

MOM 2 MOM

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CAM DOESN'T REALLY MIND driving me around to these things. He looks at home behind the wheel of the ancient Ford Ranger his father sold him after he quit the army. Likes to talk about the Ranger's mileage, how his father took such good care of the engine that it sings even after thirty years. Most days he takes his lunch—always a ham sandwich with one slice of processed cheese and a can of Coors—to the garage, slides the driver's seat way back, and listens to his old high school CDs on the new stereo deck, the only change he's made. I've learned not to ask him to come inside—it's his place, but even after a few weeks I still wonder which drawers are mine.

"No, go ahead," he says. "Text me when you're done."

"You could come in—there's nothing nearby anyhow," I say.

"I'll find a coffee shop or something."

"The last sale had a table with donuts and everything."

He rubs his thumb along the buffed vinyl arc of the steering wheel, shakes his head, and tells me to have fun. I lean across and give him a kiss on the cheek. As he drives away, through the smudged glass on the back of the cab I see the silhouette of his hand come up to his face, although I can't tell if it's just resting there or wiping something away. I smell a remnant of his shaving cream on the damp March air.

This is the third *Mom 2 Mom* sale I've been to in as many weeks, but the one I'm most excited about. The women at the other sales gush about the selection and the number of sellers who show up here. *If you get to any of them, they say, make sure you hit Grace Baptist out past Waterdown. They're making babies on production lines over there. Must be something in the water.* The pregnant ones always rub their bellies when they say it, a hungry gesture I can't quite match. I'm a petite five months and barely showing at all.

I turn towards the church. It's a new building, all straight lines and gentle angles and perched on its own small hill, the property fronting Concession Road #3. On one side, dark woods brood over a stream on the

property line. The other two sides are shored up by the berms the municipality uses to hide the adjacent landfill from the road, but from the church's gravel parking lot everything is on full display. Bulldozers push mounds of trash bags to the edge of the built-up ground and later cover them with earth, raising flocks of panicked seagulls with each change of direction.

"Hi! Welcome to Grace!"

A perky waif in tight jeans and blonde highlights is waiting behind a table just beyond the front doors, her hand already extended, palm up. The cardboard sign next to the girl says that the sale is free, but that there is a recommended donation of five dollars. The sales are always fundraisers, either for church programs or distant charities that sound vaguely familiar. I uncrumple a bill from my pocket and hand it over. In return, I'm given a plastic bag that will be filled with pregnancy swag like yoga and diet pamphlets, vitamin samples, maternity store coupons and the like.

"Have you been to a *Mom 2 Mom* before?" she asks.

She gives me a scan, her eyes stopping at my belly. This seems to be part of the rite-of-passage at these sales, even from the young and definitely un-pregnant, followed by the requisite questions and necessary platitudes. *How far along are you? How are you feeling? What's the date? Boy or girl? You look great! You're glowing!* I wonder if she even knows she's doing it, and then wonder if my lack of a baby bump will register. In my mind, she'll ask, *Are you even expecting?* and I'll struggle to find a gracious response, her question like sandpaper grit between my teeth. Like a few days ago when Cam came in from the garage and asked, *How do I know it's even mine?* I gnashed my teeth about trust and offered to pay for a DNA test, called a cab to go to the clinic, then fought with Cam as the cabbie spun ruts in the spring-soft driveway when we told him he wasn't needed after all.

"Sure have," I manage to say.

As though I've passed some test, her eyes light up. She introduces herself—she's a Madison, of course—and launches into her spiel, punctuated by enthusiastic words she's obviously been coached to say. The sale is a Longstanding Grace Youth Group Tradition, a Fundraiser for a Missions Trip to Uganda to Help the Africans.

"And you'll be going too"?

"It's my third trip," she says. "They can't even build their own wells or churches."

I start to wish her luck, but her sparkly eyes have already moved on to a pair of hugely pregnant women who've arrived behind me. I step past

her farther into the foyer, which is jammed with tables piled high with baby miscellany and staffed by women mostly younger than me, but with darker shadows beneath their eyes. The customers are all women, too. They browse between the tables in cheerful bargain packs of two or three, teenagers looking for things to giggle about, moms leading daughters around and purchasing their grandparenthood, Starbucks-toting friend groups in ill-fitting yoga wear with pregnancies carefully aligned.

I stop at a colourful table piled with winter clothing. I can't resist digging through—it's been organized by age and gender, so each pile is a bright life story, from the impossibly small to the joyously more substantial.

"When are you due?"

The woman sitting on the folding chair behind the table is looking at me over her phone. Her stylish glasses reflect two identical squares of bright blue from the screen.

