

Middlemen

Grace is moving in with me because my lease is being renewed and my rent has increased and she is trying to wean herself off her parents' money. Also, the windows in my apartment let in a lot of light, unlike Grace's long, thin apartment, which has the ambiance of a tunnel.

Darren, my ex-boyfriend and Grace's co-worker, is helping us make the cross-borough trek from Brooklyn to Queens. Darren and I had the sort of amicable breakup only possible when gender is the primary issue. It's not that I dislike men; it's not even that I won't date them; it's just that I more often prefer the softness of women.

I stand in the dark, empty kitchen, which smells like Lysol, and shove the three mugs we've been using into the last brown box without washing them. Grace's mug is rimmed in pink lipstick, over and over in a pattern, as if it's part of the design.

I can see down the dark hall where Darren is leaning one shoulder against the wall. His hand is almost over his mouth, his fingers squeezing his bottom lip, like he is both thinking and trying to prevent himself from speaking. He is watching Grace, who is in the bathroom pressing down the plastic spout of a bottle of body lotion in order to lock it closed. A dollop of lotion spurts into her hand, and she rubs it onto her pink ankles and up her thin calves. She moves slowly and purposefully—she knows she is being watched.

A glint of sun coming through the bathroom window, one of the two windows in the apartment, hits her shiny legs in just such a way that light seems to be coming out of them rather than shining onto them.

Darren smiles.

I watch all of this quietly from the kitchen, off to the side, like a stagehand.

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After several trips back and forth from Brooklyn to Queens, Grace and I carry the final boxes upstairs to my apartment while Darren parks the car. On the way up, we run into my downstairs neighbor, Vinny. He's unshaven, red-eyed, dressed in plaid pajama pants and a black terrycloth bathrobe covered in cat hair, getting yesterday's mail. He looks us up and down. "Now I've got two single ladies on top of me!" he says, and he laughs and laughs, his yellow teeth gleaming like kernels on a corn cob. Grace beams back at him, as if he's just said something pleasant.

I am relieved when all of Grace's boxes are piled high in the spare room, now Grace's room. I have a strong urge to push Darren out of the door and lock it. Grace and I would never have to leave. We could live forever off egg rolls and pizza delivery.

The stacked boxes look like buildings in a neglected city, Grace Godzilla-sized among them. "Let's hang pictures," she says brightly. She bends over a fat box, sticking her butt out, flipping through frames.

“What about your bed?” asks Darren. The mattress, which had been a pain in the ass to move, leans against the wall in a gentle arch, pink sheets still sagging from it, disassembled slats of dark cherry bedframe resting behind it.

“It just drives me crazy when the pictures are crooked,” she says, ignoring him, pulling out a square canvas featuring some abstract version of Grace herself, painted by an ex-boyfriend.

“Here?” Grace asks, looking back at Darren and me who are leaning side-by-side against the opposite wall. It is impossible, comical, to determine where a picture should hang in a room full of packed boxes. The picture is so far above her head that she has to stand on tiptoes to hold it. Her body, bronzed by the afternoon light, looks like a Degas dancer all grown up. The short bob of her blonde hair is curled behind her ears and pointing, mimicking the shape of her sharp, determined chin.

“It’s not straight,” says Darren, indicating an adjustment with his hands.

Grace moves the picture, sloping too far now in the other direction. “Good?” she asks.

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Grace and I settle into a routine. Since I work on Long Island and Grace in Manhattan, I always get home first, and since I have spent all day at work printing recipes off the internet, by the time Grace gets home, the sweet smell of onion and garlic fills our little kitchen and I am bent over the stove with the seriousness of a sentry in Grace’s pink cupcake apron.

When Grace gets home from work, she immediately changes, not into pajamas, but into a white V-neck tee and navy sweatpants rolled at the waist. We allow ourselves the locker-room ease of dressing and undressing wherever and whenever we feel like it. We unhook our bras at the kitchen table, slipping them out through sleeves and hanging them over our chairs, we stand over the sink in our underwear, brushing our teeth, we run on our tiptoes, dripping wet, looking for lost towels. We watch each other from the corners of our eyes and pretend we are not watching each other from the corners of our eyes.

