Wayward Daughter, Wayfaring Woman

 A hung silence settled between them. He shifted in his seat. Her hands crumpled a paper fortune. Images raced in her head: the exit, the short walk down the street, then the chinatown bar where she used to be a regular. She could see herself leaving, walking out from it all, but she couldn’t find the excuse, the reason. She must have been sitting like that for 30 seconds before he leaned forward, resting his hands on hers. She let go of the fortune, and finally let her hands rest on the tablecloth.

“But, yeah, I don’t know if you feel the same way back,” he started. And in his wrinkled button-down, and with his big green eyes, he looked genuine. She felt so calm, so comforted. “But, regardless, I wanted you to know that I love you Maddie.”

 Even if he didn’t mean it, she took her chances, “Don’t worry, Matt. I love you too.”

 Feeling her fiancé’s hand on hers as he got into the Uber reminded her of the warmth of that night. She smiled at him again, and when he had gotten on his seat belt and noticed her, he smiled back, “You in a good mood?”

“No, but I’m glad you’re here,”

 Matt nodded, “It’s good we’re doing this. I know it’s been a long time, but you’re much older now,”

 “I know. You’re right,” She looked outside at the passing scenery. After some minutes it grew more familiar. “How’re you doing? Feeling alright for this?”

 “Hm? Oh, yeah I think I feel fine. If I’m worried I guess it’s for you,” he squeezed her hand. He stopped himself short of making a joke about how expensive the uber ride was. Didn’t really feel right in front of the driver. Also if he did she’d probably offer to pay for part of it, and he was planning to take care of it. Soon, they were at the foot of a gravel circle drive, with a single house at the distant top.

 While they were still a long way off, a someone stepped onto the porch. Maddie noticed this, figuring that her mother heard the car from in her house. The Uber stopped just before the porch, and the couple got out on either side, with Matt circling around. Hand on hips, Maddie’s mother waited for her daughter to come to her. Maddie stepped up the old wooden steps. Standing before her mother, wearing daffodil yellow flats, a bright sundress, and her hair’s curls over her shoulders, Maddie looked up, “Hi Mom. Thanks for having us over,”

She threw her arms around her daughter, and kissed her.

 “Hi Rose, your house is beautiful.” Matt said, walking up behind them. Maddie stepped back from Rose, who turned toward him.

 “Oh, Matt, welcome! Thank you for saying that; I’ll admit it hasn’t been so easy taking care of it all *alone*,” Matt’s fiancé rolled her eyes and stepped in the door, “Good timing by the way, the sauce is just about ready.”

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 Dinner was shrimp alfredo, set in Rose’s dining room. Matt thought this was unexpectedly ornate. While her kitchen felt cramped even with just 3 people grabbing dishes and was floored with linoleum (‘easy to clean!’ Rose had noted), and Rose’s living room sported a well-loved recliner and sofa, their colors dull with overexposure to the sun, her dining room was elegant. Eight high-backed chairs sat comfortably around a long wooden table. A china cabinet sat on one end, and a window on the other let in golden sunlight that gave the crystal a warm sparkle. Their party of 3 sat around one end of the table. Rose’s usual eating table (a squat wooden piece in that small kitchen) wasn’t large enough.

 “Maddie’s dad was in charge of this room. I compromised that he could have this room any way he wanted, if I could design the rest. It should’ve been obvious to me back then how different we were,” Rose scooped some white sauce over her noodles. Matt noticed his fiancé staring off out the window. Seeing the sunset’s rays reflecting off her eyes, he thought she must have taken after her dad. “Oh, I almost forgot the wine. Do you two have a color preference?”

 This caught Maddie’s attention, “Actually, none for me, thanks though Mom.”

 “Oh, okay, no worries darling. How ‘bout you Matt?”

 “No, I’ll pass tonight too. Thank you for the offer though,” he responded.

 “Alright, I guess I’ll stay sober too then.” Rose reached for her water.

 Swallowing his bite, Matt asked, “So you got to design the majority of the house? Sounds like a good deal. Is that why you’ve stayed here all this time?”

