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Donato's

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Donato's

The soup is served late, already cool, as if the kitchen staff and waitress have come together, conspired somehow to send you a message. You eat it anyway. You're stoned and dehydrated—even room temperature minestrone tastes great. Something between your ears and brain is throbbing. Across the room at the hostess stand, you can see a woman gesturing, not-so-subtly, at your table. You take another spoonful of soup, swallow it, force a big smile for anyone watching.

On either side of you, Emily and Jordan are still fighting.

"I never told you I was going with you guys to Jake's," says Emily, "not for *sure*, anyways." Her words aren't slurred, but her voice is shrill, which might just be worse. People from the tables around you are looking over now, frowning.

"What do you mean?" says Jordan, exhausted and angry. "What were you planning on doing between now and going out, then?" He takes a swig of his beer—an Italian import whose taste he doesn't bother to enjoy—and washes it down with a handful of unbuttered bread.

They've been fighting for hours now. Emily showed up at your apartment this morning already pissed off, half-explaining her text exchanges with Jordan in between sips of mimosa that she mixed herself. When Jordan got to your place an hour later, the two of them hardly said a word to each other, just glared, until a few drinks each had loosened them up. That had been at the first bar. At 10:30, maybe? It's nearly six now. They're still going at it.

Emily pouts and crosses her arms. She's wearing a green crop top with the bottom half of her boobs hanging out. Her shirt had been full-sized once, an Irish flag printed across its front, until Emily took a pair of kitchen scissors to the lower third of it. More recently, at the last bar you stopped at, she'd

spilled half a White Claw down her front, giving what was left of the shirt its current dark, damp color.

At least the pair of shamrock-shaped sunglasses had gotten lost during the Uber ride to dinner.

Jordan, to his credit, is considerably more put together. He's already, at only twenty-three, showing the prowess of a functional alcoholic twice his age. You've never liked Jordan—you've sat through enough of Emily's 3:00 a.m. sobs to fall for his fake-charming bullshit—but you find yourself taking his side in this fight, even if it's only because his voice is less irritating. Emily is a pushover with the men she dates, and when these boyfriends are inevitably cruel to her, she takes it out on her own friends (usually you). There have been many before Jordan, and you're sure there will be more after: a constant stream of assholes and burnouts about whom she refuses to take your advice.

Today alone you can point to several times—getting ready in your apartment, talking to friends from school you bumped into downtown—when Emily told anyone nearby that she *would*, in fact, be at Jake's in between dinner and going out. You don't bring this up, though—you don't want to stir the pot. Not that either of them would listen to you, anyway.

Emily only ever manages to muster the courage to stand up for herself after enough drinks that the coming argument would anything but articulate. And Jordan, without fail, always takes the bait. In that way, at least, they're perfect for each other.

If you were a fly on the wall, you might even find this argument interesting: so mindless that it's funny. As you are, though, seated in the center of a sleepy dining room of seventy-somethings, you're freaking out. You hate drinking—the way it makes your friends insufferable and the men they date somehow worse—but you're starting to wish you only took one weed gummy instead of two before the bar crawl.

“Don't give me that *shit!*” Jordan says, too loud. His voice is big and male. It carries across the room, bounces off the walls and into the ears of everyone in the restaurant. The people who have just been seated look concerned, instinct telling them to worry about the women sitting with the belligerent man. The ones who have been seated for a while, who have already heard Emily's side of the argument, just shake their heads. Another woman calls a waitress over, holds her hand in front of her lips and whispers something.

You feel like you should do something, give the room a little wave that says, “Don't worry, this happens all the time.”

And that's when you realize you can't, that you haven't been moving, that you *can't* move at all. You've been frozen in your chair for who-knows-how-long. Emily and Jordan are still bickering back and forth, repeating the same arguments louder and louder, and more heads are turning, looking at them, looking at *you*. Your chest is tightening, squeezing around your lungs. Your

breath is heavy. Air flows in and, slowly, flows back out. Your skin is crawling, inside and out, but you can't worry about that now. Ignore the eyes, ignore the sounds, just focus on your breathing. One breath. One, two. Then another. One, two.

