

Oh Fuck

1990

“Oh fuck”, Whitney mumbled.

The baby tiles spun into a kaleidoscope. The grout between each square dissolved like quicksand. A dingy rainbow rose like a phoenix up the wall. The daffodils spun off the wallpaper sprinkling their cute fucking petals in all directions. The chrome of the toilet paper holder cut like a sword through Whitney's third eye, which had at that point coagulated with her other two to make one cess pool of optic mess. Self help books, dusty and flagged along the small shelf, were swept up in the wrath.

All the elements were forcing their way towards the eye of the storm, now spinning in tropical temperatures at the ceiling. It was the strongest storm of 1990 thus far. A category 5 of Whitney's fabulous decisions.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head... “oh... oh FUUU”

With her hands finding the porcelain limbs in the last second, she hurled the entire Hurricane into the water below. She gasped. And down she went again. Tears welled in her eyes and she whimpered softly. Lifting her head she looked into the oddly placed mirror right behind the toilet.

She saw her pupils were as big as the bowl beneath her. Only the ticklish preservatives of the ecstasy remained in her body now. She was surprised at how her smeared mascara brought out the blue in her eyes. Her hair was disheveled in the cute way one only achieves in the morning after a good night of sleep. She continued to stare at herself in this oddly placed mirror and became more and more pleased that in spite of it all, she looked really fucking pretty. She attempted to stand and so as to rally this new found confidence she tried to wink at herself. Both of her eyes closed and all of her eyelashes stuck together from the soggy mascara, leaving her temporarily blind and reaching for the wall for stability. She rinsed her hands off and jammed a finger full of toothpaste in and around her mouth.

Whitney straightened her posture. “Okay.” She was ready for what the night still held for her. She swung open the bathroom door with conviction, slamming it right into the nose of Kyle Kettner who was waiting somewhat impatiently to finish off his cocaine in private.

“Oh my God. Oh my God, are you okay?”

“I think you broke my nose.”

“Oh, no. Oh, no. I’m so sorry. Let me see.”

Whitney tried pulling his hand away but with her depth perception still skewed from the optic storm, she connected a mean right jab to the other side of his already bloody nose.

“Ooww!”

“Oh my god! Oh my god! I’m so sorry. I was just trying to…”

“Well stop trying!”

“I’m so sorry, Kyle.”

Kyle had been too preoccupied with the fate of his schnoz to look at the culprit. Now confusion accompanied his frustration. How did his strange assailant with her dramatic cosmetics know his name?

Whitney’s mortification doubled. She knew he did not recognize her. How could he. She was invisible to guys like him. And Kyle was the dreamiest boy in school since 9th grade. Nearly four years of loving Kyle Kettner from afar.

“Have we met?”

“Well we met exactly one year ago. Here actually, at Kelly’s Christmas party.”

“We did?”

“Well I may have just imagined that.”

“So we don’t know each other?”

“No. Well I know you. I don’t *know* you. But I know who you are. So, no. We don’t.”

“Well I’m Kyle…”

“Kettner. Oh Jesus. I’m Whitney Perry. Whitney.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah”

"Well come in here and let me at least get you some some tissues for your nose."

Kyle sat on the sink counter and Whitney rolled a mound of toilet paper around her hand and ran some water over it.

"Here. You take it. I don't want to punch you again."

Kyle looked down at Whitney and smiled.

"It's ok, go ahead. My vision is a little cloudy anyways from..."

"The mystery punch! Did you try it too? God, I'm fucking wasted."

"Well, that's not exactly what I was—"

"Oh. God, I'm so sorry. Really—"

"You don't have to apologize anymore. Maybe you kicking my ass was fate."

Whitney blushed to match the pools of Mystery Punch that were drying in the bottom of the many abandoned plastic cups on the sink. She couldn't help but think... was Kyle Kettner flirting with her? Oh my fucking God. Kyle Kettner was flirting with her.

He leaned in closer. "Synchronicity at its finest."

Wow, Whitney thought, that is a pretty good word. Is Kyle Kettner smart and hot? None of this makes any sense. She smiled and urged him to lean his head back.

A few moments later Kyle's bleeding stopped. She dabbed his upper lip lightly with wet tissues to clean off his dried blood. He hadn't stopped looking at her the whole time.

"Your make-up is cool."

"Really?"

"Your eyes are kind of pretty, you know that?"

"Yes."

"Well, ok then."

“Ha! I meant yes, I love this mascara... that I’m wearing. Cause it brings out my eyes. I think maybe it does, anyway.”

“Ok be honest, Wendy, how long did it take you to make your hair look like you just had sex?”
Kyle lifted one his dark eyebrows.

“Oh just a couple minutes of... not having sex.”

“Mhm.”

“It’s Whitney, actually.”

“Yeah.”

He just kept staring. His eyes a deep forest green unlike anything she’d ever seen up close. Oh my God. Oh my God. Kyle Kettner was about to kiss her. And he did. She lost track of time as it moved differently now. She didn’t know how long they sat there kissing but when they stopped Kyle was smiling at her.

“Your breath is so minty.” He said.

“Oh. I brushed.”

