

No Way Out

(the recurrence of the end)

"hmm..what?" *WHAT? what, please NO, fuck, what, jesus...FUCK.* A dizzying mix of shock and resentment and she couldn't formulate a more articulate response, even in her head. *This woman's teeth*, just like overly large and unnecessarily white, were just chomping through the words that would alter the trajectory of her life. They were not complementary to everything else –instead they usurped what might have been an otherwise pleasant face that they just intruded on everything that held any semblance of harmony so in the end she just could not stand this whole FUCKING face. The whole thing; it was all just *FUCKED bucked teeth* anyway.

What did she actually say though? Did that BITCH with the obnoxious little squirrel of a child just say *that*? Her effort was no help; her actual vocal box dry, she muttered out a pathetic, "excuse me?" to try to look offended and at least stall out the moment to regain her composure.

Jackie never actually swore out loud, but her inner voice could be pretty nasty. Before, it had been her own little cloying secret; lately though, it meant it she could feel the word FUCK fall anvil impressing into her brain.

"You heard what I said...I *said* that I *heard* that your husband had an *affair* with his UNDERAGE student. Chelsea we're going right now."

Time stood still as she grabbed the squirrel's hand and rushed off.

SHE HAD NO RESPONSE. Her throat tightened and she wanted to defend or explain or mostly just scream. or.

her stomach outputted some terrible acid... and the dread of her consciousness began to fill in.

she just could not respond now. it was over—it happened over two years ago, she reminded herself again. the buck-toothed bitch wasn't there. not anymore. the moment had passed a long while ago and she heavily got out of bed to start her morning.

(life now)

she sat in the car at the front of the department store unable, really, to get out immediately or with any enthusiasm.

she just took a minute to rest her eyes on the shitty door and the shitty architecture that was designed to look like some fake italian villa. not a real one, a fake one and she knew it. she was keenly aware of the fakeness of the villa. she had actually been to italy. it was her honeymoon. it was a shitty cruel world that she spent the majority of her time in a fake italian villa.

today was one of those days she couldn't get out of the car. not fast, not pleasantly. not even contentedly or disgruntledly. just couldn't move. just stared at the stupid fake plaster and the stupid rod iron decorations and the 40s casanova music that poured through the speakers shaped unconvincingly like little grey rocks in the uncreatively designed entrance. designed to invite; she couldn't approach. she really didn't want to put on the coat provided by the corporate office—the one that made her look like a doctor—a doctor of *perfume*, a *fucking PERFUME doctor?*-- but she was not a doctor. she didn't even have a college degree at all. it had never bothered her until she had to wear this stupid fucking jacket with the same black tights and same knee length skirt and same shoes that she had to stand in for 50 fucking hours a week.

she couldn't enter that space just yet. she didn't feel "part of the team" just. yet. she didn't have it in her yet able to up-sell the next person who approached her with a daytime fragrance in addition to the night one and to open a line of credit with a 29% interest rate to pay for both bottles. she would get a gold star for opening a new credit card (which mattered to them most of all), but she couldn't describe chemical top notes of orange zest and bergamont or whatever that she really didn't smell, supported by maybe dirtier bottom notes like musk or sandalwood none of which would satiate desire whatsoever. most of all she resented the star of the show—the middle notes—sometimes jasmine, perfect and white and delicate like it's never to be disturbed, or maybe rose, the classic aromatic that suffocates those with any slight allergy. these middle notes, always opportunistic, claim to be well-rounded, but she knew the truth. that in order to be worn, these scents were so heavily manufactured as to not be themselves at all. there was no resemblance to the (admittedly heavily landscaped) jasmine bush outside her apartment that she became aware of each spring bloom—a hearty fragrance not to be ignored. nothing in these colored liquids that she pandered to every precious, bejeweled fingers would make these patrons feel more alive. if they were buying it in a bottle, they were already dead.

there was some small power of protest watching the entrance to *johnston's* from her car. this portal to a static existence, stealing 5 minutes of paid time judging the steady stream of couples or moms with small children waltzing into the doors. *these people. just meaningless, fucking lives. just stupid, fucking people thinking that their next event is some unique fucking deal for which they need some matching scent. she couldn't think of something that mattered less. day after day she helped the suckers motherfuckers by pretending perfume for some thing that was not so to her. so not the "joy of johnston's."*

