

RUMPUS ORIGINAL FICTION: SOMEONE WILL COME AND GET US

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“Watch me,” I say, a signal for Hamish to counter my weight with his, a warning that I may be in trouble. My fingers peel off the wall, sandstone dimpled with handling. *Falling*, I’m supposed to announce, but I don’t, because even when I’m down to two fingertips, I still think I can top out. Rock climbing hollows out my stomach, a sensation not dissimilar to the uterine suck in the last irrevocable moment before an orgasm. It always feels like I’m making a mistake on purpose.

I know better than to push off, but there’s a stubby outcropping on the cliff below and I want to give it some room. That’s how I end up bulleting headfirst toward Hamish, until the top rope snatches me up short. Then, I dangle over him like bait.

That night I’m still thinking about falling, while my husband twitches rabbit-like in the warren of our sheets and blankets. Sam’s a restless sleeper. Sometimes I lay my legs over his to anchor them down; tonight, I exile him to the couch, protesting that I have to be at the courthouse in a few hours.

But I can’t get back to sleep, and eventually I jettison the sleep mask and ear-plugs, and join him. The couch is too small for the both us, and Sam gives me a jocular bounce, making it silly in case I’m expecting anything else.

“You sleep okay?” I ask.

“I’m tired,” he says. Sam is always tired. When he has sex with me, it’s like he’s on a chain gang and I am one more bucket of rocks for him to haul. Even before his promotion, even before we put down his dog last summer and he went back on the antidepressants, I could tell sex with me was a chore.

I’ve been testing myself out. I set up a Tinder profile that doesn’t show my face just to see what would happen. I ride the subway and it looks like a buffet. A man with tattooed hands responds to my eye contact by pressing his business card into my palm, and I keep it, measuring how much slack my conscience will give me. Sometimes, I text my ex-husband; it shouldn’t count as cheating if it’s sex with someone you’ve already had sex with.

But I haven’t done anything I couldn’t come back from. Even texting Hamish to ask if he wants to meet at the gym is innocent, if you discount motive.

I wish, he texts back. *Next week is better.*

Sam and I attend a wedding. There are chairs covered in peridot fabric dyed to match the bridesmaids' gowns, and the beta fish unfurling in the centerpieces are spoiling for a fight with the fish at other tables. It's a nice wedding. The bride works in foreclosures, the groom in litigation, and the reception is larded with people whom I haven't seen since law school and can't remember the names of.

When Sam and I first got together, I told him that I wasn't cut out for monogamy. I *warned* him. Before Sam, I went to parties with mattresses on the floor and blurry strangers, heavy with the smell of bleach and bowls filled with condoms. Before Sam, I had sex with my dentist after a cleaning. Before Sam, I owned a leather dress and I still don't know where I lost it. Then Sam and I merged last names and I discovered that I also love: flannel pajamas, wandering Costco looking at the oversized tubs of condiments, sending out Christmas cards with pictures of us at the summit of some trail. Our marriage was like one of those dreams you watch with interest but are not actually in. I know what will happen at this wedding. Sam and I will pretend to attack one another in the photo booth, he in the oversized novelty sunglasses and myself in the Viking horns. The DJ will play "Uptown Funk," and "Love Shack." I will poke a slice of wedding cake with the tines of my fork while Sam tells a story.

Sam tells our table-mates about the squirrel that got into our apartment through an open kitchen window last weekend; we had to flush it out with some couch cushions and a long-handled duster. When I tell this story, I get a distracted chuckle. Sam tells it, and people from other tables decamp to ours, dragging their chairs with them. Sam has the gravitational pull of a campfire.

The cellphone spasms in my lap: a text from Hamish.

Still on for next weekend?

Yes, I text back, searching for an emoji that will be flirtatious but not too flirtatious and Sam says something I miss. Everyone laughs.