And in he went again. He started to take off her top. She didn’t mind. She unbuckled his pants and pushed them down with short jabs to the floor. Next thing she knew she was turned around with her hands planted on the top of the toilet. The cold porcelain was familiar. She looked forward into the mirror, also familiar. Despite the compromising angle, erratic bobbing of her head and now sanguine patchiness of her skin, she thought, “Wow, I do look really fucking pretty.” She smiled big through a tiny jolt of nausea brought about more by the very recent P.T.S.D. than anything Kyle was doing. To be honest, she didn’t feel him much at all due to a combination of the Ecstasy and his very small member.

“Ah, how does that feel?”, Kyle said somewhere between a moan and a declaration.

“So good.”

“Yeah... Am I big in you?”

“What?”

“Am I big in you?”

Not particularly, Whitney thought. “Oh yeah. I can barely take it.”

That was all Kyle needed. He moaned in what sounded like a mantra as he came, “Take it if you can. Take it if you can... take it if you caaa—.”

For a moment Kyle breathed heavy and massaged the muscles around her hips. She was fairly certain he was still inside of her. Whitney had imagined a million ways she would lose her virginity but never like this. Out of congratulatory reverie she attempted to wink at herself again.

“Did you cum too?” Kyle asked.

“Oh. I think so.” Whitney smiled.

“Cool.”

Kyle zipped up his pants and buckled his belt. He ran his finger along the bridge of his nose where a small bump had risen like a knot on a rotting log. “Okay, I’ll walk out now. Wait like 30 seconds and then come out so it doesn’t look weird.”

“Oh. Yeah, ok.”

“It was nice to finally meet you, Wendy.”

“Yes it is.” She tried to wink again. By the time she opened both of her eyes, Kyle was gone.

Whitney looked around the quiet bathroom. All of those cute fucking petals had found their way back to the daffodils on the wallpaper. The self help books sat on the shelf and crossed their arms in silent judgment. Her eyes settled on the open Colgate bottle next to the sink. A sad little pile of toothpaste had dribbled out and was already leaving a starchy stain on the counter. She counted to thirty.

During the longest thirty seconds of her life, Whitney had decided she would fill up two cups of punch and deliver one to Kyle, who could now greet her by name too, or at least something close to it.

“30!”

She opened the door, a little slower this time, and scanned the room for Kyle. He was no where in sight. She made her way to the punch bowl. It was empty. Again she looked from corner to corner of the party but no Kyle Kettner. Then a tap on her shoulder.

“Whitney?”

“KYLE!”

She turned to see a smiling boy holding two cups of punch. Her heart jumped up to her uvula and then plummeted back down to somewhere below her stomach. It was not Kyle. Instead... a short, scrawny boy with bad skin.

"What did you say?"

"I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"Well I bet Mr. 'Someone Else' doesn't have the last two cups of punch." He smiled so harmlessly that it made her even more sad. He handed her a cup. "Hey. I know you don't know me, but here." He handed her a cup.

"Thanks, I'm Whitney..."

"Perry. Yeah, sorry. We had Algebra together last year and I remember these things. I'm Matt Kettner. Call me Matt. Obviously."

"Sorry, you said your last name was Kettner?"

"That's it."

Whitney looked at him puzzled by the coincidence. Matt smiled. He was used to this momentary silence as people connected the dots.

"You're probably thinking of our Lacrosse Captain? Kyle Kettner?"

"Oh. I don't know."

"It's ok. He's my brother."

"Brother?"

"Older. Obviously. Just by a year though."

"I didn't know Kyle had a brother." Whitney couldn't help but scan Matt from the floor up, which didn't take long.

"I know what you're thinking. How do people tell us apart? What with all this bruiting masculinity to boot."

This made Whitney laugh a little, though a deep ping of sadness came with it.

“Ok, Whitney, how about we see who can finish their punch first and then go dance? I love this song so much.”

“Oh I don’t really feel like...”

“Ready, GO!”

Whitney beat him by a long shot. He finally finished and smiled again, just as harmlessly. A little red stream of punch dribbled down the right side of his chin. Whitney reached to wipe it off for him at the same time he went to grab her cup and landed her second right jab of the evening.

“Jesus. I’m so sorry.”

Matt adjusted his jaw a little and grinned.

“No pain, no gain!”

He took Whitney’s hand and they waded through the dance floor where Deee-lite's new hit song “Groove is in the Heart” blasted buoyantly from the boombox.

1991 - A couple months later

“Oh fuck.”

“Again?”

“Yeah.”

Whitney jumped off the futon and into the bathroom in two giant leaps.

“Oh FUUUUUU”

Color Me Bad’s “I Wanna Sex You Up” was playing number one on MTV’s Countdown that week but was now inaudible due to the sound of Whitney’s up-chucking. Hurling that was just as loud as it had been 20 minutes before. Matt waited for the violent part to end and tip-toed into her bathroom with a glass of water. He kneeled down beside her and gently pulled her hair from her face.

“Drink up, buttercup.”

“Ew.”

“Times three.”

“I was talking about you saying...”

“Just take a sip.”

A little stream of water dribbled down the side of her chin and Matt wiped it away with his sleeve. Whitney looked up and into the heart-shaped mirror she had gotten for Christmas.

“So this is why you put that mirror there?” Matt laughed.

She looked pale and worried and not pretty. She sipped the water and handed it back to Matt who smiled at her like he was genuinely proud of her for keeping it down.

“Food poisoning?”

“You’ve been watching me do this for a week.”

“Do you think you’re allergic to something?”

