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Reasons

By: Jewel Blanchard

I sat in the window of the coffee shop as if it were a normal day. I stared blankly at my reflection, focused on everything but the thing I could not think about. The shop was empty, save the man who sat alone—like usual. But today the scent of coffee tugged on a half-remembered memory. I recalled the scene vividly. I was young. My mother braided my hair at the kitchen table

“When you were little, what did you wanna be when you grew up? I kicked my legs under the table, bumping her steaming mug on the tabletop sideways.

“A doctor,” she replied, yanking at my hair. I winced, but didn’t protest.

“And you did become a doctor,” I pronounced, tracing the mug with a finger.

“Nurse,” she corrected, tying off the ends of the plait.

“What’s the difference?”

“Doctors were men. Nurses were women. And it took a hell of a lot of fuss to change it.”

“But why—“

My mother interrupted me as she held the mug in knotted hands. “I wanted to be a doctor, but it couldn’t happen.” Her eyes bored into me. “That’s important, Clarisse. You can’t have everything. Accept it and move on.”

A loud scraping noise broke the recollection. The man who sat alone stood up and looked across at me. I broke eye contact hastily, but he was already walking over.

“I see you at this seat every day,” He grinned, “and we’ve never talked.”

“Oh,” I said, fumbling for words. “Yeah, I’ve seen you too...”

“Look, I’m not very good at this,” the man overcompensated, “but I was wondering if you’d like to go out with me sometime.”

I toyed with the sleeve of my cardigan. “I’m flattered,” I said without faltering, “But I’m not interested in dating right now...” When I glanced back, his eyes were fixed on my arm. Without looking, I yanked my sleeve past my wrist, hiding the angry marks I’d uncovered.

“I’m sorry,” he shrugged. “I just see you at this seat every day. Forget it.” He stayed beside me as I finished my tea, smiling amicably. “It was nice to finally talk. I’m Henry by the way.” We stood up to leave.

“Clarisse,” I smiled. “I guess I’ll see you here tomorrow.” I walked down the street, suddenly uncomfortable in my daily routine. I glimpsed Henry trudge off in the opposite direction. I almost called after him, invited him to walk with me. Almost. My attention was caught by a flyer advertising the Farmer’s Market in the park. Seeing it, I strode with purpose.

I spent my walk concentrating on the sound of my heels against the pavement. The sun was low as I heard the first strains of music. I hummed a few bars of the familiar song under my breath. As I rounded a corner, the park was

before me, strung with soft lights, crammed with carts and people, and full of tantalizing scents.

“Twice in a day!” I jumped, recognizing the voice of the man who sat alone. He was also approaching the park entrance, from the opposite end of the block.

“I guess so,” I answered warily. “How did you know I’d be here?”

“I didn’t. I come every Friday,” he paused, then “Care to walk with me?”

I followed him into the buzzing crowd. It wasn’t much of a Farmer’s Market, really. Mostly food vendors serving steaming tamales and spicy noodles. Parents chased after their children, pleased with their contributions to the world. A band played, surrounded by dancers. People sat all around—on benches, fountains, and grass. They ate, sang, and enjoyed each other’s company. It was the kind of scenery that makes you sad for little reason. For once, I had a reason.

“Pad Thai!” I pointed, but Henry didn’t hear my hopeful observation.

“Curry?” he suggested. I nodded and we stopped at the line. “Is that alright?”

“Yeah,” Curry was alright. AS we received our fragrant orders, my stomach lurched.

It was hard to pick Henry out of the crowd in his dark coat as we searched for a seat. Strangers swirled: grandmothers, mothers, and their daughters who would become mothers. Sons of mothers, sitting with the mothers of their children. Suddenly, I was alone and holding a hot tray of curry. I spun around, calling out for my companion. The speakers were deafening, and on top of that,

everyone was shouting. The familiar, numbing panic began to spread through me. *What are you doing, Why are you doing this, You shouldn't be running, Remember last time you ran?* Empty faces, immune to my frenzy, jostled past me. I ran into a woman, spilling my meal all over her shirt. She looked at me out of my mother's eyes. I jumped back, reassuring myself it wasn't her. I muttered apologies as my head screamed at me, *Run, now, run, RUN!*

"Clarisse!" I darted to the voice, smacking into Henry. Seeing the panic in my eyes, he lifted his curry out of the way and wrapped his other arm around me. I hid my face in his shirt, sobs wracking my body. We stood like that for a few minutes, until I collected myself.

"Your curry's getting cold," I said at last, voice muffled.

We split the rice ravenously, watching as people danced a few feet away.

"Want me to call you a cab?" he asked. "My brother got panic attacks all the time."

"I'm fine," I lied.

"So," he said, "how's your first Farmer's Market? Aside from, you know..."

"Way better than the Hospital," I ignored the impulse to avoid his questioning look. I couldn't keep distracting myself. "It was my Mom. She, uh, had a stroke this morning."

"Oh, my God!" His face contorted into a clichéd look of sympathy.

"I think she's fine," I interjected quickly. "The doctors said she was in stable condition."

“You think?”

“We didn’t talk much. I got the call during work, and I ran down to the hospital, of course.” I remembered the eerie fluorescent lights, the sinister beeping. The pit of dread in my gut at the thought that I wouldn’t get the chance to make things right. “My mom and I never quite got along,” I explained. “Last time I’d seen her was six years ago.” I took a breath. “But she didn’t even know they called me. I ran into her room and there’s no ‘Thank God you’re here’ or ‘Claire, I missed you. I love you.’” I winced at the sting in my throat. “Six years and this woman says ‘Get her out of here.’ So I got out.” I sighed. “Shouldn’t have, but I did.”

“Why didn’t you stay, then?” Henry picked at the grass.

“It was so hard to walk in there,” I couldn’t stop my words. “all she ever did was use me...” I realized I was tracing the old scars on my forearm with a thumb, “I just was hoping we’d end up fixing things, you know?”

“My mom’s pretty controlling,” Henry said, “all in the name of looking out for me. But she did show me how to stick up for myself.” He looked at me. “Go. Stick up for yourself.”

“But she told me to leave.” I thought of my mother’s now-internalized lessons of defeat as I made the excuse.

“Don’t do it for her.” Henry’s words hung between us. I looked at the musicians. At little girls dancing. I recalled a second memory, happier this time. It must have been Kindergarten: Mom and I danced together. I forgot the tight braids and scars. I ignored the bitterness and manipulation. She was my mother. I loved her. She had taught me something after all-how to be a better woman than her.

“Where are you going?” asked Henry as I stood up with resolve.

“I’m going back to the hospital,” I replied, “but first I’m going to dance.”

The ground was bathed in amber light, and it vibrated with the bass.

There were more people packed together than on the green, but the atmosphere was freer. I began to move my hops, letting myself get lost in the melody. When I felt a hand on my back, I knew it was Henry, and I melted into him. Neither of us were great, but together, we were slightly less terrible. We shouted with the songs we knew and swayed to the songs we didn’t. I tied my cardigan around my waist, letting my hair brush against the scars that I was so ashamed of.

I don’t know how much time we spent like that, the stranger and I, before my phone rang.

I fished it out. An unknown number. Feeling a familiar dread, I fled the dance floor, dragging Henry by the hand. I waited to answer until I could hear, tearing towards the street.

“HELLO?”

“Miss Adams?” asked a chillingly calm woman.

“Th-this is she.”

“Miss Adams, I am sorry to inform you that you mother is dead.”

“What do—the doctors said she was in stable condition!”

“She was, but there were complications.”

“I was on my way there,” I faltered, “I wanted to tell her how sorry I am.”

“She said the same thing.”