She's laying on the futon when I get home from work. Her left hand is above her head, her right draped across her stomach. Her knees are half way bent, feet flat on the pseudo-mattress. Her eyes are closed and she's got “Stairway to Heaven” on loop again. Her lingerie-clad body doesn't even flinch as I swing the door open. She's just a few pounds too heavy for her next-to-naked body to turn me on anymore. She strokes her own black hair the way I used to when I loved her. The plain silver bands on both our fingers are the only indications that this was once a marriage.

“How old am I?” she asks.

“Twenty-three,” I say.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Phenomenal.”

She drops her legs and crosses her left foot under her right knee. I look at the constellation of freckles on her milky white calf. I can't remember what we used to call it. Sometimes I don't even remember her name. But today it runs circles in my mind – biting, chasing, barking. Not a moment's peace. Roxanne, Lola, Chastity. None of these. Emily. Like Emily Dickinson. Invalid, reclusive poet. Except all of my Emily's poems are etched on the walls of her skull. Little lies she tells herself and me and anyone who will listen. So just me then.

“And as we walk on down the road/Our shadows taller than our soul/There walks a lady we all know...” Emily hums to herself.

The blinds are down. The room is dark. She's locked herself in and if I don't watch myself, I'll be playing prisoner before long, chained to the bed upstairs like I haven't been in too long.

“Let's go out for dinner,” I say.

“Who shines white light and wants to show...”

“I was thinking Casanova? Or Azteca?”
“How everything still turns to gold…”
I shut off the stereo. Her mouth clamps tight immediately. I want her eyes to shine with rage. I want her to stand up, to slap me, to scream. But she doesn’t. She looks at the ceiling.

“Italian,” mumbles Emily, short hair wrapped once around her index finger.

“Okay. Can you be ready in half an hour?”

The second mumble is indistinct, but she’s moving. Maybe for the first time today.

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We sit ourselves down across from each other at our favorite hole-in-the-wall restaurant. Emily’s put on a knee-length a-line skirt. She wears a pink sweatshirt over it. There’s too much gel in her hair. I can smell it over the tangy red wine I’m sipping and she’s inhaling.

The lights in the restaurant are dim. We’re sitting by the window, and though it’s only six-thirty I still can’t see across the room. Ambiance is a must with Emily. I can’t take her to a McDonald’s or Denny’s anymore. It feels too much like the real world, a world she doesn’t belong to anymore. A world I doubt she ever associated herself with.

“How was work?” she asks in a conversational tone, but she’s eyeing the lamp swathed in a scarf above us.

“Fine,” I say. “I don’t know why we bother teaching existentialism to teenagers. They aren’t capable of understanding that kind of complete disassociation. They’re too caught up in…” I trail off, wondering if she knows where I’m going.

Emily shrugs her chunky shoulders, creating a second chin. Her eyeliner is smeared and there’s glitter on her cheeks. It sparkles in spite of her lackluster irises.

“You underestimate them.”

“I underestimate most people.”

“Defense mechanism.”

“Shrink working out, then?”

“Bastard,” she says, motioning to her empty wineglass. The waiter looks offended, but I shake my head. I feel sorry for the staff here. They speak barely any English, but the only words they do know are the ones that make up most of my wife’s present vocabulary.

“So, you thinking about throwing yourself back in the job market?” I bravely ask, and I watch her draw back into herself. Face collapsing, arms retreating into her sleeves, and the never-ending soundtrack of her life gets the pin dropped on the record.

“Dazed and confused for so long it’s not true/Wanted a woman never bargained for you…”
I can’t help it. I reach my sneakered foot over to her side of the leg-room and stroke her calf with it. Just like I knew it would, her head snaps up and her fingers make white-knuckled fists I can’t see. A fire lights up behind her eyes that fails to melt the unchanging rock before it.

For a split second I think she’s going to stay, but she doesn’t. Faster than a speeding bullet she’s out of the booth and the bells on the restaurant door are tinkling frantically. I throw sixty bucks on the table and pray that it’s enough to cover the many bottles of wine while also making up for Emily’s unintentional insult to the waiter.

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I’m running after her, trying to focus on the pink sweatshirt that keeps dodging mailboxes and lampposts. My lungs feel like they’re inhabited by a bunch of Brits on Guy Fawkes’ Day. Between the floundering effort to stop smoking and my expired gym membership, I’m really not qualified for this kind of romantic activity—chasing after lovers, that is.