“No.”

“Well, you should go to a doctor, Whitney.”

“I don’t want to go to a doctor.”

“I’ll go with you if it would make you feel better. I hate going too.”

“I don’t hate going to the doctor. I just...”

“What?”

“I haven’t gotten my period.”

“Oh.”

Matt crinkled his nose. He always did this when he was trying to figure something out.

“Pregnant, Matt. I might be pregnant.”

“Oh.”

Matt swallowed loudly and bit his bottom lip. He always did this when he was sad about something. He did this the night he met Whitney after she declined his request to kiss her goodnight.

"You're like my best friend now, Matt. You have to promise me you won't tell anyone."

"I am?"

"Well you're with me everyday. Do you see me hanging out with anyone else?"

Matt smiled harmlessly back at Whitney. He always did this.

"Promise me."

"Promise what?"

"That you won't tell anyone. If I am... you know."

"Of course."

"Say you promise."

"I promise."

1991 - Graduation Night

"Oh, oh... oh fuck."

"Did you just..."

"I'm sorry." Said Matt.

"It's ok."

Matt crinkled his nose as if he was trying to remember how to breathe normally. His left leg shook in small jolts until finally he regained control of it.

"Geez. I didn't even make it through one song."

“Technically you didn’t make it through the first chorus.” Whitney smiled.

Matt swallowed loud enough to eclipse Mariah Carey’s singing for a moment but before he could bite his bottom lip Whitney laughed and pulled him closer to her.

“You felt amazing.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Matt had imagined how he would lose his virginity a million times and each time it was just like this. Just like this, but longer.

“I guess I got overwhelmed. You just look so beautiful in this cap and gown.”

They both laughed and hugged. Whitney pulled Matt’s dusty brown hair away from his eyes.

“Are you sure it’s ok that I... you know... inside of you?”

“I’m already pregnant, Matt.”

“I know. But I couldn’t like, make more babies pop up in there, right?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Cool.” Matt sighed with relief. “It really did? Feel good for you?”

Whitney shook her head, yes. She smiled because she wasn’t lying. In fact, it even hurt a little on account of Matt’s surprisingly large member.

“Did you... you know?” Matt asked.

“What?”

“You know... cum too?”

“Oh. I think so.” Whitney giggled up at him and tried to wink. He smiled down at her, a little less harmless than before. She thought to herself, how on earth did I let this happen? She was in love with him.

“How does she do that with her voice?” Matt said.

"Huh?" Whitney was pulled back to the moment.

"Her voice, Whit. When she goes high like a dog whistle. Can you do that?"

"Hell no."

"Do you want to stay at my house tonight?" Matt asked.

"Hell no. Wait. Sorry. Why?"

"You never come to my house. I just thought maybe we could stay the night together for once."

"Oh... I don't know. I think I should..."

"Forget I mentioned it. I really don't care. My brother's probably there trying to relive his glory days with the Lacrosse team luddites anyways."

"Oh. Yeah."

"You could stay at my house." Whitney said looking into Matt's eyes.

"Really? Like stay the night?"

"Will you?"

"Of course. If you want me to... of course."

"Emotions" rattled the speakers of Whitney's Mercury Tracer in all of its pop chart glory. And anticipation of their summer and, as the valedictorian had put it, 'the rest of their lives' buzzed between them. Humming just as loud as the Friday night lights that illuminated the now empty football field. A hundred red cap and tassels left abandoned like the would-be-forgotten Yearbook promises of the class of 1991.

// Intermission - Refill your popcorn. Reapply your lip gloss. Check your Pagers and call home to let them know you may be back a little past curfew since Katy is taking Theresa and Jamie home first. (They buy that one every time.) //

1992 - Christmas time

"Oh fuck! No no no."

“Oh boy. He really got you this time.”

“This is a new sweater too!”

“Here, I’ll take him while you change.”

“Oh Fuck, look at this.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’ll come out.”

Matt took the crying baby boy and lifted him high into the air and back down.

“Did the big boy have a whoopsies on Mommy?”

Whitney yelled from the bathroom.

“Oh fuck!”

“What is it?”

“This has to be dry cleaned. I was so excited to wear this.”

“You know, I don’t think you should curse in front of the little guy.”

“He’s a baby. He doesn’t even know what words do yet.”

“I bet he feels it though. And plus it’s all a sponge in there. You never know what is going to stick.”

“For his virgin ears or yours, honey?”

Whitney winked at Matt as she walked topless to the closet. He rocked the baby boy who was now giggling with him. Neither of them ever had the heart to tell her that both of her eyes closed whenever she tried to wink.

“Matt, have you seen my other sweater? The one with the Manger scene?”

“Maybe it joined forces with all the ugly coffee mugs and ran off to start a Christmas musical?”

Whitney poked her head out of the closet. “You think my sweater is ugly?”

“No. I’m just kidding. It’s fun.”

"I like to be festive."

"I know."

"I cant believe you hate my sweater."

"Hey, if it makes you feel better, I like that one more than the one that just got sprayed."

"That doesn't make me feel better."

"The uglier the sweater the more beautiful you look?"

"You should stop talking now."

"Yup."

Matt bounced with the baby and touched his nose to the baby's nose. He noticed as he drew the babe closer to him how the almond shape of the boy's eyes weren't so different from his own. He liked that. "Your mommy loves her silly sweaters, yes, she does. And we never laugh at mommy's silly sweaters do we? No no no."

