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# I

Time did not exist in the hospital. Like a Las Vegas casino, there were no clocks anywhere, and the harsh fluorescent lighting remained equally bright during the entire stretch of visiting hours. Alice had asked, once, if they turned off the lights at night, but the nurse didn't seem to hear, or maybe she thought it was a joke, but in either case, she didn't respond, and so Alice didn't know the answer. Her father, Leonard Stern, was still in his bed in the center of the room, attached to more lines and cords and bags and machines than Alice could count, and had hardly spoken for a week, and so he wasn't going to tell her, either, even if he did open his eyes again. Could he sense the difference? Alice thought about lying in the grass in Central Park in the summertime as a teenager, letting her closed eyelids feel the warmth of the sun, when she and her friends would stretch their bodies out on rumpled blankets, waiting for JFK Jr to accidentally hit them with a Frisbee. These lights didn't feel like the sun. They were too bright, and too cold.

Alice could visit on Saturdays and Sundays, and in the afternoon on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when her workday ended early enough that she could hop on the train and get to the hospital before visiting hours had ended. From her apartment in Brooklyn, the subway ride was an hour door-to-door, the 2/3 from Borough Hall to 96th Street, and then the local all the way to 168th Street, but from work, it was half an hour on the C train, a straight shot from 86th and Central Park West.

Over the summer, Alice had been able to visit nearly every day, but since school had started, a few days a week was the best she could do. It felt like it had been decades since her father was still himself, when he looked more or less the way he had for Alice's whole life, smiling

and wry, his beard still more brown than gray, but in reality, it had only been a month. He'd been on a different floor of the hospital then, in a room that felt more like an under-decorated hotel room than an operating theater, with a photograph of Mars that he'd torn out of the *New York Times* taped to the wall, alongside a photo of his ancient and powerful cat, Ursula. She wondered whether someone had taken those things and put them with the rest of his belongings – his wallet, his telephone, whatever actual clothing he'd been wearing when he checked in, the stack of paperback books he'd brought with him – or whether they'd been thrown away in one of the giant flip-top waste bins that lined the sterile hallways.

When someone asked how her father was doing – Emily, who she shared a desk with in the admissions office; or Sam, her best friend from high school, who had three children, a husband, a house in Montclair, and a closet full of high heels to wear to her job at a terrifying law firm; or her boyfriend, Matt – Alice wished for an easy answer. The longer it went on, the more the question turned into an empty phrase, the way one might say *How are you?* to an acquaintance passing on the sidewalk as you keep walking. There were no tumors to excise, no germs to fight. It was just that many neighborhoods of Leonard's body were falling apart in a great, unified chorus: his heart, his kidneys, his liver. Alice understood now, as she never truly had before, how the body was a Rube Goldberg machine, and every time one domino or lever got knocked sideways, the whole thing would stop. When the doctors poked their heads into the ICU, it was just the word *failure*, over and over again. They were all waiting for her father to die. It could be days or weeks or months, no one was quite able to say. One of the worst parts of the whole thing, Alice understood, was that doctors were almost always guessing. They were smart people, and the guesses were informed by tests and trials and years of experience, but they were guessing nonetheless.

Alice saw it now: all her life, she'd thought of death as the single moment, the heart stopping, the final breath, but now she knew that it could be much more like giving birth, with nine months of preparation. Her father was heavily pregnant with death, and there was little to do but wait – his doctors and nurses, her mother in California, his friends and neighbors, and most of all, the two of them. It could only

end one way, and it would only happen once. No matter how many times a person was on a bumpy airplane, or in a car accident, or stepped out of traffic just in time, no matter how many times they fell and did not break their neck. This was how it went for most people – actual dying, over a period of time. The only surprise left would be when it happened, the actual day, and then all the days that followed, when he did not push away the boulder or stick his hand out of the ground. Alice knew all of this, and sometimes she felt okay with it, it being the way of the world, and sometimes she was so sad that she couldn't keep her eyes open. He was only seventy-three years old. In a week, Alice would turn forty. She would feel immeasurably older when he was gone.