(the reveal—two years prior)

It had been a nice morning. She had gotten up around her usual 4:30am, still dark and fresh outside, she enjoyed a cup of coffee whilst browsing her social media and answering the comments that the 70 plus students and their parents left on her posts. When the sun peaked over the distant mountains, she put on her gear (boots, riding pants, gloves and helmet) and braved the cold to say good morning to her everything. The air was so cold that both her and her horses visible breath mingled as she nuzzled each horse's nose. She owned six horses total, with one half giant Irish spring horse named Zeus who's shoulder height towered over her 5'3" frame. The other five horses were for students—docile and sweet, even the most incompetent child could maneuver them around the small dirt area that she had built in her backyard. After feeding, shoveling, and cleaning each stall, she saved Zeus for last. As she worked on his stall, he would periodically come up to her and rest his giant head on her shoulder. He was her ultimate dream, something that went back to childhood fantasies, and she decided they needed a trail ride together this morning. She led him to the tack room, quickly geared him up with his saddle and reins. Gave him an extra long brush with a flat-handed soft rubber groomer, massaging in circles until his coat was soft and in good shape. Then, like a gymnast who had practiced her routine endlessly, she effortlessly threw her leg over him and off they went.

They had to walk through a few residential areas to get to the trails, and it was calming to see lights turning on in some of the houses as the residents awoke. But the early morning air still had a bit of fog in it and it gave her a chill she was unable to shake. Still, the animals persistently brought her comfort—especially Zeus. He was so strong and stable, vitally reliable; he knew the path and her patterns of riding, his footing was so on point, that she almost didn't have to prompt him by squeezing her thighs or pulling on the reins: they were an automatic pair. Once they hit the trail, Zeus picked up speed, trotting, anticipating the long flat stretch ahead where Jackie would run him to his limit. There was no other feeling a galloping animal underneath you of that size. This morning, she needed to get rid of that chill, so she rode him harder and faster than ever before. Her hips moved in rhythm with his gait until her body could steady itself with the pace. She felt she was only able to tap into a small part of his potential, and wished somehow she could push him until his hooves didn't touch the ground.

They arrived home sweaty and hot, despite the cold and the time it took to unsaddle Zeus. The face she met was familiar but frantic, not friendly.

"It was a mistake!! A mistake, I promise, I didn't know this would happen...I swear to god Jackie, she ONLY sent me TWO pictures. TWO, that's it..."

She just stared at him. His face she had known for ten years, but somehow at this moment it became less knowable. It was contorted in ways she hadn't seen....her adrenaline from the ride and the information was more unsettling than she could process. "Who? What?"

"Kaytie!"

"Jim, slow down and tell me what you're talking about. Who is Kaytie?"

"She's that girl from my class. Remember I told you she's always looking at me with, with those eyes kinda..." His voice trailed off when he really didn't want you to hear what he was saying.

"And?"

"She sent me a couple of pictures. That's it. One of them she was topless. That's it! I swear! I told her to knock it off. I guess she told her dad and he called me."

"What the.... JIM." She looked at him with eyes that asked him to stop this a million steps ago. "You're a high school teacher. A pillar..." she couldn't even get it out. too cliché, so naive.

He just took his stance as the idiot on the sidelines, which would remain for the rest of the conversation. She assumed this meant he told her everything. (but he didn't and that would later be the crux of the whole problem.)

"what about my teaching, the shows..." her voice trailed off with hints of horror taking the lead in what was still unable to be articulated. The *fallout*. Her clothes suddenly felt tight, as though her body became aware of them touching her sweaty skin. Everything wasn't normal. Her brain kept wanting to play out these stupid FUCKING interactions he was accused of, but she stopped. She actually didn't care that much. What he did—it was already there in her head and what did it matter to entertain it.

But the business. She looked outside at all she had done. The six stalls, 1.67 acres, memories created and beloved in each square foot. The time, the maintenance, the planning, the investment—the *students*. ("but she was *your student*," she choked out to his obviously pretend sad face).

