

## Chapter 9

### Part 1

The disconnect hangs heavy, like the fatigue of covid and the metallic taste its antivirals leave in your mouth. We mostly occupy separate spaces—a strategy to avoid the awkwardness of having nothing to say to each other.

There it is. This awareness pools warm and heavy behind my eyes.

Maybe, it's not that we have nothing to say, but that we are scared—hurt by a history of being misheard. And we both know, we can't unhear.

Last Friday, you asked me for help but it was hard to recognize the request through the sting of implications and judgmental comparisons. The miserable patterns that orbit our relationship appeared closer, maybe it was the meteor shower. Mercury was in retrograde.

The fight is always the same: who contributes what, how I manage my time, and the goddam sand from the sandbox. The nuances of stringing words together is reminiscent of young children, hot in the face trying to express thoughts. Or, like the game of telephone, whispering the message around the circle from ear to ear. *Can you help* is heard as *you don't do enough*, and *I sacrifice* comes out *I'm unhappy*.

I should have known this was coming. The patterns of pulling away, withholding affection, and the flatness in your voice.

A few nights before, I had brought watermelon out to the kids where you were sitting talking to our neighbor. Your discussion sounded deeply reflective, thoughtful. The screen of my iPad glows bright and the small squares of the keyboard blur together behind the obstruction of my tears. Jealousy and grief mix like whiskey and ginger ale and I am belligerent from the pain. I long for deeply personal conversations to realign our wavelengths.

I had already lined up the neighbor girl to watch the kids the Saturday morning following our fight. With a sense of desperation to replenish our souls, we had a beach outing planned. You needed to get your gills wet and feel a barrel under your board. I needed a minute; I found several, like treasures, lining the bottom of the stream. Stream is generous, it's a trickle this time of year, but the water polishes the stones revealing keepers—and the minutes in time devoted to the search revived my spirit.

As you peeled off your wetsuit, we sat side by side on the edge of the van, a quiet distance between us that spoke more than words.

We took our conversation on the road, navigating both cautiously. This, and that, and “maybe we need to take an honest look, despite the pain.—If we are completely honest,” you ventured, “is who we are now and who we aspire to be compatible with each other? Do we meet each other's needs?”

Sorry my brain is still trying to catch up. I disassociated for a second and my body was somewhere out the window—maybe straddling the guardrail or picking a blackberry off the bramble. The seatbelt pressed against my collar bone and I stole a glance at you in your long sleeve gray Henley. My breathing slowed with the additional knowledge that you love me, but you aren't *in love* with me. It faded out long ago.

“We were on drugs back then. Maybe you need alcohol to feel connected?” You say with a stab.

The double yellow line stretched before us and you looked over as you added, “there's nothing here. Go ahead, say it.”

I didn't say anything.

Separation. Divorce. An uncoupling. I won't be the one to say it. Hope waning, we blame each other for morphing into someone new. Someone neither of us knows.

While I would guess that most couples grow apart gradually, our divide seemed to come on over night. I pinpoint the moment to our son's birth, almost two years ago.

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Things moved so quickly after they induced. Getting my epidural was the worst part and I almost backed out when she missed the first placement. But the next contraction hit with a deep, grinding twist at my midsection. You joined the nurse's urging me to breathe slowly, an unwelcome suggestion piercing through my already frayed nerves. It was a rock in a hard place to face another wave or sit up straight and tall on the edge of the bed to curl forward at the spine, like a cat. My knuckles turned white clenching into your hand as the pressure grew for a second time.

And at last, the needle was inserted and the worst was over.

Only a short time later, my arms pulled our tiny boy up and forward onto my chest, guttural sobs escaping through bursts of laughter. A confusing whirlwind. The next two hours passed in a sweet blur. I didn't know at the time those would be our last tender moments of untainted closeness.

Didn't you think it was weird that no one actually checked my milk supply? He latched so good right away and I had nursed Eva for twenty-two months, so when he started crying, no one suspected a thing.

After eight hours of tears, it broke me to pass our brand new baby off to the curly haired nurse. She took him to the nursery out of ear-shot so we could try to sleep for an hour.

Snores erupted from your bed by the door almost immediately, which fueled me with a jealous spite. I wrestled to remove the pillow from behind my head. The bed motor hummed faintly as I lowered the incline and repositioned the flimsy pillow between my knees. Each twist pinned and contorted my gown. Thoughts gnawing at my head, prompted another flop.

*What kind of mom sends their newborn away so soon? How many minutes had it been?* Salt of snot and tears on my tongue. With my thoughts racing, I pressed my eyes shut and my thumb down on the call button, maintaining both as time stood still.

