



AUTHOR PROFILE

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AG

1. INTRODUCTION; PERCEPTION OF CAUSE

I could die from excitement. At this very moment, this very second, my heart is pounding as if it might suddenly stop beating. It's so fast. It's clearly excited about something. Unlike me, my heart doesn't hide its excitement. Is this for tomorrow's wedding? Or perhaps it's because it's the wedding of my heart and me. Are we happy because we're getting married, or because we're marrying the most gentlemanly man in the world?

All I know is that I can't sleep from excitement.

My fiancé still hasn't come home. I wish I could share my excitement with him, but it's fine. He's working hard

to make sure nothing goes wrong with our wedding. Maybe that's why I feel a little bad—because there's nothing I can do to match his efforts

When sleep won't come, I get out of bed and head downstairs for a glass of water. Going down the stairs to the kitchen at night feels like torture. My bare feet are strangely cold despite it being summer. I look at my legs, exposed by my short shorts. Even though they'll barely be visible beneath the skirt of my wedding dress, I want to make sure there isn't a single hair on them. By then, I reach the kitchen and grab a glass bottle filled with cold water from the fridge. My intention is to go back to my room and try to sleep again—I shouldn't look tired at my wedding—but the sounds coming from the hall ignite something in my mind. Inside me, a match labeled "curiosity" in red ink bursts into flame. As the bottle in my hand begins to chill my fingers, I step into the hall.

No one is there.

Just as I'm about to turn back, I hear the same sounds again. They're coming from the front door. I don't know why, but I press my ear against it and try to hear what's happening outside.

It must be close to three o'clock. What are they doing out there at this hour?

Suddenly, there's a loud thud against the door, as if something heavy has hit it. If I were in my room, I probably wouldn't have heard it—but standing right behind the door, I jump at the sound. I quickly look through the peephole.

My fiancé.

Seeing him brings a smile to my face, but before opening the door to let him in, I decide to wait a little longer. He's grinning, staring at something just below the peephole. It must be whatever hit the door earlier.

"You say you're marrying her for her money, but to me it feels like you're deceiving me. You're always with her." The woman's voice from just beyond the door makes my brows knit together. What is she talking about?

Why is there a woman at my door at this hour?

Why is my fiancé with her?

"Give me a little time. Time to transfer all her property into my name and get what I need to divorce her." For some reason, hearing my fiancé's drunken voice makes a lump form in my throat. I can't swallow. I try to convince myself they're not talking about me. My eyes fill, but I stare at the ceiling for a few seconds and force the tears back.

"No one would look at that wreck for any other reason anyway." Was that wreck me? Was I a wreck in people's eyes? No. No, they're not talking about me.

"We need to leave now, my love. She must have fallen asleep waiting for me. We can't risk getting caught."

The girl lets out an exasperated sigh. "I'm so sick of that woman."

She was the one with my fiancé, yet I was the woman—is that it?

When they move a little farther from the door, I can see them both clearly. The first thing I notice about the girl is her bleached blonde hair, frayed at the ends and fried from too much straightening. She's wearing leather leggings and a red bustier. I can't see her face well because of the darkness. They stop beside a motorcycle.

Suddenly, as if she knows I'm here, she turns toward me. I'm sure she can't see me, but I feel like our eyes meet. A sense of familiarity wraps around my entire body. As she looks in my direction, my fiancé leans down and presses a small kiss to the lips of the girl who isn't me. They speak a little longer, but I can't hear what they say. Then she gets on the motorcycle and drives away. I hope, I think.

I hope she gets into an accident tonight.

My fiancé walks back toward the door, staggering slightly, his drunkenness reflected in his steps. I don't know if it's right to still call him my fiancé.

A moment ago, I couldn't sleep from excitement. Now I'm trying to resist the sting at the bridge of my nose. My eyes are burning, and I can't even swallow. Wasn't life supposed to be fair?

A woman had just shattered all my dreams and left, calling me a bitch on her way out. Where was the justice in that?

I was fully aware she wasn't the only one at fault, but right now I couldn't find the strength to blame my fiancé.

I slowly slide down against the door and sit on the floor. Meanwhile, my former fiancé reaches the door and tries the keys one by one. Eventually, he manages to insert one into the lock—but the door doesn't open because I'm sitting in front of it. Being drunk, he can't reason through it, so he assumes the problem is with the key and walks away. He'll probably spend the night in his car. Or maybe he'll go back to her.

Who knows?

I lock the door again and run upstairs to my room. I don't even realize I've cracked the glass bottle in my hand from squeezing it so tightly, nor that I've cut my hand. I throw the bottle to the floor. Once inside my room, I sit on my bed, pull the duvet over my head, and unlock my phone.

Wedding canceled.

03:10

Without checking the time, I send the same message to everyone involved in tomorrow's wedding. No reason. No excuse. No explanation. No details. Short and simple. Wedding canceled.

I try not to think about what happened, because thinking makes me want to sob uncontrollably. I want to cry until I'm hollowed out, until I can breathe again. But I won't cry. The ones who made the mistake should be the ones crying. I don't have a single tear to waste on people who believe there's nothing lovable about me beyond my money.

And yet... a part of me whispers: Cry. Cry as much as you need and feel lighter. It will help. Stop being stubborn and cry.

Does a person's inner voice interfere with what they do? Mine does. I want to clench my fist and hit my head until it falls silent, but I know that if it goes quiet, so will I. My lips are pressed together, my teeth grinding against each other as if trying to break. The corners of my mouth strain downward, but since I refuse to let them, they tremble instead.

I'm angry. Angry at myself. Despite everything, I'm furious at myself for still being in love with that man—and for wondering whether, if I had gone to sleep early last night, I might have lived a happy life with him, never knowing. I hate myself for blaming only that blonde woman when she isn't the only guilty one in this story.

Above all, isn't she a woman too?

How could she be part of something so vile?

I don't know. Maybe this is life's sense of humor. Maybe the karma for the wrongs you committed years ago finds you like this—humiliating, merciless—forcing a windowpane down your throat and refusing to stop until it tears you open.

As I stare at the last name on my phone—the final person I need to inform that the wedding is canceled—these are the thoughts running through my mind. I don't want to tell him.

I wasn't even the one who invited her.

I could never have done something that required that much courage. After stealing all her happiness, how could I invite him to watch mine?

When I can't even look her in the eye without shame, how could I tell her my wedding is canceled?

Do you know what the cruelest part is? She would be sad. If she learned I had canceled my wedding, she would be deeply sad for me. I—the one who stole her life, her dreams, her future. Her killer. If she knew I had been betrayed, she would feel sorry for me.

After all, I was a woman who had just learned she was cheated on by her fiancé.

In truth, I wasn't even surprised. I had always known that one day the curses I had earned would find me. I tied what happened to that. What was the price of one curse? Two? Three? Four? I hadn't only earned her curse—I had earned her entire family's. I deserved this.

It was painful to accept, but it was true.

Maybe that was why I wasn't rebelling against it, why I was so calm in the face of something this devastating. I knew I was someone who deserved to suffer. By hurting someone who didn't deserve pain, perhaps I deserved it most of all.

My fingers tremble as I stare at her smiling profile picture. She looks happy. The complete opposite of me right now. I wish I didn't know that the smile on her face is only there to make people believe she's happy.

Who would have thought that years later, a pain like this would bring him—and everything about him—rushing back to me?

I wipe away the tears that refuse to fall and take a deep breath. I have to do this.

Wedding canceled. I was cheated on.

3.51

I don't even know why I added that explanation.

Within seconds, the check marks turn blue. He sees it immediately, but even after a long time, he doesn't reply. While I wait only for him, I'm bombarded with curious messages from everyone else asking what happened.

Hours pass.

Night turns into day.

The time of my wedding draws near. The tears that refused to fall all night have left my eyes red and burning. I start hearing sounds from downstairs.

“My love!” The fact that his voice can still make me smile, despite everything, feels like a cruel joke.

“Haven’t you woken up yet?” He’s wrong. I didn’t pass out drunk like he did. I didn’t sleep at all—what waking up?

“If you don’t want to be known as the bride who was late to her own wedding, you’d better get up.” I fell in love with him for that sense of humor.

“You must not have slept from excitement. If I could, I’d pull the sun down and turn it back into night so you could rest a little longer.” It was his thoughtfulness that bound me to him completely.

He slowly opens my bedroom door, smiling at me. His handsome face is what made me fall blindly in love.

I don't know what I look like, but it must be worse than I think—because the moment he sees me, his smile vanishes. His brows draw together. “Are you okay, baby?” Hearing the concern in his voice makes me question myself. Could what I saw last night not have been real? Maybe I hallucinated from lack of sleep. Who am I trying to fool? I know what I saw had nothing to do with sleeplessness.

He rushes to my side and cups my face in his hands. I'll miss that, too. The moment he does, the tears I've been holding back finally spill freely. Watching them fall from my eyes seems to pain him. Can someone love the person they're cheating on? I'm so desperate to be loved that I dig through everything, searching for the smallest sign that I am. A tiny clue. But there's nothing. Maybe everyone is right. Maybe I don't deserve to be loved. There's nothing left in my hands to argue otherwise. Still, I had hoped. I had been excited at the thought that maybe someone could love me, too. Deep down, I find myself wishing I had gone to sleep early last night and married this man without ever knowing. The thought comes without my permission.

I would never want to wish that I had never learned he cheated on me.

That would be pathetic. I've lived my entire life like a loser; for the last person beside whom I didn't feel like one, I might have begged anyone and anything not to let him go.