To my great satisfaction, she trips on a crack in the sidewalk only feet from our car. She makes no attempt to get up, so I slow down to a steady trot, hoping she doesn’t have a concussion. I take the time to notice that it’s almost dusk and somewhere the sky is pink and purple and two people who love each other are leaning on their car, arms wrapped around waists, thinking about how beautiful life is. But not me. I’m watching a tiny crowd get sucked into Emily’s games. This group who thinks that lifting her off the ground is a good thing when really if we just left her there to rot the only person it would make any difference to is me.

I kneel down and see her huge chest heaving. Her eyes are staring straight ahead, but they’re in tune.

“C’mon, Em,” I say, picking up an arm, but it falls out of my hand and slaps the pavement. Hard.

A woman gasps behind me. There are mutterings that she’s unconscious, talk of calling 911. I want to tell them there’s nothing wrong except she’s crazy, but no one wants to hear that. Crazy people don’t walk the sidewalks of unknown towns. They live fancy lives in New York City or stab their wives in West Virginia trailers. But suburbia, at least, is safe.

There’s nothing to do except lie down with her and wait. I can’t lift
her, and if she doesn't want to move, she won't. So flat on my back, viewing
the same sky as my hypothetical lovers, I start singing the lyrics to "All My
Love" so that only she can hear me. An involuntary smile stretches across
her face. This assures the crowd that not only is she okay, but that somebody
really should call the cops. The loonies have invaded.

"I love you," Emily tells the sidewalk.

"Against your will," I say when I've finished my song.

"Nonetheless." She props herself up on her elbows. Her face comes
into view above my own, so close I could kiss it, but I know better. "Sing it
again?"

I do.

***

It's been a few days since I've seen Emily. She's shut me out of the
bedroom and only eats when I'm at work. I knock on the door when I get
home to make sure she's still alive. She throws something against it to ac­
knowledge her continued existence. Sometimes a pillow, sometimes a fork.
Depends on what's handy.

I like having the place to myself. I can come in and correct tests at the
breakfast bar without Emily hovering in the corner between the dishwasher
and the cupboard waiting for me to
sit on the opposite side of the couch
so she can watch TV. She'll never
do it alone. The only two things she
does independently of me are listen
to Led Zeppelin and stare at the
ceiling. Sometimes I wish she'd read,
but I'm not entirely sure she still
remembers how.

I get lonely after awhile. Being
with Emily means no social life, no
personal life, no life at all. So after
about day five of lockdown, I'm feeling the need for a drink or a night of
watching "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" on mute. They have about the
same effect. They're both depressives.

I leave the door to the apartment open and take the ten stairs up to
the second floor where all we've got is the bedroom. The rest is just empty
space. Dead space. Space that would have been filled were we a happy
couple.

To my surprise, the door is open. I push through it, but she's not there.
"The Song Remains the Same" creeps through the crack under the bath­
room door. I want a sexy bubble bath for two with the rose petals and the
candles and the champagne in martini glasses. I expect an overflowing tub.

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I want a sexy bubble bath for two with the rose petals and the candles
and the champagne in martini glasses. I expect an overflowing tub.

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Water all over the floor. Emily’s version of a temper tantrum. A way of letting me back in without making me think she needs me.

But I’m unprepared for what I find when I break through and flick on the light. Emily is lying, white-faced, in pink water. I look for the source of the blood, and it’s a horizontal cut on her wrist. It’s not bleeding anymore. She turns her head to look at me.

“I did the right one first, but the way the skin fell open when I moved my hand...” she says, her face contorted like a kid who’s eaten something unsavory. “I don’t think I cut deep enough, but I just couldn’t do the other one.”

“How, Em? How’d you do it?”

And she shows me. It’s more than I can take. My vomit mixes with the water. Bile and blood, tingeing it a baby shit brown. In her stomach is one of the serrated kitchen knives that her grandmother sent as a house-warming gift when we got the apartment. Her grandmother is blissfully unaware of all the things my wife is — and that we’ve never opened her present.

“Must not have hit anything important,” she states.