"I can hear you."

"I would tell you to just go topless except I don't think my brother could handle meeting you for the first time under those circumstances."

Whitney stopped sifting through her clothes. "Maybe I shouldn't go."

"Whitney, you have plenty of other sweaters"

"I don't know. I feel gross now."

"Whit, I can count on one hand how many times you've actually come to my parents' place since we've been together and they love spending time with your baby."

"Our baby."

"Well, yeah. You know what I mean."

"As far as I'm concerned you are his daddy."

"Yes. And I appreciate that sentiment. And my parents love having him around."

Whitney's eyes grew sad like this whenever the issue of the baby's father came up. "It's not just a sentiment."

Matt had been so gracious. He really was the baby's father in all the thankless ways that count. He had moved into Whitney's parents with her and was bartending most weekends on top of his managerial position at Best Buy to help save for their own apartment.

Kyle had been away at college on his Lacrosse scholarship so it hadn't been difficult to avoid seeing him so far. But it was bound to happen. She thought of all the things she would say to him when they saw each other again. Of all the things he may say to her.

Matt insisted. "My parents were expecting us at 7."

"Ok, ok. What time is it?"

"Almost 7:15."

"Oh fuck!"

"Whitney!"

"Sorry."

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Kyle looked up at the posters that covered the walls of his High School room. All blissfully ignorant to the notion of framing or anything more svelte than double-side tape. He leaned back in his worn out bean bag chair and juggled the lacrosse ball in and out of the net. He always did this when he was commiserating over something.

Away for one year and already his brother had locked himself down with some illegitimate daddy duty. A far cry from the debauchery Kyle had grown accustomed to at Bucknell University. He couldn't say he was eager to meet the girl but he was curious to see the baby. After all, it was going to be a part of his family soon. He was going to be an uncle. Sort of.

The doorbell rang and he could hear the front door open, followed by the animated welcomes of Grandparents. Well, 'kind of Grandparents', he thought. He had better put a shirt on. No need to suffuse baby brother's girlfriend with desire of the family jewel, he thought.

Kyle shook Whitney's hand and smiled through the polite introduction. He looked at her for a brief moment as though he recognized her from something. How could he have known her

heart stopped for that moment? Just as quickly, he moved his attention to the baby boy with forest green eyes.

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“More wine anyone?” asked Mrs. Kettner.

“Yes, please.” Whitney polished off the last of her glass.

Matt looked at Whitney surprised. She never drank this much.

Mr. Kettner smiled and said, “You know I don’t think anyone at this table is technically of age to be taking part in the festivities, my dear.”

“I’ll be 21 in February, Dad”, Kyle boasted.

“Oh it’s the holidays, dear. Stop being such a prude.” Mrs. Kettner looked at Whitney as she filled her glass. “You’d think it takes years off the life of men to be a little *festive*.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Thank you, Mrs. Kettner.”

Whitney took a big sip and then another before putting it down. “Everything was delicious. Thank you so much, Mr. and Mrs Kettner.”

“Our pleasure, dear. And Matt, perhaps you should take some notes?” Mrs. Kettner leaned inconspicuously towards Whitney and whispered loudly. “He’s never been part of the clean plate club.”

“Jesus, Mom.”

“And Mary and Joseph in the manger.” Mrs. Kettner snapped pointing to Whitney’s sweater. “Now Whitney, did you like the green bean casserole?”

“I can’t remember having better, Mrs. Kettner!”

“Enough with this Mrs. Kettner nonsense. It’s Diane to you, Whitney. Why don’t you have some more casserole.”

“Oh, I’m pretty stuffed...”

“You know I make it every year but I feel I haven’t perfected it just yet. Kyle, honey, pass her the green bean casserole will you?”

Kyle lifted the giant dish of casserole with ease and handed it to Whitney. She had to use both hands to lift it back to her side of the table. Kyle smiled politely and quickly went back to devouring his second helping of everything. Whitney stared at Kyle as she dished more casserole onto her plate. She watched how his jaw muscles flexed as he chewed and noticed a small bump on the bridge of his nose.

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“Are you sure you don’t want another piece of pie?” Mrs. Kettner smiled warmly from the living room sofa. Her teeth were dyed a deep purple from the two glasses of wine she’d devoured during the annual game of Scategories.

“We’ve got to put the baby down, Mom.”

“We haven’t even finished the game.” Mr. Kettner said with eyebrows turned upside down.

“Thank you so much for everything, Mr. and Mrs. Kettner.”

“Of course, dear.” Mrs. Kettner yelled upstairs. “Kyle, your brother’s leaving. Come say goodbye.”

Kyle bounced down the stairs so quickly and loudly it sounded like a giant bag of popcorn in the microwave. He was wearing nothing but a towel.

“Going somewhere like that?” Mrs. Kettner laughed.

“I gotta hurry and rinse off. We’re all going to see Kris Kross tonight.”

“So no one’s going to finish this game with me?” Said Mr. Kettner.

“Is that the group that wears their pants and everything backwards?” Matt asked.

“Yeah. They’re dope. You guys want to come?”

“Well, no, Kyle. We have... a baby to put to bed.”

Kyle couldn’t quite hide his judgement. Mrs. Kettner looked confused and asked, “But why?”