"Marissa wasn't even nervous," Sam says, "but then she is much braver than me." He lifts my hand by the wrist to display my skinned fingertips. "That's why she *literally climbs mountains with her bare hands.*"

A man at our table holds up his own scabby paws. You tell a man you're good at something physical, he needs to show you he's better. "I'm doing V5s now. Let me know if you want some pointers for your next project."

I text Hamish, *Can't wait. Still sore, though.* Hamish never questions my ability to handle the long run-outs, never steers me toward the gentler, slabby climbs or begrudges my gains. If I lead us up a sandbagged slope, he never holds it against me.

Hamish: *Worth it.*

It would be worth it: those chalky hands on me, the red of his hair between my legs like a sunset.

The gym is humid with the damp of physical effort. Coaches shout beta. The mats atomize the embedded smell of feet when climbers hit them, and chalk dust handprints snake up the wall.

Hamish works his feet into tight climbing shoes. "We'll get it today," he says, that one course we haven't been able to solve. There's a tough crossover halfway up, demanding a pivot of the hips tight to the wall and a transfer of weight that doesn't make sense to either of us. We stand side by side on the mat, looking up, miming holds, plotting.

"I think if I just stay lower there..." He points. His pale arm skims mine. There's an even paler scar in the crook of his elbow.

"Go on," I say. "Let's see it." Hamish hugs close to the wall as he climbs. The muscles in his calves flex. He reaches the crossover where we've both always gone sprawling, and I take a step back, checking to make sure no one is in his landing zone.

He nails it and then it's a few more reaches and he's topped out. He lingers up there. Not like he's waiting for someone to notice, but like he's taking a moment for the view.

"What are you doing Wednesday?" I ask him once he's down. My brain pulses out the same unfinished sentence: *I'm going to I'm going to I'm going*

"Potatoes, I think. You'll be there?"

I started volunteering at Meals on Wheels under duress from the firm's partners, who are big on giving back and offer flex time in return. But it turns out I like pushing a knife through raw vegetables. I chop until my wrists ache.

"I'll be there. You busy after?"

"No," he says. "Why?"

"Let's do something."

"Something?"

I let the question dangle.

“Yeah. You know.” My skin crackles. I am lightning. “Something.”

My husband is outside of the gym.

“I had a feeling I’d catch you,” Sam says, and hugs me, a paper bag of groceries swinging between us on his arm.

I can’t remember what *pleasantly surprised* is supposed to look like, and lift the edges of a smile as heavy as a tarp filled with water.

Hamish introduces himself. The men shake hands and we stand there with the 7 train shrieking in the distance.

“We finally solved that V5,” I tell Sam by way of explanation.

“Good,” Sam says. “Good work.”

I am making this awkward. It’s like that dream I have where I approach the witness stand only to find I have forgotten about words. I wish there were curtains I could pull around myself, when I want a conversation to be over.

Finally, Hamish waves and hitches the straps of his bag over his broad shoulders. “See you Wednesday, Marissa. Nice to meet you, Sam.”

“I needed to pick my shoes up from the shoe repair and I realized I was close enough to come find you and take you to dinner,” Sam says, after we’ve split from Hamish at the corner. “Why are we walking so fast?”

“No reason,” I say. “Work to finish at home. I’m sorry. I can slow down.”

Sam drapes his arm around my shoulder. His arm is heavy and my shoulders are tired. “What are you doing on Wednesday?”

“What?”

“That guy said he’d see you. Wednesday.”

“Oh. Meals on Wheels. That’s where I know him from.”

I haven’t done anything, and still the casualness feels like a cardboard mask, cheap and unconvincing.

“Because watching you two in the gym, it looked like you were flirting. With *Hamish*.”
Hearing Sam say his name is like seeing someone casually pick up and examine the heft of a hammer you plan to use later to bludgeon someone.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I say, and stop to look in the window of a store that sells mostly antique Ball jars but displays them in such a way that they look beautiful.