She suddenly remembered the day in the backyard when she signed the papers for her property at the previous owner's sun-worn picnic bench. Her dream, almost a decade in the making, came true that day. She left the bench there and sat on it often. No matter what drama with students or parents, no matter what disaster with the horses on show day, even the time she lost almost \$20K to an insurance issue where

part of the yard had to be restructured—through ALL of it, that bench brought her solace. She couldn't even look at it right now sitting outside the window, white-washed wood, splintering at the edges, mocking its own form.

"I need a moment." She left him and went upstairs to her bedroom. It was one of the only times in her life that she could remember having such a visceral reaction to hearing words. It was like acid reflux, but something different. Not acid, but a more ancient, deep rooted pain. like to fix it you'd have to lift the top off of an overcooked casserole, look straight in and bear the heat of the steam as you try to figure out whether it needs more time to get the cheese just crusty enough.

(the reflection)

Upstairs, she shut herself in the tiny bathroom. She would have looked in the mirror, but even that was almost too much documentation. Isolated and sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, she reached behind under her shirt and unclasped her bra. Immediately they fell, heavy and relieved. Pulling the straps out from the sleeves, loose fabric rested softly on her bare skin.

She could feel her ribs open and breathe a few, then she slouched, as hard and as deep as she could, and they rested on her stomach. She breathed in the disappointment of it for a minute and heard him say it again in her mind. The problem was that she couldn't navigate it. She had sacrificed them to have their girl and there wasn't a way to get them back again. Not naturally.

She bent her eyes at her hard nipples poked through her t-shirt, odd directions. They did that since after nursing. Ever since she pushed hard on each one, into the pump, manipulating, tenderizing any firmness to squeeze out the last drops, for fifteen minutes a time. Her general impatience probably made them sag an extra inch, she thought. Even though they were covered at the moment, their image was in her mind's eye. They were longer than she wanted them to be, the nipples too blotchy, too large, the skin too papery. They were soft, but not supple. In fact, they didn't have many good angles, and even sometimes when she laid back, they collapsed in on themselves.

She wanted the feeling of them again on her chest, their impressiveness, her ability to control how intrusive they were with a single pull upward of her ribcage. Now, there they rested, pleading to not be asked to impress. Seemingly flattening more and more each second, against the ribs that used to prop them up. almost trying to hide in the spaces between them, the protruding nipples looking every direction, paranoid eyes asking for not a second longer of attention. (she wondered if the picture... but tried not to think about it.)

She knew other people said things like, they are a reflection of your journey (with like a sunset/sand picture background and in over zealously cursive font), but it didn't help. she was tired of being ok with it. there wasn't all that much to get from that.

She went to light a candle, but the wick was too small. Its flame barely holding on, more recognizable as a reflection on the side of the glass. She left it and lowered herself into the bathtub. Grabbed her knees, naked in the dark, she wished the boundaries of her entire self would just recede and she could exist less. Opening her eyes in the dark, the barely lit candle danced around as it tried to desperately hold onto its life. A deep sigh, and twenty minutes later, she was dressed and in bed, ready to let go of this day.

(the mistake)

Habitually, the next morning, she found herself in her office chair. It was comfortable and conveniently placed in the kitchen with her calendar next to it on the wall. She spent so many hours molded to this chair, scheming about to maintain what her creation. Carefully cultivating her persona with every post on her socials, every vigilantly thought-out emoji placement for every event, every show, even the regular PR stuff that she had recently prided herself in. She had learned how to use the portrait setting of her new phone and her page was now filled with glossy pictures, ten-year-olds with braided hair in riding clothes, trotting around the arena like some array of American Girl dolls. Some of them were older girls, caught mid-jump, the horses skill on display more than the girls'. Her favorite picture, the one that stood out the most, was the one placed right next to the coffee pot in the kitchen so she saw it every morning. She was in the center of the picture, surrounded by a team of girls at the end of the best show she ever put on. She left it there to remember the show but to also know it was the standard she had set and needed to strive for; now she wondered if it would never be beat.

