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## Ginger Tea

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# Ginger Tea

Eve sat at the kitchen table, dressed only in a long t-shirt and underwear, sipping black coffee from a purple mug and staring out of the window. It was the only window in the room, and in the mornings she could see right into her neighbor's kitchen across the street. The little Jarred girl was having a birthday party, and her mother was baking her a cake. Eve and her husband, Dom, were invited to this party, along with the other residents of Highmore Street. Everyone on the street had accepted the invitation. The Jarreds were well liked by all the neighbors except Eve, who hated anyone with children. They had received the invitation in the mail a month ago, and Dom had stuck it to the fridge door with a smiley-face magnet he had painted himself.

Eve watched as her neighbor pulled from the cupboards a mixing bowl, flour, sugar, baking powder. From the fridge: eggs, butter. Eve took a sip of her coffee and set the mug down on the coaster, so as not to leave a ring on the blue tablecloth, a wedding present from Dom's grandmother. "May you and your family eat many happy meals on this tablecloth," the card had read. That card, along with the rest of their wedding memorabilia, was stuffed into a box in the garage, next to a bag of old clothes that needed to be taken to Goodwill.

Dom came into the kitchen, yawning and scratching his chest. "Is there any coffee left?" he asked as he searched the top cupboards for the box of Cheerio's.

"No, I've had the whole pot," said Eve. She hadn't slept well the night before, it was difficult to judge how long she'd been awake. "I'll make more." She didn't move, only gazed out of the window as she spoke. Beth Jarred, with her flowered apron covering her khakis and measuring cup in hand, made such a perfect housewife picture within the frame of her kitchen window. If she had looked up, she might have seen Eve in her long shirt, an old one of Dom's and stained with yellow paint, greasy hair pulled back and calves curled around the legs of the chair like a child. But Beth Jarred wouldn't look up, her only daughter's birthday cake took all her attention. She cracked four eggs into her mixing bowl. Eve imagined she could hear

each yolk plop onto the metal surface. She didn't own a mixing bowl, wasn't sure there were eggs in the fridge either.

"What about tea?" Dom said. Eve looked up at her husband, her coffee mug halfway to her lips. He was leaning over the counter, his hands folded on the hideous green top. The gold of his wedding band glinted at her. Her own ring hung from a chain around her neck, tucked under the collar of the white t-shirt. When she wore it on her finger, she had the tendency to take it off and leave it in odd places: the fridge, the medicine cabinet, the gas station.

"We haven't had tea in years," she said thoughtfully. Not since their second date, a picnic on top of Mount Sentinel. Dom had brought apple cinnamon tea in a thermos for her to drink if she got cold. She hadn't needed to. In the kitchen across the street, Beth Jarred was mixing the cake ingredients together with a hand-held mixer, stopping periodically to scrape the sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula.

"I know," Dom said. "What if I make some of that ginger tea you like? We could use those fancy cups with the gold rims, the ones your mom gave us last Christmas."

Two years ago, when they were in their first months of marriage, Eve would have teased him. "And can we talk with English accents, too?" she would have said, wrinkling her nose the way he liked. Instead she said, "I'll make more coffee." For the first year, they'd been genuinely happy. Then she'd gotten pregnant and had a miscarriage. Then Dom had disappeared for two days and slept with the owner of an art gallery that regularly showed his work. Now, more than a year later, he sometimes spent days in his studio, swiping at huge canvases with oversized paintbrushes. It was wearing, living in a house with a person who spent most of his time in another world. Outside, the leaves were starting to fall down from the trees, covering the sidewalk and her own 1987 Ford Escort. There were no other cars on the street, the neighbors had theirs in garages where they belonged. Traditionally, when she'd married Dom, the car should have become *theirs*, but Eve could only think of it as *hers*. Eve had bought the car with her own money right before he proposed, and she reasoned that when they had kids to worry about, they would get something with more room, more reliability, maybe a minivan. Across the street, Beth

Jarred was preheating the oven.

Dom started to hum. The tune sounded vaguely like “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” The art gallery owner’s name had been Lucy. Eve realized that her silence must be making her husband uncomfortable; he couldn’t even paint without the radio on. She took one hand from her mug and gestured to the window. “Do you think they have curtains? Do you think she even cares that we can see her?”

Dom came to stand behind his wife, his hands now resting on the back of her chair. They watched as Beth Jarred poured the creamy white cake batter into a rectangular pan, smoothing the surface with the rubber spatula. “They have curtains. I’ve seen them.”

