

WHAT COMES NEXT

Some things we walk away from, even when the road  
ahead is uncertain.

The gravel crunched softly as the car's headlights filled the kitchen. It could still be James. He would fling open the back door and set his satchel, stuffed with papers, on the entryway rug. He would drop books on the counter, his blazer over a chairback. He would loosen his tie. He would kiss her.

The doorbell rang. Jess didn't move. It rang again. She stood, her chair scraping the floor, flipping light switches as she made her way to the front door. It was Denise, the therapist. "You're home! I thought I wrote the wrong date."

Jess rubbed the small of her back with one hand, the other resting lightly on her pregnant belly. "I decided to lie down. I didn't mean to sleep so long." Their eyes met, and Jess looked away. "James isn't here." Just like that. The bare fact of his absence.

"Should we reschedule?" Denise looked concerned.

"His lecture circuit," Jess shrugged. "He's so busy right now." Then, "It was so nice of you to come."

"I like home sessions." Denise draped her coat over the sofa, was slipping off her shoes. "It helps to see couples in their own environment." She smiled again, but it faltered. "Give him a few minutes. Will you show me around?"

Jess nodded. They padded from room to room. She pointed out the blue and gold tiles James had insisted they ship back from some villa in Tuscany, the Kilim rugs, the Miro in the hallway-

stick figures drowning in a sea of stars and dots. Finally, she slid the glass door back and stepped outside.

"The rose garden." Jess announced. All around them in the purple light mounds and bunches and creeping tentacles of roses climbed trellises and towers, covered the ground and arched overhead, in shades from ivory to magenta.

"The ones in flower shops," Jess explained, "are Chinese hybrids. These are old English garden roses, from a few rare strains. They've survived the fall of Rome. They're the roses Shakespeare wrote about."

"My husband sends me a dozen every year on my birthday," Denise mused. "Just think of having that, any day that you liked."

"Oh no." Jess laughed softly and shook her head. "James would never cut them."

Inside, she made tea and gestured to her office. "Do you mind? I have a reading tonight." Denise followed her into a small office tucked under the stairs and looked around as Jess gathered papers from a cluttered desk. On a large bulletin board were scraps of cloth, advertisements, photos, a comic strip." The woman busied herself looking around. "This is my place. For when I'm writing," Jess explained. She was suddenly very tired. She sat down.

"He's not coming, is he?" Denise asked.

Jess was so still that the word, when it came, seemed like a thunderclap. "No."

"I think I need to tell you something, Jess," Denise said, her words careful, deliberate.

A sudden tightness passed over her belly, and she swore she saw, for just a second, the impression of a small foot, just below her ribcage.

"Jess, you need to divorce him."

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In the parking lot, her mouth filled with saliva and she had to spit in the bushes, steadying herself against a post. She couldn't do this on an empty stomach. The cafeteria was closing, station by station. She spooned canned peaches and cottage cheese from the half-empty salad bar, eating half of it while she waited to pay. The man in line behind her—young, no, not so young—asked her if she was alright. She nodded but, to her horror, it became a great wracking sob.

His arms were around her then, absurdly, the tray gone somewhere. His shirt was flannel, soft and woodsy smelling. The baby, pinioned between them, was perfectly still. When she could breathe, she pressed a crumpled bill to the counter and ran.

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She was late, the small lecture hall fuller than she'd expected. The director, already at the lectern, nodded in relief

and introduced her to polite applause. Jess crossed the stage quickly, her book in hand, feeling their eyes on her swollen body. She read a few poems, smiled, laughed. She hardly knew what she did.

She remembered, just in time, to introduce the next author, was startled to see the man from the cafeteria striding forward, smiling broadly, now pumping her hand, now sending a warm puff of breath to break against her earlobe, as he whispered, "We meet again."

She sat in front-row, the baby roiling and squirming inside her. The man read a story, a fairytale about the death of a marriage. It was good; achingly, hauntingly good. His words were velvet and brass, incantatory, perfect. And she knew it was not fiction.

When it was over she grabbed her things and hurried into the hallway, but she couldn't leave. She found herself, instead, in the autograph line. She fumbled for her wallet, bought a copy of his book, and clutched against her chest, waiting. When it was her turn, he looked up, pen in hand, and they said nothing. He bent his head to write, and pressed the book back into her hands.

In the car she read it: "You are not what is happening to you. You are what comes next."

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Jess saw them, before she'd even taken off her coat, and gasped. A dozen fat white blooms in the moonlight. The heirloom Albas. Over years James had trained them to climb the rear wall of the garden, in the dappled shade of a pear tree. There was a note, in his bold, slanting hand: "Forgive Me." But when she bent closer, she could see the petals, crushed on one side. Already damaged. The most practical of sacrifices.

She dropped them, vase and all, in the trash.