

You Must be Judith...

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Raindrops splintered against the window, singing a song against the panes as they hit in varying chain rhythms. The smell of water and earth permeated the closed doors and crevices, the clammy chill creeping in through the walls. Spring in the country, the rain playing its annual part breathing life back into the world by drowning it. Flowers hesitantly opening, cautiously licking the drips off their lips as they drizzle along their petals. Rain, rebirth, renewal.

An ache ran sprints round her knee cap. She stared dismally at the dazzling aquatic orchestra. It was forecasted rain all weekend and as everyone always said, "We needed it!" She sat in the middle of her bed, her sore leg outstretched beneath her overstuffed down comforter and linen sheets as she methodically rubbed the throb to no avail. The heat didn't help; it didn't hurt, but it didn't help. Like clockwork, when she turned 40, she was welcomed into her new life phase with insomnia and a twinge in her knee whenever the weather changed more than five degrees.

It was 6:27 a.m. Her alarm was set for 6:30, but she never needed it, just kept it for nostalgia from a time when she couldn't will herself out of bed. A low crackle of wood burning came from her wall-mounted fireplace, emanating heat throughout the oversized bedroom, keeping the moist chill from reaching the inhabitant. The crackling played in a perfect, imperfect loop generated for optimal white noise effect. Her demeanor was calm. She slowly massaged her knee and stared listlessly forward. A single tear rolled down her cheek mirroring the scene she was witnessing. Her mind

was a raging torrent. The tear hovered at her jaw before breaking off and falling to the covers with an almost silent tap before absorbing into the woven fabric. She only allowed herself the one, but let it dry to a delicate crust, growing tight along the line it drew across her face.

6:28...6:29...6:30—BRRRRRRRRRRRIIIIIINNNN.

She abruptly leaned over and shot her hand to the night stand to silence the vintage clang of her alarm clock. It sang a slow *ting* as it settled back down for another 24 hours. *Get up.* Edith took a deep breath in, closed her eyes, and held the oxygen inside her lungs for a moment, then exhaled evenly, opening her eyes slowly. She threw the blankets off, inched her way to the edge of the bed then swung her legs off the side and slowly slid her feet into the waiting velvety slippers. She paused and rubbed her knee for one last moment, then stood and groped for her robe. The sight of rain gave her a chill that wasn't physically noticeable, but the thick fabric of the robe gave a sense of comfort in the weight of it on her shoulders.

Edith had a gorgeous, quaint kitchen just above her, but instead of making the journey upstairs for her breakfast tea, she had a small kitchenette installed in one of the corners of her room. It was similar to the living room bars from the '60s, but modernized with a white marble slab counter and white-washed wainscoting enclosure. She always filled her French spout electric kettle the night before so she only had to switch it on. Edith paced around the counter to the cupboards for her tea cup and porcelain tea pot. *Asinine...every morning boiling water in a kettle, then moving the boiling water to another kettle for steeping.* She made the same gripe every morning but refused to steep her tea in the electric kettle because the manufacturer explicitly said not to. Edith placed the set on the counter with a faint clatter, then swiftly turned on her heel to face her array of tins containing all her artisan teas. She paused, considering her choices, but every morning, always the English Breakfast blend with two tablespoons of non-sweetened almond milk creamer.

Although she complained inwardly about the process, Edith thrived on her mini rituals where she was in complete control. Control of how to execute, control of when—control. Edith liked control. After making the tea came drinking the tea while brushing her hair, then journaling to clear her mind.