As I cook—chicken chili with beer biscuits, lemongrass coconut curry soup, spinach artichoke mac and cheese—Grace sits at the green two-person table, which we found together at a yard sale in Flushing, picking green paint off with her fingernails, knees to her chest, bra dangling from the post of the chair, trying to work through the mystery of her failed relationships. “In this city resides an entire city unto itself of my ex-boyfriends,” she laments. “You’d think they’d call once in awhile.” She speaks of her ex-boyfriends as if they have gone into hiding together, refugees from the terrifying land of their relationship.

We do not talk about my exes, there are very few to speak of. Even Darren we treat like a jointly-made old college friend rather than my ex. When he calls, we trick him by picking up each other’s cellphones—no one can tell our voices apart. “Guess!” we shout into the phone. “Guess which one I am!”

Our first night in the apartment together, Grace slipped into my double bed braless in a white tank top and bright bikini underwear. “I’ll put the bed together soon,” she said, curling into the blankets like a kitten and falling instantly asleep.

But even after Grace finishes distributing her things—brown boxes splayed flat, dishes piled to capacity in the cabinets, pillows taking over the couch, pictures hammered into the walls and perfectly aligned, extra furniture spilling out of her room into the living area, which now looks like a thrift shop that sells mostly chairs—her bed still leans against the wall as if it’s some aesthetic decision, just part of the décor.

Grace is an expert. How many evenings, before we even lived together, had Grace finagled herself into my bed, claiming she was too exhausted, too drunk, too cold to go home? Flip off the light, turn on the fan to blur the noise. There in the dark-humming, dreamlike night, Grace’s small, delicate hands would creep across my tingling skin, gently trace the scoop of my waist, the broad curve of my hips. But I’d wake in the blind-sliced morning light and find her curled up so far on the other side of the bed she was almost falling out of it.

After a few months of living together, our periods sync up and we spend days crying in tandem about our lives and our bodies. Grace leaves pieces of chocolate around the house, and I sniff them out like a truffle pig. We lie on the couch head to foot using chairs as side tables, hot water bottles resting on our stomachs, reading women’s magazines, pointing out the clothes that would fit us worst, commiserating about our terrible, dead-end jobs and the much-better lives we were supposed to be living.

But the secret is, as we sit side-by-side in bed watching TV on my little whirring laptop, huddled up close to make out the sound from my dull speakers, the computer warming us and light shining on our faces as if we are staked out around a campfire, alone in dark woods, far away from anyone who cares what we do, sometimes then, I think I’m just a finger’s width away from the life I am supposed to be living.

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For Grace’s twenty-sixth birthday, I bake a devil’s food cake, then slather it in vanilla buttercream frosting. We are eating it before dinner to be sure to fit it in, then Darren will come over for dinner. We sing Happy Birthday together, Grace’s face golden in the flickering birthday-candle light, a colorful confetti of wax dripping into the frosting. When we finish singing, Grace takes a deep, considered breath and blows out the candles, sending us into the dark.

“Happy Birthday,” I whisper. She grabs my hand, as if she’s about to fall, though she’s sitting perfectly still. I squeeze it. She seems about to say something, but then her phone lights up and begins to trill.

“My parents,” she says. She lets my hand go, jumps up, flips on the light.

Through the phone, I hear the muffled, off-key, Midwestern voices of her parents singing the song we just sang alone.

In pictures, Grace's parents are always drinking translucent cocktails next to terrible things like horses or politicians or rose bushes.

I cut us pieces of cake. Grace puts the phone on speaker to free up her hands for eating. I point to myself—should I announce my presence?—but Grace puts her fingers to her lips, indicating quiet instead.

At the song's end, everyone claps except for me. I am busy, anyway, scratching out little pieces of wax from the frosting with the tines of my fork.

"Did you get the check?" her father asks.

"Yes, thank you," says Grace before taking a silent bite of cake.

"Are you getting along with your roommate? What's her name again?" asks her mother.

"Sophie," says Grace, winking at me. "Thick as thieves."

"We got the pictures of your new place," says her mother. "It looks very nice."

"Even though it is all the way out in Queens," says her father.

