don't like goodbyes. Daddy said goodbye and he hasn't come back.”

“Aww Jules, your dad loves you, I'm sure he's just busy.”

“Jules, go get your backpack before we're late.”

“Okie mommy.” I watched her run inside the house. Looking at Elizabeth I finally took her in. The feathers in her hair today were a soft lilac and black, and her spring dress was lilac to match with black lace along the bottom and a black bow around her waist. Despite everything going on in her life, she seemed to be okay.

“You look nice today,” she said crossing her arms. Each nail was a different shade of purple.

“Yeah, well, I wanted to ask if you and Julie wanted to go out to dinner tonight, to celebrate a completed job.” I offer her an innocent smile, I don’t want to scare her away and give her the wrong idea.

“I-we’d love to.” Julie interrupts our smiling moment, but it’s okay, the little kid has wormed her way into my heart. Elizabeth tells her about dinner and she quickly asks if she can bring her ducky. I tell her of course.

“Thank you Blake,” begins Elizabeth buckling herself in, “Julie and I appreciate this.”

“I hoped that you would.” This time, I wasn’t imagining when I caught her blush. The rosy outlook of her cheeks made my heart race.

“That was a wonderful dinner,” said Elizabeth in a hushed tone as she lead the way up the walkway to her house while I carried a sleeping Julie in my arm.

“I’m glad you thought so.” I headed up the stairs and carried Julie up to her new room, careful not to trip on any toys lying around. Elizabeth had already started to paint as I had worked on her bedroom closet. Already there were blue walls with little ducklings all along it and blue fuzzy carpet along the floor. Julie loved it.

“Here,” whispered Elizabeth lifting the comforter and sheets. I laid her down and Elizabeth took off her shoes, tucking her in tightly. Being with her this evening proved it, I wanted to be with her, I wanted to get away from Janelle. The sight of Elizabeth acting so tenderly warmed my heart and I made a silent prayer that Janelle would sign the divorce papers.

“She’s adorable,” I muttered, stuffing my hands into my pockets. Why was my ring still in my pocket?

“She is.” Elizabeth looked at me, pulling her silky purple shawl off her shoulders. “Would you like a cup of coffee? Before you go home?”

“I’d love one”

I followed her down the stairs, closing the door quietly behind me. I knew the house well by now. I knew that the fifth stair step going down from the second floor creaked, and the third step going up from the bottom as well. I knew that on the doorframe to the kitchen there was wood chipping from the top, and on the wall next to it, dark marks lines the passage of time in Julie’s height.

“Romance or adventure?” she asked turning on the coffee machine.

“Romance tonight,” I said taking a seat next to her, sitting with my body away from the table so that I could watch her. My phone sent vibrations through my body, and this late, I couldn’t understand who would be calling this late. The name on the screen made my blood run cold. Janelle. No, not tonight I thought, I wouldn’t deal with her tonight. Shoving the phone back into my pocket, I caught Elizabeth watching me, her grey eyes studying me

“Who was that?”

“Huh, oh just my friend. He’s uh, having marriage problems.”

“Oh, so then why are you ignoring him?”

“Because I don’t know how to help him.”

“Well maybe I can help, I’m an expert at marital problems?” She winked at me, making me feel comfortable enough to unload, to some degree. I didn’t want to lose her.

“Well, see, him and his wife found out she can’t have children a few months ago. The news sort of broke her. She changed and it was instantaneous. She’s like a different person now. She’s mean and cruel and she figures he was the one who convinced her she wanted children, he didn’t

know he did that, doesn't understand how, and she just calls him stupid all the time. She's mean and vicious and cold and even I think she is a stranger, and I've known her for years. We went to college together. I thought she wanted kids."

"It sounds like she's projecting."

"Yeah well, she's pushing him away and he filed for divorce. He hasn't decided though, of whether or not to give her the papers."

"Is he happy?"

"No."

"Then he should. It sounds like she's not happy and is pushing him away on purpose. They should both be happy and it doesn't sound like either are. Loveless marriages are the worst, trust me."

"Except, he still loves her."

"Sometimes love isn't enough. How long has it been?"

"Uh, six months I think."

"Has he tried suggesting marriage counseling?"

*I suggested it once, she called me an ignorant ass.* "I don't think that would work anymore."

"Then he should give her the papers. Maybe leaving her will give her a wake-up call." The coffee machine beeped. Elizabeth got up and grabbed two mugs. I followed, hugging her, thanking her for her help. Laying her head on my chest, she hugged me back, wrapping her arms around my waist. We stood like that for a while, my heart pounding as I decided to look down at her. Cupping her chin, I bent down to kiss her. There was a moment when I thought about Janelle, about the fact that I was still married, that this was wrong, but the moment my lips touched hers, all that vanished and I thought only about Elizabeth, and how she smelled, like gardenia's, and

how her lips tasted like raspberry. When she pulled away, shutting off the coffee machine, I thought that was the end. Instead she wrapped her hand in mine and led me to the bedroom. I didn't even think about Janelle again that night, I only thought about how good it felt to be loved again, to hold someone close to me and kiss them and have them kiss me back.