Maybe that's exactly what makes me pathetic.

It doesn't matter. Just...

Whatever.

“Leave my house. Please.” The sentence barely escapes my trembling lips. The fingers that had been gently wiping my tears freeze. For a few seconds, he seems to process whether he heard correctly. As he does, his face slowly contorts with pain. My eyes catch on the way his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. I had fallen in love even with that small rise in his throat.

“What are you saying?” His hands quickly find mine, gripping them tightly as if afraid to let go. He wants me to repeat it—but he has no idea what torture that is for me.

“Please,” I press my eyes shut. Why is this so hard to say?

“Please leave my house.”

“But why? Did I do something wrong? Even if I did, I swear I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry. Please. We have our wedding today, my love. Don’t do this.” The pleading in his voice makes me cry harder.

“You are the mistake.” I yank my hands free.

“All the time I wasted on you—what a waste.” With every sentence I form, my heart is crushed again, but I force myself to listen only to my mind.

“You’re being too harsh. You’ll regret this. Don’t.” Even now, he sounds so considerate. Who would have

thought he'd turn out to be such a bastard?

"If you don't leave my house, I'll call the police," I say coldly, meeting his eyes. Seeing how hurt he looks makes it worse.

"Baby, don't do this. I'm sure it's something we can fix. Tell me the problem. I'll eliminate it for you, I promise." Ah. How sweet he sounds right now.

He must never be sweet to me again.

He tries to take my hand once more, but I pull back. "You're the problem. The problem is that you're disgusting. That you can act so well that you make me question what I know, even when I know everything. You said you'd eliminate whatever the problem was, right? For me—would you eliminate yourself?"

"What are you talking about?" He's still trying to wriggle out of it, hopelessly. But he won't succeed.

"That girl you cheated on me with..." I have to ask. I know the answer will hurt, but I need to hear it.

"Was she better than me?"

He doesn't answer. He's stunned. He must not have expected me to know. The way he looks at me sends a pain through my heart unlike anything I've ever felt. It lodges there, becomes part of me. A pain that will never leave. She was, wasn't she?

She was better than me.

Damn you, my love.

I didn't listen to him again. I started screaming as if I had lost my mind, and the disturbing sounds I made continued until I threw him out of my house like a rag. Every insult I hurled was for the sake of convincing myself that I no longer loved him; there was no reason left for me not to turn into someone who swore like a madwoman.

After I shoved him outside and slammed the door, I heard his voice one last time.

"You must have gone insane! I'm leaving now so something irreversible doesn't happen, but it won't be that easy to get rid of me. I'll be back. When you come to your senses, we'll talk again!" He was the one who had truly lost his mind. He had exposed himself while he was drunk, and now he was standing at my door, shouting and blaming me. A complete parasite.

Despicable.

Shameless.

It still wasn't enough to convince myself that I didn't love him. The insults and curses I threw at him were no longer enough to make me believe it.

"Why?"

That was the only question I wanted to ask the man who shouted from behind the door and then stormed off. The fact that that woman might be better than me could not be the only answer.

While you were turning her dreams into the impossible, you didn't have an answer either.

She... she was different. I never meant to steal her dreams.

You did.

I didn't!

You stole her dreams and lived them yourself.

I did it for her! A profession that darkened my father's life had never been my dream.

The profession that made me leave my father alone in a hospital and curse myself over and over again could never have been my dream.

It was her. I fulfilled her dream. His dream wasn't to become a soldier—it was to become one with me. I wanted her dream to come true, even if only halfway. Despite my father, who forgot my mother and me because of what she went through in that same profession years ago, I wanted her to be happy.

You're hurting her even more.

No. She's a good person. She always has been. She's happy. My happiness makes her happy. It always did.

The traumatic event I had just lived through was triggering old memories. The voice I heard in my head was nothing but an old echo. It had to be. Years of treatment and medication had left it in the past. Why had it suddenly resurfaced? I couldn't go back to those years of therapy, pills, and suffocating dark days. I couldn't survive that again.

I felt afraid. For the first time in a long time, I felt truly afraid. Afraid enough to want to cry like a child until my

father came and stroked my hair, telling me he would protect me...

But my father never stroked my hair. He wrapped his hands around my throat and squeezed until I nearly died.

He didn't talk to me to calm my fears—he shouted that he wished I were dead.

You are not someone to be loved.

I pressed my hands over my ears to block the voice out, but it was coming from inside my head.

You are not someone to be loved.

“Shut up!” I screamed so hard that it felt as though something tore in my throat.

You pushed away the only person who loved you. No one is left.

No, that's not true. My father loves me! He just doesn't realize it. He forgot me, but I'm his daughter. He loves me. Fathers love their daughters. He loves me.

You

Pushed

Away

The

Last

Person

Who

Loved

You.

I collapsed onto my knees and started crying. I had a large house, and I knew every inch of it like the back of my hand, yet I felt lost. I didn't know where I was. I didn't know how far my feet had carried me before giving up and forcing me to fall to my knees. Maybe I was in my room. Maybe in the bathroom. The living room, the kitchen, the study, the terrace... Wherever I was. The only thing I knew was that my knees were cold. Even while crying, I noticed how cold they were. There was probably no rug beneath me. Later, I should put rugs all over the house.

I stopped crying and slowly got to my feet, looking around. I had collapsed right in front of the stairs. My legs had endured far less than I thought. Even my legs couldn't endure me. Maybe the voice was right.

I wiped my tears and went to my room. The sun burned my eyes. I pulled a simple black dress from my wardrobe and put it on quickly.

I was going to be late for my wedding.

In the mirror, I looked at my thick, swollen bangs framing my straight black hair, the puffiness under my eyes, the redness in them, the dried salty streaks on my cheeks, and my flushed, runny nose. I am not beautiful enough to be loved.

You're not.

I know. Shut up!

Without taking my phone or anything else, I left the house and chose the shaded paths, making my way to the shore where my wedding was supposed to take place.

The place where the forest ended and the vast sea began was perhaps too intertwined with nature for a wedding. I didn't care.

I hadn't hired anyone to decorate the place or arrange anything, so it was deserted, as it always was. Apparently, informing everyone by phone that the wedding was canceled had worked. There wasn't a single person there.

No one came for you.

They couldn't have known I would be here.

if they had, it wouldn't have changed anything. Even

We can't know that.

God, no. Engaging in a conversation with the voice in my head was bad. Very bad. It meant everything was worse than I thought.

Everything was starting over, but my endurance had already run out. I walked close enough to the sea that the droplets splashing against the shore reached my face, then sat down and watched the restless water. I don't know which decision was more absurd—choosing my wedding venue as the place where I cleared my mind, or choosing the place where I cleared my mind as my wedding venue. As I watched the sea, the shining sun stabbed at my eyes. I hated it. I hated that while I was in so much pain, it continued to illuminate everyone else—my fiancé most of all.

No one cares about you.

I forced myself not to respond. I couldn't. That would mean I had lost. I couldn't lose. After spending years defeating that voice, I couldn't lose now.

No one cares whether you live. Die.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I cared that I was alive. That was enough. I didn't need anyone else.

As I listened to the sound of the water, my mind felt as though it drifted far away. Suddenly, I heard the sound of crushed leaves and branches behind me, but I didn't turn around. I knew who it was. I knew she had come for me. She always comes for me.

I knew she was standing right behind me during those long, silent minutes we shared. In the end, I was the one who broke the silence.

"How did you know I would come here—"

"Are you hearing the same voices again?"

The question she asked, in that voice I hadn't heard in years—one that tickled my ears and filled me with a strange peace—pushed me into an even longer silence.

Why ask a question whose answer she already knew—and knew I wouldn't give?

She rolled his wheelchair to my side and stared into the distance, just like I was.

"He was with me for my money." I couldn't hold it in and spoke again. She didn't question me. She knew I had no one else to tell these things to. I had longed for someone to listen to me for years.

I never had a mother who would say, Tell me, nor a father who would ask, What's wrong? I never had a friend to confide in. He thought that after I ruined his life, I had gone on to live happily—but after I lost him, everything had gone to hell. It was all my fault. I deserved it. I had never once rebelled against that truth. I had no right to. I had done it to myself. When she was the only thing I had, I pushed her away with my own hands.

When I saw that he remained silent, I spoke again. "Last night. I couldn't sleep. I saw him outside my door with a girl. He was drunk and—"

I didn't continue.

She listened and felt sorry for me, but she didn't say a single word. After a long while, I heard her voice again.

"Have you ever gone to see your father?"

"No." I had never visited her after she was locked in that hospital—not because I believed it was the most

rational decision, but because I had been undergoing treatment for years. After years of therapy, many things had changed in me. But according to the men who had once worked with my father and helped raise me, nothing had changed in her. That only fueled my intense fear of her, and even after my treatment ended, I couldn't go. I was afraid.

You're afraid your father will hurt you.

I'm afraid my father will hurt me.

"Shall we go see him?" My lips trembled with the urge to answer, but I pressed them together tightly and kept watching the sea. Has he missed me?

You are not someone to be missed. He is much happier without you.

I ignored it.

"Maybe we should go see him."

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2. DEVELOPMENT; PAINFUL PERSPECTIVES

09.04.2004

There were so many people crying. My grandmother was crying, my aunt, my father's sister, even Aunt Zehra—my mother's closest friend, whom I had never seen cry before—was crying. There was a suffocating heaviness in our house. As a child who had just woken up and whose mind had not yet fully cleared, I was too unaware to understand what was happening. I wandered around the house, looking for my mother. I was thirsty. My throat was dry and sore. I was going to ask my mother for water.