"Second week in July," I say.

"Oh, you should head into the sanctuary. Lots of newborn stuff there."

"Thanks, I will."

"You won't need these things for a while. My stuff starts at twelve months."

Even after three sales, it's embarrassing how little I know. The other women seem so wise, something moving through their life stories that hasn't been woven into mine. One of the ladies at the last sale, held at a Christian school in Smithville, paused in the middle of a story about her fourth child, and shook her head. *I never thought I'd have to wait so long for a boy—I'm 29, you know.* I'd assumed she was older than me. I left the sale without buying anything, the aging reality of childbearing keeping me in a daze as I walked away. After Cam picked me up, he caught me worrying small bits of vinyl from the Ranger's seat with my fingernail. *Damn it, Yellie, it's hard to find parts for this model. The seat's still the original. Fuck.*

Cam doesn't swear very often. It's one of the things that makes him handsome. Sometimes, after he's been on his own for a while, he develops a hard edge, but it passes quickly. He's soft and firm and polite, which is why I got over my nervousness and spoke to him first after we got off that bus. For the entire trip, his army buddies had been so loud and foul, and he wasn't, and when I said hello and asked if he'd like to get a coffee, he smiled and said yes. He endured the hard time they gave him about abandoning the unit, sat down with me at the GO Terminal café, and missed his connection when I

invited him to my tiny apartment above the Sally Ann on King Street. He got out four months later, with a little money paid out for something that happened overseas, and his first call was to me. I decided that it would be all right for him to know that he got us pregnant. *You're keeping the baby*, he said. *That's a good thing*. A few days later, he found an old house to rent and said I could live there if I wanted to.

I pull out my phone and text him.

so far so good lots of ppl here

I tap SEND and move into the sanctuary, a huge space tinted brightly by stained glass windows. Stacks of chairs line the wall, a skyline of dark upholstery. It's packed with tables and women and children darting around. The sound would be the gentle roar of a sideline subway station, but the taupe carpeting and suspended sound pads dampen it to a self-conscious hush. No one's whispering, but it sounds like they are.

The sound gets me. I've been here before. I raise my hand to my forehead and dig my middle and ring fingers in until it hurts.

"Shit," I say.

"You didn't bring your friend with you this time."

The speaker could be the girl at the front door's older sister, until you see the wrinkles partially filled in with foundation, more than a hint of crow's feet, parenthetical frown lines. I remember the eyes, so pale I can't tell if they're blue or grey. Edged in perfect black eyeliner, stark, bringing out their lightness. Her facial skin tone is at odds with the neck that's visible just above the pink t-shirt's collar and the hands holding a clipboard against her breasts. Black yoga pants, on brand, and pink runners to complete the ensemble. Even the soles of the shoes are pink. Everything looks new.

I hedge, trying to buy a moment. I was here a few years ago, all fucked up and thirsting for adventure, before I grew up. Before grace settled me down and threw me into a job that pays well enough to make permanent change possible, if I line things up just so. I'm waiting for an overdue pay bump and a promotion, and haven't told anyone at work about the pregnancy, although some of the women probably suspect. I want to introduce myself properly, like I can now, far removed from a time when I lived in clothes so trashy they looked used even in the store. But my confidence has deserted me, my edge is gone—I'm the impostor again.

"I'm sorry, I—do I know you?" I ask.

She smirks.

“And not British, either. I knew it”, she says.

That day was a blur of a friend and me getting lost on our way up Highway 6 to a party in Guelph, weaving into the parking lot to ask directions, ending up inside and playing our roles as a joke, arm in arm. *Weeah Cock'ney lesbiyins*, we drawled. *'Opin' to foind somefink fo' the bay-bay! Nappays and prams, luv—nappays and prams!* The rest of it so indistinct aside from our brutal accents and the voice of this woman, sharp behind us as we stumbled around the stalls making messes and mocking everyone. She didn't like it when Tamara, as high as I was, leaned in so close she could have licked the lady's lashes. *Is yo' oy loinah tattew'd on?* Guessing afterwards, having fled in the car when the police got called and laughing ourselves lost even more, that she must have been one of the organizers. Important somehow. She got her own line of the chant we made up, *Fucked wif the pahsta's woife, we did!* as we drove up and down rural roads that all looked the same. We're still Facebook friends, but I've blocked her.

“I think you should leave,” she says.

“Look, I'm here alone. I'm due in July, and I didn't realize—”

My phone buzzes. Without thinking, I bring it up and look at Cam's reply.

ok

“I don't believe you,” she says.