“You know what I’m talking about, Marissa. That look of yours.” He licks the ball of his thumb and smudges something off the side of my nose. “I remember being on the receiving end of that look,” he says, without sadness, without any expectation that I will argue.

I turn from the store window. The moment you take those old turquoise Ball jars home, they no longer look interesting. “Let’s just go home and order something,” I say. “I’m cold.”

The wind kicks up, animating dead leaves and garbage. When I stop to button my coat to the neck, my hair wraps around my face so that I almost miss it: a wall of glass falling from the sky on 43rd Street, end over end like a sheet of ice. This windowpane crashes into the sidewalk ahead of us and shatters into lethal glitter.

“Holy *fuck*,” I say. A chorus of car alarms. “Good thing we stopped or we might have—”
I stop. Sam has a look on his face that I’ve never seen before. I thought I had seen all of his looks. “Let’s cross the street, Sam.”

He cranes his neck upwards, trying to see the empty socket of the blown-out window, and resists me tugging on his sleeve.

“Did a *window* just blow out?” a man holding a baby asks us, his arms curled over his daughter. You know something bad has happened in New York when strangers talk to you on the street.

“Too much construction,” I say. Sometimes I feel panic about the torrent of people moving to Long Island City, a tumbling wall of limbs and briefcases and shopping bags.

For a moment, no one moves, and then pedestrian traffic nervously resumes around the broken glass. The man with the baby walks in the middle of the street, putting up his hand when a car

comes, pointing to the sky like it might spit more windows. A woman takes a picture of the shards as she passes.

“Sam? You okay? Can we just go?”

Sam keeps checking his hands for cuts, and my face, too. “We would have been standing there,” he says.

“We weren’t though.” His peacoat winks: splinters of glass. “Are you cut?”

“We almost died,” he says again. He takes my hand and slides it inside his coat pocket for safekeeping.

“I want to go with you,” Sam says.

“Go with me where?”

“Your climbing gym.”

“I don’t think you’d like it, Sam. It’s hard. And it’s sort of. You know. *Me-time*.”

“Meals on Wheels, then. Let me come with you to that. I think it would be good to have something that we do together.”

“We already do things together.”

“I mean things outside of the house.” He wraps his arms around me and slips his hands under my dress. “Although this is good, too.”

I feel ill. Ever since that window fell, he’s been climbing into the shower behind me, running his hand along my hips while I’m microwaving dinner, texting me emoji of eggplants, peaches, tacos.

“I’m tired,” I tell him.

I leave the apartment at a half-run, late. Sam follows.

Hamish is wearing gloves and peeling potatoes in the industrial kitchen when we come in. He knew from the start that I was married. I don’t peel vegetables or climb with my wedding ring on, but a woman mentioned Sam in front of him at the gym, in the way that women do.

Putting down the potato he's skinning, Hamish removes his gloves to shake hands with my husband.

Sam says we all shake hands too hard. Rock climbers and their reliance on grip strength: I keep a tennis ball in my bag and squeeze it if I have to wait for something.

New volunteers are supposed to go through a whole safe food-handling orientation, but instead the kitchen manager leans against the counter to listen to Sam tell Hamish about the falling window. We peel while he talks; the pile of naked potatoes grows.

"If it hadn't been for Marissa, stopping to look in the window of that junk store—" Sam says. *Antique store*, I want to put in, worried Hamish will think I'm the kind of person who likes church rummage sales, used hats and candy dishes printed with kittens and shitty paperback books thumbed until the pages go soft.

"We'd have been red mist," Sam says. "There wouldn't have been pieces big enough for them to identify."

On our last wedding anniversary, I had worn suspender stockings and a corset and all Sam said was, *You don't need all that*. The sex had been perfunctory, and had left me with a run in the stockings because Sam had not clipped his nails.

"Did you, like, sense something was about to happen, Marissa?" The kitchen manager is trying to give me a chance to contribute to the narrative.