It was all part of it. *Of Maytown Bridal: Lessons and Trailriding*. She looked at the calendar—three weeks to the show and suddenly there was a deep well of anxiety, an abyss she had never prepared for, never saw coming. 70 students, 6 horses, 5 teachers, \$36K of income they needed. It was everything she cared about, but now she was suddenly a fraud...she jumped up and looked at him.

"Listen, we don't tell anyone. Not a single person. If her dad is upset, we'll pay him off. She was almost 18 right?... it is ok. I think it was fu. CK. in. G. stupid of you—she paused at the power and thickness of those constants as they resonated in her throat, the ability to articulate them with effect and glared into his eyes with the venom that any wife can produce on a dime.

She looked around her house. At the ribbons, so many blue and red, some dusty first and second prizes, pictures framed and motionless across every wall. Her eyes landed on one of their own daughter, plait in place, smiling face against the long white striped nose of her quarter-thorough-bred cross Julie that was the most docile creature ever met. *When was that? Ten years ago?* A pang in her stomach at the thought of her daughter, now older than this student that her husband...

"everything i've created will be done...my whole life..." her voice choked helpless at the thought. she would've felt angry at him, but he just seemed to stand there so fucking stupidly. stupid fuck.

Then her dignity settled in with intention: "We just simply pay them off. We sign an NDA or something. It is the only way. What did her father say *exactly*?"

"um he was just like if you offered something for damages, we'll let it go. you can never contact my daughter again type of stuff. since she only sent pictures to me, not the other way around, so he was like i know she can **be like that** and ya know..ha ha."

she shook her head at him, "what the FUCK is wrong with you?" this time it just slid right out

"I just felt like I don't know maybe we could figure it out for a second." His sheepishness both made her irritated and pitiful.

"Look, Jim, it's not like that. My whole life. The business I built. What do you think will happen? Do you think I can run a business with this kind of gossip? You didn't think, you NEVER think..... It's ok, i don't know, do you think he will stay quiet? let you keep teaching at La Renta? It wasn't dangerous what you did. I mean *she* sent the pictures to *you*! That's all that happened, right? Please now is the time to tell me."

"Yes, swear to god." eyes open, unblinking so as to seem earnest.

"And what did you say back to her?"

"I said something like, you look very pretty or good or something but please don't send me pictures like that."

"'Pretty or good or something?' Jesus Christ. And that's why she sent you the second one."

"Yes. But then I was stern and said not again and she kind of laughed but didn't send any more."

"ok. well. i don't fucking know, jim. jesus christ it was a stupid move and you handled it like SHIT. let's just hope it doesn't get out."

(soon after: the breaking of the gates)

"Chelsea, RIGHT now." She grabbed her daughter's arm.

"Wait....Wait Nancy...WAIT please...what um *please* tell me what you are talking about." (sincere ignorance never served anyone in this scenario but it's always the default).

"You know what I'm talking about, Jackie. You know I always thought that Jim was weird. The way he looked at Chels." A look at her daughter with sympathy as though she was being raped this very moment, but all that really happened was that the teeth just seemed to clump further together in indignance with each dumbass conclusion they drew. She knew for a fact Jim hated that little girl, and he was not a pedophile. He had done wrong, but 17 is not 10.

"Look..."

there was nothing. if she tried to give context, it sounded like she was defending him. no matter what, she knew the well was now well-poisoned. it was over. maybe she could start over, sell the property. find another community. her mind raced around a hundred thoughts and options to avoid facing the face in front of hers and what it meant.

They began to walk away. "wait, please. can you just tell me how you found out?" she knew it was admitting defeat, but she needed to know. at this point it was scanning a news article about a murder to find the cause of death.

"My oldest Sarah is friends with Kaytie. She showed her the pictures she sent Jim and his messages back. Not only that, Jackie--she said you *paid* her dad to keep quiet. To protect *someone* who engaged in *sexual activity* with a *minor* and who *teaches minors*. You are **finished**."

