

O V E R D U E

Dinners were godawful. Every dinner, every day without fail: God. Awful. Elaine glanced at her mother, Cath, from across the table, eyeing the way the woman elegantly slid a chunk of fish meat off of her glistening fork with the backs of her teeth. She wanted to punch them in. If only God would look away for just a second, she would've bashed them in until each pearly white dripped red. But unfortunately, the Lord always watched. The crucifix that hung behind Cath's head reminded her of the fact.

“Elaine, honey, the maid says you woke up at 1pm today,” she said. The word ‘honey’ made Elaine stiffen in her seat. ‘Honey’ meant ‘useless’. ‘Honey’ meant ‘lazy-ass’. ‘Honey’ meant ‘you sad sack of shit’. Elaine stared down at her plate as she replied, “I stayed up late last night, sorry.” Without even looking at her—as if it was almost too painful to do so—Cath pressed for what kept her up. Her daughter took the semester off. She didn't have any work from internships to do because—oh, that's right—she didn't *have* any internships. What could have possibly been so important at 3am in the morning? The only result from terrible sleeping habits were eyebags and, honestly, she should not be letting herself get any uglier.

“Right, dear?” Cath gracefully looked over at her husband for a reply.

Elaine’s father mindlessly hummed in agreement. Elaine quietly seethed in her seat. It was torture, sitting there tight-lipped and spineless. The hollowed-out bag of her skin was filling up with a dark liquid, rushing in from the bottoms of her feet. She was suffocating. Why was it never this hard when she was eighteen? To be honest, she couldn’t remember it ever being this unbearable before.

Elaine had forgotten that before university, she had a power. A secret, almost magical power. One day, at around seven or eight-years-old, she had learned how to hide. Whenever her mother started in on her, Elaine would hide somewhere inside her body and watch her mother from afar. The eye sockets became windows and Elaine would peek through them from time to time to check if her mother was still there. Cath was so tiny and distorted through the glass and her voice seemed so soft – it wasn’t strong enough to reach Elaine from so far away. However, the best part—the magic of it all—was the fact that her mother could never tell that she was gone. That she wasn’t even there. Somehow, Elaine’s body did as it was told, replied as it should, and kept quiet when needed without any help from Elaine. As if it were automated exactly for that kind of thing.

This power came in handy for the rest of her childhood. Elaine accidentally broke a vase? Her body took the beating. Elaine struggled with her times tables? Her body cried as Cath screeched them at her. Elaine couldn’t measure up to her cousins? Her body absorbed the lecture with ease while Elaine waited it out somewhere inside. It was dark in there, but she felt no fear. She felt the most comfortable in that darkness. The only memories of things being really hard were the odd times in which her power didn’t kick in fast enough. Once in the sixth grade, she had accidentally knocked over her science project all over the new living room rug. Bleach, vinegar, coke, and lime juice spread like wildfire and for a moment,

She was free. She realized that she was a singular individual instead of a girl with a parasitic second head growing out of her back. So after three years of that, it was only natural that Elaine wasn't elated about going back home when the pandemic began. Once one acquired the taste of freedom, anything other than freedom would upset the stomach. Elaine's felt as though it would throw up a meal she had a decade ago. Or that it would simply vacate her body altogether. Worse still was this: Elaine's immunity had completely worn off.

She gripped her knife and fork harder. "I was writing."

A scoff. Then—

"Writing! I thought you've given that up by now."

"But Elaine's good at it, Mom," Jason, Elaine's eight-year-old brother, pipped up from beside her. She had forgotten that he had been sitting there the entire time.

"What do *you* know." Back when Elaine was eighteen, Jason was only five. He was quiet. Reserved. The boy only made noise when he was expected or asked to. Him having a dick already made him the favourite – those other qualities made him *the darling*. Elaine hated him. He was second to Cath on her list.

"Don't take that tone with your brother," Cath told her. Elaine bit down hard on her tongue. Now that Jason was eight, he spoke more and Elaine loathed the sound. She thanked the stars that she worked better late at night since that meant she was awake while he was sleeping and vice versa. She only had to bare his noise mostly at those damned dinners. The only thing that grated at her ears more though, were the coos Cath made at him as if he were a rare, beautiful baby bird that had been gifted to her by the gods.