 “Oh, yes, that’s part of it. The area’s also nice. I get along well with most of the neighbors.” Rose went on to talk about the Beale’s, Robertson’s, and Adam’s. Anna Willis also lived alone, and had been in the area longer than her. Dave Greenlaw didn’t much like his wife, but they’d agreed to stay together until the kids were out, which they almost were. Rose liked the area because no one lived very far, but everyone preferred to live far enough away that you couldn’t see another house standing on your porch.

Maddie was considering walking to the kitchen for seconds when Matt finally saw an opportune end of that conversation, “Rose, thank you again for having us over. We’ve, um, actually been looking for a chance to come over,” Maddie cocked her head and smiled at her fiancé. She reached out a hand to grab his on the table, “so we could tell you in person that we’re, engaged.”

A look of surprise flashed over Rose, “Oh, congratulations you two. Oh my,” Her eyes glanced quickly at her daughter. Resting on a napkin, Maddie’s left hand realized its nakedness and hid itself under the table. Her right started to get clammy holding Matt’s. “Well I’m so happy for you! Oh, I am glad we used the nice room for dinner now.”

Matt’s hand held Maddie steady. She set her eyes on it, and took a slow breath “Thanks Mom. I wanted to tell you sooner, but I also wanted to tell you in person. I’m sorry it’s so late now, but I’m really glad tonight worked out,”

“Oh, darling,” Rose got out of her seat to hug her daughter, “you don’t have to be sorry about nothing now, I’m just so happy for you.” After a moment, Rose said, “And, lucky us, I think I have some dessert as decent celebration, Matt could you find it? In the fridge?”

“Sure thing,” he squeezed Maddie’s hand again, gathered their plates, and found a pudding pie Rose must’ve saved from some event.

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Their dessert conversation was filled with talk about Maddie and Matt’s relationship: how they met and how he popped the question. The young couple also admitted that, while a fun feature, they didn’t much care for the alliteration of their names and would try to avoid drawing attention to that whenever possible. Lying lovingly, Rose assured them that it would get better with time. While Matt was washing dishes in the kitchen, the mother and daughter talked on the couch in the living room.

 “Oh, and, you know, I do still have my wedding dress,” Rose noted.

“You can’t be serious,” her daughter giggled, “why?”

“I don’t like to remember the man from that day, true, but I do like to think about the girl. It was a big moment for her,” Rose looked down at her hands on her lap, “You’re welcome to use it, if you’d like.”

 Maddie put her arm around Rose, “Thank you, Mom, I really appreciate it. From what I remember though I’d have to hem it? You were taller than I am.”

 “Yes, true, the alterations you’d have to do would be expensive, but cheaper than a new dress.”

 “I suppose,” Maddie laughed, sitting back in the couch, “maybe weird to say, but I haven’t put much thought into my ideal white dress. I’ll probably check out new dresses though, to see if anything strikes me. You never know.”

 “Honestly I didn’t know what I wanted either; I took a lot of help from my friends and my mom,” Rose’s gaze again fell, “How would you pay for a new dress, honey?”

 Maddie raised an eyebrow at this, “Um, I don’t know,” she decided to take it as an innocent question, “I guess I’d need to go to the store to see prices first, to see if buying one is even reasonable. Like I said, I haven’t really put a lot of thought into that part.”

 Rose nodded, “Yeah, smart,” she paused. She adjusted to sit up tall and face her daughter, while keeping her feet planted on the floor, “Honey, where’s your ring? You don’t have one, do you?”

 Maddie pushed herself up. She looked over at her fiancé, but he couldn’t hear or see them while he was washing dishes. Her body sat up straight and her face hardened, but her eyes fell to her knees. “No. I don’t.” Looking back at Rose, Maddie could tell this topic wasn’t going to be dropped. “Well? It’s what you’d expect. But so what if I don’t like him because he’s got money?”

 “Sure, so what,” Rose mimicked, “So, what do you like him for then?”

 Maddie’s brow furrowed, “What’s this coming from? What’s wrong with him?”

 “Oh come on, nothing’s wrong with anyone, but that doesn’t mean it works with any two people either. And I should know.”

 “Well I’m not going to end up like you. We’re having a *catholic* wedding. I’m taking a vow.”