Our nurse sat beside me on the bed. Her hands massaged into my back and she coached me to slow my breathing, loudly, syncing her exhale with mine as a guide. Desperate to sleep but conflicted, I kept thinking *ten minutes have passed, you only have fifty more minutes before they bring him back. You need to fall asleep, now!*

This pressure gave way to a panic attack that woke you from your slumber. “How are we going to manage when we get home and don’t have help?” I questioned. You skewed my insecurities, holding them against me even to this day.

Back home, Edmond’s red-in-the-face screams continued and by his sixth day we tossed the tubes and syringes. My prolactin levels were mysteriously low and milk never came in. Breastfeeding was not an option.

My grief was all consuming. I spent much of the first few days in bed sobbing.

It was an unthinkable rejection when you turned away, in bed, denying me your embrace as I grieved alone. And in your mind, it was an abomination that I was so stuck on breastfeeding when we finally had our healthy baby boy at home. Wasn’t that all that mattered? My sadness was a black raincloud, casting shadows on the joy. I took that from you.

You’ll never forgive me for this. And I will never forgive you for giving your mom the bottle to feed him on the couch, while my wounds were so raw. Obsolete and breathless, I wanted to just walk out our front door and vanish into thin air.

It was a rough transition to bounce back from this induction into our family. We never could gain much traction to bridge the sickening gap. The former love affair of playfulness and poetry thrives only in my memories. I wonder sometimes if romanticizing my drinking and drug use is not entirely about the substances but the deep connection and lust of afternoons on ecstasy, dancing naked in hotel rooms, or splitting a smoke after sex.

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News to me: Edmond’s birth doesn’t jive with your timeline for the distance. In your eyes it was more gradual—as is typical of most relationships.

How could I not have seen this coming? It's jarring to hear you say, the disconnect came years earlier and in pieces. You stated that it started with the *sacrifice* of moving in with me. The second piece came only a month later. I was five months sober and five weeks pregnant with Eva. I didn't have my legs to stand on. *What do I know about being a mom? I hated my mom. And what about my sobriety?*

You couldn't wrap your head around my fears and I couldn't understand your lack of empathy.

Save for the occasional eruption, you masked your seething well.

Our wedding day, with our daughter standing in those gold shoes, holding a dahlia flower as big as her face, was nothing short of perfect. Your marriage vows had a line about your forgiving love that conjures my tears. With both hands, I sweep the salty outpour across my cheeks in synchronicity, shaking them out at my ears. The air from the bedroom fan cools the wet trail they leave in their wake.

Your vows spoke to a love you wished you could give me; of the quality of forgiveness—there is none.

What did I expect a marriage—our marriage, to be like? There was a time you adored me. I could feel it when I arrived at your house on a Friday evening and you'd opened the door with that Cheshire smile. Your eyes would ignite and devour me from behind the lines of all the smiles that came before. I imagined being married to you would feel like that moment when you opened the door day in and day out.

Attributing the absence of that smile to the weight of responsibilities, I just assumed it was the move out of state. I never thought we would have the stability of a home. Our dreams were coming true.

Can you believe we bought our first house—and site-unseen? Caravaning north with Eva buckled up in the backseat and our son just the size of a plum growing inside of me, was a rush. When we passed the sign "Welcome to Oregon" you launched your fist out the window, jerking up and down in excitement. I honked through tears of joy. Never could I have imagined the twists around the corner.

We envisioned you'd maintain your own company and the luxury of setting your schedule, but the benefits from that unexpected job offer were unbelievable. The structure of its routine schedule cripples you. You hate it, and a grotesque jealousy squirms inside of you. This brings us almost full circle, as you want to know what did I do today? What did I contribute on any given day? Are we pulling the cart in the same direction?

All of this strain, all of these totally normal problems pack a punch. Co-sleeping, failed attempts at sleep-training, the baby's crying, the garbage disposal is making that sound again...And my heart rate is high and my blood pressure is low. I must have slept funny because my neck hurts and my fingers and toes are tingling. Fatigue sets in—and this, this is too much for our young, already strained relationship.

The tick bite was in 1996.

A lifetime of vague clues. My body is not my own. Lyme disease and bartonella hide and thrive in my tissues. The low prolactin levels that prevented me from nursing: just one of many things that now make sense.

You resent that I am sick. I resent that I am sick—and I find your reaction shockingly disturbing. We wrote our own marriage vows and while the cliché bit about in sickness and in health wasn't spelled out, I expected it was implied.

Sometimes, I think it's not about me at all—any of the confusing hurt and disconnect. Deep down I think you are scared. Your disappointment matches my own. Is it possible all this other stuff is just a manifestation of your fear, an inability to accept the challenges that fell at our feet?

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