Did Mom leave us?

When I heard Gene's voice, a seed of doubt settled inside me too. "Mom," I tried to moisten my dry throat by swallowing, but it was so parched that even swallowing hurt. "Mom." When I called out again, I came face to face with my grandmother. The woman, nearly eighty years old, wrapped her arms tightly around me without a word and began to cry. I didn't know what to do. The only thing I knew was that I didn't like it. She pressed my face against her chest so hard that I couldn't breathe. Her arms did not loosen until I forced my head back.

"Grandma, where is my mom?"

"Oh, my unfortunate child. Oh, my henna-haired child. Oh, my beautiful-eyed child. How could they do this to you too, oh—"

When I realized she had chosen to wail instead of answering me, I frowned and pulled away from her. I was very thirsty.

So was I.

If I couldn't find my mother, then I would drink my water myself.

I walked barefoot through the crying people to the kitchen. I took a glass from the clean dishes and reached for the water. I reached and reached, but my hand simply couldn't make it. After struggling for about thirty seconds, I took a fork from the drawer and tried reaching with that. It took a while, but when I finally managed to fill my glass, I pulled back with childish triumph and sat down on a chair, just as my family had taught me.

Ever since I could remember, I had been subjected to their strict education. It was supposed to make me more cultured, a better person. Was I uncomfortable?

I don't think so.

We aren't uncomfortable.

When I took a sip of my water, a sudden scream made me drop the glass. I looked at the shards of glass scattered across the floor and the water splashed over me.

I hope the person screaming has a good reason.

Carefully stepping around the broken glass, I left the kitchen. Then I heard my aunt crying out, "Mom!" Was she a child too? Even I wasn't crying like that.

When I entered the living room, I saw a crowd gathered around someone.

I stepped closer.

Closer.

My brows furrowed.

My grandmother was sleeping. Why were they shouting? It wouldn't be nice to wake her. My mother had told me that unless it was something important, we should never wake someone who was sleeping.

My aunt's mother must not have raised her well.

Gene was right.

My aunt, who was crying loudly with my grandmother's head in her lap, lifted her head when I stood in front of her and fixed her eyes on mine.

When my empty eyes met her eyes filled with hatred and grief, the image that emerged was strange. Why would a grown woman look at a small child with so much hatred?

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18.12.2004

Hello, Gene,

Can I pour my heart out to you today?

My father is a soldier. Soldiers have different ranks, but since I am just a small child right now, I don't even know what a rank is. Because of his job, my father would often go far away. Still, he was the best father. He would bring us gifts from wherever he went, spend all his leave with us, and give us the entirety of his love. The favorite in our house—the number one—was my mother. Then came me. My father was third. If I had had a sibling, my father would have gladly become fourth. I always knew that. But I never had a sibling.

I couldn't.

My mother died in her early twenties. She didn't die—she was killed and became an angel. That's what Yunus, one of my father's friends, told me. No matter how much I asked, he never told me who killed her. Still, since I was my father's daughter, and there was an aunt who blamed me for everything, it didn't take long for me to learn what had happened.

You, she said.

Your mother died because you were born.

She married your father because she got pregnant with you,

And your father killed her.

I learned.

I learned so well that I will never forget again why a grown woman would look at a small child with hatred. That day, my grandmother couldn't bear the pain of my mother's death. She had a small heart attack and passed away.

I don't know if she became an angel too. No one told me. But my aunt poured all her hatred onto me as if I were the one who had killed them.

My mother died that day.

While I slept peacefully, in another room my father was strangling her.

As my mother took her last breath, she called out to me with hope. Not for me to wake up and help her. For me to wake up and run.

I was my father's next target. If Yunus hadn't grown worried when he couldn't reach my father and come to our house that day, maybe I would have died too. I didn't wake up. While my mother tore her throat apart trying to make me hear her, I hugged my stuffed bear tighter and kept sleeping. Yunus didn't even know I was there. After all, when someone sees a dead woman and a man who has lost his mind, who would think a small child was sleeping in that house too?

My father is sick. Do you know what schizophrenia is? That's it. It's genetic. I have it too. That's why other people can't hear you. But that's not the point. They say the illness is in the mind. So that means you are actually an illness inside my mind. My father had a Gene too. But his Gene was bad.

My father had once been treated and healed. His Gene had gone away. But during the last time he left us for work, there was a conflict. The bad people injured him. That was why it took him much longer to come back to us. He went to the hospital to recover. Spending time with other wounded soldiers there brought his Gene back. Do you understand me?

My father had someone like you, just like I do. He had gotten rid of him long ago. Then he was injured, and his Gene returned.

I am real.

I know, Gene. But please don't speak. Today I will speak, and you will listen. All right?

As I said, my father's Gene was bad. After everything he had been through, it deceived him. It made him believe there was a devil inside my mother and me. I don't judge him for believing that. I can understand him. He tried to ignore his Gene, but Gene began showing him things that weren't there.

When my father killed my mother, he thought he was saving her.

He wasn't killing my mother—he was killing the devil inside her. If he did that, the devil would die and my mother would come back. That's what he told Yunus. Maybe that's why I'm not allowed to see him. Then again, I never wanted to. If I wanted to, would they let me see my father? I don't know.

Maybe I should try.

Maybe I will.

Oh, and by the way— I'm not sad about living without my mother and father, Gene. Maybe a little. But I'm content. I have to be content. Because if I'm not, they might send me to an orphanage. Yunus has a daughter. A kind-hearted girl. She loves me. I love her too. She is my friend. Sometimes she talks to me about boys and makeup. I've never talked about such things with anyone before. You don't come when I'm with her. That's why you don't know her. I told her about you. She wants to meet you. Maybe one day you should come with me. Maybe she will see you. Hear you. We won't know unless we try. I don't want to go to an orphanage and be separated from her. The other day, I tried to make pasta and spilled the pot over myself. The water hadn't boiled properly, so it didn't leave a mark, but it hurt. I didn't tell anyone. If they find out I can't take care of

myself, they might send me away. I cried a little. Then I picked up the spilled pasta.

Yunus hired a babysitter to look after me during the day, but like everyone else, she returned to her own children when night fell.

At the end of the day, I am always alone.

After killing my mother, my father was placed in a psychiatric hospital. Because he was a soldier and because of the weight of what he had witnessed, this was considered an appropriate sentence for him. My paternal grandmother had died long before I was born. My maternal grandmother died from grief the day my mother was killed. My mother's only sibling blames me for everything and does not even want to see my face. My father does not even have a sibling. I am aware of all of it. I am alone. Completely alone.

I am always with you.

I know, Gene. I love you, but I cannot even touch you. And sometimes, a person wants to be with people like herself—people everyone else can see.

Speaking of people... no one still knows about you. You are our little secret. When Yunus took me to a psychologist, I was terrified that he had found out about you. He was afraid that my mother's death might have created trauma in me. Our secret is safe. Yunus insisted that I stay with him, but I refused. Then he arranged for someone to stay with me day and night, but I am still afraid of that woman. That's why I didn't want her to stay with me at night. When she gets angry, she shouts a lot. Sometimes she hurts me. I am

afraid of what she might do while I am asleep. Still, Yunus thought this was just another one of my “rebellious phases.” He said that if I refused these arrangements, I would have to stay in an orphanage. But I am not without anyone, Gene. I refused. When they try to force me into things, I run away. The last time I ran, they couldn’t find me for two days. You remember. I was on the streets for an entire night and two days. It was a very cold evening. I will never forget it.

In the end, Yunus hired another babysitter who would stay with me during the day and return home late at night, coming back early in the morning. This woman is much more frightening than the previous one. She hits me very often. She hurts me and is careful to leave the marks where they cannot be seen. I have never told Yunus. He never even asked me why I didn’t want a babysitter. If he had asked, I would have told him.

Anyway, Gene... thank you for listening to me. I’m sorry if I’ve given you a headache. I love you. I hope you love me too.

I love you.

Only you, Gene.

Only you—and the love of Yunus’s little daughter—belong to me.

...

31.12.2007

Hello, Gene.

We celebrated my tenth birthday recently. You know that. I looked for you so much. I was so sure you would come. But you didn't. Why didn't you come, Gene?

You're not answering. Are you upset with me? Did I do something wrong? Please let's make peace. I don't want to lose you too.

We celebrated my birthday with Yunus's family. They bought me a doll as a gift. According to Yunus's daughter, the doll looks a lot like me. I would have shown it to you, but she liked it very much. She is my only friend. I gave it to her. Now it's her doll. But I can show you the one I have. In return, she gave me the doll I once said looked like her. Now we are always together. I love her. Truly. But I think you don't like her. Whenever I go to her, you disappear. I miss you. I want to spend all my time with her, but that means losing you. She keeps telling me I need treatment. She says that if I get treated, I won't see or hear things that don't exist anymore. It makes me think. Should I get better at the cost of losing you?

I am something that exists.

You finally came. You've grown taller. Look—your head is almost touching the ceiling. Please don't leave again.

...

03.01.2010

People hate me because of you. At school, no one plays with me. The other day there was a trip. A girl's mother pointed at me and told her to stay away. When the teacher made that girl sit next to me, her mother argued with the teacher. All because I see you when they can't. Because I hear what they don't.

I'm crying, Gene. But don't worry—I still love you. At school, Yunus's daughter is always by my side. Everyone loves her. But she always chooses me. I love her. She keeps telling me to get treatment.

I think I will start.

...

03.07.2010

Today makes it exactly six months. I have been in treatment for six months. Yes, just as I suspected—I have the illness called schizophrenia, the same one my father had. It's genetic.

