

UNHAPPY PEOPLE LIVE LONGER

What a surprise. Kevin's high school friends, his parents, smiling, dressed-up, waiting around an elaborate spread of food and presents as Kevin and I struggle through the door with our suitcases. "Con-grat-u-lations!" they sing, stretching the word to three times the normal pronunciation. "Wow!" I say. "Wow!" Kevin says; and we look at the friends, at the parents. We do not look at each other.

People step forward for hugs, and I'm forced to put my sweaty arms around them, my ratty tank-top and shorts pulled toward their silky, perfumed bodies. I tug on my ponytail. I stop smiling. "Uh, huh. Thanks. Great." Until I hear Kevin whisper to his mother, "The wedding's off," and everyone around us steps back. We are suddenly diseased.

His mother touches the collar of her dress and looks at me. "It was a long car ride," I say.

The party quiets and a tray of something falls to the floor.

"Excuse me," I say to the girl in front of me wearing bright pink lipstick: an ex-girlfriend, probably; a slight smile at the announcement. Though as I weave through the friends, the family, I notice many slight smiles and I feel a little better, like this isn't the disappointment; before was the disappointment, when we stepped in the happy couple.

I reach the fallen mini-quiches and sit down on the floor, cross-legged. I pick the quiches up one by one, dust them off, and eat them.

Kevin's friend Charlie kneels next to me. "There's more of those in the kitchen," he says. People start whispering around us, continuing on at a lower tone. No one moves to leave.

"We couldn't stop and get something," I tell Charlie. "We had to get here."

"When'd you make the decision?" he asks.

"You know the water-tower painted like a peach?"

He nods. I spot Kevin across the room, frowning at me, and I bite into another quiche. Next to Kevin, his mother glances at me and slowly shakes her head.

“Do you mind knocking some more food on the floor?” I ask Charlie.

He grabs a handful of cheese from the table and pushes it into my palms. “I better go talk to Kevin,” he says, and I’m left alone on the floor, looking at the skirts, the way they wave around the legs as the women shift and sway. I eat the chunks of cheese slowly, the way I savored M&Ms as a kid, and I let my eyes glaze, let the murmurs above me become something distant and peaceful. People twist their bodies to move around me. The floor is cool and shadowed and not too lonely.

A pair of glossy black shoes fill my vision.

“Maybe you’d like a chair?” I look up and see it’s Kevin’s dad Harold, standing straight and tall, his knees not even bent. The sunlight streaming in from the windows illuminates the beads of sweat above his lip, turns them different colors. He’s wearing a pink tie.

“I’d love a root beer,” I tell him. “You have some, right? Considering this party’s partially for me?”

He disappears. People hover above me, glance down, smile briefly. A lot of throat-clearing. Some bickering. A spilled drink. A discussion about someone looking at someone they shouldn’t. A complaint about a necklace. I search for Kevin’s tennis shoes amongst the polished ones and there they are: gray, torn a bit at the heel, the toes too pointed. He’s standing next to a pair of strappy beige sandals.

I untie my own sneakers and shove them beneath the table; then I stretch out on the hardwood and people stumble away from my sprawling limbs. I listen to the hitches in their conversations, the pauses, the stutters, the *uh, um, well hums* as they regain their balance. I stare up at the ceiling, tense, hoping people won’t step on me, and then wanting them to, wondering if I would scream, or if I would close my eyes and feel happy. Kevin’s dad returns with a Coke, pauses above me so a drip of water falls on my shoulder. *Crash*. My arm paralyzed. I watch his feet walk toward Kevin’s sneakers.

A few moments later the sneakers weave toward me, dodging the enemy shoes, tripping, stepping on some; *go this way, the other way*: if only he could see things how I see them. Kevin bends down, his eyebrows ruffled, his hair matted against his forehead, smelling of baked

car. He puts the coke on my stomach, and the condensation bleeds through my tank-top, infects my stomach. I look at him, bearing the pain, but it's there, I know, in the way I squint between blinks.

"You'd do this anyway," he says, and he sighs, looking at me. "You feel fat enough yet?"

I try to shake my head but somebody's standing on my ponytail. So I shrug, and he takes the can from my stomach, pops it open, and takes a sip.

"I was hoping for root beer," he says, and he puts the can down and spreads out beside me, so again everyone stumbles away, and there I am, sandwiched between him and the table. "That was a long drive," he says as his fingertips brush mine, and I close my eyes and wait for the murmuring to go away.

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"She said the best part about getting married is that she can get really fat."

I open my eyes and find I'm still flat on the floor. Kevin and his parents sit on some folding chairs to my right, staring at me. Otherwise, the living room's empty.

"Fat's not such a bad thing," Catherine says. "So long as it's not in the middle."

"That doesn't make sense," Harold says.

"The middle's the dangerous area," says Catherine.

"The *best* part," Kevin says.