Eve twisted in her chair to look up at him. “When were you at the Jarred’s?” In the two years they’d lived on Highmore Street, Dom and Eve had never made an effort to become friendly with the neighbors. She was perfectly fine with their image of the eccentric artist and his antisocial wife.

She felt him stiffen, and though he tried to keep his face expressionless, she thought she saw him wince. “Last summer, they had a barbecue. You were gone.”

Eve took another drink of her now-lukewarm coffee, hands tight around the purple mug. “I know where I was.”

He moved around the table to sit in the other chair. She knew he wanted to hold her, but knew her well enough to know that she might want distance. Dom reached his hands to the middle of the table, palms facing the ceiling. She was meant to reach for him with her own hands, but she kept them safely clenched around her mug. “Where?” he said.

“I told you, I was at my parents’.” That was part of the truth, all he was ever going to get. Eve wanted him to be tortured a little, to speculate about any affairs she might have had with a sheep farmer from Stevensville or a high school teacher. She had gone to her parents’ house for a few days, but they were out of town and she’d been uncomfortable. She spent the rest of the time at her friend Anne’s in Polson. Beth put the cake into the oven, middle rack. After a few moments, Eve commented quietly, “The Jarred’s have a nice kitchen.”

Dom now leaned into the back of his chair and ran his hands through his curly hair. Eve forced herself to keep looking at

him: tall, lanky frame, crooked nose, eyes the color of black coffee. He wasn't looking at her. "The rest of the house is nice, too. I went over there a couple of times after that barbecue."

What did he mean by that? How much had he seen of the house? The bathroom, the basement, the bedrooms? The bed? Under the sheets? "Really," Eve said, just to say something. She thought of Mr. Jarred, who worked at a bank and came home each night after his wife and child had gone to bed.

Dom's eyes flickered to her face for a second, then back to the window. "I had to talk to someone, you know? You had just left and I was hurt, Evie. She talked about her husband threatening to leave her, we helped each other."

"Why didn't you talk to Lucy?" That seemed logical, Eve thought. He had already slept with her, she assumed they had kept in touch.

"Laura," Dom said softly.

"Laura," Eve repeated. "Why didn't you talk to Laura?" Eve had only met her once, at one of Dom's show openings. Laura had informed Eve that she just loved Dom's work, owned five of his paintings. That was more than they had in their whole house; Dom hated to look at the canvases after he'd finished with them. Eve had hated the woman even then, for being more a part of Dom's world than his wife was.

"She was in Toronto at the time. She lives there now." He sighed. "I wouldn't have even gone to that barbecue if you hadn't left, Evie. I wouldn't have needed to."

Eve gripped her coffee mug, half expecting a suffocating wave of rage to wash over her, but all she felt was a niggle of annoyance. So this new friendship of his--maybe beyond friendship?--was her fault, was it? Well, if he cheated once, that probably made it more likely he would do it again. She wouldn't be surprised. She couldn't argue with him, though, it was all circular. He would feel guilty for not being there for her when she was grieving over their lost child, she would feel guilty about running away. She watched as Beth Jarred took a sponge from the sink and wiped down all the counters and the stove top. Beth pulled the cake from the oven, inserted a toothpick into the middle to test if it was done. The toothpick came out clean. She put the cake into the fridge.

Eve could no longer feel her husband watching her from

across the table. Though she didn't hear him get up, she suspects he has retreated to his downstairs studio. She dipped her finger into her coffee again, let the cold black liquid drip from her fingernail back to the mug. She inhaled the rich scent, watched as Beth frosted the cake with a chocolate frosting she no doubt made herself. Eve hated frosting. She liked her flavors to grab attention: the spicy, bitter sweetness of ginger, not the seductive, sweet smoothness of frosting. After a few more minutes, Eve got up and went to their bedroom to get dressed. Though she wasn't really looking forward to spending an afternoon in the home of Beth Jarred, she couldn't pass up the chance to observe Dom and Beth together. She needed to see those curtains.

Three and a half hours later, as early afternoon was wearing into late, Eve walked across the street with her husband. She was dressed in a jean skirt and a long-sleeved blue shirt of Dom's, which she had carefully inspected for paint splashes before putting on. Dom had come back upstairs as she was going through his closet. He hadn't said anything, just pulled a shirt at random from a hanger and left the room. When she came out of the bedroom, he was sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for her and holding a carefully wrapped package.