“Why what?”

“Why would they wear their pants backwards?”

Kyle laughed and high-fived his brother. “Good seeing ya, Matty.” He smiled at the baby boy and scratched its belly. “Night night, little guy. Ahh, he is all tuckered out.” Then he turned toward Whitney to say goodnight. He paused. “Were you a Scorp?”

“What?”

“Were you a Scorpion? You know, did you go to Sawtelle High? You just look familiar for some reason.”

“I do? Yes. I did. Or I mean I was... a Scorpion.”

“Maybe we had a class together at some point. I don’t remember these things.” Kyle said pointing to his head.

“Maybe we did. I don’t remember anything. Or those kinds of things, I mean.”

“That’s gotta be it. Well it was nice to finally meet you, Wendy.”

“Whitney!” The rest of the Kettners said in unison, waking the baby and sending him immediately into a fit.

“We better get this guy home before all hell breaks loose.” Whitney was red in the face and her hands were shaking as she repositioned her boy against her collarbone.

Matt crinkled his nose a bit and smiled at his family. “Goodnight.”

“Merry Christmas, you two!”

“Almost!” Matt and Whitney answered in unison.

Oh my fucking God, Whitney thought, Kyle Kettner doesn’t even remember.

**1994**

“Oh fuck! This is dope.”

Kyle leans back in his bean bag and juggles the ball in and out of his lacrosse net. Notorious BIG’s “Ready to Die” album is playing loudly through his boombox which takes up the entire

surface of his dresser. Some spare change hovers and wiggles from the bass of the speakers. Next to his bean bag are a dozen cassette tapes including debut albums from Outkast, Nas, Snoop Doggy Dog, Warren G, Method Man, Da Brat, and the Fugees. Kyle bobs his head and grins and then looks at us. He leans in closer and in shattering our notions of a fourth wall, he whispers,

"Now this has nothing to do with the story but I wanted to mention that 1994 was a monumental year for the world and especially the kid that wrote me into existence"

(Mind you, I gave Kyle no agency to speak on my behalf...)

"The year 1994 marks one decade on earth for our author..."

(...or to reveal my age.)

"... and was the very year he became obsessed with music. Rap music to be specific. A fact of import heightened by the fact, and yes I reiterate, the *fact* that 1994 was the single greatest year in Hip Hop history..."

(I can't argue with Kyle there.)

"subsequently it became an informative year for 'Cookie', as he calls himself. Now *that*, my friends, is synchronicity at its finest!"

Kyle wafts the ball high into the air and catches it in the net with ease.

"What? Still trying to put me in the cliché, 'neanderthal jock for a brother' box? Void of any cerebral mechanics just cause I delight in the spoils of my natural athleticism and good looks? Look, so I don't remember Wendy... or our chance encounter in the bathroom. Sue me. If I tried to keep track of every girl that threw herself at me from the time I was 16 till now I'd have no room left in this handsome head for music trivia." Kyle smiled and dug into the bean bag. "So as you read on, try to consider that perhaps, just perhaps, you should judge one based more on their options than their actions alone."

## **1997**

"Oh... FINE."

"FINE!"

Matt and Whitney laid in bed and stared at the ceiling. Breathing out of sync from each other in short heavy puffs. The silence was growing thick and fetid. Whitney finally broke it.

"I just don't know why you've become so obsessed with this."

"Do not make me sound like I'm crazy."

"I'm not saying you're crazy. I'm just saying that you bring this up so much now and you never used to."

"I'm not obsessed with anything."

"Matt, I know. I just... I told you from the beginning it was a mistake and I never wanted to think about it again. It was meaningless then and is so much more meaningless now. You've been his father since the day he was born so what difference does it make."

"Because I wasn't his father since the day he was conceived. That's the difference."

"You're the one that fucking said one kid was all we could handle."

"We've barely handled that."

"Well it's not like you couldn't pump one of these out if you wanted. Come on! Let's go."

"Stop."

"Why? If it's such a fucking feat? Come on, I'm ready. Let's get you your own. Then maybe you'll stop talking about this so God Damn much."

Matt threw the sheets off of him and walked into the bathroom and shut the door. Whitney grabbed a pillow and put it over her face and screamed into it. She threw the pillow on the ground and looked at the bathroom door. She could hear the water running. A tear formed and dribbled down the side of her cheek catching the blue twinkle of the television glow.

"Semi-Charmed Kind of Life" doo-doo-doo'd faintly from MTV's late night video programming.

A moment later Matt walked out and sat on the side of the bed. "Look, I know I agreed to this from the beginning and back then I was ok with not knowing. All that mattered was we were together and..."

"So why isn't that enough now?"

"It's just different, Whitney."

"But why? Nothing has changed. It's only become more meaningless."

“Whit. Someday, he is going to want to know who his real dad is.”

Whitney tried to swallow.

“And whether it was a meaningless night to you, it will never be to him.”

Whitney had never considered this. The truth of it seemed to block the air from getting to her lungs.

“Matt, I’m sorry. I just really want to go to sleep now.” Her words wobbled in her throat like the Third Eye Blind singer’s shaky falsetto, betraying any resolve she hoped to keep.

“Ok Whit.” Matt would surrender for the night. He rubbed her leg and listened deafly to Stephen Jenkins do as most songwriters do and betray the explicit confidence of girlfriends past. To anyone who will listen... in this case, the masses.