She's scrutinizing my left hand, looking for a wedding band. Her ring finger is festooned with a huge stone and matching gold bands, garish against her pale skin. It's strange what we look at when escape isn't a possibility, and I can't say it with any authority, but I'm certain that aside from the kids everyone else in the sanctuary is married. All I can see is diamonds and gold, princess cut, squares and ovals, flush bezels and posts that grip the stones like four-fingered hags.

I've never worn rings. I tried my mother's on when I was just a girl, but it felt so confining that I had to take it off. It was probably just sized too small, but how would I know? For a moment, a band of cool remained on the skin from the alcohol in the cleaning contraption on the bathroom counter, where she'd drop the ring in a little basket. Mother's ring never left the cleaner—she just faithfully topped up the alcohol every so often as it evaporated. The woman standing in front of me probably never takes hers off, even to do the dishes or sweat through spin class, the skin and muscle underneath proudly compressed. Outfits chosen to match. Makeups, too.

This is tiresome, I think, and so predictable. I put my phone away and fold my arms.

“I’m not a ring kind of person,” I say.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Like you are, obviously.”

She’s taken a half step back, clutching the clipboard to her chest with both arms. Looking to both sides for support or escape. I start to feel a bit of the old defiance—who the fuck is she, right?—but it leaves me as quickly as it came, as though the carpet and sound padding absorbed it too. The voice it gave itself was the Oxy voice from not too long ago, ridiculous. *’Ew the fuck is shay, roight?* I don’t want to fight today.

“I’m sorry. I won’t be any trouble.”

“No, you won’t, because I’m calling the police.”

“Okay,” I say, although I know she won’t this time.

And then my back is to her and I’m wandering past the sale tables, immersed in an ocean of used onesies and sleepers, wandering through a forest of contraptions for breastfeeding. At every table there’s at least one package that never got opened, little jewels amongst all the secondhand items and slightly faded kiddie clothes. I’m amazed at the bargains. A few days ago, Cam drove me to a baby store where the prices left me speechless long after he picked me up. You’re quiet, he said, and waited for me to fill the space behind his question, getting angry when I didn’t, twisting the volume up to drown us both out. Here, though, everything is a fraction of the price in the stores, the items gently used but generally well cared for. It’s hopeful.

A table at the far side of the sanctuary draws me in with its fantastic colour range. Colours I’d wear myself, earth tones and blues and greys, and unexpected colour combinations you’d swear wouldn’t work, but do. Not a dusty pink or powder blue onesie in sight. I lift a sealed package of hemp baby cloths and turn it over, looking for the price.

“Go ahead, take it,” the woman behind the table says.

“I’d like to pay.”

She waves away my offer. “First time buying baby washcloths?”

“Ever, in fact.”

“You’ll get dozens of them. Receiving blankets, too. They’re on every what-to-get-the-new-mom list. Seriously, take them, on me.”

“Thanks.”

I look down at the cloths, thinking about all the people I haven’t told. Won’t.

“Single mom,” she says.

A simple statement of fact, as easy and confident as sunrise. She sits back in her chair, nods, and smiles, lighting up the sun spots and wrinkles on her makeup-free face. No grey hair yet, although I suspect she wouldn’t really care either way. Jeans and a wool cardigan. No rings, either.

“Yes. No. He’s around,” I say.

“That’s good.”

“And you?”

“No, it’s just me and the beans.”

“Your kids?”

She lifts her chin at the far side of the church, next to the stage, where a young boy is holding court with a handful of other kids his age. He’s a born leader, even I can see, with a shabby look and shaggy hair you can tell is the envy of every other child.

“That’s Ozzie, bean number one,” she says.

“He’s popular.”

Liz gives a snort.

“Yeah, church kids love him—probably sense he’ll be the one with the good weed someday.”

I laugh at the surprise and the truth of it. Sudden, sharp, delicious. My cheeks are out of practice.

“And this is Roz, bean two,” she says. “Say hello, sweetheart.”

She looks down and gives the car seat on the floor next to her a fond, work-booted nudge. I didn’t notice the seat before, or the pink nonpareil nested into the blankets there. A tiny, pleased gurgle makes its way past the folds of cloth, and I watch the mother take a deep breath, as though she can fill her lungs with the perfect acceptance radiating from that little face.

“How old?”

“Three months and twenty-four days,” she says.

Roz wiggles her nose and falls back asleep with an unexpectedly accomplished groan. And I can’t help but think that we’re never that still again.

“I’m Yelhemina,” I say. “But call me Yellie.”

“Liz.”

A beat.

“You all have z’s in your names.”

“You make connections where you can,” she says, shrugging.