"We aren't sure why you decided to live all the way out there," says her mother.

"You're looking quite healthy, too," says her father.

Grace freezes mid-chew. "How healthy?"

"There are men who like that sort of thing," says her mother.

I take a giant, spiteful bite of cake and then begin washing the dishes. Grace switches off speaker and finishes the conversation in her room.

I think of Grace's parents and wonder if I'm better off with mine. My father has been calling more frequently. Ever since Grace moved in, he has shifted from asking me questions about how to do certain things in Gmail to asking me about my sex life. My mother vaguely blames my sexuality on his lack of boundaries. "No wonder you're turned off by men," she says, though clearly he hasn't had the same effect on her—she is busy in Boston with a new husband and a trio of pale, grown-up stepsons whose names all begin with B.

My father's main flaw is boundless, childlike curiosity. He can find out more about a stranger in ten minutes than some people know about their own siblings—I once overheard him talking to a JC Penny employee about her abortion. But he hardly goes out any more, and he is lonely, much lonelier now that my mother has taken her half of the furniture. He mutters around our big, empty house all day like a ghost searching for evidence of his earthly existence, pointing at where things once were. "That table," he says. "Where is that table now?" "There's no coat rack anymore. What will people do with their coats? What does your mother expect me to do with their coats?" I tell him to buy a new coat rack. "I want *my* coat rack," he says. My mother doesn't have this problem, her house is overcrowded with furniture: half of the furniture from her

marriage with my father, half from new husband's old marriage, and a selection from the sons, stacked along the walls in the basement.

I dial my father, resting the phone between my shoulder and my ear, and hang a mug that says *republiCAN* in an ugly serif font upside down on the drying rack.

"You're living with a woman," he says, without pleasantries. I can hear his voice echoing through our old house.

"Yes," I say.

"Then you must be sleeping with her."

"Do *you* sleep with every woman you meet?" I say.

"I would if I could," he says. "How can you stand it?"

"I'm not, like, a straight-up lesbian," I say.

"Amazing," he says. "The modern world is astounding."

I suddenly notice Grace leaning casually against the doorframe, perfectly still, wearing something I've never seen before, a sleeveless, cottony A-line dress with red and white pinstripes. She looks like a pin-up, the vertical lines curve gently in at her waist, the fitted bodice frames a subtle shadow of cleavage. She glides up next to me, listening in.

"What's it like to make love to a woman?" he asks. "As a woman, I mean." I look at Grace and roll my eyes, but her eyebrows are raised as if to say, "Yeah, what's it like?"

"I have to go," I say and end the call.

"You didn't have to hang up," she says. I have told her about my father—she wants a landline so she can answer the phone and assess for herself.

I point at the *republiCAN* mug. "I don't like this one."

"It's supposed to be ironic," she says.

"But your parents *are* Republicans," I say. "They call gay people *homosexuals*."

"At least," she says, "my parents have gotten us these dresses." She puts her hands on her hips, turns her head sideways, and shrugs a shoulder up towards her chin in a profile-pose. She freezes for a moment, as if waiting for a camera to flash, then comes back to life, pinching the skirt of the dress between her finger and thumb. "There's one for you."

She leads me through the maze of chairs to her bedroom closet, where the red striped dress hangs there, tags still attached. At its side, three more pairs of matching dresses—that makes eight new dresses in total—in other colors, all low-cut and high-hemmed.

I am a little stunned by their sudden appearance, by the stealth with which they have appeared. "When did you get these?" I ask. I touch the one that's light pink, silky and smooth as Grace's skin, on the verge of negligee.

"Here and there," she says vaguely.

The tailored seams, the fine fabric, they are obviously well made—but, even so, they look almost tawdry hanging there in duplicates.

*

“Am I seeing double?” Darren asks when we open the door.

Grace throws me a satisfied glance. “Guess!” she shouts. “Guess which one I am!”

For dinner, I’ve pulled two of our extra chairs into the kitchen, one for me to sit on, and one for my plate, so that Darren and Grace have seats at the table. Grace and I sit side-by-side in our dresses, matching except my dress is two sizes bigger than Grace’s, and on me the pinstripes look less sex-symbol and more circus-act. Still, we seem to work as a pair.