 “Maddie, for god’s sake the ceremony isn’t going to be what matters in 10 years. You’ve got to love each other,”

 Maddie pursed her lips as she found the words. She closed her eyes, “I do love him. Sure, I’m not like him, but maybe someday that’ll change, and that’ll be for the better. But for now when he’s near me – you can’t imagine the comfort he gives me. Things seem quieter, and I can see so clearly. No one knows what love is exactly, but you have bet on something, right? And this is a good bet.”

 A soft smile defined Maddie’s face, and her half opened eyes drifted to her mother. Rose maintained her posture, and her eyes narrowed, “Don’t say you don’t know what love is.”

At this Maddie tensed again and looked down, and a strange expression came over Rose. She had said this quietly, as Matt was just walking in.

“I finished with the dishes, but wasn’t sure where they go.” Matt said, standing in the doorway. His scrunched face looked back and forth between the two women, “Is everything alright?”

 “Yes, it’s all fine, thank you for doing that.” Rose said, “Matt, has Maddie ever told you the story of her first crush?”

 Deciding the dishes would wait, Matt set a towel back down on the counter, “Um, I don’t know. She’s told me about some guys from high school, but I don’t know if any of them were the first.”

 “I guess she hasn’t then, because Maddie found her first love early. She was in second grade when she started playing with a boy named Nick after school,” Rose got up and walked to the pitch black window. Matt quickly replaced her on the couch. He took Maddie’s hand and tried to exchange a worried look with her, but she didn’t raise her face, “She’d sit at the window, looking for his bike at the foot of our drive, then she’d take hers out. They’d stay out the whole afternoon, sometimes hardly making it back before our streetlights came on,” Rose turned from the window, and Matt returned her look and politely followed the story, though he could feel Maddie’s hand trembling, “I wondered what they were up to, but didn’t bother with it much; this was happening shortly before I filed for my divorce. If my child was out of the house and happy, that was probably the best place for her to be. Besides, I knew the parents, and I knew my girl; she could handle herself. And it turns out I was right!” Matt felt Maddie’s hand relax, but his focus remained on Rose. “One day, this Nick character got too frisky, and Maddie knocked his lights out. He spent that night in the hospital recovering from the whupping he got. Bet you didn’t know she had that kind of fight in her,” Rose smiled and looked at Matt, who couldn’t shake his look of confusion. She continued anyway, “Maddie visited him the next morning, but that ended their relationship pretty quick,” Rose chuckled, to herself, “anyways, whenever I think of that story, I smile a little. It reassures me that my girl knows good from bad, and will stand up for herself when she needs to.” Feeling his fiancé sit up, Matt turned back to her, but he felt that he did not recognize her. She had a strange scowl and wild eyes; though it lasted only a moment, Matt thought she resembled a vicious drunk. Rose looked back out the window. “That’s why I love her.”

 Rose heard, “You lying bitch!” as a fist slammed her left cheek.

 Another struck her other side, and she staggered. Something grabbed her shirt and threw her to the ground. The recliner hit her shoulder as she fell facedown. Her blood started seeping into the carpet.

 Maddie stared at what she had done, at Rose’s blood seeping into the carpet. “Oh my god” Kneeling by Rose, she held her hand above the mouth. “She’s still breathing, thank god. I’ll call 911.” She looked around for her phone, “Matt, I’m so sorry, I never thought I would…”

Matt wasn’t listening though, only staring with wide eyes at her.

“Matt? Love?” Maddie stepped toward him, but he started, backing away. In those big green eyes, she saw fear.

Her voice got quieter, and to herself she whispered, “Oh god. No.”

She sprinted out of the room, away from them, and out the front door – but she stayed at the porch.

There she stood, staring into the pitch black night. For a moment her legs would not take her further. So Maddie turned as she heard footsteps behind her.

“Matt, I really need you now. I’m so sorry, but you’ll never see that again I swear. Matt, MATT NO!” The door slammed, and its bolt clicked shut, and though she begged and pounded on it until her hands had splinters, there was no answer. She sat down against the door and tried to catch her breath, but she was starting to choke up.

Tears streamed for a few minutes as her mind raced through regret, anger, and confusion, but one urgent worry nagged her most: whether Matt called the police or just an ambulance, soon someone would have questions she didn’t want to answer. So, she stole away into the night.