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A Point of No Return

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A Point of No Return

For much of my life, our marriage was all I thought I wanted. Boring in the way I'd craved growing up in a household of raised voices and short tempers. He was sweet, liked to take me dancing, and he'd always harbored this stupid half-formed dream, of buying land somewhere remote- Canada, Alaska- and living off it. I'd liked our marriage. I really had. It was comfortable. He was good and decent and safe- but that was a relationship that belonged to another world.

If I hated him, truly, properly, I could have just sent him away. I wouldn't have owed him an explanation or a kind word- but I didn't hate him, I just hated that he was there. I wanted to lie, to say that it had been years, that I thought he was dead like so many others- and it would be a lie. Because, despite the distance and time and violence, the image of him, rotting slowly into the earth's embrace, skin and tendons and sinews melting from his bones into grass fertilizer- had just never sat right with me. It had never seemed real in the way it was when I pictured other people- friends, colleagues, ex-boyfriends, college girlfriends. There was something immutable about his memory that refused to allow me to picture him as anything but alive- button down, suit jacket, tie just a little uneven.

I watched as the dogs trailed after him harmlessly as he approached. In that moment, I found myself wishing the stupid mutts would tear him to shreds, and hating Henry for taking the time to gentle them into dumb loving things. I had nothing to separate the two of us but a grass field and a shotgun that had run out of shells months ago. With the distance still between us, I couldn't make out the expression on John's face, but his gait was unmistakable. Long and uneven from where he'd fucked up his knee in college. God, I wish I hated him. Eventually, he got close enough for me to see him smiling. But even then, there was a bit of caution in those eyes of his, just a little bit of uncertainty. He was thin, thinner than what was healthy, but who wasn't these days- and his hair, cut short in marriage had grown out, curling a little behind his ears. "Katie," he said, all emotional- and wasn't that a trip? I felt like he was talking right through me, reaching into the past to a woman long dead.

"John," I replied. I tried to be kind, but his name came out flat- too cool to be mistaken for welcoming.

"Katie," he repeated, more hesitant, a little confused. "Are you?- what's?-" It was some kind of surreal to hear him speak. His voice felt fake in the way of childhood memories, sort of foggy and distant. He just looked so goddamn lost- like he couldn't fathom what I was doing just standing there. And I suppose that's fair, I wasn't sure what I was doing either- he wasn't supposed to be there.

I think we may have stood out there forever, frozen in a shared moment of disconnect if the dogs hadn't both taken off like a shot back the way they'd come. I looked over the hill to see Henry approaching- his big frame made even bigger by the rucksack he was carrying. When my eyes shifted away from his approaching figure, I found that John's eyes had drifted as well, but not to the horizon, to my midsection. I allowed myself a single moment to mourn a version of events where he hadn't noticed, and met his gaze. Henry called out to me before John could ask, but I still tracked the way his eyes widened and muscles tensed- all those messy emotions with nowhere to go.

"Mal?" Henry called out, and I tore my gaze away, raising my hand in acknowledgment. "Everything alright?" He asked as he drew near, mirroring John's tension with his own.

"Everything's fine," John said, words edgy and sharp all over, "This is- she's my-"

"He's my husband," I said, cutting him off.

Henry hummed and met my eyes over John's head. Do you want me to get rid of him? He asked without speaking. I shook my head. Before my own cowardice could get the best of me I turned my attention back to John, "I made food,"

He looked thrown but Henry stepped in to cover for my deficiencies, resting a hand on my shoulder as he said, "We'd be glad to have you, the table's plenty big,"

I studied John's reaction out of the corner of my eye, watching for signs of trouble. The John I'd known wasn't the jealous sort, but as far as I was concerned that man belonged to a different world- one a million miles away from the reality we existed in now. I allowed myself to wonder about the path he'd taken to my doorstep, and what he'd expected to find on the other side. But after a moment, John just accepted and followed behind us. The entire way I could feel his heavy gaze on the back of my neck, weighed down by questions I didn't want to answer, but I knew I had to.

Dinner was a mostly silent affair, broken up only by the quiet scratching of silverware on ceramic. There was one moment though- right at the beginning, where that fragile peace threatened to shatter around the three of us. John had frozen, eyes going all misty as he looked at me, and said, "This is my mother's recipe," and he was right. There was a pleading quality to his voice, begging me to acknowledge our shared history, and I refused.