Grace spends the meal moving her shrimp fettuccini to different parts of her plate. She’s eating her salad, leaving her bowl with a layer of walnuts, cranberries, and cheese. She has no problem draining her wine glass. Darren pours us all more as Grace flings her fork between Darren and me, asking us questions as if she’s a quiz show host.

“Your first kiss?” Grace says. She points her fork at Darren and the tines hit his wineglass.

“Tina. Second grade. Swing set,” says Darren.

“You?” she says, pointing at me with one hand and now gripping her wineglass with the other as if it contains the elixir of life.

“Ms. Scarlett. Kitchen. Candlestick,” I say.

“That’s not a real answer,” she pouts.

I shrug. There’s no reason not to tell the story, but I don’t want anyone else to own it, especially not Grace. Grace’s things have found their way into every crevice of the house, Grace herself has found her way nightly into my bed, and I sit wearing a Grace-prescribed dress, which is to say, I want to keep a little something for myself.

Darren reaches both of his hands across the table to squeeze ours. “You two look glorious tonight,” he says earnestly, gazing at our matching outfits.

Grace smiles. She gets up to start on the dishes. “No, no,” I say, getting up, too. She inches close to me, so we are face-to-face. My heart races with schoolgirl giddiness. She presses her hand into the small of my back, drawing me into her, though she is looking at Darren. I follow her gaze: he is wide-eyed, slack-jawed. She kisses me slowly, showily.

“Goddamn,” says Darren. I think of Grace’s legs glinting with lotion in the sunlight of her empty apartment, Darren watching from the hall.

Grace inches her finger up and down, beckoning him.

We are all adults, I realize daily, realize once again. We can do anything we want.

The evening exists out of time and space. As a pair, Grace and I are magical, shining and buoyant. We are Siamese twins with a shared brain and separate tongues. We are making love

with extra limbs, we are making love in a room full of mirrors, we are a shout and an echo, the answers to questions and the questions themselves. We are sharing so much it feels like a blacklistable, communist offence. My bed pitches like a raft at sea. Above us—above the ceiling, the roof, the gray wash of smog and clouds—we know we are rocking under the sequiny stars, and we feel they are guiding the way.

But when I dive under the covers, I am all alone in the dark, a deep-sea explorer without compass or map to show me the route. It doesn't matter, I know it by instinct. I inch my tongue up between her legs, suck the soft, sweet oyster from its hard, gray shell. *Oh, oh, oh*, I hear her say, a siren's song traveling down from the airy surface, where Darren gets to be there to look into her shocked, pleased eyes.

*

In the morning, I take two Excedrin and see Darren out, then get back in bed and snuggle up close with still-sleeping Grace. I wiggle my fingers across Grace's stomach, but she doesn't acknowledge them. "My head," she says, and rolls away from me, to the edge of the bed.

"That was amazing," she says. She opens her eyes. "Let's do it again." For a moment I think she means us, me and her, right now, let's do it again. "His *expression*," she says, "he was so thrilled!"

The two of us? We don't do it again, not really, not yet. After Darren, Grace seems distant, distracted. She doesn't touch me in the dark. When I try to touch her, she skitters away. An exception: One night we are both drunk and there is no moon and I slip my hand in her underwear and she makes no move to acknowledge me but arches her back against the pulsing curve of my finger, and then stiffens and sleeps, all without a word.

The morning after, I wake up to her looming above me, poking her finger into my shoulder over and over, acting as if nothing ever happened. "Let's start running," she says. It's still dark. She's wearing an ensemble that's so neon it seems to glow.

"Now?" I ask.

"Obviously now," she says. "You think I'm wearing this to work?"

"This is about your parents," I say.

"Who cares?" she says, and she throws some neon spandex in my face.

This is how we end up running down Northern Boulevard each cold, dark pre-breakfast morning, yellow headlit cars whizzing by, my stomach cavernous, my eyelids heavy.

When we get home, Grace opens to fridge and stares into it, it as if it's a museum painting she longs to touch.

*

My father calls, waking me up from a dead sleep. "What's the matter?" I ask.

"Nothing," he says. "Did I wake you? I thought you were up all the time."

