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In the Duffel By the Door By: Joshua Lepard

He sat up and wiped himself while she stood and stared at herself in the mirror. She did a turn and looked at her thighs and the redness of her ass. She caught him looking and they both smiled. He stood and passed her the towel. She wiped and he tried to near toward the mirror but couldn't bring himself to see the bare reflection. So he pulled the covers up to his belly button and looked around the room waiting for her to do something. She zipped her duffel and placed it near the door.

"I'm going to the bathroom," she said and left. She was gone for a while, but then he heard the toilet water slosh down the drain and she returned without the flush of freshness she carried out.

" I love you," he said as she closed the door.

" Don't."

" You know I do."

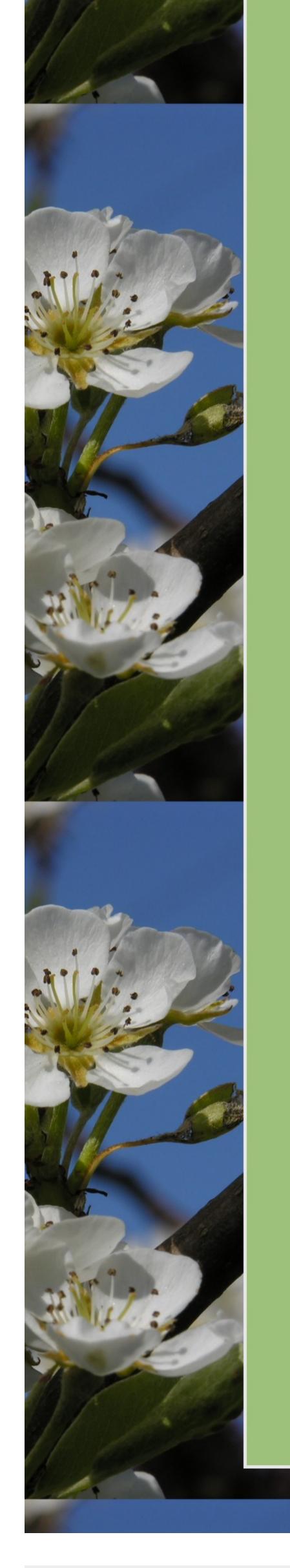
" Please. Don't," she said standing above him. She wouldn't look in the mirror this time.

" I try to tell you as often as possible," he said feeling proud because he did say it on a regular basis.

"Not now." She didn't put the lingerie back on, instead choosing sweatpants and a shirt with a singer's neon face licking an ice-cream cone. The shirt had stains of wine and paint from previous endeavors. "Something's not right."

"Well I'm right here, what is it?" He gestured for her to join him. She remained standing at the foot of the bed looking at him with dark eyes.

"There's nothing you can do now." She stood without knowing for herself what to do. She looked at him in her bed, his chest had red splotches and only a small tuft of hair between his nipples. Behind him hung two strands of clothespins securing polaroid photos of moments with her friends having good times. She looked at his smile and his eyes and saw that he was proud of himself. She assumed he thought he had all the answers. Both of them knew he didn't.



" Come lay with me, and let me hold you."

" I'm gonna go talk to my mom."

" It's past three."

" I'll wake her up."

" Can't this wait?"

" I'm going to talk to my mom."

" Why won't you talk to me? Tell me what's wrong."

"Hold on." She left the door open and walked up the stairs without regard to the rest of the sleeping house. He heard the pomeranian's small paws hit the floor when it jumped off of her mother's bed. Muffled voices worried him. Had he hurt her? He got out of bed and pulled on his pants and then sat back down listening to the indiscernible sounds above him. He waited for some time then put the rest of his clothes on. She came back down with heavy feet and closed the door.

" What is it?"

"Nothing," she removed her clothes and fell into bed next to him. "I'm tired, would you like to watch something?"

" Please talk to me." He stroked her hair and she pulled away.

