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I'll Pray for Him

"Just a couple more. Take turns pretending to tell each other a secret," Aunt Karen says with her face hidden behind her digital Nikon, her red hair falling over her shoulders. We hear the shutter sound a few more times before she lowers the camera and walks over to the table behind us. She repositions a few unclaimed wildflower seed packets that we're using as seating cards and a canvas with a painted tree, its leaves stamped on by the thumbs of our guests.

We asked if she would take photos of the wedding instead of giving us a gift because she has a great eye, but also because she was invited to both parts of the wedding: the ceremony, held at an eco-friendly bed and breakfast in Ridgefield, Connecticut where same-sex marriage is legal, and the reception held the next day in the backyard of KiRa's childhood home in rural New Jersey. Aunt Karen was a ninja at the ceremony yesterday, ducking down the rows of chairs, finding space between people's heads and shoulders. KiRa and I told everyone we wanted a moment alone in our bridal suite before we walked down the aisle together, but Aunt Karen followed us into the room, clicking away. We had to ask her to leave.

Today, she catches us upstairs in KiRa's childhood bedroom, our bridal suite for the reception.

"Don't mind me," she announces when she opens the door, smiling. She snaps shots of my sisters as they stick bobby pins in our hair and accentuate our eyes with shades of midnight and sapphire. We decided against having any kind of bridal party, but friends, parents, KiRa's younger brother, and every one of my eleven siblings have all had specific assignments over the last few months. They've been there to cut burlap for the tablecloths, tie dried lavender into bunches, put candles in mason jars, repaint the entryway and kitchen, move furniture into the back room, set up the tables and chairs in the tent, and a myriad of other duties. Most of my family will be contribut-

ing to the mini-concert we're having during the reception, complete with an eclectic band made up of a couple friends, a cousin, and a former coworker.

Aunt Karen stays in the room until they finish our hair and makeup, then snaps shots of my sisters handling the elaborate lacing on the back of my dress. KiRa and I are both excited to wear our dresses again, but we add cotton shrugs to cover our shoulders, in case it gets too chilly. The tent's heated, but it's still November. When they finish and we're ready to make our way outside, Aunt Karen runs ahead so she can take shots of us coming down the stairs together. She pauses us at various steps, has us lean against the banister, look at each other, look in the same direction, put our foreheads together, close our eyes. We've been in the kitchen for ten minutes now. The room serves as the pathway to our reception and it's filled with white lights, candles, and tree wall décor. We don't have the heart to tell her to stop.

Within a minute, KiRa's dad, Steve, opens the sliding glass door and comes into the kitchen from the back deck. Behind him, I can see our chiminea warming station, gift table, and makeshift bar with Bota Box wine and multiple kegs of craft beer. The fire in the chiminea is blazing. "Ladies... it's time," he says, closing the door behind him. "You've got a tent full of people out there who can't wait to see you."

We nod and take deep breaths. Aunt Karen looks at Steve and responds, "Okay, they're coming. Last one."

KiRa looks at me, eyes wide. "You ready?"

I smile, then place my palms on either side of KiRa's face and kiss her. We're already married, but this moment—the moment before we enter a tent filled with 150 people—feels larger than I expected.

We step outside and I don't feel cold at all. The candlelight and warmth from the chiminea embraces me. I take a deep breath and give KiRa a three-pulse hand squeeze for "I love you." She does the same back. I know we're thinking the same thing. This is where it all started. Ten years ago, long before I would realize why my relationships with men always seemed one-sided, long before I would admit to myself that I was in love with her, long before our first kiss, this is where we spent our summer nights together. Every weekend, after the Friday night show at the Growing Stage, where KiRa and I met as camp counselors, a small group of us would gather here. We'd spend all night in the backyard, doing somersaults on a trampoline covered with balloons, eating skittles and zucchini bread, dying one another's hair obnoxious shades of red, blue, and purple.

Aunt Karen and Steve run ahead and we step off the deck together. The entrance to the tent is open and I can already see faces. Aunts, uncles, cousins, friends from all walks of life, KiRa's gammy, my great-aunt Dot. They're all standing. Even my aunt Kathy, who said she couldn't make it up from Florida, waves at us, smiling, from inside the tent. Later, she'll apologize for crash-

ing our wedding; she'll tell us she "just couldn't miss it" and ended up buying a last-minute ticket. We'll tell her, "We wouldn't have had it any other way."