Alice knew some of the nurses on the fifth floor and some of the nurses on the seventh floor – Esmeralda, whose father was also named Leonard; Iffie, who thought it was funny when Leonard pointed out that the hospital lunch often had apples three ways: apple juice, apple sauce, and an apple itself; George, who lifted him most easily. When she recognized one of the people who had cared for her father in an earlier phase, it felt like remembering someone from a past life. The three men who worked the front desk were the most consistent caregivers, inasmuch as they were friendly and remembered the names of people like Alice who visited over and over again, because they understood what it meant. They were led by London, a middle-aged Black man with a gap between his front teeth and an elephant's memory. He remembered her name, her father's name, what her father did, everything. His job was deceptively easy – it wasn't just smiling at the people with bunches of balloons who came to visit new babies. No, visitors like Alice would show up and show up and show up until there was no reason to come back, just a long list of numbers to call and things to do and arrangements to make.

Alice pulled her phone out of her bag to check the time. Visiting hours were nearly over.

'Dad,' she said.

Her father didn't move, but his eyelids flickered. She got up and put her hand on his. It was thin and bruised – he was on blood thinners, to keep him from having a stroke, and it meant that every time the nurses and doctors poked him with another needle, a small purple

blossom appeared. His eyes stayed closed. Every so often a lid would open, and Alice would watch him search around the room, not focusing on anything, not seeing her. At least she didn't think so. When she could get her mother on the phone, Serena would tell her that hearing was the last sense to go, and so Alice always talked to him, but she wasn't sure where her words were going, if anywhere. At least she could hear them. Serena also said that Leonard needed to release himself from his ego, and that until he did so, he would be forever chained to his earthly body, and that crystals would help. Alice couldn't listen to everything her mother told her.

'I'll be back on Tuesday. I love you.' She touched his arm. Alice was used to it now, the affection. She had never told her father she loved him before he went into the hospital. Maybe once, in high school, when she was miserable and they were fighting about her staying out past her curfew, but then it had been shouted back and forth, an epithet hurled through her bedroom door. But now she said it every time she visited, and looked at him when she said it. One of the machines behind him beeped in response. The nurse on duty nodded at Alice on her way out, her dreadlocks tucked into a white cap with pictures of Snoopy on it. 'Okay,' Alice said. It felt like hanging up on him, or changing the channel.

Alice always texted her mother after leaving the hospital. *Dad ok. No different, which seems positive?* Serena sent back a red heart emoji and then a rainbow emoji, indicating that she had read the words and had nothing to add, no follow-up questions. It didn't seem fair, abdicating all responsibility just because you were no longer married, though of course that was exactly what divorce meant. And they'd been divorced for far longer than they were married – more than three times as long, Alice thought, doing the math. Alice had been six when her mother had woken up, told them that she'd had a self-actualized visit from her future consciousness, or from Gaia herself, Serena couldn't be sure, but she *was* sure that she needed to move to the desert to join a healing community run by a man named Demetrius. The judge had told them how rare it was for fathers to have sole custody, but even he couldn't argue. Serena was fond, when she was in touch, but Alice never wished that her parents had stayed together. If Leonard had remarried, there would be some other person there holding his hand and asking the nurses questions, but he hadn't, and so it was just Alice. Polygamy would be excellent in cases like this, or a passel of siblings, but Leonard had only ever had the one wife and the one daughter, and so Alice was it. She went down the stairs into the train station, and when the 1 train arrived, Alice didn't even pretend to take out a book and read before she fell asleep with her forehead resting against the scratched, dirty window.