Afterward, Henry excused himself to let the dogs out, and I hated and loved him in equal measure for the privacy he was allowing us. I still tried to put it off as best I could, but when I went to the sink to wash up, John slid in alongside me.

"He uh- he calls you Malory," he began, like he was trying to break the ice with a joke.

“He calls me Mal,” I corrected, trying to act like my words weren’t sticking in my throat like a dying thing. I couldn’t understand how he didn’t get it, that the day I walked out of our house without waiting for him to come back, I’d killed any future our relationship had. What he’d dropped at my doorstep wasn’t a second chance it was a desecrated and mangled corpse.

“Mal,” He repeated, “What’s so wrong with Katie?”

“Nothing,” I fumbled the bowl I was holding, its base thudding dully as it hit the counter. Without a word, John picked it up and began drying it. “When we left there was another Katie with us,” I said, aiming for dispassionate but missing badly, “It was simpler to go by last names-guess it just stuck.”

He gave a self-deprecating laugh, “Suppose I should be happy you didn’t go by your maiden name,”

I just stared at him.

“It’s just you and...”

Henry,”

“It’s just you and Henry now?”

“Yeah,” I passed him the ladle without thinking, “Other Katie didn’t actually last that long, and Lauren- from the front desk at the YMCA? She’s outback,” I said with a wave, “About six feet under conversing with the worms.” I moved to the knives, “Jasper’s alive- don’t think you ever met him, but if you leave here westward you’ll stumble across the group he’s shackled-up with these days. They’ve converted an old church, got a garden going and everything.”

“Sounds nice,”

His words hung in the air, and nothing rose to take their place. Beside me, I could feel him working himself up to ask the question that was really eating at him- and I found myself almost morbidly curious as to how he’d do it.

In the end, it was more straightforward than I expected, he just stopped drying and asked, “How far along are you?”

I shrugged, “A few months, don’t know for sure,”

“I’m just surprised,” He said, sounding far too self-pitying for my liking, “you never wanted kids when we were-”

“No shit, John,” I snapped. My words were sharper than I meant them, mean in a way he didn’t really deserve but I couldn’t find it in myself to regret. I straightened up and dried my hands. “There isn’t exactly an abundance of contraceptives in the end times,” I said, holding eye contact until he broke and looked away.

John’s voice was strained when he spoke again, “I- I just want you to know- I’m not mad. You had no way to knowing I was alive, and it’s been years-”

“It has,” He halted his speech, face going tight as he pressed his lips together. Behind his eyes, I could see him working, analyzing me like a problem to be solved, an obstacle he could overcome if he just approached things the right way.

“Do you hate me?” he asked.

I just watched him for a moment. Studying the lines on his face and the gray in his hair that he was too young to have. “Why would I hate you, John?”

“I don’t know,” he frowned, “for not being there?”

I sighed, and in an act of half-forgotten habit, reached up and brushed aside a piece of hair that had come loose from behind his ear. “It would be easier if I hated you,” I said, “if there wasn’t any part of me that missed you,”

“But you don’t want me here,” he finished.

“No,”

For a moment I wondered if he would get angry. I watched the tension in his face, the way his muscles twitched under his skin, and the way his gray eyes looked through me and out the back of my skull. I wondered what he was seeing, wondered if he was trying to picture his Katie- picture her crawling with worms, chest caved in with rot. Was that a better conclusion for him than what he’d found?

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you,” He said at last.

I didn’t bother correcting him.

He waited until Henry returned, then John rose and put his coat back on- jerky, as if his own limbs were betraying him. Wordlessly, I handed him a small bundle of leftovers which he accepted in equal silence.

Henry fixed James with a careful look as he reentered the cabin. “You’ll be going then?”

“Yeah, I will.” he paused, “Westward?” John asked, without fully turning to look at me.

“What?”

“That friend of yours with the church- westward?”

“Yeah,” I said, “you’ll see the path, it’s traveled enough,”
John stilled, “Sounds nice, might stick around for a while,”
It was an invitation I had no intention of accepting.

Capri Potter