You raise one hand up to the table, grab your spoon. Its texture—cold and metal—grounds you for a second, so you focus on that instead of Emily and Jordan, tune out their words. You take another spoonful of soup, then butter some bread; do it like it's totally natural, like there's nothing else you should be doing. Anything mindless, anything to occupy your hands while you focus on your breathing. One, two. One, two. One, two. Focus on the sound of your lungs, your heart, not on them.

You know you should be angry or, at the very least, embarrassed—you've gotten far more worked up over less in the past—but you can't muster the emotion. You're too high. The wandering eyes of the strangers around you, confused and upset, are physically weighing you down. Your shoulders and neck are crawling, heavy yet tender. You try to slink backwards into your chair, try to disappear. Breathe in, breathe out, eyes straight ahead, focused on nothing. Your vision blurs, pleasantly.

"Is everything okay?"

One of the waitresses is leaning over your table. You're about to speak up, say that no, actually, you're not, but she's not talking to you. Her arms are crossed, eyebrows lowered. She's angry. She's looking right at Jordan, reading the largeness of his physical presence as a threat.

"We're fine!" says Emily, and she tries to flash a smile. She's had about four too many drinks for that; she just looks crazy. Emily's answer doesn't satisfy the waitress, but she does stand down a little, thinking at the very least her interference has calmed the argument. Emily shoots Jordan a nasty look, which he returns.

"You know what we *could* use?" says Jordan, in the particularly pompous voice he saves for waitstaff while he's drinking, "some more bread." He shoves the empty basket of bread across the little table, towards the waitress. It slides halfway across the table then stops, tips over. Jordan locks eyes with the waitress. You watch her, gears turning in her head, calculating where this conversation is about to go, deciding this asshole isn't worth her time.

"Fine," she says, "but keep it down." She takes the basket and turns back to the kitchen.

The rest of the restaurant is quiet. No one is watching your table anymore, you can see that much, but the deliberate way they stare at their menus and cellphones is almost worse. You know what they're thinking. You're thinking it, too. One, two. One, two. One, two.

"I need to go to the bathroom," you say, suddenly, and before Emily or Jordan have the chance to respond you're already standing, walking away. You

keep your eyes straight, bob between the few tables still in your way, avoid the waitresses whose conversation stops when they see you. You move slowly, with what you hope passes for nonchalance, but then someone behind you laughs and you're speeding up. Tucked away to the side of the bar is a dark, unmarked door. You go to it, open it up and step inside in one fluid motion, realize only after the door closes behind you that you're looking at a urinal, that this is the men's room.

One, two. One, two. One, two.

The door doesn't lock, either, which normally wouldn't be a problem except for that what you really need right now is to be alone, away from Emily and Jordan and the waitresses and everyone else in the restaurant, their arguments and their judgmental eyes. There's a chipped sink and a dirty mirror. Then, in a tightly packed row, a toilet and two urinals. No stalls separate them. The room is long and narrow, hooking back behind the bar, so small you can touch both walls at once. You hear footsteps on the other side of the door, voices, and your stomach drops.

Your jeans around your ankles, one-ply toilet paper between your ass and the porcelain, right arm outstretched to keep the door closed, you try, and fail, to pee. The bathroom smells like cat litter and cleaning supplies—you can see both in the far corner—and an uncomfortable warmth is steaming up from the toilet bowl. You close your eyes, try to stop pressuring yourself, let your body do its thing. Focus on your breathing, that much you can handle, but that only makes it worse. One, two. One, two. One, two. Except the twos are irregular, offbeat and heavy. Sweat is pooling on the bottoms of your legs.

A minute passes, maybe more. Nothing has happened and, realizing nothing is going to, you get up from the toilet, pull up your pants and buckle your belt. You wash your hands twice, jutting your butt out to keep the door closed. You make the mistake of checking your reflection in the mirror. Your mascara is running, for what has to have been hours, and in all the commotion of dinner, no one bothered to point out the red sauce dotting both of your cheeks. You splash sink water on your face and it helps; despite how you look, you feel almost normal. You can't stay in the bathroom forever, but for this moment it's a sanctuary.