I see you much less now, Gene. I miss you. You don't come like you used to. This is your first visit in two weeks. We used to be together almost all the time.

You should stop the treatment. Their goal isn't to heal you. It's to separate us.

I don't think so, Gene. If that were true, my friend wouldn't want me to get better.

I trust her.

She's deceiving you. Kill her.

Be quiet, Gene. I love her.

...

06.10.2011

When I fell hard onto my knees, I didn't even have the chance to get up before a sharp kick landed in my stomach.

As I cried out in pain, I tried to speak at the same time. "Please... don't." I was speaking to the large girl who was the leader of the group.

She stood in the corner, watching with pleasure while the others beat me. When she noticed me looking at her, she put on a fake expression of sadness and walked toward me. "Did that hurt?" I nodded quickly.

"I'm sorry. Please tell them to stop." Even as I tried to explain myself, she wasn't listening. "When you snitched on me, that hurt too. What were you thinking, telling the teacher that we were bullying you? I went home and got beaten. Someone had to pay for the beating I received." But it wasn't a lie.

That day, they had hurt me far worse than usual. I had run to the teacher in fear and asked her to protect me. Even when she asked what happened and learned everything, I had no idea she would go talk to that girl's family and cause her brother to beat her.

How could I have known?

She grabbed my always messy hair—messy because I had no mother to gather it with her hands—and forced me to stand. Then she slapped me so hard across the face that I fell back onto the concrete floor. As I tried to push myself up, I saw drops of blood falling from my nose onto the ground. I didn't know how many times the gym floor had been stained with my blood.

As I watched my tears fall onto the blood beneath me, I braced myself for another blow.

Instead, I heard a voice.

"Tostak, where are you?"

The joy that filled me at the sound of that voice only made me cry harder.

Tostak.

The new nickname my only friend had given me.

“Tostak—”

“Let’s go.”

After the leader delivered one last harsh kick to my stomach, making me groan in pain, they left the gym together. I couldn’t endure it anymore. I collapsed onto the floor and lay there quietly until my friend found me. It hurt. It hurt so much.

“Tostak!” Judging by the sudden panic in her voice, she had found me. She ran to my side and dropped to her knees.

I smiled, because I didn’t want her to be afraid for me. “I’m fine.” I could feel my right eye swelling shut. It wouldn’t open. Considering my split lip, my bleeding nose, and the rest of my battered face and body, I’m sure I wasn’t a pleasant sight. Still, that didn’t stop me from smiling for her. Anyone can become beautiful with a smile. But I’m not sure if that applies to people who already look frightening.

I saw her look toward the direction the group had gone, her expression filled with hatred. This was not the first time. She knew why.

They always hurt me. She always saved me. And dressed my wounds. Just like now. They were afraid of me.

With the tension of starting a new school—high school—Gene began visiting me more often. These visits were never good. They made people afraid of me. They turned me into a toy for bullies. Every step I took to escape bullying only made it worse. The worse it became, the more Gene visited. The more Gene visited, the worse the bullying became. And the result was this. Life had always been cruel to me. But being bullied because of something I was receiving treatment to escape from hurt me not only physically, but psychologically. I was the one being bullied. Yet my friend was loved by everyone. She was beautiful. Easy to get along with. Wealthy. Her father was a well-known soldier. She was good enough that both boys and girls gathered around her. And I— I was trash who was always beside her. Pathetic. Because she knew I felt uncomfortable when other people were around us, she never let anyone join us. Maybe that made the bullying worse. Maybe they thought I was stealing her from them. I told her many times that she could spend time with other people if she wanted to. Every time, she acted as if she hadn't heard me.

She took my hand and helped me stand, then dragged me up to the school rooftop. While I waited there, she quickly found a first-aid kit and returned.

"It was them again, wasn't it? They need to be taught a lesson." As she applied cream to my wounds, I tried to swallow my pain.

"Don't interfere. They don't have a problem with you." I don't want her to get hurt because of me.

"Anyone who has a problem with you has a problem with me." She looked into my eyes and smiled. "Did you forget? We're the same."

Yes. That's exactly the kind of relationship we had.

...

14.11.2012

Kill her. She doesn't love you anymore. She should die.

I'm watching her. With other people. Talking, laughing, having fun. Without me. Had my only friend found herself new friends?

The milk and cake slipped from my trembling hands and fell to the ground. I had gone to get them for her, and in my absence she immediately made new friends? Does she not love me anymore? Will we never be like we used to be?

I'm your only friend, idiot! Kill her. She's deceiving you. She'll separate us.

As Gene's voice echoed inside my skull, I saw her notice me. When she did, she said a few things to the others and walked over. She picked up what I had dropped. "Did you get these for me?" She sounded cheerful. Could she be cheerful without me?

“Yes.” When I answered quietly, she chirped, “Thank you,” slipped her arm through mine, and started walking. I could feel the hostile stares of a few people from the group she had just been talking to burning into my back as we left the classroom together.

...

03.01.2013

“Hi.” When I lifted my head, I saw a girl smiling at me. Her eyes, hair, clothes—jet black. Even the whites of her eyes were black. She looked emotionless even while smiling. And Gene was there. Right beside her. They were holding hands. Next to the girl’s darkness, Gene’s colorful body dazzled as always. He was at least twice her height and so thin his bones were visible. He had no face. His arms and fingers were disproportionately long. His back was grotesquely hunched. And yet, despite all of this, he resembled a human being more than the girl did. Even without a face, when Gene “smiled,” a hollow formed where his mouth should have been—and right now, that hollow was deeper than ever.

Did she leave you?

“No. Nothing like that happened.”

Even while speaking to Gene, I kept watching the girl from the corner of my eye. She had straight black hair with thick bangs, a pretty upturned nose, porcelain skin, and colorless full lips. She was beautiful—but so soulless and drained of color that she pushed people away.

Then why isn't she with you?

“She must have had something to do.” We always spent lunch breaks together, but today she hadn't come. I looked for her but couldn't find her. Since we had arrived at school together that morning, I knew she was here. When I couldn't find her, I came to the place we always came to—the school rooftop. It was technically forbidden. But who cared? I was sitting at the edge, staring into the distance, when Gene found me instead of her. That was strange. Gene usually didn't come when she was around.

Seeing that I wasn't responding, the girl in black sat beside me. Carelessly, she turned her face outward and let her legs dangle over the edge. Most people would be afraid to sit like that. She didn't look afraid at all.

“I can be your friend. Tostak?” The way she deliberately used that nickname to gauge my reaction made anger flare inside me.

“Don't ever call me that again.” I have never expressed my anger outwardly in any part of my life. Not at my father for taking my mother from me. Not at people for taking my father from me. Not at my aunt for blaming me. Not at the caregivers for hurting me. Not at the bullies for leaving marks on my body. Not even at my

mother for giving birth to me. I had been angry many times—at many things. But because I never let it leave my body, people thought I was emotionless. They hurt me, assuming I wouldn't feel pain. They abandoned me, assuming I wouldn't miss them. Maybe everything that happened was my fault. Maybe if I had shown my feelings, none of this would have happened.

"Forget her. I can be your friend."

"I love her."

"Does she love you?"

"Yes." No. Yes.

The way the girl turned her head to look at me over her shoulder was strange. "Look. She's happy with her new friends." I followed where she pointed and saw her. She had made new friends. While I waited for her on the rooftop, she was laughing in the courtyard with others. She thinks you're a freak.

Even if I wanted to argue with Gene, how could I be sure she didn't think the same when everyone else did?

"Be friends with us." The girl beside me grabbed my hand and pulled me up. I couldn't even feel her touch.

"No," I whispered, pointing at my laughing friend and the mixed group of boys and girls around her. "I want to be like them. I want to live without being bullied."

You can.

How?

"Make them afraid, Tostak. Make them fear you."

Do something big.

What? What should I do?

Take back what was stolen from you. From everyone. Forever.

...

Undefined

I ran my hands through my hair and kept slamming my head against my knees. My head hurt. Gene and the girl in black kept visiting me. Their voices echoed. It hurt. The voices hurt my head. There is a way to stop everything. Do what they want.

I barely spend time with my friend anymore. I don't let her come near me. The more time I spend with her, the stronger Gene and the girl's pressure becomes. The more the bullies beat me, the louder it grows. Do something big.

Take back what was stolen from you.

From everyone.

Forever.

Kill.

Everyone's precious one.

The only person you can kill.

Kill her.

I dug my nails into my scalp and let out a scream that tore my throat apart. I can't take it. I can't. The voices won't stop. I want to smash my head open. A gun. A knife. Even a stone would be enough. I need to silence them forever before they make me do what they want. I need to break my skull. They must die. Gene must die. The girl must die. I must die. If that doesn't happen, the one who deserves to live the most will die. My strength to endure is fading fast. Someone help me. Let someone understand everything and help me. I can't endure it.

I can't hold them back any longer.

"Tostak?" The moment I heard her voice, all my thoughts stopped. She came. She came for me. I opened my eyes and stood up when I saw her looking at me with concern. I smoothed my hair with my hands.

"You came." Even I could barely hear my trembling voice.

"Yes."

"You came for me."

"Of course I came for you. I wouldn't take this risk for anyone else."

I started laughing. Too much laughter. So much. I laughed so hard she began looking at me as if I'd gone insane. Sorry. I'm already insane, aren't I? "Are you okay? You're scaring me."