“Why would you think that?”

“You’re looking very good,” he says matter-of-factly.

“How would you know what I look like?” I ask.

“You sent a picture,” he says.

“No,” I say, but when I look back at my text messages it’s there, Grace and me that afternoon in our running gear.

“You know what your mother took?” he says. I can hear him pacing around the house. “All of the recipe books, plus the shelves they were stored on. I don’t have one recipe from all of our years together.”

“But you don’t cook,” I say. “At least she left the microwave.”

“That’s not the point at all,” he says.

“Dad, it’s two in the morning, what *is* the point?”

“I do have a question for you, since you have pleased both men and women—”

“Jesus, Dad,” I say. “Come on.”

“Never can tell with you, Kid. Sometimes you want to talk about it, and sometimes—”

“I don’t ever want to talk about it,” I say, and hang up the phone. But I’m not mad, not really. He’s like a toddler who’s drawn on the walls to test out the crayons. I wonder, sometimes, if all his questions aren’t really just the same two questions appearing in different forms: *What makes a person love a person? What makes a lover leave?*

Grace rolls over in bed. “Who’s that?” she asks.

“Did you send my dad a picture of us?” I ask.

“Does he like it?” And even in the dark I can see her smiling that leg-lotion smile I’m beginning to hate.

*

One morning when we get back from a run, I fling myself on the peeling white-painted stoop and pant loud as dog. I raise myself up and half-heartedly lean over my leg, forcing myself to stay down for ten Mississippis.

When I look up, Grace has her leg slung over the porch railing like a ballerina at the bar, her ass facing the downstairs window where Vinny lives, the point of her chin to her knee.

“Mmmm,” she groans into her stretch.

A strong coffee and cat litter scent enters my nostrils, and I look up to see Vinny, peaking out of his door in his black bathrobe, ogling Grace’s ass and shaking his head. “Sorry,” he says. “She just gets more beautiful every day.” Thinner, is what he means. She gets thinner every day.

Grace flings her leg off the porch railing and bends herself in half, her outstretched hands flat on the porch. From this position, she looks back at Vinny and smiles. “Thank you,” she says. “Thank you very much.”

Upstairs, getting ready for work, Grace appears from the bathroom with a towel swirled around her head and another wrapped around her body. “Do you remember Darren’s face?” she asks. She looks top heavy, her head seems very large, like the bright plastic ball on top of a pin.

“Yes,” I say. “Astonished.” She’s right about Darren’s face. Even a woman who likes women never really looks at you quite that way — in awe of not just the opportunity, but of the mystery, of the distinct female otherness of your beauty.

“Like we were fucking angels sent from heaven!” she says. Despite the towels, there’s a puddle at her feet, like she’s melting into the spot she’s standing in. “We could do it again, you know,” she says. “I have lots of ex-boyfriends.”

“Sure,” I say. I can’t tell if she’s joking. “Let’s make dreams come true.”

“Let’s change our name to the Make-A-Wish Foundation!” she exclaims.

“Let’s file as a non-profit!” I shout.

“I’m serious, though,” and she is.

*

It’s simple to execute. We look each man up online, discuss his personality and pleasant physical features, and then Grace calls him up, announcing the plan like he has just won Publisher’s Clearinghouse. “Are you sure?” he asks. “Is this a joke?” “Should I break-up with my girlfriend?” “Am I taking advantage?”

We come in matching bras with matching mini breastbone bows. We try everything, the full spread, blindfolds and baby oil and brightly colored toys. “There are too many monkeys jumping on the bed,” Grace chants as we play.

In the morning, we lie skin-to-skin-to-skin like spoons stacked in the silverware drawer. With no courtship, there’s no aftermath. The exit is peaceful and unembarrassed. There’s some strange, beautiful diffusion of responsibility. Swaying home on the LIRR, Grace and I sit side-by-side, silent and quivering, the sun flashing behind our closed eyes, the shared secret pulsing through us like we’ve escaped the scene of a crime. When we open our eyes, we see the other people on the train staring blankly ahead. These people on the train, we think smugly, these people know nothing.

“Are we ruining feminism?” I ask Grace one day. “Are we purposefully turning ourselves into objects of the male gaze?”