April 5 - Saturday

Today's the day. Today. Today. Rain, rain go away. Today. Come again another day. It's raining, third day in a row now and supposed to continue until Monday. I usually love the rain, but today...no, I still love the rain. It's really coming down and my stupid knee. Always with the knee. Spring and Winter wreak havoc on my goddamn knee. Tooooooooddddaaaayyyyyy. Hmmm. My mind is swirling, but nothing is coming!! Just spit it out!! Get it out of there!! My Opalescent to meet my

one and only. Xoxo. I want to say it's too soon. That's a lie, it's been three years. I want to say no for absolutely no reason at all. Why do they need to meet?? A question I've asked too many times. They both know about the other so why meet? What's to be gained? Although, what's to be lost...nothing. So if nothing's to be gained and nothing's to be lost, then I am at an impasse, again. AAAAHHHHHHHHH!!! Okay, just shake it off. What else is there? Today is Saturday, Saturday is my favorite day of the week next to Thursday. Why are you making me dread my second favorite day of the week? Why didn't I say Friday? Then I would have this whole thing behind me and I would be relaxed today on my second favorite day. Favorites, I have all the ingredients, 1) baklava, 2) chocolate chip cookies, 3) Perrier...how pretentious, who drinks that in real life? She didn't get that from me...4) spaghetti, and 5) croissants. She will be here in roughly 3 hours. Ah, I remember driving all night and day. Leaving the windows down and letting my hair whip through the fresh air. Okay, enough of this. Nothing will help me today.

The pen lay loosely in her hand. She stared at the page, then looked at the clock. 6:59 a.m. Edith could easily fill two pages in the thirty minutes she allowed herself every morning to journal, unloading her thoughts, bringing structure to her day, looking at all her brain spilled upon the page, and neatly putting things back in order. Today she would be given no solace. She closed the book and snapped the pen down on top. She took up her cup and hovered over the top, letting the steam roll over her face and tickle her nostrils. She then tentatively sipping the scalding tea. She sighed to the empty room as she gazed out the window, then returned to slowly drinking the milky caramel elixir, focusing on the sweet burn as it left the back of her throat, past her lungs, and into her stomach.

The tea left her body warm as she continued her morning ritual. Next: yoga. Her iPhone's vibratory buzz broke Edith's savasana. *Perfect*. She grumbled as she snapped her eyes open, shaken from the blissful end of her morning vinyasa. In her distracted state, she had uncharacteristically forgotten to turn off all her notifications. The ensuing buzz meant her state of tranquility had sharply dissipated and her curiosity at the pending messages won out. She rolled to her side and rose, rolling up her mat and stowing it carefully in its place before granting her psyche the chance to see who was interrupting her ritual.

O: *Awake yet??*

O: *Regretting everything yet?? Call me.*

Edith smiled and snuffed a giggle.

Edith: *Yes. Yes. No, shower time. Call you after a while.*

She lingered for a moment to see if she would get an immediate response. Her pause was rewarded with a response bubble, then a reply.

O: *Wish I was there ;) I eagerly await your call, malady...*

Again, Edith smiled, then set her phone back on the table.

As the hot water drizzled over her, she closed her eyes and recalled her resolve to follow through with today's events.

Before, their legs had entwined beneath the covers as the faint light from the fireplace softly illuminated their exhausted faces. Opal turned to Edith with a serious expression, but Edith couldn't bring herself to look back. She knew what was coming. It had been too long. She knew what Opal wanted, but she didn't want to move forward. "I'm not Brittany, ya know," Opal said, flitting her eyes downward when it was apparent Edith wouldn't look at her. Edith smiled slightly, then finally turned to face Opal. "I'm not ready." Opal smiled brightly, not what Edith expected. She was expecting Opal to toss the covers off in a theatrical exit then angrily throw one of Edith's treasured possessions before promptly gathering her things and storming off. "I know." Opal slowly combed her fingers through Edith's hair, then repeated, "I know."

A year and a half had gone by since Opal's affirmation of understanding, and here they were at the cusp of an event so miniscule to any ordinary person, but momentous to Edith. She wasn't ashamed of her lover, although the age discrepancy at times made her wonder if perhaps she should be. She wasn't protecting her adult daughter, who had always been appropriately updated as to her mother's comings and goings on a weekly basis. Edith liked control and control was only supremely accomplished when she was alone. Perfection was compromised when more than one character was allowed beyond the entrance to Edith's public façade of grace and poise. Few were privy to the chaos that loomed behind her beautiful emerald eyes.