"So what did we get her?" she said, trying to make her voice light.

"Just a little picture I painted," Dom said, standing up and grabbing the keys from the table next to the front door. "It's of her and her mom."

Eve started to open the door, then paused. "Exactly how much time have you been spending over there, anyway?" She was careful not to raise her voice.

He put his hand on top of hers on the doorknob. "It was all last summer, Evie. You were gone."

"You've never painted me."

"I wanted to, remember?" Eve had forgotten, but she remembered now. He had started a painting of her when her stomach had first started to round. She wondered if he had painted over it, or if it was still in his studio somewhere. "You know, we don't have to go if you don't want to. We can just stay here."

Eve thought about that for a moment. "No. We have to go, we

already said we would.”

“Let’s go, then, we’re already late.”

And so they left, Eve hugging herself against the chill. They stood on the Jarred’s doorstep for a few moments before she realized that she was the one standing closest to the doorbell. As she reached her hand forward, she noticed that there was a tiny blob of white paint on the right cuff of the shirt she was wearing. She wished she had bothered to look through her own closet for something to wear, or at least brushed her hair. Beth, like Laura had been, was always stylishly and sleekly dressed.

The little Jarred girl answered the door. Eve couldn’t remember her name, should’ve asked Dom before they left the house. “Welcome to my party!” the little girl said. She was wearing a dress patterned with tulips, a witch’s hat, and oversized lion slippers.

“Thanks, Katie,” Dom said to the girl, and handed her the present. Katie, right, that was her name.

“What is it?” Katie asked, shaking her gift with both hands.

“Guess you’ll have to open it and find out,” Dom said.

“Who are you?” Katie looked up at Eve.

Eve tried to shake off all events and words of the day, so that she could sound somewhat cheerful for the child. “I’m Eve. How old are you today, Katie?”

“I’m eight.” She studied Eve for a moment. “I like your hair.”

“Thanks,” Eve said, thinking how much nicer her long hair would have looked if she had taken the time to shower.

“Dom!” Beth Jarred came to the door and stood behind her child. She was still dressed in khakis and a white sweater, not a smear of chocolate frosting to be seen. Her eyes were overbright, though, and her fair skin a little flushed. “Eve! I’m so glad you could come! And so is Katie, aren’t you, honey?” Katie nodded, the point of her hat bobbing. “Well, come in, come in, it’s getting chilly out!” Beth steered her daughter away from the door so that Eve and her husband could enter.

Dom put his hand low on Eve’s back as they stepped into the house. The door opened into the kitchen, like their own. The Jarred’s kitchen was much whiter than theirs, which made the room look much brighter than Dom and Eve’s hideous green one. Dom had said when they first moved in that he would

paint it, but Eve knew that he probably would never get around to it. Katie, already bored with the new party guests, ran to the basement stairs with her gift.

“Katie, darling, take off that ridiculous hat, won’t you?” Beth called after her, but her daughter didn’t hear her. She grimaced. “It’s so silly, but her father gave it to her and she won’t take it off.”

“Kids are like that,” said Dom. Eve wondered how he knew that.

Beth smiled at him and went over to the kitchen table, which held several open wine bottles for the adults and Sprite for the kids. “Would either of you like something to drink?”

“I’d like some white wine,” Dom said, inspecting the bottles. He almost never drank wine, he preferred hard liquor.

“What about you, Eve?”

“I hate white,” Eve said.

“Red for you, then,” Beth said, her white-blond hair swaying into her face as she poured. Eve suspected that, from the way her neighbor stared so intently at the liquid as it reached the glass, that she had already had her fair share of the wine that evening. Beth straightened and put on her smile again. “All the adults have gathered in the living room, so let’s go say hello, shall we?” Dom followed her through the doorway, wine glass in hand. He looked back at Eve to make sure she was coming.

Eve stayed in the kitchen for a moment. There was something so...sterile about this kitchen. There was almost no evidence that a child lived here, save for a crudely-drawn picture of a cat stuck to the fridge with an alphabet magnet. If Eve was Katie’s mother, she would have stuck every doodle on that fridge to cover up the whiteness. She turned to look out of the window, to see if she could see anything in her house, and there were the curtains: white, of course, with miniscule daisies and ruffled edges. She had expected something a little more seductive, provocative, if curtains could be that way. As it was, Eve found them sickening and resolved to go out the next day and buy bright purple ones with orange polka dots.