"You came for me. You love me!" I threw my arms around her neck tightly, but she didn't hug me back. She let me hold her for a moment, then gently pulled away. Her face looked strange. Afraid. Was she afraid of me? I love she... is she afraid of me?

"Are you sure you're okay? Should I call a teacher?" When she said that, I quickly stepped back and put on my usual expression. Emotionless. Unbothered.

I sat back down. After watching me for a few seconds, she began talking as she always did.

“Today in class, a boy fell asleep. When the teacher saw him—” She was telling a story, but the voices started echoing in my head again. This was new. When she was with me, the voices, the hallucinations, and Gene would usually disappear. But now— I hear voices. More than one. Voices that belong to no one and everyone at the same time. With her arrival, the thoughts had stopped—but now they were back. She’s afraid of you.

She finds you strange, like the others.

They stole her from you.

Time to take back what was stolen.

Time to kill.

Kill.

Everyone should fear you.

Kill her.

She must die.

“That was so funny. You should’ve seen it. I wish you were there.” She’s cheerful even when you’re miserable. She doesn’t deserve to live.

“Shut up!” When I shouted sharply, she looked at me, startled.

“Did something happen?”

“No. Sorry. I wasn’t talking to you. Go on. I’m listening.” As I tried to recover, she grew more suspicious and began pacing along the edge of the rooftop. She knew something was wrong. She was afraid of me—but she trusted me, too. That’s why she kept smiling and talking while walking back and forth along the very edge.

There are so many people down there.

This is the perfect time.

Kill her.

No one will ever mess with you again.

Push her.

Everything will be beautiful.

Push her.

I swallowed hard, trying to resist the voices—but every step she took toward the edge made it harder.

So easy

Push her.

You can do it.

Everything will be beautiful.

Push her.

No one will touch you again.

Time to take back what was stolen from you.

Forever.

Kill her!

A scream filled my ears and flooded my mind. No. No, no, no.

No!

This can't have happened.

I couldn't have done this.

I pushed her.

God damn it, I really did.

Even as she fell, she reached out her hand to me—to save her. While I sent her to her death and became her executioner, she reached toward her executioner for help. And that gesture was not unanswered. The murderer, momentarily stripped of the executioner within, grabbed her hand with everything he had left.

“Help!” Her body was dangling in empty air, but it felt like I was the one dying.

“Please help!” I held her hand with all my strength, but it wasn’t easy. I wasn’t strong enough to support someone who weighed almost as much as I did. Still, I had to hold on until someone came.

She gripped my hand with both of hers, trying to climb up, but she was so terrified that no coherent words came from her mouth. So I begged instead. I began hearing screams. All those people below—students, teachers, staff—everyone screaming. Some were running inside to get here. Some were running outside to see what was happening. They all had one thing in common. They were afraid of what was about to happen. But none of them—not all of them combined—were as afraid as I was. I had fallen under the control of the voices in my head. If I had realized I was sending her to her death, I would have stopped myself no matter what. Gene had deceived me. Gene wasn’t good. What happened to my father had happened to me. Our fates were the same. We both tried to kill the person we loved most. He never had a chance to save my mother. But I did. Right now, I was gripping the hands of the person I valued most in the world, trying desperately to

hold on until someone came. It wasn't easy to carry someone my own weight with one arm.

"Please don't let go, Tostak!" Tears streamed from her eyes, falling meters below.

"You'll be okay." My face—so much like hers—was contorted with pain. I'm scared. So scared. I don't want to lose her.

Her hand was slowly slipping from mine. When I realized that, I tried to grip tighter, but I couldn't. My arm felt like it would tear off. Almost twenty seconds had passed. No one was coming. I can't hold on. Someone come. I can't—

"I'm here!" When I heard the voice behind me, I could have cried with relief. It was a teacher. An adult. She was saved.

The male teacher rushed over, grabbed her wrist—but at that exact moment something happened. Something that should never have happened. Something that filled my voice with more pain than ever before and tore the greatest scream from my life out of me. She let go. She let go of my hands. Thinking the teacher had her, she stopped holding on. Everything happened so fast. The teacher hadn't fully secured his grip. When she released me, my hold wasn't enough against her weight. Our hands separated. The teacher failed. She fell. Her eyes locked with mine. Her hand reaching out, as if to hold her killer's hand one last time. She fell. People screamed. But no one tried to catch her. She hit the ground.

I screamed and tried to lunge after her—even to jump—but the teacher who couldn't save her grabbed me tightly. He should have let me go. She had died. My existence was tied to her breathing, and she had stopped breathing. I had no reason to live anymore. I had to go with her. I fought. So much. I cried. I begged him to let me go. But he didn't. That day, they didn't let me follow her. While she drowned in her own blood on the ground, I was forced to live. A regret and shame that would last years began. I nurtured a hatred toward that teacher that would never be exhausted, even at the end of my life. I cursed him for forcing me to live this life. For thinking I deserved to live it. I wanted to hit him over and over again.

There had never been a beautiful part in my life. Then she came. She became the only beauty in my ugly life. She spent so much time with me that I became attached. She filled the absence of a mother and father. And then the illness that ruined my life came back—and took her from me.

I hated my fate for writing such a life for me.

...

3. CONCLUSION; FAMILIAR GOODS AND HIDDEN EVILS

I have hated remembering the past for as long as I can remember. People couldn't see it, but remembering burned, destroyed, and ruined every shelter I had built. Of course, all of this happened inside me and ended easily. Easy, of course—but only for other people. I felt like a small child trying to build a shelter for myself because I had nowhere to take refuge—so powerless—and as those shelters collapsed, it became increasingly difficult to build new ones. I was getting tired. Sometimes I am so afraid that I will fall asleep without a home to protect me.

For example, even after years of treatment to cure my illness, I knew it had never really ended. It had hidden somewhere inside me, waiting excitedly for the day it would return. When I was little, I was rarely allowed to play with other children because of my father's job. They said we couldn't know who was an enemy and who was a friend. Maybe they were right, but it was the first and perhaps the greatest wrong they had done to me. The concept of friendship had always been far from me anyway; considering what I had done to my only friend, perhaps that was a good thing. For other people.

I had always longed for a friend, and at the time when that desire was at its peak, I met Gene. Or rather, he came with what schizophrenia offered me. That day he suddenly knocked on the door of my mind, and before I could respond at all, he entered. "Friendship" was a rare thing he promised me, something I was willing to fall for instantly. I was deceived very quickly. As my illness gradually took over me, all I did was retreat and give him more space. Still, it wasn't such a big problem until my mother died. Gene would come sometimes, play games with me, and then leave. What problem could there have been in that? My mother didn't mind because she thought he was just one of the imaginary friends children created. Perhaps if she had realized what was happening and sent me to treatment, she could have saved me easily from the illness that appeared in every part of my life and made me wish it didn't exist. But instead, she had died. She had left me. Along with her, my father had abandoned me. I was utterly alone. At that time, Gene started coming constantly. In fact, I realize now that whenever he left for a week, it never took more than an hour for him to return.

This was not the end. I thought it was until my only friend entered my life, but it wasn't. Gene started refusing

to meet me while I was near her. Since the moment I realized no one else could see her, I tried not to reveal her presence while around others, but I had told her about Gene. I had mentioned that she didn't come to her. Perhaps that was why she told me to get treatment. Or maybe she understood it another way—I don't know.

After all, I loved him, and I did what she asked of me.

But this made my illness fiercer, more aggressive. Gene wanted me to stop treatment. Repeatedly. I didn't care. It was the first time he started planting thoughts of murder in my mind. Those days, I was furious with him and remained angry for a long time. Perhaps that anger never ended. The seeds he planted took years to bloom, and they became the sole reason for everything that happened on that rooftop. When I pushed him off that roof, I was no longer myself. Gene had pushed the last part of me out of my body and completely taken over. I didn't remember standing up, approaching her, or pushing her. Everything for me was like a camera recording with a missing fragment. One second, I was sitting there, trying to silence the voices in my head; the next second, I suddenly hear a scream and find myself dangling from the roof, holding her hand. I was sure she would die when she fell from the four-story school roof that day. But she didn't.

God smiled upon me for the first time.

He used His mercy on me.

Much later, I learned she had survived. I had sunk into such a terrible state of guilt that they had to admit me to a hospital just to keep me alive. Whenever I came to my senses, I attacked people, screamed, and harmed myself. Even while spending my days in the hospital with sedatives, all I thought about was destruction. I wanted to burn the world. I wanted to ruin it. My pain was so immense that at times her parents forgot their own pain to comfort me. Yunus and his wife were always very kind to me, but if they had known I was the one

who pushed their daughter, would everything have changed? Would they have sent me to jail as a criminal? Or perhaps, like my father, locked me up in a hospital. Would I have ended up in the same place as him?

I didn't speak. They begged me to tell them what happened, but not a single word came from my mouth for months. It took about a week for me to learn he was alive. I remember. The moment she woke up, she wanted to see me first, but I hadn't gone to her. I was embarrassed. The day after he woke, they realized he couldn't walk. The loss of sensation in her legs wasn't because she had been immobile for too long. It was autumn. Perhaps pure chance, but I believe it was a favor from the Creator.

There were dozens, maybe hundreds, of trees in our school. Because of autumn, many leaves had fallen in the schoolyard. All these leaves had been gathered into huge containers. When I pushed her, she fell into one of these containers. Without this factor, which slightly slowed her fall, she probably would have died. Still, it didn't prevent her from sustaining damage. The places she hit caused her to lose control of her legs. Even now, she depends on a wheelchair because of me. I am sorry.