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### 3

Alice and Matt hadn't moved in together, because having two apartments always seemed like a great trick, a truly revolutionary way to be in a committed relationship, if you could afford it. She'd lived alone since she was in college, and truly sharing space with another adult every single day – kitchen, toilet, and all – was a level of commitment Alice did not aspire to. She'd read a Modern Love column once about a couple who kept two apartments in the same building, and that seemed like the dream. Alice had lived in the same studio since she was twenty-five and finally out of college, having limped through art school as slowly as she could. It was the garden-level apartment in a brownstone on Cheever Place, a tiny street in Cobble Hill where one could always hear the roar of the Brooklyn–Queens Expressway, which lulled Alice to sleep at night like the ocean. Because she'd been there so long, Alice paid less for rent than the twenty-five-year-olds she knew who lived in Bushwick.

Matt, improbably, lived in Manhattan, on the Upper West Side, which was the neighborhood Alice had grown up in, and where she worked. The first time she and Matt went out to dinner and he told her where he lived, Alice had thought he was joking. The idea that someone her age – five years younger, actually – could afford to live in Manhattan was absurd, even though Alice had long understood that where someone could afford to live often had little to do with their own paycheck, especially if it was in Manhattan. He lived in one of the gleaming new apartment buildings near Columbus Circle that had a doorman and a package room with a special cold section for people's FreshDirect deliveries. He was on the eighteenth floor and could see all the way to New Jersey. When Alice looked out her window, she



could see a fire hydrant and the lower half of people's bodies as they walked by.

Even though Alice had a key to Matt's apartment, she always stopped at the desk before going to the elevator, the way visitors were supposed to. It wasn't unlike going to the hospital and giving her name. Today, one of the doormen, an older man with a shaved head who always winked at her, just pointed toward the elevator as she approached, and Alice nodded. A free pass.

Around the glossy marble corner, a woman and two small children were waiting for the elevator. Alice recognized the woman immediately but zipped her mouth shut and tried to be invisible. The children – both towheaded boys, maybe four and eight, ran in circles around their mother's legs, trying to whack each other with tennis rackets. When the elevator finally arrived, the kids darted in, and their mother trudged behind them, her thin ankles sockless in her loafers. She looked up when she turned to face the doors, and that's when she saw Alice, who sidled in right next to the buttons, tucking herself into the corner of the small cube.

'Oh, hi!' the mother said. The woman was pretty and blond, with an earnest tan, the kind that accumulated gradually on tennis courts and golf courses. Alice had met this woman – Katherine, maybe? – when she'd brought the older child to the admissions office at the Belvedere School.

'Hi,' Alice said. 'How are you? Hi, guys.' The children had abandoned their racket swords and were now kicking each other in the shins. A game.

The woman – Katherine Miller, Alice now remembered, and the boys were Henrik and Zane – pushed her hair back. 'Oh, we're great. You know, so happy to be back in school. We were in Connecticut all summer, and they really missed their friends.'

'School sucks,' Henrik, the older boy, said. Katherine grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him tight against her legs.

'He doesn't mean that,' she said.

'Yes, I do! School sucks!'

'School sucks!' parroted Zane, in a voice three times as loud as the elevator required. Katherine's cheeks turned purple with embarrassment. The elevator dinged, and she shoved both boys out. The younger

one would be applying for kindergarten this fall, which meant that Katherine would be visiting Alice's office again soon. There were several emotions visible in Katherine's face, and Alice diligently ignored them all.

'Have a great day!' Katherine called out in a singsong voice. The elevator doors closed again, and Alice could hear her whisper-shout at her children as they walked down the hall.

There were so many kinds of rich people in New York City. Alice was an expert, but not because she wanted to be; it was like being raised bilingual, only one of the languages was money. One rule of thumb was that the harder it was to tell where someone's money came from, the more of it they had. If both parents were artists or writers or maybe had no discernible jobs at all and were available for pickup and drop-off, it meant the money was trickling down from a very large source, drips from an iceberg. There were lots of invisible parents, both mothers and fathers, who worked constantly, and if they did wind up at school or on the playground, they were always taking phone calls, a finger shoved into the other ear to drown out the noise of real live life. Those were the families with help. The ones who were ashamed of their wealth used the term *au pair* and the ones who were not used the word *housekeeper*. Even if children didn't always fully understand, they had eyes and ears and parents who gossiped with each other at playdates.