"I just like that antique store," I say. "It has—" *What did it have?* "It has these old things, that I. You know. Like."

Sam and Hamish nod. I am a falling pane of glass in this conversation.

Hamish tells Sam that he should come climb with us. He says I am a natural teacher.

I try to find some sexual nuance in that, but whatever was there is gone now. I know if I take another look, our texts will all look innocent. We were talking about food. We were talking about climbing. Rocks, not one another.

It is not right to be angry at Sam, but I am. I beat him home from work Friday evening and have just slid under the blanket with a book and a sigh when he comes home and unbuttons his pants, eager to join me.

“Why are you in bed with your pants still on?” he murmurs into my neck, but can’t figure out the trick of my trousers. Men don’t know about side zippers.

“Cold in here.” I will put on my flannel pajamas. How much clearer can I be than flannel pajamas? My phone buzzes: my mother, asking if we’re going to their place for Thanksgiving. I find myself scrolling through my phone sometimes the way one stands in front of an open refrigerator. I’m hungry and I want something; I just don’t know what.

“Do you want to go to the climbing gym tomorrow?” Sam asks, touching my hair. He loves to touch my hair. His fingers leave it limp.

“I don’t know. It’s really crowded on Saturdays.”

“I might just go alone, then,” he says, sliding his hand under my shirt. His new calluses snag on the satin of my bra. “Or Hamish said he might be able to come with me,” he adds. His breath is warm and sweet. On the wall, in our wedding photo, we kiss like the world is ending. A clock parcels out the time from the living room.

“I like this bra,” Sam says. He lifts up my shirt to have a look. “Ooh. New?”

“You didn’t notice it before,” I said. This is not true. It is new, aubergine satin, a panic of lace with matching panties. Expensive. I had felt guilty handing my credit card over. The dinky shopping bag and tissue paper felt too much like premeditation.

This morning I finally gave in and took the tags off the underwear and put it on. I needed to do laundry.

Sam gets a serious look on his face. “I know,” he says. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Things are better now, though, right?”

“They’re better,” I say. Things were better, and it made it worse.

It’s warm and clammy outside, November with a fever. On the drive to the Near Trapps, Sam and I talk about whether to go to his family or mine for Thanksgiving, and decide on mine. For Christmas we’ll switch, so it’s fair. If there was a third family-mandated holiday, we’d all be fucked.

“Are you okay?” Sam asks.

"I'm fine," I say. We drink from a shared water bottle. On the quieter stretches, Sam takes a hand off the wheel and strokes my leg like an animal that requires calming.

I should be looking forward to the holidays. My husband is nice. My family is nice.

I'm going to I'm going to I'm going to— my brain keeps trying to run the familiar mantra, but can't find a fantasy to latch on to. I want to make a plan. I don't know what for.

The foliage along the Palisades Parkway is viciously bright, and people pull off on crowded scenic overlooks to gawk at the dying leaves. Couples take selfies, framing themselves so they appear to be alone.

We park and hike the rest of the way in. Sam says hello to people coming down in the opposite direction, to their children and their dogs.

I try to find a place that's not riddled with other people, but with weather this warm, the cliffs are crowded. Shouts reverberate. Laughter.

"How about here?" I ask. The easier ways up are all taken, but I have to admit, Sam is an intuitive climber. Part gecko, Hamish says. I don't know where he gets the grip strength from.

"Whatever you think," Sam says. He touches my hair. I wish he would stop touching my hair. I hand him a helmet, and adjust the straps for him. He looks nervous, and in that moment, endearing. When I kiss him, our helmets bang.

"It's fine, Sam. You're a better climber than you think you are. The fear is normal."

Sam squints up, runs a hand along the rock face the same way he touches my back. Sometimes, I pretend to be asleep. I love to be touched while pretending to be asleep.

"Can I go first?" he asks. "Otherwise I'll just copy what you're doing."