While I spent my days at home waiting for the police to arrest me, everything that happened was completely different from the thoughts that had consumed me. She hadn't betrayed me. Why? Why? Why?

Why?

She hadn't allowed the person who had injured her legs to be punished. Why? He protected the one who had pushed her ruthlessly. Why? She hadn't taken the pain out on the culprit. Why? She had made the killer a failed hero. Why?

That's what I was told. Despite all the risks, she had slipped while walking on the edge of the roof for childish excitement, and I risked myself to try to save her. I had learned this from the times Yunus and his wife and her younger siblings came to thank me. There was no evidence, no culprit. Everything was the result of a moment's carelessness. I had no face to show them. My body felt like it was writhing in an endless pool of shame. I rejected everything they did for me. I wanted treatment. I took a leave from school. Yunus had given up trying, but eventually, it worked. He left me alone. The last thing left from my father had abandoned me. Actually, that wasn't a problem. I didn't miss my father. I mean, I didn't anymore. Everything that reminded me of him could disappear. Of course, that was until this person reentered my life. He came, and now I was going to him with my father—for the first time in years. For the first time since they had killed my mother. Even though I didn't want to admit that I was curious about his condition, deep down I was very curious. It had been like this for years. Actually, seeing him had always been something I wanted. To be his little, sweet, intelligent daughter again was a strong desire I held tightly deep inside. The fact that it wasn't true when I no longer wanted my father was my own way of deceiving myself. It didn't last long. The reason I had stayed silent all this time was exactly that. I wasn't lying, not even to myself. If I couldn't convince myself of my own lies, how could I convince anyone else?

I missed her too. But I couldn't say it. I couldn't tell her when I couldn't even look at her face. I couldn't tell her that when I had taken her legs. I was her blood-sucking killer, and she was the little girl who wanted to give her blood to make her oblivious killer happy. Did she still love me? Back then, I hadn't understood why she protected me. Growing up, I realized for the first time that someone loved me without expecting anything in return. Too late. Too, too late.

“What are you thinking?”

While watching the outside through an open window in the back of a taxi, the sun shone as if trying to illuminate the darkness inside me. I wished it could, but there was no light strong enough to even turn that darkness to gray. On the other hand, even when I heard her voice, I couldn't look at her. I slightly lifted my road-dazed eyes and straightened my posture. “Everything.”

She smiled, and I lowered my hands, which I had joined, as if feeling her smile. "Everything, you say."

"I'm curious about something," I murmured, knowing I had no right to. But before I could ask what I was curious about, I lost my courage and fell silent.

She wanted to encourage me and gave a quick command, "Say it." I took a deep breath. I quickly looked back at the trees behind us. I didn't know my father had taken her this far from the city.

"Why didn't you say it?" Why didn't you say it was me who pushed you?

"You didn't say why?" She understood what I meant.

"I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

Afraid of going to prison?

Of being a criminal in people's eyes?

Of being admitted to a mental hospital?

No, none of those. What I feared was far from physical consequences. I think I was afraid they would prevent me from seeing her. On the other hand, I had also forbidden myself to see her, so I wasn't sure.

"Some questions remain unanswered," I said.

"Some questions remain unanswered," she said.

Like me, she didn't know the reason. She hadn't told because she couldn't. Things she didn't understand had blocked her. And they had blocked me too.

I took a deep breath, looked outside again, and tried to count the trees that were gradually decreasing.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

I missed one.

I missed one.

Seven.

Eight.

Never mind.

I got bored.

Even if I hadn't stopped counting, I would have had to when the car stopped.

"We're here." When I heard the voice of the driver, who looked like he was in his late thirties, I got out of the car. The driver got out as well and folded him into his wheelchair, which he had stored in the trunk, and then got back into the taxi. I held the wheelchair handles. Was she upset that she couldn't use the long height God had given her because of me?

The road was uneven, so I was pushing her, and the occasional click-click-click sounds that came along the way didn't bother her—or maybe they didn't bother me. I had no right to be disturbed.

"Have you ever come for him?" Her voice filled me with a strange peace, but with each step I took, the fear

grew stronger and more oppressive.

"No." She had come. She had visited my father. She knew the way by heart. After moving along with her guidance for a while, I asked with a glimmer of hope,

"Has he ever mentioned me?" Had my father remembered me? Did he feel my absence? Did he miss me? I missed him so much. I wanted him to be my father. I missed my strong father who, back then, would hold both my mother and me in his arms and run from one place to another like an airplane. By now, he must be in his seventies. I didn't think there was any trace left of that strength. Had his hair turned white? Had his body grown weak? Most importantly, was he still my father? A long silence followed, and she gave no answer. Every passing second broke my excitement a little more, entering my heart as a new pain, cutting off my breath, yet I didn't show it and swallowed it with a faint smile. Why I did this or who I was hiding my feelings from, I had no idea—but I did it anyway.

When we entered the huge hospital, first the yard, then the building on the left side of the main building, we reached the reception where a few doctors were talking among themselves. He had a brief conversation with them, and they directed us somewhere.

We went up to the third floor and reached the room just before the last one at the far end of the corridor. Even standing at the door, I could hardly believe I had come to see my father and that there was only a door between us. Would he love me? Maybe he wouldn't recognize me. Could I introduce myself to him? Did I have the courage for that? If I couldn't do it, would he do it for me? Would he introduce me to my father?

"If you want, I can go in first." When I heard her voice, I nodded almost imperceptibly. She noticed and opened the door, entering first. I couldn't see my father because there was a small corridor I had to pass

before reaching the wider space where his bed was. This corridor prevented me from seeing him—or him seeing me.

As her wheelchair slowly moved through the narrow corridor, I gathered my courage for the first time to look at her. Her short but styled hair couldn't hide the fact that she was a woman. She was delicate and beautiful, perfectly made to be a woman. Unlike me.

"Welcome, my daughter." A smile, and then a voice, rough and trembling. Hearing it made my heart leap into my throat, almost exploding from excitement. How foolish it was to take it personally. The daughter he addressed wasn't me. The one he called his daughter was standing just a few meters away, yet I had no problem with it. That daughter was me. We were the same. She was a daughter, and so was I.

"I've missed you so much." I was almost sure that the embrace filled my chest with more longing than ever before, almost to the point of pain. Seeing my father react normally encouraged me, increasing my hope that he would recognize me. While gulping repeatedly, the tips of my fingers tingled. As I pressed my nails into my palms, waiting to enter, my heart felt as if helium, not blood, was being pumped into it, soaring and causing the most exquisite pain I had ever felt.

"You don't come as often as you used to." The rough, pained voice seemed to hint at the fact that he was once a soldier, firm and precise. The owner of the voice was my father. He had changed, but not so much that I couldn't recognize him. He now appeared to belong to an older man.

"I apologize for that, but I brought someone worth waiting for."

My heart was pounding so fast I feared my father could hear it from this distance, and I struck my chest with my hand, wincing in pain. Silence.

As my nose tingled from excitement, I swallowed again and took my first step inside.

One step.

Another step.

And one more.

I didn't even know when I had held my breath.

The first thing I saw was the empty wheelchair beside his bed. But unlike my friend's, this one was simpler. Probably designed for someone to push him.

As I took another step, he gradually came into my field of vision.

He was smaller than I expected. Maybe because he was sitting or due to the small hump on his back. He had lost weight; the majestic presence he once had was gone. His hair had turned completely white, every strand neatly combed back as always. Not a single black strand remained. Unlike me, who had suffered messy hair since my mother and his separation, his hair was immaculate. His eyes looked somewhat empty—was this our genes, or were we just cursed? His beard, as before, shaved clean. His thick eyebrows remained, now white like his hair. He looked old, weak. I could barely recognize him as the strong man he had once been. His uniform rekindled my memories of long ago—the military uniform, though I never learned his exact rank. Soldier, commander, sergeant, lieutenant...

Hero.

My father didn't look like a hero now.

It was heartbreaking, but he had changed so much. He had put aside everything about my father. Perhaps childish, but I had imagined that he wouldn't age during all these years apart. I had foolishly thought he would rise with his majestic body, embrace me while the smell of mint from his black hair mixed with shaving lotion filled my senses. He examined me as I examined him.

His lively, sparkling eyes dimmed as quickly as his once-bright smile. About a minute of silence passed as we studied each other. I didn't know what to say, only hoping he would open his arms. I wanted him to say, just like he had once, "Welcome, my daughter." I didn't want him to hide his happiness from me.

The fact that he hid his feelings from me broke my heart. I realized I inherited that trait from him. People who knew my father always said I resembled him. At first, it felt ridiculous. My nose, hair, eyes, height, lips, even my canine teeth—all came from my mother. Later, I realized that besides my disease, I truly did resemble my

father. Personality, luck, misfortune—

And our eyes.

Seeing these lifeless-looking eyes, one might think they belonged to a dead person, yet they proved our kinship. I loved him, and I loved what came from him. Even if it was a disease that had ruined my life.

But loving them didn't mean I wanted to possess them. I loved Gene—ah, I had erased that word from my vocabulary long ago—but I wished I had never had it. I loved him for who he was, yet I preferred not to be him. His eyes were a gift, yet I longed more than anyone to look at the world as a happy person.

Feeling my lips tremble, I pressed them together, noticing that he had swallowed at the same time.

"You—" His rough but somehow still clear voice accompanied his arms lifting into the air. My breathing quickened, and my eyes started to burn. He remembered me. He wanted to embrace me.

God, my father hadn't forgotten me!