Her own family's money was fairly simple: When she was a child, Leonard had written *Time Brothers*, a novel about two time-traveling brothers that had sold millions of copies and gone on to become a serialized television program that everyone watched, either on purpose or as a result of unwillingness to change the channel, at least twice a week between the years of 1989 and 1995. And so Alice had gone to private school at Belvedere, one of the most prestigious in the city, since she was in the fifth grade. On the spectrum from blonds-in-uniforms to no-grades-and-calling-teachers-by-their-first-names, Belvedere sat close to dead center. It had too many Jews for the WASPs, and too many cozy traditions for the Marxists.

If one trusted the literature, most of the private schools in New York City were the same – challenging, enriching, and superlative in all ways – and while that was true, Alice understood the differences:

This one was for the eating-disordered overachievers, that one was for dummies with drug problems but rich parents. There was the school for athletes and the school for tiny Brooks Brothers mannequins who would end up as CEOs, the school for well-rounded normies who would become lawyers, the school for artsy weirdos and for parents who wanted their kids to be artsy weirdos. Belvedere had started in the 1970s on the Upper West Side, and so it had been full of socialists and hippies, but now, fifty years later, the moms at drop-off idled outside in their Teslas and the children were all on ADHD medication. Nothing gold could stay, but it was still her place, and she loved it.

Alice only really saw the different categories of families once she was an adult: the blonds who had toned arms and well-stocked proper liquor cabinets; the actors with television shows and another house in Los Angeles for when fortunes changed; the intellectuals, novelists, and the like with vague trust funds and houses bigger than they should have been able to afford; the finance drones with their spotless countertops and empty built-in bookshelves. There were the ones with last names from history books, for whom jobs were superfluous but could include interior design, or fundraising. Some of those rich people were very good – good at making martinis, good at gossip, good at complaining about problems, because who could be mad at them? Everyone was on a committee of a cultural institution. And almost always, one of these types would marry one of the other types, and they could pretend that they had somehow married outside their bubble. It was a farce, the contortions that rich people would make so as to appear less dripping with privilege. It was true of Alice, too.

Alice met them all when they walked into the admissions office at the Belvedere School, where she, a single, childfree woman with a degree in painting and a minor in puppetry, would decide whether their little darlings would be accepted or not. There were lots of kinds of rich people, but they all wanted to get their children into the school of their choice, because they saw their children's lives like train tracks, each stop leading directly to the next, from Belvedere to Yale to Harvard Law to marriage to children to a country house on Long Island and a large dog named Huckleberry. Alice was just one step, but she

was an important one. There would be an email from Katherine later in the day, she was positive, saying how *very nice* it was to run into her. In the real world, and in her own life, Alice had no power, but in the kingdom of Belvedere, she was a Sith Lord, or a Jedi, depending on whether one's child got in or not.

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## 4

Matt's apartment was always clean. He'd lived there for a year, and had yet to prepare himself more than one meal a day in it – Matt did as many things as possible via app. As a city kid, Alice had also ordered in food a lot, but at least she had picked up the telephone and spoken to other humans. Like many transplants from small towns around the world, Matt seemed to look at New York City as a set to walk through, not thinking too much about what had come before. Alice set her bag down on the long white counter and pulled open the fridge. There were three different kinds of energy drinks, a half-empty kombucha that she'd left there a month ago, a salami, an unwrapped hunk of cheddar cheese that had started to harden around the edges, half a stick of butter, a jar of pickles, several takeout containers, a bottle of champagne, and four Coronas. Alice closed the fridge again, shaking her head.