"Sure," I say. "You can solve it yourself. Let's see what you've got, Sam."

Sam labors, ascending while I watch from the ground. "It's not that hard," he says. "I thought it would be harder."

"Yeah. It probably gets trickier higher up. Stay low and keep your arms straight. Go on, Sam. You can send it."

“Marissa—on second thought. Maybe I think this is high enough.”

“You’re so close, though.”

That’s what Hamish always said. *You’re so close*. I imagine him breathing it in my ear. *You’re close*. Sam climbs. My strong husband, hard muscles in his calves, concentrating with his whole body. I don’t know why I could never muster endearments for him. The couple nearest us have identified one another as *Lips* (him) and *Muscles* (her) and *Honeybun* (both) in voices that carry gratingly down the cliff.

“Okay,” Sam calls when the wind picks up. “How do I get down?”

“Just a little more, Sam, and then you can climb down the back where there’s practically stairs.”

“Okay.” His hand hovers, searching, hauling himself toward a long run-out.

“That route is sandy,” another climber says, passing by. “And you should really move that crash pad. It’s not in the right spot.”

Men and their ready supply of unsolicited advice. “Thanks,” I say, stooping to adjust it.

There’s another man coming up the trail, a man who looks like Hamish, and my guts telescope like I’ve done something wrong. It’s not Hamish, just some red-haired stranger, but I linger over his approach long enough to miss Sam reaching for some weak and damaged handhold, his climbing shoes scuffling on the wall.

He calls my name. *You’re supposed to say falling*, I think. I’m trying to move the crash pad, but it’s too late. I am skewered by regret watching my husband drop. Sam makes impact with the leaf litter and packed earth, just beyond the crash pad’s protective perimeter. His face tightens into a fist. He cries out, and I am on my knees beside him in the dirt, afraid to touch him, hands hovering over the terrible angle of his leg.

They will think I did this on purpose. No one will believe it was an accident.

“Help us,” I cry out. Why do I sound like a bad actor? “Call an ambulance; my husband is hurt!”

I am here on the mountain, but I am also in the future, telling this story to some shadowy audience, and in the story I omit the part where my attention wandered; I redact the red hair and my bowels cramping with guilt.

How could you take him up such an advanced route? Hamish would ask. *You had to know he would fall.*

It was crowded. I didn't think he would get hurt, I would protest. *It's the future, and I am vaguely by myself. You're the one who said Sam was a natural. Part gecko, you said. You're the one who told me that falling is the best teacher.*

Sam's face is the white of broken bones, of ruptured tendons, of future surgeries. "How bad does it look? Marissa?"

"I'm right here. Try to stay still. You're okay," I say. Nothing to do but lie. "Someone will come and get us," I promise him. "This happens all the time."

"My legs though."

I can hear someone murmur to his friend in a voice he thinks I can't hear, *happened to a friend of mine. And wheelchair.*

"You're okay, Sam. You're going to be fine. Just try to stay still."

There's nothing he could ask for now that I could deny him. If he wanted my spine, I'd be obliged to hand it over.

Witnesses cluster around us. A woman (*Muscles*) tries to hand me one of those neon sports drinks, like electrolytes could fix this. I don't look at anyone but Sam. I'm waiting for the interrogation. *What were you thinking? How did you let this happen?*

We are in the deep shade of the rocks now. It is cool and purple here, and I kneel in the rock-litter beside him. It's purple beneath his eyes too. "Are you okay?" he asks me.

"Don't worry about her, man. Just stay still," *Muscles* says.

Sam gestures at the lower half of his body. Maybe it's something that can be plastered and rehabbed. Or maybe it's a dead weight that will need to be wheeled around and diapered. My stomach rolls when I see Sam's crooked hand. "Don't worry, Marissa," he says. That broken hand seeks out a lock of my hair, dangling like rope over him. "Don't worry," Sam repeats. He never stops trying to touch me.