Edith emerged from the condensation to find no messages on her phone. Opal had long since realized Edith's intolerance for clinginess, but somehow, today alone, Edith wished for someone else to need her reassurance. Being strong for someone else is always easier than being strong for yourself. She dialed Opal and set her phone on speaker while she finished towel drying her hair. No one picked up; her call went to voicemail. Edith hung up. As was her process, she closed her eyes, inhaled, then exhaled slowly through her pursed lips before opening her eyes again. Just then, she heard her door open. Opal. She went back into the bathroom pretending to feign ignorance as her lurker made her way towards the stairway leading to Edith's bedroom downstairs. Edith felt calm now, as if the impending aura of Opal washed over her to soothe the disparaging thoughts rolling around in her mind. Inhale...exhale. She took one last look at herself in the mirror, opened the door, and then in a majestic firework display everything went black.

"Tsk, tsk...are you awake yet, my sweet?" Edith was slowly rolling her head to the side as she regained consciousness. An involuntary moan poured out of her lips as

the anesthetic of the temporary coma wore thin and the excruciating sharpness of the blow to her temple was being realized. It took her a moment to recognize she was bound in her chair. *Still at home. Still in my room. Opal?* Edith's vision was slowly coming into focus as she regained her faculties, she looked around the room for the voice and found its owner standing at the kitchenette making a cup of tea.

"It was hard to find this place. I thought Google Maps had everyone pinged one way or another, but you...always elusive aren't you?" Brittany was leaning over the counter slowly stirring her tea, staring straight at Edith. "Wanna guess how I found you?" she asked with a twisted smile growing across her face, "Go on, guess..." She toyed with Edith as she began sipping her tea.

Opal. She didn't say the name aloud. Edith wasn't entirely certain of what was happening, but she had her wits about her enough to revert back to her reclusive self. While Brittany wallowed in her victory, Edith was considering her bonds. *Ankles and wrists. Sloppy. She must have rushed, not knowing when I would wake. Duct tape...how original. I'm not tied to the chair, but damned if I try to wiggle around and end up flailing on the ground like a fisherman's catch of the day.*

Brittany was becoming agitated now, realizing that her prey was not being more amiable and fearful. She had played the scene out a hundred times. From the moment she first saw them walking to the coffee shop three years ago, Brittany had become obsessed.

"This was not how it was supposed to be!!" Brittany screamed. She launched the teacup at Edith, who was now completely lucid and poised in her chair. Edith didn't flinch. *I'll need to pick up some more super glue to fix that.* She stared pensively out the window at the rain still streaming down the panes.

"You've never been good at composure. I see you haven't changed, Brittany," Edith replied coolly. She kept her gaze on the window.

Brittany huffed at the remark. Tears began welling in her eyes, angry and hot, threatening to ruin her determination. She briskly made her way over to Edith and pulled a small revolver out of the back of her jeans. She clutched a handful of Edith's auburn hair and wrenched Edith's head backward and pushed the barrel against Edith's chin.

"You mean to kill me, is that it, Brittany?" Edith nonchalantly inquired. She slowly turned her eyes to meet her attacker. She didn't blink. She stared at Brittany with no malice or fear, but looked beyond her as if Brittany was nothing.

This obstinate display slightly shook Brittany for a moment. As if Edith had the higher ground in this fight when she obviously did not. "Yes," Brittany said with a slight shake in her voice, not as authoritative as she had hoped, but it was out now. Edith broke her contemplation of Brittany and went back to the window. "You can't

even LOOK AT ME??!" Brittany couldn't believe the audacity, even now, at gunpoint, Edith was incapable of being reasonable, rational, human. She let go of Edith, tossed the gun on the bed, and backed away. "You took two years from me..." Brittany whispered, almost sheepishly.

"Hmmm...more like five years from the looks of it," Edith retorted calmly.