As a reflex, I reach down to lift her out of the tub. Anything to make this scene more humane. Less like something you’d expect described in the research of scientists working in sanitariums in the 1920s. People have better ways, cleaner ways of killing themselves today. Prescription drugs, guns, jumping off skyscrapers. Okay, maybe not cleaner, but faster. It’s only the crazy ones who wallow in their pain and secretly hope they’ll live. Only people in their right minds ever honestly want to die.

When I touch the water it’s freezing, and suddenly I’m so repulsed that I just kneel there while Robert Plant packs his bags for the Misty Mountains.

“Can you get out on your own?” I breathe.

“I have a steak knife in my belly.”

“Should I call an ambulance?”

She rolls her eyes like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. It probably is.

***

The 911 call goes something like this:

“State your name and the nature of your emergency.”

Done.

“State your residence.”

Okay.

“Do you need immediate medical assistance?”

I’d say so.

“Would you like me to stay on the line until the paramedics arrive?”
That won't be necessary.
"Paramedics are on their way."
Click.
Click.
"Bitch," I mutter. "How are you doing?"
"Peachy keen," Emily says. "Pack me a bag so I have something to change into."
It's like this isn't happening to her. Like it's someone else in a different situation. We could be heading to the beach for all her tone suggests.
I don't know how long we stay there - her looking at her bloody arm and me where she stabbed herself until there's a knock on the door. I tell them she's upstairs and ask if I can wait in my car to follow them to the hospital. They ask if we're related, and I say we're married, and they give me a funny look, but don't ask any more questions.

***

I lose the ambulance in the whirl of madman driving, so I just park in the big concrete garage and walk to the reception area by the front desk. I grab a mocha from the latte stand and a seat. I don't tell anyone why I'm here. I just sit and sip coffee. I read magazines - Redbook, Modern Parent, Hunting and Fishing, People. I figure they'll kick me out eventually, and I'll pick my car out of the sea of vehicles and go home to angry messages from Emily about why I wasn't there because she's well out of the ER by now. Or I won't. I wouldn't be that surprised if I don't hear from her until it's time to pick her up and return to the way life was before this happened.

Someone's calling my name as I admire the cliche decor of the room. All eggshell white and red and green. Triangles intersecting circles intersecting squares to form Emily's face on chairs and sofas and loveseats. They call louder and come closer and I pretend that if I ignore them they'll disappear into thin air. But they're on me now. Two young men in lab coats. Doctors No One and Nobody. Their eyes are alight with the thirst for knowledge.

No One tells me Emily's okay. She didn't do herself any lasting harm. Nobody's a psychiatrist. He wants to ask me a few questions about my girlfriend.
"My wife," I correct him.
"Of course," he says, nodding.
Nobody wants to know how long I've known Emily. He wants to know when the depression started and if I had any idea what caused her decline. I sigh heavily.
What I want to tell them is that it wasn't always like this. That we used to be the best of friends. We went to the same high school, a Catholic one, girls and guys in plaid and cheap cotton. I want to tell them about
the first time she kissed me. What it felt like. The fact that she's the only person who's ever told me they love me. That in college we were happy sharing a room together – friends by day and lovers by night. I want to tell them that one day we bought rings and married ourselves following as many guidelines as our situation would allow.

I look at the boys with M.D. tacked on to the end of their names and want to tell them that there is no God, and that's what went wrong with Emily. I should tell them about the time her mother showed up at our place and threw the Bible at her and swore she'd already written the Pope to have both of us excommunicated for our immoral behavior. Her mother hit her, and that's probably something they would find useful.

From there I could chart her steady decline into what she is now. From reading every book on religion and philosophy she could get her hands on to not touching one for at least the passed two years. I could tell them that we were so cool – two individuals in a world of conformists. Using Zep's generic lyrics to solve specific problems. Until she broke with faith, and therefore her entire reason for being, to become the shell she is today.

I want to say that Emily's life was ruined when she started to think, when she began to feel the consequences of acting on passions without considering the possible outcomes. So she's quit thinking altogether about sex and religion and politics – everything except for the reality that thrives inside her head, which is the only illusion she actually holds.

Nobody presses me, but I sit there in a silence Emily would be proud of. They probably write me off as crazy too. I ask if I can see her, but they say that it's no use. They've sedated her for her own safety. I laugh at this. They tell me I can take her home tomorrow, but she'll have to come back for psychological evaluation. I give them her therapist's number, and they seem satisfied. No One and Nobody say good-bye. I bet they had amazing sex that night. Or conversation. Depends on how they swing.