It’s the kind of thing that annoys me, like matching couples’ t-shirts or colour schemes for family photographs. But I can tell that Liz isn’t the type

to reach for cuteness or nicety. No, these names have history, good leftover names you'd dig through old genealogies for, settling on the ones that can bear new weight, too, if you shore them up in just the right way. Oswald, maybe. Rosalind. I don't know where mine came from—I suspect my mother made it up just to have a funny story to tell at the bar.

I feel a presence beside me. The woman with the clipboard has appeared from somewhere and is looking at Liz with exasperation. I'm impressed with how focused she is as she ignores me—I'd say she's pretending I'm not there, but it's more like her mind can actually make me not exist.

"I've asked you to speak to your son about his language."

"Why, what'd he say?"

There's a smirk on Liz's face as she asks. She waits a long moment for the woman to respond, savouring the possibility that her response might include the language in question.

"He said the *d-word*," the woman finally whispers.

"Damn, you mean. He said damn."

"Liz, please."

"I just want to be precise."

"Liz—"

"All right, all right, I'll talk to him again."

"Soon, all right?"

With the precision of a drill sergeant, the woman turns on her heel—away from me, even though it's the more awkward move—and walks primly away. Liz watches her go, slides her gaze back to me, intrigued.

"There's a story there," she says.

So I give her the dime tour, from underestimating the Oxy two years ago to the threat of calling the police earlier today. I throw in some extras, too, like how getting pregnant makes me worry about my job and that I'll have to make a stark adjustment to my make-it-right program, how Cam seems to be strong but it's still easy to worry about him, how I have this feeling his stillness has to do with what happened to him overseas, how I think he'll probably never tell me. I finish by saying I didn't recognize the church until I came into the sanctuary.

"And Vicky saw you right away, I'm sure."

"That's her name? It fits."

"Oh, she's a peach," she says, and chuckles. "Well, that's my church word for her, anyhow."

“You go here?”

“When I can, yes. There’s lots of kids for Ozzie to play with.”

I’m surprised. Somewhere in a former life church had never been presented as something you fit into life, but much more the other way around. And to be a single mother with kids years apart, one of whom is a newborn, well, that must be a story too. Churches and single parents—especially women—are oil and water. I ask how long she’s been a member.

“I’m not one, although they’d love it if I were. I started coming when I found out I was pregnant with Roz. They’ve been good to me,” she says.

“How do they accept, you know—”

I raise my left hand and waggle my ring finger.

She laughs and admits that the math is complicated from a faith-community standpoint. She was married when Ozzie was born, the result of a Las Vegas wedding chapel fling with an American army officer. They ended things soon afterwards, but he never filed his papers. A month after he was vaporized on a roadside in Iraq she found out that she was entitled to the survivor benefits. Roz was a much later surprise, of course, from one night of trying to remember what being a woman felt like. She hasn’t told the father.

“Most of the time I just say I’m a widow,” she finishes. “And I am, technically, but not because of that IED.”

A strange thing to say, I think.

“It keeps people from trying too hard to set me up, too,” she says, as though reading my thoughts.

There’s a buzz from my pocket.

r u done?

Cam tells me to take my time, have fun, that he’ll be fine, but he’s impatient. Like time runs away from him when he’s alone and it freaks him out. Aside from that one night, we’ve only been together a few weeks, but he always texts me when he feels the rush, like he’ll catch it if he can just put me back in the passenger seat, help buckle me in. He brought me to meet his father right after he found out about the baby. Had a vision and everything, one where he finds an excuse to leave his father and me alone in that musty house and we bond. *Call me Terry*, were the old man’s first words, before offering me a cognac. *Let’s have a chat*. Cam disappeared up to his old bedroom. Not fifteen minutes later, right in the middle of Terry’s photo memory tour, cognac warming against my palm, my phone thrummed in my pocket. *r u done?*

Liz looks like she knows about impatience.

“Hey, it was great talking with you,” she says.

“You too.”

“Ozzie!” she yells across the sanctuary.

Heads turn and shake at the disturbance. Ozzie detaches himself from his admiring crowd and heads over. Liz starts grabbing onesies and sleepers and other bits of earth-toned, gender neutral baby-wear and stuffs them into a greenish shopping bag. The cloths get placed on top. She grabs a roll of masking tape and scribbles on it with a sharpie she has tucked into her jeans pocket. Peels it away from the roll and, with a deft wrist snap, tears the tape and sticks it to the cellophane around the baby cloths.

“Looks like I’ll get to make one tag today after all,” she says.

“I can’t accept this,” I say. “What about Roz—she’ll need these things.”

She shakes her head, waves my words away somewhere. There’s no space for argument—my objections are just gone.