“Objects?” says Grace. “We are goddamn superheroes.”

And sometimes, when Grace and I are jetting through New York under the guise of night or kneeling next to each other on a carpet somewhere in the metropolitan area, I agree. How did this become a symbol of submission? I feel like Grace and I are the most powerful women in the world. The men thank god, they thank the heavens, they thank the holy trinity and their lucky stars and women’s lib and the porn industry. They’d like to thank the academy and the first girl

they ever kissed and their parents for giving birth to them. They thank us, again and again. We find thank you texts on our phones, letters in our mailbox, flowers on our doorstep. Juan, the painter, sends us a perfect pencil sketch of two women embracing. Rob mails matching silver studs wrapped in matching jewelry boxes finished with matching bows. Grace holds the silver earring up to an ear, admiring herself in the mirror. “I always worried they’d forget me,” she says—who are these men who could forget Grace?—“but now they don’t want me to forget them.”

“Who is the man in the relationship?” my father likes to ask.

“Relationship?” I say. “No one,” I say, but it’s not true. There are men at every turn.

Sometimes Grace closes her eyes, her pale neck extended across a pillow, half of her mouth in a paralyzed smile, and she looks as delicate and beautiful as a swan. I sweep my hair like a feather duster across Grace’s stomach. I nuzzle my face in the valley of her small breasts. I feel the bumps of bone beneath her collar, little sand ridges at low tide. Does it count when you get what you want but you have to share?

*

I have a rare meeting in Manhattan, so I plan a lunch with Darren and Grace. I sometimes forget what Manhattan is like in daylight, all of those black, pointy heels and women made of elbows and knees.

I find Grace asleep in her blue cubicle with her head on her desk. She’s wearing a black sleeveless baby doll dress even though it’s below freezing. Grace’s limbs seem almost fake, as if the dress is mostly there to cover up the mechanics of plastic, rotating joints.

“Grace?” I say.

Grace lifts her head and looks up at me, dazed from sleep. “What are you doing here?” she asks.

“Lunch,” I remind her.

“I’m not that hungry,” she says.

On Grace’s monitor, a Google-searched image of a beautiful woman in a white sports bra and black spandex shorts. “Look at the abs on that chick,” says Grace. “You could punch her right in the stomach.”

“You know,” I say, “you’ve always looked good to me.” I reach out to tuck a loose hair behind her ear, but she flinches before I get there.

“Don’t,” she says, her eyes darting around.

As if any of this were for me.

*

I wake up in the middle of the night, and Grace is not in bed. I think I hear her in the kitchen, and I'm relieved she might be eating. I tiptoe to the door without turning on the light, opening it a crack to listen.

"It's like a little bramble patch," I hear her say. "It's like sticking your tongue in a little wet, mossy cave." I want to turn away, but my feet feel pasted to the floor. "I guess the part that's different is the emptiness, like a ring without a finger or two puzzle pieces that just won't fit. There's no hope of ever being fulfilled." My stomach turns, a hot acid travels up my throat and into my mouth, and I swallow it back down. I don't know how I know, but I know: she is talking to my father. It takes a moment for me to realize that he probably thinks he's talking to me.

I should go out there and break some chairs. I should smash one over Grace's head. I should be mad enough to wake the neighbors. But I feel more heart-sunk than angry. My mouth tastes sour. It's the same betrayal again and again: Grace has never wanted me without wanting something else on the other side of me.

I feel my own desolation acutely, as if she has already left, as if I have already watched from the second-story window as her possessions trail out in reverse order of their arrival: the throng of chairs, the peeling table, the cherry bed, the pink-sheeted mattress, her small body. My bed, the kitchen, the closet: empty again. Equilibrium is impossible, I think, you're either bursting at the seams or desolate.

I picture my father sitting in the dark at the head of the dining room table, the phone to his ear. It's a long mahogany table with four chairs lined up on one side, part of his half of the furniture. He is looking out through the doorway into the vast, black emptiness of the foyer, the living room. He'll never get new furniture—where would it fit? The floors are already filled with sun-bleached stains, bright as crime scene tape, marking off each thing that is missing.