***

I am in the house. It's quiet. I realize that even when I can't see her, the knowledge that Emily is here makes all the difference. I can't remember the last time I was truly alone. I want to call someone to be my savior, my pillar of strength through these times of trial. But all my friends and all my family have been sacrificed for Emily's sake. So instead I strip down
to my underwear and play “Stairway to Heaven” all night long. I sleep on
the futon. Left hand above my head, right hand across my stomach. Knees
half bent, feet flat, eyes closed, and still I have no idea what it's like to be
her. Not Roxanne or Lola or Chastity, but Emily who writes poems in her
head. Poems that only I can read. Poems I failed to interpret.

***

When I get to the hospital, the faceless doctors are furious. They've
just gotten off the phone with Emily's psychologist, and apparently he
really is a bastard. Things should not have been allowed to progress to
this level. It's surprising considering her mental state that she wasn't dead
months ago. Things are worse, a lot worse, than they thought. It's like
finding a lump in your breast and learning it's spread to your kidneys, your
liver, your brain. I follow them to her room to discuss her options.

And there she is, propped up on pillows, black hair sticking up in odd
places. She looks smaller, somehow, in the dressing gown. I didn't pack
her bag. Her wrist is wrapped in white gauze and I know that if I move
her sheet down and her paper clothes up I'll find a straight line with seven
stitches and minimal internal bleeding. She looks up.

I see her. Not the shell of the woman I once loved, but the thing I can
only call her soul. There's Emily before she shut down, before she became
a wraith that took up a bus seat and a half. I don't know what they said
to her, but No One and Nobody
brought my baby back from the
dead in more ways than one.

Then my euphoria falters
as I see the recognition flicker.
Downsizing her place in the
world again. Her blue eyes and
red lips, so enchanting just a mo­
ment ago, start fading into the
rest of the room – it's pale
robin's egg blue with huge
white and pink candy-striped
curtains offering the weakest
form of privacy.

Colors only distant shades of
each other blending to become one. There's a pleading look on her face
like she knows it's happening, and this time she wants to really think about
it before she goes under. But I can't move. I'm mesmerized by the way the
room swirls so that you can't make out the bed from the chair from me
from the cabinet. And in it all Emily's drowning. Sucked in by the whirl­
pool. I have the power to pull her out, but the water's already in her lungs.
It's easier this way.

Her blue eyes and red lips,
so enchanting just a moment
ago, start fading into the
rest of the room – it's pale
robin's egg blue with huge
white and pink candy-striped
curtains offering the weakest
form of privacy.
No one asks if I’m okay.
I shake my head and the whole room clears. They’ve taken the black nail polish off Emily’s right hand but not her left.
“I’ve made a decision,” she says.
“What’s that?” I ask, reaching out to the wall for support. I’m shocked at what I hear.

***

“The Battle of Evermore” plays from the CD/clock/radio across from our bed, but Emily’s singing:

“Talk and song from tongues of liltong grace, whose sounds caress my ear/But not a word I heard could I relate, the story was quite clear.”

She hasn’t said a word since we left that nauseating mix of art deco and country that interior designers without degrees decide is calming. We’re back in our own bedroom of trendy steel and red and black. She’s got the comforter tucked underneath her elbows, wrists facing the ceiling. Her second chin is trembling as she sings and fights back tears. She hasn’t left me yet—we’re both still clinging to the pieces of Emily that seeped to the surface when she spilled her own blood. It’s ironic, really, that by attempting to stop her existence entirely, she managed to give it a chance to return to what it once was. But it’s too late. I know that, but more importantly, she does. So we don’t talk. I lower my flannel-clad body onto the mattress and flip the switch on the lamp.

In that moment, while my eyes adjust, something wonderful happens. I feel her hand, half of it covered in gauze, lay itself on top of mine. Our fingers intertwine and I breathe a sigh of relief. Her hands are always the same temperature whether it be the dead of winter or the peak of summer. When she touches me, I always know it’s her. We give a name to this kind of familiarity. We call it love. Love in perhaps the deepest sense, the only way it can be touched instead of given the vague title of “feeling” or “emotion.” This right here is love in a form we cannot deny because we didn’t make it up. It’s not a poet’s words. It’s the reawakening of senses.