“That’s my cell number, if you ever feel like getting dragged to church.”

I reach for the bag, my hand travelling to my non-existent belly.

“We’ll tell everyone it’s an immaculate conception,” she says, smiling.

“Just like yours,” I say.

“Exactly like mine. Right, Oz?”

Ozzie grins shyly.

“Right, Mom.”

“This is Ms. Yellie.”

“Hi.”

“Can you carry this for her out to her car?”

“Aww, I was just—”

“Either that or you carry everything we don’t sell today. All your old stuff. All. Of. It.”

“Fine,” he says dramatically, seizing the looped handles and heading for the exit.

I reach out to shake her hand, but she’s leaning down and reaching for the carseat. I can’t really know, but I think there’s a good possibility she’s softly running a mother’s finger across a baby daughter’s cheek. I’ve heard that if you close your eyes and cast off the world for an instant you can actually feel love tingling through the downy hairs on a newborn’s face. I don’t buy it, though.

On my way out of the sanctuary, I text Cam and tell him I’m ready to go. I pass Vicky and Madison, the girl at the donations table—there’s no doubt

now that they're mother and daughter—but they don't notice me. Ozzie's at the glass doors at the front of the church, looking at all the cars and trucks in the parking lot, his feet far apart and swinging the bag forward and back between them.

"Is that your truck?"

"No, he'll be here soon, I—"

But it is the Ranger after all, its thirty-year-old red paint bright against the grey of the parking lot's crushed gravel, idling in the small turnaround, waiting for me like I'm an old lady who needs a pickup after a hymn-sing. Cam's behind the wheel, looking through the windshield at the trash-movers growling across the muddy property next door. As Ozzie and I walk out, ducking our heads in a futile attempt to ward away the rain, I can see Cam's hands at ten and two, tapping slowly to some tune on the CD player. He has the volume down—normally I'd hear the thrum and bass of the speakers through the truck's thin skin.

"Thanks, Ozzie, I can—"

"I got it."

"No, you can go back to your friends, and—"

"I said I *GOT* it."

He reaches out and tugs at the old door latch, clunking it open and swinging the door carefully out with one hand, balancing the plastic bag in the other. I hear him and Cam trade Hi's as he heaves the bag into the footwell with a satisfied grunt. He stands to the side as I slide into the seat, looking concerned and with a hand part-way out, as though it's enough to be close to my elbow in case of emergency. His actions are undertaken smoothly, without the smallest portion of self-consciousness. Familiar.

"Can you thank your mother for me?" I ask.

"Sure."

"I think the baby will like the stuff your mother gave us."

"Yeah, it's my old blankets and my socks and my jammies. From a box in my closet. They're yours now."

Cam taps the steering wheel, coughs, and shifts in his seat. Ozzie reaches to the edge of the door and looks at me.

"Are you all inside?"

"I am. You're a real gentleman," I say, and mean it.

"Mom always asks for my help."

"You're good at it, too."

He shrugs.

“There are lots of trucks around,” he says.

And he slams the door shut, in the end having to use both hands to pull it past the catch in the hinge. Once the door closes, the noise from Cam’s stereo deck faintly fills the cab, almost too soft to hear, yet recognizable, a song from his favourite classic rock CD. Track number thirteen, I know, just like I’m starting to know that Cam won’t start singing until the third verse, right after the guitar solo.

We pull away. From the corner of my eye I see that Ozzie hasn’t moved, that he’s standing on the gravel with his arms folded, staring after the truck as it leaves. I can’t stop myself from grabbing the rearview mirror and turning it so I can watch him and the parking lot fade behind us. So I can watch Ozzie and realize that he’s wearing old black gumboots far too large for him, see him watch us until we turn onto the concession road. He’ll nod at a job well done, and head back to the sanctuary. I know it.

“Nice kid,” Cam says after a few minutes.

“Nice kid,” I reply.

He leaves the volume down as we drive. The Ranger’s tires hiss through the shallow puddles spotting the road and roar through the deeper ones. I lean forward, grab the bag from the cool footwell, and hold it tight against myself, compressing the clothing inside by crossing both arms. I imagine its warmth through my own clothing, the cottons and wools holding their heat well, as the scenery flashes past in a blur of greys and greens and browns. It’s a while before I say anything.

“I don’t think I want to do this with you.”

“No, it’s not something I want, either,” he says.

Cam drives and we listen to the CD almost all the way through. Eventually my hands grow cold and I slide them under my thighs, just inches from the sharp edge in the vinyl I made with my thumbnail after the last sale. I don’t think Cam would swear at me again, not now, but it’s better to give my hungry hands somewhere safe to rest.