### ***1997 Christmas at the Kettner’s***

“Oh fuu—”

Matt stood and watched his wife throw up into the toilet of the guest bathroom. He didn’t kneel down to wipe her hair out of her face or hold water up for her to drink.

“You don’t have to be in here.” Whitney’s voice echoed into the toilet.

“Is my family that unbearable?” Matt asked.

“What?”

“Every year, without fail... you get absolutely shit-faced. The second we all sit down at that table you go for the wine. It’s like clockwork. Like you need it to stomach us.”

Whitney rolled away from the toilet and waited for the sound of the flushing to stop its drilling into the sides of her head. She looked at Matt, defeated. Her mascara was forming dark wet lines toward the back of her face like landing strips for sound to skid into her temples.

“Are you embarrassed of me?” She asked.

“Don’t turn this around, Whitney.”

“So I had too much wine. I didn’t eat enough today. You can’t...”

"You never drink like this. But every year, Whitney, every year here... it's the same."

Whitney just stared at Matt. For a split second she imagined telling him everything right then and there. She even drew breath and formed her mouth into the first word of her confession. "I..." And then she was paralyzed.

Matt shook his head. "Nothing." He left and shut the bathroom door firmly behind him.

Whitney rested her head on the side of the toilet for a moment before getting up and jamming a finger full of toothpaste in her mouth. She looked in the mirror and thought she looked older. She hoped it was only from dehydration but knew deep down that the gravity of this secret was starting to age her. She knew what she had to do.

From the hallway, she heard Kyle saying something to his wife Hillary as he walked by the bathroom door. The sound of his voice made her queasy again. A second later there was a knock on the door. She stared at the handle frozen, as it started to turn. Then Matt stuck his head in the door and scowled at Whitney. "Everyone is gathering in the living room."

"I'll be out in a minute."

Before slamming the door, Matt turned back to Whitney. "You can go home if you want... but I'm fucking staying for Scategories."

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"Oh..." Kyle leaned back in the rocking chair and ran his finger along the bump on the bridge of his nose. He stared directly into the porch light. "... Fuck." He looked away and saw giant white spots marching in his direction.

Whitney took a long drag of a cigarette and let Kyle take in the information.

"I didn't know you smoked?" he said.

"I don't." Whitney said.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Well.. to be honest I would have. I think. But when you didn't even recognize me... I don't know, it was like a weight was lifted. And I really thought maybe I wouldn't have to tell anyone... ever."

“God, I’m sorry I didn’t... Jesus. You must think I’m...”

“It’s ok. I get it. You were Kyle Kettner.”

“I mean... I still am...”

“Really, it was a relief. Sure, it was slightly soul crushing to have the guy who took my virginity not remember my name but...”

“Oh my god. I was your...”

“Oh fuck.” Whitney laughed disparagingly. “Well the cat’s really out of the bag.”

“So he is really *my*...” Kyle kept blinking to see if the big white spots had gone away. They hadn’t. They had been joined by big red ones. All of which were approaching quicker and quicker. He tried breathing faster and faster to get rid of them but it made it worse.

“Kyle? Kyle are you ok? Kyle, are you—“

He fell sideways off of the chair and onto the ground hitting his head on the arm of the other chair first and then again on the hard wood deck.

“Kyle. Kyle, wake up. Kyle!”

Kyle had slipped into a dream where he was playing with a small boy in a big green lawn. He was tossing a ball gently to the boy who held an oversized lacrosse stick like a shield. In this dream, he called the boy J.R. The boy didn’t catch the ball when he tossed it to him but this didn’t bother Kyle. In fact, he preferred it. He would *need Kyle* to teach him how. A woman’s voice was calling to them from inside the house. “Kyle. Kyle Junior.” Kyle liked the sound of this. But the voice didn’t sound like his wife Hillary. The boy looked at the house and missed another toss. He appeared just as confused at who it was calling their shared name.

Oh my fucking God, Whitney thought, Kyle Kettner is about to die on me. Right here on his parent’s porch. And it will be because of me. I’ve killed Kyle Kuttner, she thought. She was trying everything. She had shaken his shoulders, pulled his hair, and slapped him inappropriately hard. She could hear the rest of the Kettners inside taking positions for their yearly game of Scattegories. This was all too much. She started to cry.

“Kyle. For Christ’s sake. Kyle.” She couldn’t help but notice the artistry of his bone structure. The way his jaw line formed the angulate foundation for which the rest of his sharp features could be displayed. This was after all, the first time in 8 years that she had allowed herself to look at him for longer than what was required in their pleasantries at the annual Christmas

parties. Then perhaps out of desperation or perhaps something else, she leaned down and kissed Kyle on the lips. She didn't know how long she stayed there or why she thought it may help. But when she opened her eyes, his eyes were open too.

Kyle looked into Whitney's eyes. Her running mascara was bringing out the blue in them. In his daze, he didn't recognize her but the moment seemed ultimately familiar. His instincts took over and he kissed her. They didn't know how long they stayed there or why they kept kissing but when they opened their eyes, the two halves of their DNA stood at the porch entrance staring at them.

"Oh fuck." Whitney said and stood up.

The boy yelled back into the house. "Daddy! Daddy! Mommy said fuck!"