Brittany looked up and laughed. "Yes, yes, Edith, you're right. You're always right, aren't you, Edith! Fine! FIIIVVVVEEEEE FUCKING YEARS!" Brittany's eyes looked wildly at Edith who looked as though she was bored at a movie. "I have her," Brittany broke the silence.

Edith's expression remained monotonous. *She must be in the trunk of her car. Stare, don't weaken. Opal is okay.* Again, Brittany's dramatic fictional performance was not playing out. Nothing about this was satisfying. No, she would not leave here unsatisfied.

"What if I told you all you had to do was tell me you're sorry. That you were wrong for once. And admit that you hurt me and didn't care. Just tell me the truth! Tell me you're a bastard for how you left me and just picked up this new girl and gave her everything you couldn't give me. TELL ME!"

"And why would I be sorry? You left me. I should be sorry for letting you leave me? How profound the paradox you've created inside your mind, bravo," Edith replied. She smiled at Brittany.

Brittany ran to Edith and slapped her across the face. "How dare you mock me! I was trying to be close to you, but you just couldn't, could you? But for, oh, what's her name...Opal. For dear, precious, little fucking sweetheart Opal, you let her in? After I laid all the groundwork, warmed you up, and then you give all my hard work to some child who's named after a grandma from the 1930s?! No! No, this deserves retribution, and I will have it! I deserve it! Tell me the truth!" Brittany was spitting and panting with her fervor.

"You don't want my truth," Edith replied, wincing at her burning cheek, then turning again to look out the window.

"Why? Why, with all your infinite wisdom? Are you God? I can't handle *your* truth like it's some power to behold? You're ridiculous," Brittany scoffed, feeling momentarily superior in her rebuttal.

Edith sighed, "Fine."

Just as Edith was turning to face Brittany, Opal came silently from behind with a chunky ceramic vase Edith's daughter had made in the fifth grade and swung it against the right side of Brittany's head with a single resounding crack. Brittany crumpled to the floor. Opal stood shakily, her chest heaving up and down trying to recover from the adrenaline coursing through her veins and throbbing in her temples.

The vase was sturdy; it hadn't broken. It hung at the end of Opal's now flimsy grip. It slipped free and thudded to the ground. Opal's bottom lip began quivering as she began bathing in the entirety of the situation.

Opal sent the text, knowing Edith wouldn't respond, but merely acknowledge. *I know she's freaking out right now.* Opal sat for a moment contemplating before she jumped up and grabbed her keys. *What's an extra hour or so early? She's lying if she says she minds.* Opal had a way with Edith. She accepted her coldness and distance. She never held it against her. But Opal also knew when Edith was floundering. Edith had this way of tensing the corners of her mouth and screwing up her brow when she was overwhelmed. She could see Edith now, rubbing her knee when she woke up, drinking her tea, doing her breathing, doing the yoga, all in an effort to loosen that tension, but more to lessen the strain on her emotions. *Ha! I bet she's mad I texted during her yoga.* Opal snickered inwardly as she slid into the driver's seat. She pulled the door shut, put the keys in the ignition, checked the side mirror, then before she could check the rear view, cold, hard metal kissed her temple as she turned. Her breath choked. She slowly raised her gaze to the rearview mirror and saw a crazed woman sitting in her back seat, face plastered with a clown-like smile.

"Let's go see our Edith, huh?"

Opal felt like she was going to vomit. "Wh-whadda you want?" she managed to stammer out.

"I want..." the stranger cocked the pistol against Opal's temple, "to go see Edith."

Opal slowly nodded, forgetting what to do next. *Seatbelt.* She fumbled with the belt but it locked in place from being jerked around, but she finally got herself buckled in. *Turn the car on.* She slowly turned the key and the car roared to life. Opal squeezed her eyes shut and sent a silent prayer to any God that might be listening, then opened her eyes and put the car in reverse. The woman didn't say anything during the drive. Opal didn't recognize her. Edith wasn't the type of person who had enemies, let alone ones who would want to shoot her. Once they turned towards the approach to the house, the woman instructed Opal to park. The panic that had slowly abated during the drive flashed back in full force as this surreal scene's climax was implicitly creeping up. Opal hadn't wanted to consider the end of this drive, but here they were. The last thing Opal heard was the crack of her own skull before everything faded into darkness.