Managing the guest list was my least favorite part of planning our wedding. By the time our "please respond by" date had passed, we were still waiting on at least thirty guests. A few people even messaged their replies on Facebook. A couple months ago, KiRa and I were going over our seating chart in the dining room of our Binghamton apartment.

"Only one today," I told her as I made my way to the kitchen to retrieve my coffee. I'm always leaving it in the microwave. I tossed the mail on the edge of the dining room table, careful not to disturb the seating chart circles she had scattered across its yellow surface.

When I returned and sat down in the chair next to KiRa, she said, "I still don't know if I should put my parents at separate tables." The rays from the sun passed through the window, hitting my eyes, so I moved my chair a few inches closer to her. She leaned over and pulled my legs onto her lap.

KiRa's parents' divorce isn't final yet, but their separation is. Her mother moved out of the house she had lived in for twenty years soon after KiRa and I began turning our ten-year friendship into something more. I exhaled and squeezed KiRa's shoulder.

"Don't even go there yet," I said. "We'll cross that one when we have to." KiRa pushed a handful of white paper circles across the table and stretched her arms above her head. I was about to reach for the familiar brown envelope sticking out of the pile, but instead started sorting through the rest of the day's batch. Our current NYSEG statement. The weekly Binghamton Price Chopper sales flyer. A couple credit card offers addressed to someone with a combination of our last names, Randolph R. Fritzky.

"More for Randy," I said, smirking as I passed the envelopes to KiRa.

She laughed and tossed them to the side. "That guy gets more mail than we do."

I glanced down at a combined David's Bridal and Men's Warehouse coupon offering 25% off bridesmaid dresses on one side and two-for-one tuxedos on the other. I held the men's side up for KiRa to see, and raised my eyebrows. "You sure you don't want to marry me in a suit?" I asked.

"Why do they keep sending us these things?" she said, shaking her head and snatching the flyer from my hands. She inspected it for a moment and then smiled at me, brushing a few strands of hair behind her ears. "You could totally pull off a tux, sweetie, but I think it's a bit late to return our dresses."

I took back the flyer, and then added it to Randy's discarded mail. "Agreed," I said. "No tuxes."

We went shopping for our wedding dresses together; our moms, KiRa's gammy, and a handful of my sisters tagged along. When we arrived at David's

Bridal for our appointment, a short girl with way too much sparkley blue eye makeup greeted us.

"Hi! I'm Courtney!" she said, standing so close to me that I could smell her vanilla-scented perfume. Her eyes darted around the room, never meeting mine. "Are you KiRa?"

"Nope," I said with a higher voice than I intended to use. I turned and gestured toward KiRa, who had her arm around Gammy. "I'm Rosie," I said to Courtney, placing my palm on my chest.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" She looked at KiRa and then at me, shaking her head. "Janice told me you were the bride!" She smacked her right thigh and let out a short, awkward laugh. She took a couple steps toward KiRa and regrouped.

"Congratulations, Bride!" She gave her a quick hug. I couldn't help but wonder how many strangers she was obligated to embrace in a single day.

"This is your welcome bag." She handed KiRa a plastic bag, which held nothing but David's Bridal catalogs and a complimentary pen as she took in the size of our group. "Who do we have with you today?"

KiRa gave me a look. It was time for clarification.

I saw her catch Courtney's eyes. "We're both brides, actually."

Courtney looked like a robot running low on battery power. "Oh goodness. I'm sorry. This is a double appointment then? I didn't realize. You're both getting married?" She seemed to be short-circuiting.

"Yes," I said. "To each other."

Her eyes widened a bit before she caught herself. "Oh! Oh, wow!"

Courtney gave me my hug and then nearly shouted, "This is gonna be so much fun!"

I wouldn't say the experience was fun; Courtney seemed set on dressing KiRa like a mermaid, and me like I was about to receive my First Holy Communion. But we did end up leaving with two lovely, reasonably priced dresses that complimented each other: mine with capped sleeves, and KiRa's strapless.

After that appointment we were constantly bombarded with wedding ads geared toward heterosexual couples. We were getting used to it. I took a sip of my coffee and then picked up the small brown envelope.

"Who's that one from?" KiRa asked, lifting her chin and glancing toward my hands.

"Not sure," I replied. "It just has a return address. I can't remember who lives in New Milford." I broke the seal of the envelope and pulled out the card.

Next to the printed words "Wish we could be there," someone had written a checkmark. No sad face. No message for the brides at the bottom. Just a sloppy checkmark. I turned the card over to see if they chose a word for our

“In one word, what do you wish for the brides” wordle. But there was just an empty space.