She heard Dom laugh, that great booming guffaw of his that was so distinctive. He was probably laughing at one of his own puns. His favorite one was about the history professor who only read “hysterical” fiction. Eve went into the living room to stand



between him and Beth on the white carpet, next to the fireplace. She didn't recognize many of the other guests, though most of them lived on the same street she did. The elderly woman on the couch, balancing a plate of bread and cheese on her lap, was maybe one of Katie's grandmothers. She didn't see Mr. Jarred anywhere, even though it was Saturday and the banks were closed.

Eve couldn't pay attention to the conversation, which mostly consisted of all the neighbors sharing memories of little Katie: the time she ran away, the day she fell from the Wrights' swing set and broke her arm, her first day of school. At one point, Katie and her friends came upstairs, playing tag. All of them were wearing socks, except Katie, who was still in her lion slippers. Eve willed them to be careful on the slippery linoleum of the kitchen, especially after she saw Katie stop several times to pull one of her slippers back on. She was pulled into the talk when one of the men who lived down the street said, "It's Eve, isn't it?"

Eve nodded, self-conscious now that everyone was looking at her.

"So which one of those rugrats over there is yours?"

"Yes," the woman next to him smiled, "You two are such a good-looking couple, your child must be beautiful."

Eve opened her mouth to answer, but Dom beat her to it. "We don't have any children." His hand went to her lower back again.

There was awkward silence. The man who had asked the question excused himself to go check on the kids. "Eve?" Beth said. "Do you mind helping me in the kitchen for a moment?" Eve handed her wine glass to her husband and followed her neighbor into the kitchen.

"You must excuse Bill," Beth said, handing Eve a cheese tray as soon as she stepped through the doorway. "He has almost no social skills whatsoever."

"It's fine," Eve said.

Beth opened the fridge and pulled a vegetable tray from the top shelf. "Dom told me about your miscarriage last summer," she said. "I'm so sorry." Her face was full of pity as she looked at Eve.

"Yeah, he told me you two talked." Eve's tone was more

clipped than she meant it to be.

“Please don’t read anything into what happened,” The look of pity changed to a pleading one. “We were both drunk and hurt...Peter is never home, Katie is such a handful...it was just kissing, I swear. I would never cheat on Peter.”

“Stop,” Eve said. “I understand.” But she didn’t understand, she was too startled at Beth’s outburst to process the information just then. She mostly wanted to leave the kitchen, which was starting to remind her of a hospital room in all its sterile whiteness. She wanted to go back to the living room where at least some of the guests were wearing colored clothing.

“Are you sure you don’t want some tea or something? I hear you like ginger,” Beth pleaded. “We can get Dom and talk this whole thing out, right here.”

Eve started to get angry then; her hands gripped the cheese tray like they had gripped her coffee mug that morning. She knew that Dom had told Beth about Eve leaving, but did he have to share of all his wife’s likes and dislikes with the neighbors too? Would she meet Mr. Jarred one day and find out he knew whether she preferred Herbal Essences over Tresemme? “You don’t want to leave your guests,” Eve said. “After you.” She stepped out of the doorway so that Beth could enter the room first. Beth dropped her eyes and started to walk.

Beth didn’t see her daughter’s slipper lying in the middle of the doorway, but Eve did, right before Beth tripped over it, causing her to crash hard. Carrots, pickles, broccoli, and radishes created a kaleidoscope of color on the white carpet. Beth had fallen on her stomach, her face planted into the ground, legs awkwardly bent. The party guests gasped and rushed to see if she was alright, Dom included, but Eve just laughed as she hadn’t for over a year, as if the slipper had been placed there for her own amusement.

If Dom had stood up to lead her away from the scene, her catharsis would have been ruined. Eve was glad he was helping Beth up and to a recliner in the corner, his hands carefully distant from her chest and hips. The other guests were picking up vegetables from the carpet. It looked like some bizarre scavenger hunt, which only made Eve laugh harder. Her left hand clutched at the middle of her chest, where her wedding ring rested. She could feel her fury evaporating, like steam from

her coffee mug, with every shake of her shoulders.

As the sound of a car door slamming reached them from the garage, Eve looked toward the kitchen, the way out. Her husband understood the signal. He edged himself around the recliner and the kneeling party guests, touched his hand to her lower back, and they walked together home.

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