Later, Opal stirred awake and blinked hard, trying to see in the darkness around her. She listened intently to the rain tapping on the metal. She couldn't hear any voices. Opal knew she was in her trunk when she caught the scent of the in-

cense-saturated blanket next to her. Her mouth was taped closed, hands taped behind her, and ankles also taped. She stayed still for another minute to listen for any sign of movement. When she was sure there was no one, she began maneuvering her hands towards the lever in the back of the trunk. She never understood the purpose of one seat being able to lay down via a lever from the trunk until right now. The seat popped halfway down. That woman had left Opal's parcel intact on the seat. Opal managed to painfully right her hands from behind to in front of her, then remove the tape constricting her breath. She used the lever to make a cut at the end of the tape around her hands, then untied her ankles.

Carefully, she slid herself into the backseat of her car, then slowly peeked up to see if anyone was outside.

It was as if everything had been a dream. Nothing was amiss. *Edith!* Opal regained her composure, left the car, and ran to the house. She prayed she wasn't too late.

*

"Opal," Edith spoke in a hushed, yet stern tone.

Opal's attention was pulled from her reverie and back to the scene of Brittany laying in a puddle on the floor. Opal wiped the tears streaming down her face and clumsily ran to Edith, who was still bound on the chair.

"No, Opal, call the police right now." She looked directly into Opal's eyes as she said this, trying to focus and calm her at the same time.

"Um, okay, I-I don't, I don't know where my phone..." Opal was shaking and confused.

"Calm down, breathe," Edith cooed. "My phone is on the table."

Opal complied.

Edith could hear her whispering to the operator on the line behind her. Edith kept her eyes fixed on Brittany. She was still breathing, but her hair had fallen over her face. Edith couldn't see if she was waking or still knocked out. "Opal," Edith whispered. Opal was giving instructions to the operator and pacing back and forth to use up her excess energy. "Opal," Edith hissed this time, becoming anxious at remaining tied up and not knowing the state of her attacker. Opal realized Edith's tone, finished the call, and hung up the phone. She quickly returned to Edith's side to begin cutting away the tape. Opal was just able to free Edith's hands when Brittany shot towards the bed and retrieved the gun. Opal stumbled backwards in surprise and Edith held up her freed hands pleading as if in defeat.

"I loved you," Brittany blubbered, a demented look in her eyes. She pulled the trigger with a resounding pop that rippled throughout the room like a shockwave, then silence. The rain pattered softly on. Metal tittered along the tiles. Knees cracked

hard, then what was left of the face, smacked on the solid ground as the sickly, fresh blood washed her hair.

“Moouooooommm!!!” a cheery voice came from above as the door slammed shut.

It was an eerie quiet. Something thick in the air, air that would have otherwise been refreshed from the rains outside, was stifling as soon as she closed the door. “Mom?” she said again, now uncertain and anxious. She stood in the living room listening, feeling for any movement in the house. She tiptoed towards the stairway leading to her mother’s bedroom and cautiously leaned forward, again straining to hear anything. She felt foolish for a moment, thinking she was overreacting and that maybe her mother was in the bathroom and couldn’t hear her, but something in her stomach churned. Something was not right.

She took one step at a time, making sure to avoid the squeaks she had learned over years of use, until she stood at the landing looking over the entire room, soaking in the scene that had unfolded, unbeknownst to her, just minutes before she turned in to the approach to the cottage. She blinked and covered her mouth to stifle a scream, then sat backward onto the step.

Opal turned her head when she realized someone new was in the room. She rose from where she was sitting on the edge of the bed and slowly walked toward her, hands out in the universal sign of “safe” and to show her that she didn’t have a weapon. She said, “You must be Judith.”