“Well, it’s definitely a no,” I said to KiRa, handing her the card. I slid my legs off her lap and pushed my chair away from the table. “Who does that?”

I got up to retrieve my laptop from the bedroom so I could look up the address. But, as I sat down on my bed and opened the computer, I realized who the RSVP was from.

“I think it’s Uncle Billy,” I called to KiRa. I opened the address book on my desktop, typed *Bill* in the search bar, clicked enter, and proved myself right. By the time I closed my computer, KiRa was sitting next to me.

Sitting there with his “No” in my hand, I felt numb. I felt isolated in a way I hadn’t before, not even when I first came out. I tossed it in the manila folder where we’d been keeping the rest, shrugged, and told KiRa I wasn’t surprised. She took my hand and kissed it in response.

I knew Uncle Billy wasn’t planning to come. My mom called me back when we sent out our save-the-dates, told me he’d driven the hour to my parents’ house to tell my father—his big brother—that he wouldn’t be attending my wedding. She said their conversation had been heated and that she’d stayed out of it because he was Dad’s brother and she didn’t want to say something she’d regret. It was the first time I fully grasped the difference between Uncle Billy’s Assembly of God ideology and the Catholic faith I’d grown up with in my own household. I had witnessed Uncle Billy’s unwavering belief system in the past, but this was the first time it really hit me. It was the first time I realized that for Uncle Billy, merely being Christian wasn’t good enough.

In the weeks that passed between the day we received his R.S.V.P. and our wedding, I thought a lot about Uncle Billy and what an impact he’d had on my childhood. I thought about how at family gatherings he used to pull me aside and teach me songs like “Skidamarink—I Love You” and “In Moments Like These” before the rest of the cousins, so that I could show all of them how to do their parts better. He seemed to always have a guitar around his neck. I thought about how when we all camped at Lake George, we could always hear music coming from his campsite. He used to curl his whole body into the inner part of a big tire and roll into the lake. He used to be the first one off the cliff jumps and rope swings. But, somehow, even with all of his energy, he was the one who made me feel safe. He was the one who showed me the power of prayer. Even if I didn’t believe deep down that it was going to work, it still felt nice to hope. I thought about the year I got terrible poison ivy while we were camping and he had everyone put their hands on the top of my head while he asked the Lord to “take away my discomfort.” He drove me home and stayed until I was comfortable in bed watching *Anne of Green Gables*. Uncle Billy was the one who taught me all about God’s lessons of

love and forgiveness. Even the license plate on Uncle Billy's van still reads, "FORGIVE."

But, most of all, I thought about Creation, a four-day Christian festival that occurs once a year at the Agape Campground in Mount Union, Pennsylvania. On average, 80,000 people attend Creation each year. They go to hear sermons and see fireworks and performances by the rock stars of Christian music, to find purpose and camp together in one large open field. They go to be saved. For eight weekends of my life, from the age of eleven until the summer after I turned nineteen, I went to Creation with a handful of siblings and cousins and members of Uncle Billy's ministry. I looked forward to it every year. My mind kept taking me to Creation, and I thought about one summer in particular. The summer Stephen, Uncle Billy's oldest son, told me that my friend John Patrick was going to Hell.

It was so hot that year and I remember wanting to get through breakfast as fast as possible so I could run to the lemonade stand. The heat was unbearable. Sometimes we hiked to the lookout just for the shade, or walked the main road down to the river, but those excursions were often not worth the effort. The lookout only provided a view of the festival grounds and the river was so cloudy that nothing beneath the water's surface was visible. I preferred the lemonade. Freshly squeezed with just the right amount of sugar and ice. We always drank it fast so the ice wouldn't melt and then we walked the path around the main stage and field, holding the leftover cubes against the backs of our necks as we checked out the stands of Jesus-centric merchandise: WWJD bracelets, tie-dyed T-shirts with various Bible quotes, some with "Creation Festival" printed on the front and "A Tribute To Our Creator" on the back. One of my brothers bought a green one that said "Liars Go To Hell. Revelations 21:8."

Breakfast was at 8:00 a.m. sharp so we would be on time for morning worship at the main stage. Uncle Billy was serious about the schedule. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the site were mandatory, as was morning worship and at least one sermon a day. Curfew was 10:00 p.m., unless the night's concert or candlelight vigil went later than that.

That day, while everyone else was getting ready to head over to morning worship, I was scraping eggs off the bottom of the pan with a plastic knife. Stephen was sitting at the table drinking orange juice with his feet propped up on the bench.

"You know what's too bad, Rosie?" he asked me.