Despite the infinite happiness I felt, as I tried to bow my head to release years of emotions, I restrained myself. Trembling increased as I ran into my father's arms, tightly hugging his neck. My arms wrapped around him, trying to show I never wanted to lose him again. I gripped him so tightly it was almost as if I could split

him in two. I buried my head in his shoulder. I wanted to cry, yet no tears came. Not only that—they burned my eyes.

While inhaling his scent deeply, I noticed something—or rather, the absence of something. I couldn't feel the pressure on my back and arms that I expected. There was nothing. No one was embracing me. No sense of peace.

Why not?

I felt the hands I expected on my shoulders, then slightly higher. The hands tightened. The pressure increased. Breathing became difficult. My face was pulled away from his shoulder. He didn't do it himself. Grabbing me by the throat he was attached to, he pulled me away. The grip intensified. Oxygen couldn't enter my body properly. My vision blurred, but even that couldn't prevent me from seeing the fear and anger in my father's eyes. His thick eyebrows were furrowed; his eyes were filled with fear. His face tensed with rage and sorrow. His hands tightened around my throat. I would rather be born deaf or never have been born than hear the words he shouted.

Honestly, most of the time, I preferred never having been born rather than living.

But this didn't change the fact that the heaviest and most damaging sentence I had ever heard was my father shouting in anger, "Aren't you dead?" People often said bad things to me, excluded me, cursed me for supposedly scaring their children—but none of it was as devastating as the sentence my father uttered.

Did my father wish I were dead?

As I began making strange noises from not being able to breathe, a single tear fell from my right eye, followed immediately by one from my left. But that was it. The first two drops from my eyes were the ones I used to project my inner self outward, and I never showed my emotions to anyone. The tears that followed weren't like those first two; they didn't burn my eyes and only flowed due to lack of oxygen. I had no idea what expression was on my face, but given my state a moment ago, I was almost certain there was no sign of emotion—maybe just a slight indication that I was in pain. Normally, I could hold my breath for about a minute and a half, but when caught unexpectedly like this, the time shrinks drastically. For roughly a minute, my throat was being squeezed by my father, who wanted me dead, and for about thirty seconds of that, I trembled from the need for oxygen. I needed air.

"I should have killed you that day."

"Demon."

"Die."

"Die."

Did you think I was the only one wishing you dead?

When I heard the voice laughing loudly, I tried to cry out for help, but it barely became a meaningless groan. I tried to free myself from my father's hands without hurting him, but it seemed impossible. My father was a

former soldier and still incredibly strong. I was in pain. I had never considered that wanting to die could be this agonizing. I wanted a painless death—a death not coming from my father.

When I realized that the high-pitched, never-ending voice my father started making while strangling me belonged to my friend, my vision began to darken into spots. Screams and pleas for help. Within seconds, as I felt intense pain covering my entire back and head, I barely realized that we had fallen. My father, unable to use his legs, tried to catch me as he squeezed my throat and fell on top of me. I was about to pass out, unable to stay upright, and fell backward with him. The fall was hard, but I didn't feel any damage. I couldn't feel anything else because the lack of oxygen was so painful that it numbed all my limbs.

"You took my wife from me." My father shouted as if in a trance, lifting my neck and slamming me back to the floor. It hurt. I moaned in pain in response. I hadn't done anything, father.

Don't forget the demon inside your.

The voice whose name I did not want to mention spoke again. I had no idea why I gave a nonexistent voice a name.

"Hey, hey, hey, what are you doing?" I heard a voice—a deep, familiar voice I recognized as a soldier's. I tried to turn toward it, to understand who it was, but my consciousness wasn't clear enough to manage that. I was too unconscious to even respond to my father. Still, I felt someone lifting him off me. Who would have thought that on the day I met my father for the first time after secretly longing for it for years, I'd want to thank the person who separated him from me?

Shortly after my father pulled away, my consciousness completely shut down. My body couldn't handle the

oxygen-deprived lungs any longer, and I blacked out.

...

I don't want to think. I refuse to think. I curse that I'm not dead. I don't know if I'm some kind of experiment, but somehow, despite everything, I'm still alive. Of course, in the times my father wasn't in my life, there wasn't a threat to my life. There were no people trying to kill me. There were, of course, people who hurt or beat me, but none of them intended to kill. Hurting me was enough for them. Unlike them, my father wanted me dead. Completely gone. But it didn't matter. I was sure that the one who wanted to kill me wasn't him. How could a father want to kill his daughter? He must have been under the influence of his illness. I forgive him because I can understand him. I wouldn't want to, but unfortunately, I understood him best. Understanding my father trying to kill me and being unable to be angry at him was frustrating. Anyway. Thinking about all this made me uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. Since the only thing you get from thinking is pain, I could stop thinking forever and live like a five-year-old child—or even like a pet. I could be one of them. I don't know. Maybe I don't even want to know. I'm not sure. Lately, I didn't understand anything.

My stomach growls. I haven't eaten in a long time. Recently, because of the diet I started for my canceled wedding, I was already eating little, but that didn't stop me from being hungry. I'm hungry. I want to eat something. My mind is awake, but I can't wake my body. My paralysis, if it had happened, had caught up with me. I didn't want to be paralyzed. Dying would have been easier, but if I stayed paralyzed, I'd suffer. And if I became paralyzed, there would be no one to take care of me. Neither a bite to eat nor hygiene. Considering that I was already hungry, I wouldn't last long before starving to death. Maybe a week, maybe two. Two weeks full of pain. Sounds terrifying. I don't want it. I don't want to be paralyzed. But I can't open my eyes. My body doesn't move. Not even a tiny movement in my fingers.

"I don't understand why he did this." The voice I heard suddenly halted my thoughts. My brain felt as if time had stopped. A kind of paradox. The voice of the person who saved me from my father—this painfully heavy sentence—was a soldier's. Just like my father's. Rougher and older than I remembered, but still more vigorous than my father's.

"He recognized her. Isn't this some kind of progress?" My friend's voice—the one I called beautiful. I would never forget this voice.

"Not her, her illness. He remembered not his daughter but a demon. It would have been better if he didn't remember at all."

"But father, we're talking about years. So many years. Not a few, but far too many. So much time has passed, and both of them have changed a lot. Especially her—" I felt a hand in my hair. "She's grown. When her father last saw her, she was as small as a leg. He couldn't have recognized her only because of illness. This is something stronger. Maybe it's the bond between a father and his daughter. Not simple."

"I don't know. It feels like she was born just yesterday. I saw my dear friend nearly cry with happiness. That man, whose expression had never softened until that day, was made to bounce around like a child with his daughter's birth. Knowing that their relationship has reached this point breaks me." My friend's father. Yunus. Had he not forgotten me?

"Father, I'm upset. I'm very upset for her. Her life is so terrible that even the possibility of experiencing a tiny

bit of extra misfortune, like a grain of salt in the ocean, is terrifying. No one deserves this. Especially someone whose only fault is being born like her.”

They were silent for a while, and every second of that silence hurt me. I thought they were talking while everything was quiet. I witnessed every sentence they constructed about me and my father, and it hurt. Even their sorrow and their saying they were concerned for us hurt me. Their good intentions hurt me. Even saying that I didn't deserve it hurt me. I ached from someone pitying me.

About a minute later, I realized my eyes were open, and they had gone quiet. Yunus smiled broadly at me while I noticed my friend pressing the nurse call button beside me. In seconds, the nurse arrived. All three of them leaned over me, inspecting me as if I were some kind of alien. As I came to, I tried to create a faint smile on my face. It wasn't natural, but I wanted them to think they saw some emotion.

“What a beautiful day,” I said. I actually wanted my voice to sound eager, but it came out more like I was miserable. This thought bothered me too. Maybe I should have done nothing and waited for death until the end of my life. Death was one of the rare thoughts that wasn't disturbing.

“Even this weather?” When I heard the nurse's voice, I turned my eyes to the window in the room. The last time the sun had shone brightly, it wasn't around now. Even though I was sure it wasn't too late, the sky was overcast. When a sudden ray of light lit everything for a second, I liked it—but the loud voice that followed scared my friend.

“Yes.” Actually, the weather was gloomy, but I preferred that to a blazing sun when I was this low.

I was thinking about what to do or say. It felt strange. I had never had to think before acting or speaking. Actually, it wasn't like that, but I always seemed to know what to do. I wished I needed that now because all three of them were watching me as if waiting for me to act, and it made me uncomfortable. I wanted to vanish, to disappear, to turn into specks of dust instantly. I was so uncomfortable that if I had a single wish, I could use it right now to disappear. Without thinking. A single wish could completely change my life. Imagine that—it would really be easy. A wish. Only one. What would my wish be? I don't know. I'd have to think.

“About your father—” I looked into my friend's blue eyes, who had decided to take charge seeing me in distress. Big and timid. They must have inherited it from Yunus. Innocent eyes, so unaware that she was pushing me away from the edge.

But she didn't continue. When Yunus made a warning-like sharp sound from his throat, she stopped, and I didn't encourage her to continue because I didn't want to. I didn't want to think about my father in front of all of them. Maybe I'd cry.

I highly doubt it.

Still, what if I did?

I didn't want them to see.

We kept looking at each other for a while. The nurse didn't forget to check me. Fortunately, she said I could

be discharged today. Since I wanted to leave this place as soon as possible, I stood up immediately. My head spun, my vision blurred for a moment, but it passed quickly, and I managed not to fall. I didn't even have an extra minute to spend here. I didn't want to be near my father. I didn't want to remember him. This place was full of reminders of him. Yunus and the nurse tried to persuade me to stay a bit longer, but I didn't respond. I didn't stay. My friend said nothing. I wanted to think she understood. As I left the room and headed downstairs, all she did was follow quietly in her wheelchair. I don't know what happened, but Yunus and the nurse didn't follow.