The sun that had seeped its way into the house is what woke me up. Elizabeth was gone, out of bed, my clothes were neatly folded on the floor by my side. I got dressed, hoping Elizabeth would turn up, but she didn't. It was when I was done, she I went through my pockets to get my phone that I noticed my ring was gone.

Running down the stairs, all the thoughts and possibilities, of places I hoped it would be, I ran to the kitchen. There is was, in the kitchen table, in front of Elizabeth, next to her coffee cup.

“You're married?”

“Yes, but—”

“That story you told me last night,” she sniffled, “was that about you?”

Hesitantly, I took a step towards her. “Elizabeth—”

“Don't lie to me, not anymore.”

It was as though everything was crashing down on me. “I didn't mean to lie. We don't wear out rings anymore.”

“I won't be the other woman.” She let out a weak laugh, choking back tears in her white robe. “Who am I kidding I already am.”

“No Elizabeth—”

“No! No, I feel in love with you, somewhere along the line, I feel in love with you. But you know what, I am not going to be the woman that ended a marriage. I know how that feels, and I

don't care if you and your wife are having problems, that doesn't give you the right to make me the other goddamn woman. I am not a whore, I am not a slut and I will not do that to her, to someone who is clearly so damaged. So, please, get the heck out of my house and don't ever come back."

"Please hear me out."

"Get out!" She slammed her fists on the table, and I felt like a miserable human being doing that to her, making her feel like this. So I picked up my ring, and I left. A part of me hoped she would call me back, telling me she would let me explain, telling me that she understood I hadn't meant to lie. That never happened.

I tried to make it work with Janelle again. I suggested counseling. All she ever did was give me that pointed look of hers. Repeatedly she would tell me that that wouldn't fix anything, that I had to learn to deal with not being able to have kids. All I ever wanted was for her to be happy, I told her that again and again. She never believed me. In bed she wouldn't even touch me, she would sleep as close to the edge as possible, in a ball. Sometimes I thought she was crying with the way her body shook. Janelle was always sound asleep when I looked over at her.

One night at dinner, when I thought about it, I decided I couldn't live like this anymore, not with someone who continued to shut me out.

"I had an affair."

Janelle eyes me coolly with her green eyes. "I figured."

"You figured?"

"Yeah, I just thought you needed time to deal so I gave it to you. I mean come on, I've been dealing in my own little way with the decorator." She smiled at me above her wine glass.

“You are fucked up,” I said, unable to take it. “What happened to you? You can’t just shut off Janelle, you can’t just do whatever the hell you want. You can’t fuck someone and shun your husband! This affected me as much as it did you.”

“Oh don’t act so pious, and don’t you dare give me that shit. You have no idea what I have been going through!”

“I wonder why. I can’t understand if you are not willing to talk to me. So no, don’t *you* dare give me that shit. This, this is all your fault. I tried, I tried to be there for you but you didn’t want me.” I reached into my briefcase, pulled out the divorce papers and threw them across the table, glad that the folder fell into her food. “Here, I’m filing for divorce. I’m leaving you Janelle.”

Something changed and I saw her fear set in her once beautiful blue eyes. “No! You can’t! Blake I need you.”

“Oh no you don’t, you just proved that. These past six months, with your own revelation, you have proved that you don’t need me. What you need is god damn therapist, so go get one, because I am done.” That was what I left her with as I went upstairs to grab the bag I had prepared earlier. Looking back one final moment at her, I wasn’t surprised to see her gingerly looking through the papers, both tentative and somehow relieved at the same time. All this time I thought this was a big deal, and maybe at first it was, but not anymore. This woman was a stranger, and I wasn’t about to try and understand what went through the confines of her head.

It wasn’t right to be here, sitting outside Elizabeth’s house. Especially not after what I had done to her, how I had made her feel. I wasn’t going to get out; I wasn’t going to bother her tonight. A part of my wanted imagined it, imagined walking up the steps to her door. She would open it, without even thinking about it and would let me explain. I’d confess and tell her everything about

it. After that, she would let me in, even let me sleep on the couch. But no, I couldn't make that assumption; I couldn't unload on her, not with what was going on in her life. It wasn't right to make her life over complicated out of a selfish desire to be with her. Maybe in a few weeks we would run into one another. Heck maybe I wouldn't see her for five years. I watched her lift her daughter into the air through the white curtains and smiled. I put my car back into drive, took one final moment to look back and thought about how we had kissed. Even if I never saw her again, I would always think about her. All I could do was hope that she would forgive me and let me back into her life someday. Driving off, I left them alone and made my way to the closest hotel. I could always hope.