"What?" I said.

"I think your friend John Patrick is such a great guy, so freakin' funny. But, I really hope he changes his ways in time."

I stopped scraping and looked up at him. "In time for what?" I asked.

"You know...in time for God to forgive him. For being gay. So he won't go to Hell." Stephen drank the last of his juice, and then flattened the paper cup with the palm of his hand. He tossed it toward the trash bag duct taped to the end of the table but missed by a few inches. He threw his head back and said, "Aw, man," then got up to retrieve the cup.

I went back to scraping, staring at the inside of the pan, my lips pressed together. My ears felt hot. I didn't understand. Why would John Patrick need to be forgiven? He went to church more than I did. We'd met in church choir. His mother taught CCD classes.

"But he believes in God," I told Stephen.

He yawned and stretched his arms above his head. "That's not enough, though."

I felt my heart beating faster and my throat went dry.

"Don't worry. I'll pray for him," Stephen assured me.

I hear Uncle Joey's voice over the sound system he arranged for the reception. "Ladies and Gentlemen, let's give a warm congratulations to the happy couple. Rosie and KiRa Fritzky-Randolph!"

We enter the tent and all I can see are smiles, all I can feel is warmth, all I can hear is applause set against the main riff to Pearl Jam's "Amongst the Waves." My brother stands on stage, waiting to sing. All the design ideas and notes we'd been jotting down in our wedding notebook for months comes alive as we make our way toward the dance floor. Thousands of white lights, hundreds of candles, mason jars filled with dried lavender and yellow roses, even the centerpieces made from the slices of two fallen trees—one from KiRa's parents' yard and the other from mine. Everything is just as we imagined.

We're supposed to go right into our first dance, but we can't help but stop to hug those we pass. Things seem to be occurring in slow motion and I'm overwhelmed with all that is happening, all that has happened to get us here.

I didn't have to come out to most of my family. Once my mother and father knew, the "coming out" part was pretty much taken care of; what scared me was waiting to see how people would act when they saw me next, waiting to see if things would change. I remember walking up the hill of my parents' long driveway after parking on the street and seeing my younger brother standing at the top, about to get into his car. I held my hand up in a frozen wave and he smiled and shut his door without getting in. When I reached the top, he hugged me, lifting me off the ground, and held me there until I realized he knew. When I called my aunt and told her over the phone, she responded with, "Oh darling, I've known since you were in high school," which was as much a validation as it was a gut punch. Over a decade had passed since high school. It seemed unfair that she knew before I did.

I wasn't surprised by the support on my mother's side. They're an open-minded bunch and other than one older cousin who began using Facebook as a forum to preach the word of God, and who believed my "choice" was sinful, most on that end of the family accepted the news without hesitation. Still, it was the ones on my father's side, the devout Christians, the ones I thought would take it the hardest, who amazed me. No matter what they believed, I was shown nothing but love. My Aunt Joanie, a sixty-six-year-old woman who came close to becoming a nun in her younger years but had five children instead, called her youngest daughter and one of my closest friends, Mary Anne, to discuss what she'd heard. Mary Anne called me right after their conversation, excited to tell me her mother had said that "she knew Jesus loved me," and that "if God made me this way, he must be okay with it."

It's not until we pass by the table with my ninety-four-year-old Aunt Dot that I begin to tear up. She hugs me close and says, "God is good" before I let go. I wonder if she knows how much it means to have her here and I think about Uncle Billy. What is it that keeps him away but not her?

The reception is a whirlwind but KiRa and I make sure we keep finding each other. We let everyone know that we won't be walking around to say hello to our guests while they eat their dinner, but ask instead that they find us on the dance floor. I sing a song I wrote for KiRa and almost make it through without crying. Toasts are made, our fathers give speeches, and my three-year-old nephew steals the show by jumping up on stage to play bongos during the concert. But, John Patrick steals the show back with his unbelievable rendition of "Origin of Love."

Weeks later, we'll look through the album of over 2,000 photos that Aunt Karen sent us, trying to choose our favorites. We'll come across a photo of Uncle Billy's sister-in-law standing in the middle of his three boys and their significant others. They're all laughing and giving thumbs up to the camera. Everyone but their parents. We'll end up calling this the "Fritzky Represent!" photo, the one we'll go to when we're feeling sad that Uncle Billy wasn't there, because it will remind us that things do change.

I'll think about how Uncle Billy will feel if he ever sees the picture—whether he'll be disappointed in them for coming or feel regret for being absent. I wonder if he'll pray for me.