"Oh sweetie, Mommy's sorry. We don't need to tell Daddy about the NO NO word."

The boy looked at Kyle blankly. "Why are you on the ground, Uncle Kywol?"

Whitney answered before Kyle could speak. "Uncle Kyle needed a little nap." This made the boy laugh. "Yes, sweetie. Even grown-ups need nap time."

"Why you were giving him CBR?"

"Oh. CPR. Yes. Well, Mommy was giving him CPR to wake him back up. Sometimes grown-ups take the deepest naps!"

"Daddy! Daddy! Mommy saved Uncle Kywol's life!"

"Oh no, no, sweetie. We don't need to tell Daddy. I was just doing what anyone else would have done."

Kyle's wife, Hillary, came out onto the porch. "Honey, what are you doing on the ground?"

"I..."

"Nappy time!" The boy yelled.

"He fell." Whitney interjected.

"How much did you drink, honey?" Hillary asked.

"I guess I had more than I thought." Kyle worked his way back onto the rocking chair and scratched the boy's head."

“Well everyone’s ready for Scattegories.” Hillary looked down at the boy who was currently transfixed with Uncle Kyle. “Come on buddy, you got a whole pile of Legos waiting to become Gotham City.” She looked back up at Kyle and Whitney.

“Oh, I’m just going to finish this cigarette.” Whitney said.

“I didn’t know you smoked.”

“I don’t.”

“Well you know that gives you wrinkles.” Hillary said. “Okay, we already have teams and couldn’t find you two so you’re a team.”

“No!” Whitney and Kyle said in unison.

Hillary furrowed her brow. “Drink some water, Kyle” she said and led the little boy inside.

Whitney and Kyle sat and stared out across the huge lawn. A lonely pair of headlights made their way up the quiet road and flashed like morse code through the spindly winter thicket. After a moment they looked at each other. Whitney spoke.

“I don’t know what I expect you to do with that information. I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do with it.”

“What information?”

Whitney blinked hard and fast. “What I shared before you fainted...”

“I’m sorry, I must have hit my head cause I can’t seem to remember anything from before I fell.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I am... kidding.”

“Oh my God. Oh, Jesus. You asshole.”

“I know. I’m sorry. That was inappropriate.”

They looked at each other again.

“What part?”

“Well. Yea.”

“We don’t need to even…”

“No.”

“It was a mistake.”

“A momentary lapse of judgment—”

“Reality.”

“Both.”

Whitney took one last drag of her cigarette, now barely long enough for her to hold between her fingers.

“Well I guess we should get back for the game.” She said.

Hypnotized by the smell of competition, Kyle hopped up. “Let’s kick some ass.”

Whitney flicked her cigarette into the snow and watched the red taillights of the lone traveler get smaller and smaller through the naked forest.

Mother Fucking Scattegories

“I Smell Sex and Candy!” Matt shouted.

“What?” Mrs. Kettner said, crinkling her nose, confused at how this proclamation had anything to do with ‘Songs that begin with S’.

“That doesn’t work.” Hillary shouted. “That begins with ‘I’.”

“Pronouns don’t count.” Matt said. “Besides, you are on my team, Hillary!”

“Pronouns most definitely count, son.” Mr. Kettner said.

“Pronouns are frivolous to titles.” Matt argued.

“Anything but!” Hillary yelled. “You’re telling me you could do without the *She* in “Isn’t *She* Lovely”?”

“Absolutely not.” Matt said smiling at his beautiful, blonde teammate. “In fact, let’s count that too while we’re at it!”

“This is mayhem.” Mr. Kettner said as he set his Scotch glass on the table like a gavel.

“Always a stickler for the rules.” Interjected Kyle.

“Not all the rules.” Hillary winked at her husband.

“Well that’s a silly thing to sing about.” Mrs. Kettner was still dubious.

“It’s part of the ‘grunge’ thing.” Mr. Kettner said proudly. “Like that band ‘The Nirvana’.”

“Oh, I’ve heard them.” Mrs. Kettner said. “They do not sound like their name.”

“It’s not Nirvana, Dad.” Kyle said.

“Yeah, it’s something weird”, said Hillary.

“Marcy’s Playground.” Whitney said.

“That’s right!” Kyle shouted and patted his teammate on her leg. Whitney froze.

“Well look at you getting on the scoreboard, Whitney.” Mrs. Kettner smiled at her. “I almost forgot you were playing.”

“Sorry, I’m just not feeling a hundred percent.”

“Oh dear, something from the food?”

“Definitely not the food.” Matt said.

“Never one for competition.” Hillary said rhetorically. Though Hillary had every right to hate Whitney if the truth were as bare as the season, it wasn’t. And Whitney had always wondered why she was such a bitch to her in front of the family but so warm when it was just the two of them.

Mrs. Kettner started to get up. “Let me get some red wine for you. That usually settles my nerves.”

“That’s the last thing she needs, Mom.” Matt was rolling the Scattagories dii in his hand vigorously.

“Geez, don’t be such a cop, Matt.” Kyle said.

“Well you can escort her to the bathroom next time, then.” Matt said.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” Whitney said.

“I’m just saying *he* can hold your hair back next time you need to ‘settle your nerves’.”

“Matthew.” Mrs. Kettner said.

Kyle was unknowingly crumpling the tally sheet into a mess in his hand. “Why don’t you just have a little fun for once, Matt.”