"You left a lot of your notebooks," Jason said. His voice was meek. Afraid. To him it seemed that Elaine could erupt at the slightest of his movements. That no matter what he said or did, even if he were on her side, Elaine would find his

weakest angle and gut him alive. He thought he was coming to his sister's rescue only to find himself at the end of her blade.

“You. *Read* them?” The dark liquid rushed in from beneath her faster now, up her legs and into her chest. Her eyes pierced through the top of Jason's small head and he felt his hair beginning to burn. She kept her glare as her mother laughed, going on about how Elaine had about a million notebooks lying around – of course Jason found his way through some. Something inside Elaine snapped.

“Are you shitting me?” She was *violated*. Her notebooks were hers and hers alone. Her ink—her words—belonged to no one else. They were not *for* anyone else unless she decided otherwise. That was the only thing she ever had. The only thing that granted her escape, safety, and sanity. Something that shielded her away from her apathetic father, spoiled brother, and horrific mother. When she wrote, she was herself: a form so pure that if any were to see it, it would be sullied. Ruined. Tainted. Her brother got his dirty little hands all over her soul and she was ready to kill.

“*Excuse me?*” Cath felt a stirring in her chest. A newfound thing she had never felt before. It squeezed against her lungs as her perfect mouth hung agape at her daughter in disbelief. Jason pressed his lips together until they were pale. Originally, he thought that reading his sister's notebooks would provide him the answer to why she hated him. He hoped that within the lines he'd find out what exactly was wrong with him. But when he was met with tales of fantastical worlds instead, he couldn't stop himself. He fell into each one, fascinated. He thought Elaine would be happy to know that she was his #1 author. He thought he could tell her later that the little stories she wrote—especially the ones about the aliens—were his favourite and that he devoured them. He never thought it would make Elaine...

Like this.

“Mom, those are private. Even an idiot would know not to touch those!” Elaine’s voice was rising, being pushed by the dark liquid that now threatened to spill from her throat. Her father warned her to quiet down, but Cath interjected by saying it wasn’t Jason’s fault; Elaine didn’t explicitly write KEEP OUT or DO NOT READ OR I’LL MURDER YOU on all the covers.

“Oh my God, you fucking *bitch!*” Elaine stood, knocking her chair back as the black began to surge from her mouth.

“You *always* take his side! No matter how stupid and insane you sound, you fight for him until you look like an idiot. You *worship* him and he’s only a *fucking* child who does jack *shit!*” The vile gushed onto the table, seeping into the white cloth like spilled wine. Cath slowly got onto her feet, her stare sharpening as she enunciated every vowel in Elaine’s full Chinese name. That way the vowels meant, “*I’m warning you.*”

“It’s like nothing I ever do is good enough for you! What do you fucking want from me? Why am I *always* the goddamn—”

Cath smashed her plate onto the edge of the table. The porcelain scattered all across the floor. Blood pulsed from a gash on her finger, but she did not notice. Everything was on fire in her. She couldn’t see past the smoke that collected behind her eyes. A blaring silence rang through the house, the way it used to back when Elaine was a child. The kind of blaring silence that forced Elaine to hide and forced her body to endure whatever hell awaited her. But instead of hiding, Elaine held her mother’s threatening glare, hardened.

Taking her own plate, she threw it as hard as she could onto the floor. It shattered. Shards flew. Jason sat in fear while his father was frozen in his chair. Cath blinked at her daughter, momentarily shaken out of her fiery haze. Momentarily

shaken out of the person she had become. Suddenly, she was twenty-five again, staring at the little girl she had for a first child. She couldn't recognize her at all.

“I. *Hate*. You,” Elaine spat, the statement long overdue. Tears were running down her face, but these tears were different. They weren't the same tears she had cried back then. Without a care for shards, she walked away barefoot from the table and into her room to cry until she couldn't anymore.