I was going to take the elevator, but knowing she couldn't manage it, I opted for the stairs. Your fault.

My fault.

I left the hospital building, the hospital grounds, this neighborhood, even this city. I took a taxi because I was alone, but she followed me in her father's car. She had someone.

When I got home, I didn't close the door behind me because I knew she would try to come in. I went upstairs, to the terrace, and for the first time, I looked at the truly darkened sky. There were too many stars, but the moon was alone. Lonely, different, excluded, single—like me. It was alone too.

Just minutes later, she arrived on the terrace. She came beside me, almost silently on her wheelchair, and began watching the sky just like me.

"No, you're not like him." I slowly turned toward her as I heard her words. She, too, was watching the moon like I was. "You are not alone. I'm with you. Even when I'm not next to you, I'm still with you. I love you. You know that." The relief his few words gave my body was incredible. I didn't know if this was the highest level of

friendship, or if he had gone crazy like me, and ours was just the ordinary friendship of two mad people—but it felt amazing.

“Does he not love me?” We were alone, and I didn’t want to prolong it. He must have been surprised I went straight to the point because his eyebrows lifted in astonishment. If it were a normal day, and a normal friendship, I would have laughed, but if I laughed now, she might think I was crazy.

This shouldn’t be a problem for you.

I sat down in one of the two chairs I had placed to look outside while ignoring the sound. The chair where I spent most of my days. I felt something beneath me, got up, picked it up, and sat back down. Seeing what I pulled from under me made me smile. A doll. How could I have forgotten and sat on it? On my 10th birthday, this doll was the share that fell to me among those exchanged. It was her. I saw her looking at my hand too. “You hear it, right?” Her noticing everything this quickly scared me. Sometimes I wondered if she was a product of my imagination, but if she were, no one else could see her. Could they? Also, that day I pushed her... she wasn’t at all like a figment of imagination.

“I hear. From the very beginning.”

It was always there.

“Are you still keeping that doll?” Her voice sounded surprised.

“You?” I asked, because I didn’t even need to say I was keeping it. She could see.

“Of course.” That made me happy.

“Hello, Gene,” she whispered to me, but the one she addressed wasn’t me. Gene. Perhaps the only word that didn’t suit her beautiful voice. Perhaps the only word that didn’t become magnificent with her beautiful voice.

Gene didn’t show himself anyway, but when she first tried to talk to him, he had stopped even trying. Still, I knew he could hear her. I knew he was here, hadn’t gone anywhere. I could hear his breathing. No. Not hear, feel. I could feel his breath. I was alive. Every breath I took was a reason for him to live. One more reason to stop breathing.

“I’m sorry I haven’t spoken to you before.” I didn’t know if this would change anything for me, but I could tell from the teasing laugh that it changed a lot for Gene.

My friend talking to him—I didn’t know if it was good for me, but it felt incredibly good. It felt like they had broken all the walls that separated me from the people around me for the first time. Beautiful. The last days of someone spent in pain from illness, finally reaching death; a human reaching the pinnacle; or the first unique moment you finally grasp something you’ve longed for. Many examples could be given, but none seemed enough to convey what I felt. Maybe enough.

Maybe not.

“I know his body is your home.” As we spoke, the weight loaded onto my body—the weight I hadn’t realized I had gotten used to living with him—gradually lessened. Ten kilos? A hundred? At least a ton. Such immense relief.

“I know you won’t abandon him.” I knew this too, but hearing it from her felt different. Still, it was the first time someone was talking to Gene. Someone other than me talking to my Gene was... much. Just so much. I didn’t even know what to say. I felt everything good, intensely.

“No matter what I say, you won’t pull away by your own will.”

I knew Gene was paying attention, somehow listening. I’m telling you, Gene is inside me. I feel him, understand, know, love him, and I don’t want it. I don’t want it with all my heart, truly.

“But I swear, one day he will pull you out from within, and until that day, I will stay by his side. Even if it lasts forever.”

“That won’t happen. You can’t separate me from what’s mine.”

I became Gene’s voice and repeated what he said so my friend could hear it too. Gene was so strange that sometimes I think my father was right. He seemed too strange to be just a disease. Was it because he was a demon? According to my father, definitely a demon.

On the other hand, I realized my friend knew it wasn't me who pushed him. I guess the fact that he neither demanded answers from me nor told anyone the truth, and was still by my side, was why.

"You're by my side." Gene left. Only I, her, and my voice remained—too loud to be a whisper, too hushed to be normal.

"I'm by your side."

"Always?"

"Always."

Thinking about it, if I had one wish, I think I would wish for schizophrenia to disappear completely. I'd want to be friends with her again and live a normal life this time. But it didn't matter. Somehow, as long as I was with her, nothing else mattered. Even my father not loving me didn't matter at this moment. After all these years, his absence didn't hurt as much as before. At least I was happy. I was happy as long as I was with her. As always. And I would do anything to spend the rest of my life with her.

"The door." I realized she had been talking to me until I heard my friend raise her voice. I had been lost in thought. Another trait of mine I didn't like—sometimes when I drifted off, I didn't hear people.

Her voice brought me back, and I heard the pleasant melody from below. The song that played at the restaurant when my father proposed to my mother. It had to be that. That's how I remembered. The doorbell of our home. Always like this. My father did it. Long before I was born. The door rang, and this alone was enough to make me dive into memories.

"Sorry," I murmured to her. "I'm leaving." When I stood up, I saw her moving with her wheelchair. My home had an elevator, but it had nothing to do with my father's love for my mother or me. I had installed that elevator. A small thing I had done during the years I spent waiting for my friend to visit my home, very useful for her. If her home didn't have an elevator, I could gift her mine. If I spent enough time there to remember my parents, that would be enough.

By the time I thought about it, I was already at the door. I didn't even bother to ask who was behind it. With him beside me, nothing could scare me. I imagined seeing someone with a knife behind the door. That had happened in a movie I had seen once. The woman was happiest, the door rang, and she opened it without thinking. She shouldn't have. She would get stabbed, die on her happiest day, in front of her children. Though older than that girl, I had no children yet. Would my friend hug me while I bled out my last breath? On the other hand, it could have been my father. He could have decided to finish what he left unfinished and come all the way here. He could have had a weapon or knife in hand. Even without all that, he could have killed me. He was my father. I couldn't resist him. I wouldn't want to hurt him by accident.

Yet none of what I expected happened. Among the billions of people I imagined behind the door, the one I didn't expect appeared. My fiancé.

Or rather, my ex-fiancé now.

For a moment, I want to smile and hug him, but stopping myself isn't difficult. I didn't need him anymore. I had received the love I needed. Why did he come? He made me feel bad. Nauseous. My stomach churned. Could I be pregnant?

I was being ridiculous.

I haven't even kissed him yet.

Still, my stomach churned. Was it because of him, or the woman grinning behind him? Blonde hair wrapped around red-polished fingers, chewing gum with a sound. So irritating I could strangle her. Right now, I want to kill her. There's no reason for her to live, so why is she alive?

Seeing that I was looking at the woman behind him, my ex turned to her too, but immediately faced forward again. His brows were furrowed. He seemed to be trying to understand something. Still, he forced a smile. Or thought he was smiling, because he looked more scared than happy. He had every right to be afraid, coming into my home barely a day after I chased him away, because I could beat him at any moment. I could be a pathetic loser, but not stupid. I would never give a second chance to a man who cheated. There is no excuse for cheating.

"My love?" He says as if asking. He seems to want to know whether what happened yesterday was a temporary crisis or something more permanent. Bringing his mistress with him is quite telling.

"I don't know what happened yesterday, but I thought you might want to talk."

I don't speak because there are more important things. I'm angry. I feel like I might go mad. Every sound the woman makes with her gum echoes in my brain. My hands itch to wrap around her throat. "Stop that," I say through clenched teeth. I feel like my brain might explode any second.

"Stop what?" My ex asks, confused, but I don't even hear him.

"STOP THAT!" I shout with all my might. This time it works. The woman stops chewing gum, giving me a look that makes me feel like an idiot. I relax, but I'm still angry. This shameless man—why is he at my door again?

Turning to him with rage: "What do you want?"

He steps back, suspicious, but stays in place. He recreates the smile on his face that I've never seen disappear, looking at both the flower in his hand and me. I hear his voice:

"I missed you. I don't understand the problem, but please forgive me. I love you, I love you so much. More than anything. Will you forgive me?" Watching his tense body, as if he was about to hug me at any moment, every word he said made me even angrier.

All these lies make me angrier.

Angrily, I grab the flowers. White roses. My favorite. The flowers he said were my favorite. Now I didn't like them.

“How dare you bring that woman to my door too? I thought you loved me, disgusting man! If it was money you wanted, I would have given you as much as you wanted. You didn’t need to deceive me!” I throw the flowers in his face and point to the woman whose laughter I hear behind him.

“Now take that woman and get out of my house. Forever!”

I slam the door in his face. I spend a few seconds making fists to stop my trembling. Once my breathing evens out, I slowly turn around. I should return to my friend.

She must be bored.

I left her alone.

What an idiot I am.

She was alone.

She wasn’t. She was right behind me, eyebrows furrowed, giving me a look whose meaning I didn’t understand.

I take a step toward her.

She doesn’t move.

She studies my face.

Takes a deep breath.

Her eyes narrow.

“What woman are you talking about?”

I hear Gene’s laughter.

THE END.