" I don't want to talk, would you like to watch something?" He looked into her brown eyes and they revealed nothing but the brilliance of her irises. She didn't smile or frown. She kissed him and turned off the lamp on the nightstand before rolling over. He sat in the dark looking at the silhouette of her curved body.

They woke when her phone's alarm played her favorite song. She got up and changed and paced around the room the way anyone does before going away. She made sure to double check everything. His clothes were still on so he tied his shoes and watched her from the bed.

" Good morning!" She smiled to her duffel bag unzipping it and fingering the contents.

"Morning beautiful," he said. She looked up at him and left the room. He heard her in the bathroom and decided to put on his coat and follow her. Her hands were full of dry shampoo, a toothbrush, and makeup bags. He'd never seen her wear makeup before in the short time he had known her. It had been a full year, but he considered anything under lifelong as short lived.

"Hi."

"Hello."

She walked passed him and back into her room to pack the makeup. He followed her with his hands in his pockets.

" Would you like to talk?" he prodded.

" I can't wait to see Alabama Shakes! I know this isn't my first time, but it's different every time and I love Caroline and Marcy."

" You know what I mean."

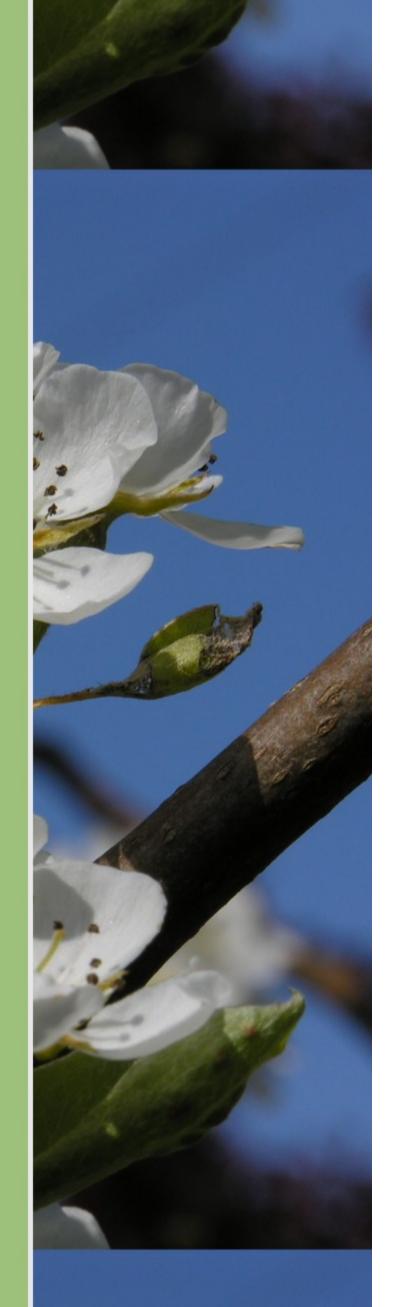
" It'll be interesting with Tyler there since you and Jack won't be going, but Marcy says she loves him and he's hilarious so it'll be fun."

" Does it bother you that I'm not going?"

"Nope. I know you don't want to, and it's probably best if you don't. It's not good to have anyone on the fence there. Caroline and I will be in one tent, and Marcy and Tyler will be in theirs so it works out this way."

" You do know I love you, right?" He knelt beside her and her duffel and put his arm around her.

" To the moon and back, of course!" She smiled and jumped up and slung the duffel bag around her shoulder. Him and her mother helped her pack her car. They said nothing to each other, making separate conversation with the daughter while she focused on what she might have forgotten. It had been a while since he had seen a sunrise, but even now clouds muddled the color. He watched them morph and drift up into oblivion.



"Your car is blocking me," she said. She pecked his lips and got in her car. He followed her to the window.

" Is everything alright?" He said through the crack.

" My love," She blinked. "Everything is fine. I'm about to have the time of my life. We weren't trying. I'll be back soon enough, and we can talk then." Though, too much time would pass, almost a week before they saw each other again. Time enough for him to work his muscles to exhaustion, and time enough for her to enjoy forgetting home.

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