"I was there," I tell him. "I remember."

They look at me awhile.

"Maybe she's just unhappy," his mother says. "Some people are unhappy and they eat to feel better."

"What's she got to be so unhappy about?" Harold asks.

They stare at me.

"Just no other reason why someone would lie on the floor like that," his mother says.

"I don't know how being fat's going to make her happier," Harold says.

"She doesn't want to be happy," Kevin says. He sighs and gives me a sad look.

“Yes she does,” Harold says. “It’s human nature to want it. Just impossible to have it.”

“Thanks,” Catherine says, “I’m glad to know that’s human nature.”

“Haha!” Harold says. “I’m not talking about us. Of course *we’re* happy, we’re not even human.” He looks at Kevin. “We don’t even cook anymore. And the maid comes tomorrow.”

“You got it,” Catherine says. “That’s the definition of happiness.” She rises from her chair and crosses the room to peer down at me. “Would you like!...a pillow!” she yells.

“Don’t give her that,” Harold says. “Tell her to get up.” He looks at Kevin. “She needs to get up.”

“Unhappy people live longer,” I tell them. “I read that somewhere. Something about the metabolism.”

Catherine looks at Kevin. “That’s really sad.”

“She says there’s always eating,” Kevin tells her. “Three, five, seven times a day.”

“You’ve got to think about it like that,” I say. “There’s happy and there’s unhappy.”

Catherine sighs and leaves the room, comes back with a pillow. “Just stop talking, dear,” she says and puts the pillow on the floor by my head. When I don’t move she places the pillow on my stomach.

“Why are you doing that?” Harold says. “They’re not even getting married anymore.”

“They’re still getting married,” Catherine says. “Kevin doesn’t care that much about appearance.”

Harold says, “Think about it. Imagine what you’re saying.”

“It’s because she was happy,” Kevin says. “She wanted to get married and then she didn’t.”

The fact that I’m twenty-eight. The fact that I’m alone in the living room on my back and everyone is sleeping. The fact that I’m getting fat from the quiches, from the cheese, and no one will marry me. The fact that I ruined the party. The fact that I’m not wearing shoes. The fact that I enjoy feeling like this. The loveliness of ruined things.

I wake to sharp pains shooting through my back. My tailbone aching, my head throbbing. The house smells like coffee. I pull myself off the floor and stretch and go into the kitchen. Kevin's father's at the counter with the newspaper and a steaming thermos.

"It would be nice if you guys got some carpet in the living room," I tell him.

Harold sips his coffee, his eyes on the paper. "Then you'd be on our floor for a month. You'd never leave."

"Don't you like me here?" I ask. I open the refrigerator and take out the orange juice, pull a glass from the cupboard. I hear Harold close his paper. "There's nothing worse than boredom," I tell him, and then I drink all the juice in my glass, watching him over the rim.

"Nobody's happy," he says. "There's nothing special about that."

I put the glass on the counter. "Some people are happy."

"They're faking." He holds the thermos in front of his waist and he turns it around and around. "Catherine thinks you have an eating disorder."

"Why does it have to be so specific?" I say. "I like to think of it as a life disorder."

"You're much worse than last time," he tells me.

I slump against the counter. I lull my head toward my shoulder. "What's the point in getting better? Getting worse is much more fun."

He puts his coffee on the counter and begins chewing on his thumbnail. He chews and looks, then chews again, making it ragged, smoothing it out. "It's pretty embarrassing for us, that's all. Explaining why Kevin wanted to marry you in the first place."

I straighten up and pour another glass of juice. "Do you think anyone really wants us to be happy? I mean, if no one else is?"

"Come on." He drops his hand. "Getting married has got nothing to do with being happy."

I finish the juice and look around the kitchen. A clock shaped like a teapot. A blue and white cookie jar on the counter. A loaf of sunbeam. It's almost 5:30, and through the coffee smell I get a whiff of myself, like something cracked.

"I guess I'll take a shower," I say.

“Be sure to use all the hot water,” he says, flipping through the paper. “Go ahead and use up everything.”

With the hot water crashing, I scrub down my skin, turning red, feeling raw; and I get really mad and think I’m going to be happy: I can do it, I *want* to do it, if no one else can. But there’s happy and there’s *happy*. And there’s Kevin and the apartment and the grocery store to go back to, there’s that feeling of the car, the cramping of the legs, and the people, the crowd, obstructing the food, and I forget about being happy; I don’t think of it again until I turn off the shower and look at my fingers and remember I’m getting old. I think how it will be outliving everyone in misery. But. I’m not that old. That’s the problem. The wrinkles flatten out when I leave the steamy bathroom, like walking through a wall, like dropping to the floor, and I forget for awhile how it was where I came from. And here’s the air-conditioned hall, where water patters to the floor, and I know, through one of these closed doors Kevin is waiting with a place in the bed for me.