'Hello? Are you home?' she called, in the direction of Matt's bedroom. There was no answer, and instead of texting him, Alice decided to do the small pile of dirty laundry she'd shoved into her tote bag before going to the hospital. The very best part about Matt's apartment was that it had a dishwasher and a washer/dryer. The dishwasher was wasted on him, as he rarely ate off actual plates, but the washer/dryer was the love of Alice's life. Usually Alice lugged her bag of dirty clothes to the laundromat around the corner from her apartment, which she didn't have to cross a single street to get to, and where they would wash and fold her things and then return the clean clothes to her inside a giant laundry bag dumpling, but the ease with which she could wash her favorite jeans and three pairs of underwear and the shirt she wanted to wear to work tomorrow, that was something special. Standing in front of the open washing machine, Alice decided she

might as well wash what she was wearing, and so she peeled off her jeans and T-shirt and threw those in, too. When the clothes started to spin and swish, she slid in her socks down the slippery floor to Matt's bedroom to find something to throw on. The front door opened, and Alice heard Matt's keys hit the kitchen counter.

'Hi! I'm back here!' she shouted.

Matt appeared in the door of his room, giant horseshoes of sweat on his neck and armpits. He took out his headphones. 'I swear, I almost died. Today was a Mash Attack, which is three circuits, including dead lifts and extra burpees. I drank, like, four beers last night, and I fully thought I was going to puke.'

'That's nice,' Alice said. Matt went to CrossFit enough to have a smaller beer belly than he otherwise might, but not enough to be able to complete a class without threatening to vomit. He said the same thing every time he went.

'Gonna shower.' He looked at her. 'Why are you naked?'

'I'm not naked,' Alice said. 'I'm doing laundry.'

Matt opened his mouth and panted. 'I still think I might boot it.' He walked around Alice's body and pushed open the door to the bathroom. She sat down on the bed and listened to the water go on.

They weren't a great couple, Alice knew, not like some of her friends and acquaintances, the ones who posted rhapsodic Instagram paeans every birthday and anniversary. They didn't like all the same things, or listen to the same music, or have the same hopes and dreams, but when they'd met on an app (of course) and had a drink, the drink had turned into dinner, and the dinner had turned into another drink, and that drink had turned into sex, and now it was a year later and the doorman didn't ask for her name. A year was a decent amount of time. Sam – who was married and therefore knew how these things went – thought that Matt would propose soon. If he did, Alice wasn't sure what she would say. She examined her toenails, which were in need of some more polish and now had only tiny discs of red at the tips, like polka dots. Her fortieth birthday was in a week. She and Matt hadn't made any plans yet, but she thought that if something was going to happen, maybe it would happen then. Her stomach did a little flip thinking about it, as if the organ were trying to turn around and face the other direction.

Marriage seemed like a good deal, most of the time – you always had someone there, and when you were dying, they would be huddled next to you, holding your hand. Of course, that didn't count the marriages that ended in divorce, or the unhappy marriages, where hand-holding was a memory. It didn't count people who died in car accidents, or had fatal heart attacks while sitting at their desks. What was the percentage of people who actually got to die while feeling loved and supported by their spouse? Ten percent? It wasn't just the dying, of course, that made marriage appealing, but that was part of it. Alice was sorry for her father, that she was all he had, and she was afraid that she was too much like him to have anything more. No – she would have less. Leonard had a child. Not just a child – a daughter. If she'd been a boy, and not trained by society to be a good, dutiful caretaker, it might have been different. It had all just gone so fast – her thirties. Her twenties had been a blur, and ten years ago, her friends were just starting to get married and have children – most of them didn't have babies until they were thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five, and so she wasn't that far behind, but suddenly now she was going to be forty, and that was too late, wasn't it? She had friends who were divorced, friends who were on their second marriages. Those always moved along more quickly, so it was easy to see what had been wrong the first time – if a couple got divorced and two years later, one of them was married with a baby on the way, it was no mystery. Alice didn't know if she wanted to have children, but she knew that at some point in the very near future, her not knowing would swiftly transform into a fact, a de facto decision. Why wasn't there more time?

Matt came out of the shower and looked at her hunching over her feet like a worried golem. 'Want to order some food? Maybe fuck around before it comes?' There was a towel around his waist, but it dropped, and he didn't bend to pick it up. His erection waved at her.