I squeeze her hand and suddenly she’s on top of me, kissing my face. For a second I want to shove her off, tell her this isn’t how we work. But I get that sensation between my legs, the one I’d forgotten about, and suddenly years of neglect are forgiven and I wrap my arms around her. I rake my nails down her side. Her back arches so fast that she pops a stitch in her stomach. Blood is pouring from the wound like I can’t believe.

“I thought it wasn’t that bad,” I say.

“It doesn’t matter,” she whispers. Her hand is moving lower, closer.

“We should stop that.”

“No!” She yells. My hands are suddenly trapped to the bed and her lips are on my neck. Blood is soaking the sheets, staining the mattress and
my life forever. She puts her fingers into it and paints my face like an In­
dian warrior's. Somehow it's sexy. The air smells like death, but our hearts
are both beating fast, and as my fingers go inside her, I wonder how any­
one could ever love a man. How a person could resist a woman is beyond
me. My mind races as I tend to my temptress, source of all evil, the reason
mankind fell. Tonight her name is Emily, Roxanne, Lola, Chastity. No. It's
Eve, and she's taking a bite out of me.

Somewhere, miles away from my bed of sin, the music stops. I hear
nothing. I see nothing. Just the taste of blood and sweat and the knowl­
edge that I'll never have this again.

***

My theory about crazies only living in the urban or rural places in
America is confirmed as Emily and I listen to Led Zeppelin's Greatest Hits
three times through on our way out to her new home. She chose voluntary
commitment, more for my sake than hers, I think – making it the only
unselfish thing she's ever done. With the exception of last night. But some­
thing tells me she woke up satisfied.

The place looks like a military camp, and, in fact, it was. Rows and
rows of red brick houses lined up perfectly. In the middle is a huge white
building with paint peeling off the trim. Once officer's quarters, now
administration for enlisting men and women only slightly less insane than
soldiers.

The green lawns at least are inviting, but Emily looks like she's walk­
ing to her funeral. She's dressed completely in black except the roots of her
red hair are showing through. She's afraid of getting better. Of abandoning
her defense mechanisms and trying to live again. Or of the possibility that
she could die here, never feeling any differently than she does right now.
And I get this odd feeling. I don't care. Not if she improves. Not if she's
happy. Not even if she lives or dies. The expiration date on this relation­
ship is up. We're both starting to rot, but I'm too young for that.

I hold the door open for her. A sexy blonde greets us.

"You must be Emily," she says. "And you are?"

I look down at the silver band on my left hand that matches Emily's.
Sometimes I forget that I'm not really married. Sometimes it's easier not
to know that I could have been well within my rights to kick her out of
the house I pay for. That's not to say I didn't consider it. But I never could
have. Most things change.

The nurse and Emily both wait for my response. I set down her hot
pink suitcase and as I drop the baggage physically, I'm rid of it mentally.
I'm free. I can leave and she'll never find me. Hell, she'll probably never
escape these historic walls. For the first time in my entire life, I'm so close
to independence. I grasp it with both hands and hold on tight for dear life.
The nurse is tapping her foot.

“I don’t know who I am,” I say. I turn on my heel and start heading straight for those wide double doors – the way to my salvation. Emily starts to cry. She’s screaming my name.

“Jack? Jack? Jacqueline!”

But my kitten heels that replace my usual All-Stars on special occasions keep clacking across the tile. I throw open the heavy oak doors and run up the pathway to my car. Midway I stop.

The colors around me are so much brighter than ever before. The picture of the lawn and the trees and the mountains in the distance. And me in the middle of it all. Nothing blocking me from the world at large. I just shut my life up in a mental hospital, but I’ve been given a second chance. And I know just where to start.

I walk to the middle of the lawn and dig a hole in the manicured grass, dirtying my hands. In the hole I place my wedding ring. A divorce is easy to obtain when your marriage is not recognized by church or state. What neither know is how their lack of support destroys lives. Or how their honest separation might save us all.

I listen to AC/DC, the Backstreet Boys, and a radio station that plays nothing but classical. I let down my hair and allow it to fly behind me as I drive as fast as I can toward my destiny. Emily Dickinson was crazy. She sat in her house and pined for a life she could have had. We love her. We live by her words. Only because she’s dead. Who would have befriended her when she was alive? Me. Only me. 🌸