(today)

she sipped her daily mocha on a fake rod iron bench near johnston's entrance as she took one of her two 15 mintuters. you'd think they'd have made the rod irons a bit

closer together so her ass could enjoy her fifteen minutes of freedom more thoroughly, but the perfume kiosk which she manned 50 hours a week was so near the doors that as people walked in and out, a waft of nauseating, inappropriately strong fragrance riding a perfectly pleasant wave of air conditioning escaped and never fully let her anyway.

she thought of jim at the trial. she remembered the face she once loved in another life, now melted and pathetic, with no defense. would she go visit him she wondered? for their daughter's sake? 15 years was a long time, a harsh sentence. but saving pictures on your phone of someone who is underage is a REAL fucking crime, jim. -- and. he. had. SAVED. THEM. -- the discovery process was hard. they had to gain access to his phone, his texts, *their texts*, and his searches. even relatively vanilla pornography can be made to sound degenerate under that harsh spotlight. she didn't feel like she could recall the way she once felt about him. it had been absorbed into the chaos of the unraveling of their lives, never to be recovered.

when the break time was up, she went back inside to stare at the same scene. to literally just stand there and stare. the promotional posters hung strategically from the ceilings, ever changing with plastic white smiles and various combinations of happy couples. red and yellow, maybe blue—primary colors and beige clothes, all produced to encourage shopping, making each consumer think that their next event —a back to school night, a dinner with the boss—is what counts. if they could just nail their outfit, she had the right scent. what feelings would you like to evoke, she asked on repeat? she spent three days on a corporate-paid “retreat” to learn the script and the right connotations (brands) for each scent. it's how she earned her doctor's jacket and the several samples that littered the inside of her purse and corners of her drawers at home.

today's task was to change out the display. once a season, this was her privileged duty. although it was just a matter of setting up a few bottles of perfume in a certain way according to a diagram provided, a process so thoroughly uncreative that someone with zero skills could perform it, it was a respite from just standing and staring. so she took some small pleasure in it and made sure she did it correctly. this one required she retrieve something from the back.

she entered the warehouse section of the department store, a place reserved mostly for the workers that unloaded the trucks, a warm and sweaty place with a distinct outdoor/indoor, musty and cement smell. Somehow it refreshed her each visit.

She found the location of the item for her display. A large, approximately three-foot, frosted glass bottle, shaped cylindrically like a water funnel, filled with a golden brown liquid stood there on the shelf. She stared at it for a good few minutes, taking in its form-- its intrusiveness, its presumptuousness. the glass was so thick. so much

perfume in there. for nothing? how could she sell little bits when this great quantity sat unused? maybe it was just brown colored water for the promotion.

She picked it up and carried it back into the store to her kiosk. It was heavier than she thought. Years of being alone, only standing at this kiosk, only watching tv on free time, had left her once strong, commanding, horse-controlling arms, a bit more weak and flabby. (A flash of Zeus went through her mind –just cleaning his hooves was a gigantic task and took her entire body weight to press against his shoulder and get him to lift one for her. Suddenly, the earthy smell of his coat, the dirt that accumulated in the cracks of her fingers as she brushed him. Her ability to use those dirty hands to grab his mane, throw a leg over, and feel his power under her to go wherever she wanted)...

The bottle was over half her height...what the fuck were they thinking? It was absurd. SO fucking absurd. She maneuvered around the clothing sections and back through accessories, taking breaks and setting the bottle down because it tired her arms to the point of shaking. (as if this was supposed to be part of her fucking job description.)

She finally got to the carpet-tile line, took a deep breath, and lifted the bottle for one last time before trying to get it above her waist to reach the counter. There were little markers for where it should sit and everything.

But as she lifted her arms, it *must* have slipped or fell or dropped --

and CHUNKS of glass exploded fireworks all around the other bottles knocking some of them over as well. and the brown liquid, that was actually perfume of course, just stinky, wasteful, fucking perfume you scam artists, scattered dosed across the whole display. The whole series of displays that made up her little corner of the store varnished with a smell so thick and potent it burned the inside of her nose. None of it though, none of it resonated in the years to come as much as the SOUND of the thick, frosted glass shattering, a loud cacophonous blast as it hit the fake sandstone tile that was not italian after all.

She stood there and stared at it for a long time before picking up the store phone, dialing extension 543 and telling them there was a clean-up in perfume.

Then, she walked out. There was a Johnston's or some other in the next town over anyway.