Alice nodded. 'Pizza? From the place?'

Matt pushed a few buttons on his phone and then tossed it behind her onto his king-sized bed. 'We have thirty-two to forty minutes,' he said. Matt might not have been great at cooking, or other things, but he was good at sex, and that wasn't nothing.

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Belvedere, like many private schools in the city, was not contained in a single building, but over time had spread across a small patch of the neighborhood like a virus. The lower school and admissions were in the original building, on the south side of 85th Street between Central Park West and Columbus – a compact six-story modern architectural eyesore with excellent air-conditioning and big windows and built-in projection screens and a carpeted library with comfortable chairs in bright colors. The big kids – seventh through twelfth graders – were now in the new building, around the block on 86th Street. Alice was glad not to have to deal with teenagers on a daily basis. The seniors spent the fall loping in and out of the college prep office next door, and seeing their lanky bodies and poreless skin from ten feet away was more than enough exposure. The admissions office was on the second floor, and if Alice craned her neck out the window, she could see the slope up the hill into Central Park.

The admissions office had an airy waiting room, with expensive but well-loved wooden puzzles on the low, child-sized wooden tables, waiting to be played with by anxious parents as their children met with Alice, her colleague Emily, or their boss, Melinda, a formidable woman with wide hips and a rotating selection of chunky, dangling necklaces that the children always wanted to touch. ‘Tricks of the trade!’ she would say whenever a mother complimented them, the woman trembling like a greyhound in her exercise clothes. It was also what Alice and Emily would say when they snuck out for cigarette breaks during the day. Emily would lean her head around the half wall that separated their desks and say ‘Tricks of the trade?’ and they’d pop out the

emergency door in the back of the school and smoke in the small gray square of pavement where the garbage cans lived.

‘Did you see Bike Dad today? I fucking love Bike Dad,’ Emily said. She was twenty-eight and in the middle of wedding season, which was exactly like bar mitzvah season, only you had to pay for your own outfit and present. Emily had gone to eight weddings over the summer, which Alice knew because Emily was a drunk texter, especially when she was feeling sad. ‘I bet he’s a Leo. Don’t you think?’ she said now. ‘He’s got that Big Leo Energy. The way he pulls the bike up on the sidewalk with both kids still on it? You know that thing has to weigh, like, two hundred pounds, and he just, *raaarrrrrr*.’ She extended a fearsome claw.

‘Nope,’ Alice said, taking a drag. The cigarette was Emily’s, a Parliament. It tasted like wet newspapers, if one could set wet newspapers on fire. Alice had mostly quit several times over the last decade, but somehow it had never quite stuck, despite the gum, the books, and the disapproving looks from strangers and friends. Thank god for Emily, Alice thought. Almost none of the younger staff smoked anymore – they didn’t even vape! They smoked pot but could barely roll joints. They took edibles. They were babies. Alice knew that it was healthier, sure, it was better for their lungs and probably the planet, too, but it made her feel lonely.

‘He was wearing a striped T-shirt, like Picasso, only hot and not creepy. I love him.’ Emily scuffed the sole of her shoe on the concrete.

‘His wife does pickup,’ Alice said. ‘What about Ray? Saw him come in, what’s going on with that?’

Ray Young was an assistant kindergarten teacher and played the ukulele, and he and Emily slept together once a month, give or take. Emily always swore that it wasn’t going to happen again, it was just that he walked his dog by her stoop, which Alice thought of as a *Melrose Place* problem, but Emily had never seen *Melrose Place* and so she kept her thoughts to herself. He was twenty-five and perfectly available, which meant that Emily found him boring.

‘Oh, you know,’ Emily said, rolling her eyes. ‘He fucks like his parents are watching.’

Alice let out a cough of smoke. ‘You are terrible.’

Emily winked at her. 'Let's go back inside before we get detention.' She dropped her cigarette and crushed it. 'Oh, by the way, how's your dad doing?'

'Not great,' Alice said. She flicked her still-burning cigarette to the ground.