Your high is manageable, if not pleasant, but instead of relief you feel, for the first time all day, anger. Anger at Jordan, sure—for his arrogance, the condescending way he talks to Emily and to you—but really, it's Emily you're mad at, not him. You'd warned her about Jordan, about *all* the boys like him, advice she has refused to take seriously except in hindsight. She'd dragged you out to bar crawl even though she knew you wouldn't have fun, dragged you to this damn restaurant, too. Dragged you into the insanity of their argument—at once about nothing at all and about everything—carried

out among strangers, made you an unwilling actor in this public performance of their dysfunction.

And you know tonight, tomorrow, whenever all this blows over, she won't thank you for your help. Won't apologize to you, either. She'll whine a little over FaceTime about how needy Jordan is, then send over photos from a weekend trip with his parents, asking if you think they're cute. As if you weren't right there on the front lines with her, caught in their crossfire.

You open the bathroom door to the sound of glass breaking. From where you're standing you can't see into the dining room, but you can see the wait-staff's faces. The younger girls lean over the bar with mouths open. The older waitress, the one who confronted Jordan earlier, just shakes her head, goes back to cleaning.

Your feet are moving, sliding between tables that aren't bothering to hide their stares anymore. In the center of the dining room, the chair you'd been sitting in is flipped over, legs jutting diagonally into the air. Jordan is leaning back, arms outstretched. His one hand had knocked over the chair, the other wrapped around what used to be a bottle of Peroni. There are shards of glass on the floor.

Across the table, Emily is hissing. "Are you serious, Jordan. Are you *fuck-ing* serious?"

Jordan's smirk is cruel. "I forgot my wallet. What am I supposed to do?"

"You didn't forget shit! You've been buying drinks all day."

"Maybe," he says, with slurred satisfaction. "Or maybe I'm just sick of paying for all your shit. Maybe I'm sick of your constant attitude."

"Fuck you!" She throws a combination of cloth napkin and spat-out food towards Jordan's face. It falls short, hits the table, and he laughs. The room is silent but also buzzing. You stay where you are, at the edge of the dining room. You can't look away.

Emily doesn't seem to know what she's saying anymore. Her words slow, sound weaker by the syllable, and even at a distance, you can see the day—all the alcohol, all the arguing—catch up to her at once. She starts to talk, fumbles her words, ends up with something between a burp and a hiccup. It's a few seconds before Emily tries to speak again, except this time, her voice is different. Unguarded, vulnerable.

"You're a real asshole sometimes, Jordan," Emily says, and then she's crying. Big, juicy, drunk tears, loud and snotty, darkened with glittery makeup, right in the middle of everyone.

Jordan doesn't say anything, just stands up from his chair. He doesn't go to Emily, try to comfort her or apologize. Instead, he fumbles in his pockets, pulls out his wallet, throws a credit card on the table as if that's enough. He turns his back on Emily, looks for the door and then starts towards it. His shoulder hits yours as he passes—not aggressive, he's stumbling drunk. He

doesn't bother to close the door behind him when he steps outside. A cool draft blows in from outside. The only sounds left come from Emily, mumbling something unintelligible between snotty tears.

Emily looks up and sees you, really sees you, for the first time all day.

"He's...he's..." she tries to say, but can't finish her sentence, slips back into tears, sloppy and loud, and you know that whatever is still working in her booze-filled brain is expecting you to come to her, hug her, tell her everything is going to be okay. How pathetic she looks. You're one of the crowd, now; separated and silent, staring at her spectacle with judgmental eyes. You know that Emily believes this is your job: damage control, showing up to clean up her messes, wiping her the tears away. It's been you in the past, and it will probably be you in the future, too. But not today. Not today.

You take one step back, then another, then another. You imagine that you're melting into the crowd, away from the commotion, letting the distance between you and Emily grow and grow and grow until you're out the door. The dark March night is cold on your skin. Across the street, you can see Jordan shivering against a road sign, scrolling through his phone, probably looking for a ride home. He looks up and catches you staring but you don't turn your eyes away, not this time. The two of you stand like that for a minute, eyes locked, not saying a word. Then, in silent understanding, you turn away from each other, head in opposite directions down the street.

With the two of them behind you, you can finally breathe. The air outside is fresh, clean, and when you exhale it comes to life before your very eyes—condenses into a silver fog and then, slowly, disappears into the nighttime air, fades to black. You focus on these breaths; appreciate, for once, their beauty, their music.

One, two. One, two. One, two. One, two. One, two. One, two. One, two.