“Well that’s impossible, right? Unless I’m wasted or break something?”

“Hey, no one told you to play surrogate daddy instead of going to college.”

“Wow, big word. It even starts with an S.”

Mr. Kettner butted in. “That’s not really song, Mathew. Technically, the category is Songs that begin with S.” Mr. Kettner was unaffected by the rising tension in the room.

“You really want me to be a dumb jock, don’t you. Would that make it easier for you? Would that make you hate me less for *enjoying* my twenties?”

“Boys?” Mrs. Kettner begged.

“Kyle, you think everyone wants to be you. I’d rather be a substitute Dad than have a scholarship’s worth of lacrosse groupies and a day care of their bastard children.” Matt crinkled his nose. Something in him shifted, as if a heavy stone was moved aside to let in the harsh light of some fulgent truth.

Whitney looked at Matt shocked. And then at Kyle, pleading silently for armistice.

Hillary stood up and turned to her teammate with a layered sadness in her eyes. “That’s not just hurtful to Kyle, you know.” She stormed out of the room. The stab of her heels against the wood-floor echoed throughout the silent room. Resonating like a low piano key pounded by a child unaware of his own strength.

Mrs. Kettner followed her. Whitney picked up her son who was asleep on the carpet next to his Legos and followed the women. The brothers looked down at the table of playing cards that divided them.

Mr. Kettner watched the women leave the living room and then slammed his scotch on the table.

Matt jumped. Startled from the gavel. "I'm sorry, Dad", he said.

"Well, I suppose it's too damn much for a father to ask to finish one God Damn game of Scattegories."

1999

"She wants me to go to therapy." Matt said.

"She thinks YOU need therapy?" Kyle asked.

"Well not like that. It's couples therapy."

"So you guys would go together?"

"Yeah."

"People do that?"

"I guess so."

The Kettner brothers sat on their parents' porch and watched the autumn afternoon paint the chaparral like a pumpkin. Matt's cigarette blushed like the forest and sat still between his fingers like a dog beside his master.

"I didn't know you smoked." Kyle said.

"I don't."

Silence made itself comfortable between the two. Pressing but fitting with the zenith of the Fall season. Funny, Matt thought, how the severity of circumstance can disregard even the most insistent beauty of a moment.

"How has it been staying with Mom and Dad?"

Unsure if he should let on to how easy child-free life had been the last few months, Matt crinkled his nose and answered. "Not half bad."

"Dad still make you play chess with him?"

"Every night."

Kyle looked at Matt who was focused on the something further than even the bits of visible highway beyond the forest.

"Maybe I should ask Hillary to try that group therapy stuff?"

"Couples therapy"

"Yeah."

"You two still at odds?"

"Oh yeah." Kyle sighed. "Was tough news to take."

"Sure was."

"And she just really wants kids. And I'm just not sure I'm ready...". Kyle caught himself. "Well you know what I'm saying."

Matt was silent.

"Matty, you know... with all my fucking silly choices, you know I'd never choose to do something like this. I mean, it's just as much the universe's sick joke on me as it is..."

Kyle caught himself again. "I just feel really fucked up about it is what I'm trying to say."

"I can't imagine."

"Matt, can you just..."

"I'm sorry. I know in some twisted way, it's not your fault." Matt swallowed loudly. "And I don't really *think* you would ever do something like that on purpose."

"Think?"

"Baby steps."

"Fair."

Kyle studied the loyal menthol in Matt's fingers. "Can I get a drag of that?"

Matt looked at Kyle, bewildered.

"Just give me a drag." Kyle said.

"I sit out here a lot." Matt said. "More than I ever did when we lived here. And just think about how fucking silly this all is."

"You couldn't make this shit up."

"And I keep coming to the same place with it."

"Yeah?"

"So everyone wants to know the truth. Everyone thinks lying is the demise of relationship.. but I don't know. Maybe it was the crux of ours. If I really face it, that lie gave me the life I had with her.

"It's still your life, Matty."

"If Whitney had told me the truth from the beginning, I wouldn't have been able to swallow that pride. I would have left. I know I would have. But I love them and the time I've spent with them have been the best years of my life. So in a way I can't blame her. She did it for me as much as she did it for her. Maybe."

Kyle felt some warmth return to his extremities. "So you think you'll take her back then?" he asked.

"No."

Kyle looked at his brother now surprised to see the cold resolution in his face.

The screen door opened and Mrs. Kettner stepped halfway out of the door. "You boys getting hungry?"

Neither answered.

"Ok. Well, still another thirty or so before dinner", she said. The cigarette breathed when the wind caught it like a tiny furnace against the wooden deck but she didn't say anything. She took in the rare sight of her two boys sitting together and watched the falling red leaves drift down

like embers of the stubborn menthol. "We're losing all our privacy again, aren't we?" she said and went back inside.

Kyle got up after a moment and walked toward the house. He turned and said, "Whitney needs you. And that boy needs his Dad. And that's you."

Matt almost said something but didn't.

Kyle opened the screen door and sighed. "Maybe you tell Whitney what you just told me. Hell maybe even the therapist too. Just to see how it plays."

A gust of wind carrying northern temperatures blew Matt's dusty brown hair across his forehead. And startled him when it caught the screen door and slammed it loud behind Kyle, like a child who didn't know his own strength.

-Cookie

