She stood there, wearing daffodil yellow flats, a bright sundress, and her own brunette curls draping her shoulders. He thought she might’ve been beautiful with the sun shining; but it was night, and she was on his front doorstep, arms crossed, slouching and shivering from the cold.

Nick gasped, “Maddie.”

<------->

“I can’t believe you went back to his house. What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything for a while,” Maddie responded, continuing her story, “Didn’t even look him in the eyes until I was inside and sat on his recliner. I think my first words were probably a weak, ‘thank you’ as he handed me some hot tea. He said polite, saying that I must have been freezing, and told me to let him know if he could grab me anything else. Then he went to work getting some flames up in his fireplace.

I remember being interested in the room after a few sips of the tea. It’s funny how, when the big things are on your mind, it’s little things that can catch your attention. Anyway, it was a reasonably spacious living room, especially for someone of our age, uh, twenty-two at the time I think, to be able to own. I was in a comfy recliner like I said, and he also had a couch that helped to surround this low coffee table, and a smallish dining table behind those. His kitchen had a mini bar as part of it too. And I remember noticing the decorations. He had paintings and other odd art littering the walls and shelves; it was stylish, litter is the wrong word, but somewhat eccentric. The room had character. I noticed it because it so contrasted the apartment I had at the time out on the east coast. I moved too much for silly keepsakes, and I could only afford a cramped little place, and I had a roommate to help pay for rent; Nick lived alone.

Hm, I guess the trouble with getting distracted by little things is that they’re not usually more than a small detour from the big things. Still, I guess they let you approach the big things from a different angle.

I ventured for a small conversation, ‘It’s nice you have a real fireplace - I haven’t seen one of those since I moved out.’

‘Yeah. I mean, I don’t use it as often as I should - who does? - but it is nice.’ He said, staring at a small flame, waiting to see if it would catch ‘How’s the tea by the way? I got it from a farmer’s market they were having downtown.’

‘Oh, was that the Saturdays on the Square market? I remember I always loved the cheesy bread that one stand had.’

‘Right, where they’ll sell you the bread for like half the price they’ll sell you water for, because they know you won’t realize how badly you’ll need the water until it’s too late.’

That made me laugh, he was so right. Hm, maybe you’ve never had cheesy bread? It’s super salty, at least that stuff was, and dehydrated you pretty quick. Sorry, back to the story.

I said, ‘Anyways, the tea is good, thank you for it.’ I had thought about just spilling out thank you’s and I’m sorry’s for a lot of things, but instead I just asked if he was having any.

He said, ‘No, actually, now that this fire looks like it’ll live, I was thinking of pouring myself a whiskey. Do you want one?’

Awkwardly, I said something like, ‘No… thank you… I don’t drink… I mean not anymore.’

He just said, ‘Oh,’ and there was a bit of silence for a moment.

I broke it by saying that he should feel free to have some though.

‘Okay. You sure?’

‘Yeah, please do,’ I grinned at him, ‘I’m sure anyone could use a drink after the scare I gave you just now, showing up at your door like this.’

He nodded, ‘that’s true,’ and got up and made himself something.

I remember he didn’t smile back, and his tone was more, uh, subdued, than mine seemed, and wondered then if I was being kinda fake, and then - do you know how, when you’re dreaming, if you realize you’re dreaming, that’ll be what ends the dream? It was kinda like that in a way. I realized I was putting up like this wall of politeness or something, and once I did it came crashing down. Then I recalled with this painful clarity what my situation really was. I was on the run, both from the law and my own home, and was sitting in the living room of someone I knew from when we were kids together, about whom there was a rumor he’d tried to rape me, which I knew was false but didn’t say anything; and to whom I hadn’t spoken to since.

I felt my whole mood and demeanor come crashing to earth; it seems like it was only years after that I even attempted a joke.

As Nick came back and sat on the couch with his drink, I tried to think of some other small talk to throw out there. But,

‘Nick, do you… remember… when I’d tell stories when we were kids?’

He nodded.

‘Can I tell you one now?’

He shifted in his seat, ‘You know, Maddie, I never really liked your stories all that much. They always seemed to be about something bad happening to people.’

‘Yeah, I was never very good at the happy stories,’ I smiled, then felt my smile fade, ‘But can I tell you one anyway?’

He looked at me, and he must have seen some earnestness in my eyes, because he said, ‘sure.’

And that’s the way I managed to tell Nick what happened that night, as if it was just some story I had made up.

Of course, he realized that it was just about that night.”

FIN

 then it was kind of like when you’re in a dream, but you realize you’re dreaming. and as I realized that an adrenaline rush I didn’t realize I was having, or maybe wall of politeness came down, and the events of that night I didn’t realize I was suppressing in my mind came back to me.

Once she was inside and sat in Nick’s living room she spoke her first words, a weak, “Thank you” as Nick handed her some tea.

"Of course, you must be freezing from being out there. If there's anything else I can grab you let me know." He replied as he crouched by the fireplace, getting some flames started.

Maddie looked around the living room. It was reasonably spacious; the recliner she was in and the couch gathered around a short coffee table, and behind her was a small dining table, and a kitchen-plus-bar nearby that. She could barely afford her one bedroom out on the coast, even with the help of a roommate.

The room also had a character that Maddie’s apartment lacked. Miscellaneous paintings or small pieces of art littered the walls in a stylish, though eccentric, fashion, with a handful of more classic photos of people standing in a line, staring at the camera, and smiling. She didn’t have the space or money for artsy things, and she moved too much for that stuff anyway. As for pictures, she must have never really thought to print them out.

She didn’t speak, didn’t even meet his eyes until she was sat in Nick’s living room and had sipped some tea, “Thank you.”

Maddie looked around the living room. It was reasonably spacious, with a couch and an armchair she occupied, plus a small table behind. She could barely afford her apartment out on the coast even with the help of a roommate.

Nick had never left the town they grew up in, and had kept jobs steadily since high school, so that he had a reasonably spacious house, while Maddie, out on the coast, could barely afford her apartment even with the help of a roommate. However, Nick lived here alone.

“Of course,” Nick said, as he crouched by his fire place, “You must be freezing from being out there.”

“Are you going to have any tea?”

“Actually, after I get this fire going I think I’ll just pour myself some whiskey.” He caught himself, and paused for a beat, unsure of what to do. He then looked over at Maddie, “I’m happy to get you some of that too, if you’d like.”

“Oh no, thank you, I don’t drink anymore.”

and I can make you a drink if you like” Nick immediately felt embarrassed and regretted this usually standard offer of hospitality.

so that he now owned a house while Maddie just had an apartment with a roommate on the coast.