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## Cold Feet

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# Cold Feet

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**Author Bio**

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## Cold Feet

"Are you crying?"

"No."

"It looks like you're crying."

"Well, I'm not."

Jake is looking at me, his blue eyes set on my expression, his fork in mid-air. I break the stare and take another sip of the wine that one of Jake's colleagues gave him. He clears his throat and changes the subject. "It looks like it might rain tonight."

"No it doesn't." I twist the stem of the wine glass between my thumb and forefinger in the silence that follows.

"Rob Petrowski—do you remember him? I think you met him at the engagement party, he has a really bad toupee, but he's only about thirty—"

"Yeah, I remember him."

"Well, Rob told me today that his wife, who's a climatologist, thinks we're going to have an early winter. He told me she said the first frost is going to be a lot earlier this season. Soon."

"Well, we'll have to cover our crops then," I say quietly as I get up and begin clearing the table.

"Aren't you hungry? Come on, sit down . . . you hardly ate half a piece of chicken. Did you even have any rice? Do you feel okay?"

"I'm fine, Jake."

I flip on the garbage disposal and clang the dishes around the sink before putting them in the dishwasher. When every last morsel of food has disappeared from the basin, I turn off the garbage disposal and close the dishwasher door.

"Don't forget to switch the magnet!"

Last week, after a series of arguments, Jake went to Bed, Bath, & Beyond and purchased a magnet that reads DIRTY on one side and CLEAN on the other.

On the refrigerator, in a sheet protector, is a chart that he made on Excel detailing each perishable item and its expiration date. The morning before each product's expiration date, Jake throws it away in the dumpster outside our apartment building.

There are smaller things, perhaps more normal. Our movie collection is alphabetized within genres. Every Monday he wears a blue tie, every Friday he wears a forest green polo shirt. He makes the bed every morning and washes the sheets every Thursday. The first and third week of the month we have cream colored sheets; the second and fourth we have sky blue. He wakes up at 6:27 every weekday to get to work by 8:00, 9:31 every Sunday to get to an 11:00 church service. Saturdays are a free-for-all.

When we are getting into bed that night, Jake asks: "Are you going to take your car to the train station?"

"No. Laura's picking me up and we're just going to leave her car at the station."

"I can give you guys a ride if you want. So you don't have to worry about leaving the car there all weekend."

"That's okay." I turn off the lamp on my nightstand. The dark sometimes suffocates me.

"Which library are you doing research at?" He knows the answer.

"NYU."

"Be safe, okay? Don't take the subway by yourself, and don't walk in Central Park by yourself either."

"Okay."

There is something stinging in the back of my eyes. I move myself toward Jake, positioned so my back is facing him, and pull his arms around me.

Jake has already left for work by the time I wake up the next morning. There is a note sitting on the kitchen counter, next to the sink: Have a great trip. Call if you need anything. See you Sunday. Love you. I hide the note before Laura comes, tuck it away in my overnight bag. She is late, but I knew she would be, and that is why I asked her. She calls the landline from her cell phone. "Ready? I'm sitting outside."

I go out to the front of the building, and there Laura sits in her Maxima, smoking a cigarette. She sees me and smiles a little and hits unlock in her car so I can get in. "That's all you have?" she asks, gesturing toward my bag. I nod.

"It's only two nights."

"Two long nights," she reminds me, with another weak smile. She turns the volume up on the radio and begins searching for a station. Amidst the sounds of static and pop songs, I hear a weatherman say they are expecting an early frost. Laura settles on a crude morning talk show.

Jake didn't want to live together until we were married. But we got engaged right after he finished law school in May, and his roommate Brian moved to Texas at the same time Laura moved in with Eric.

Of all people, it was Jake's mother who finally said we should just move in together. Once Newsweek did an article on her. Well, she was in an article that highlighted ten different people, called, "Angels Among Us?" She is very modest and won't talk about the article, but it makes her happy. She started volunteering with the Catholic Relief Fund after Jake and his two brothers were in grade school. The family had sponsored African children before, moved by the commercials with pictures of starving infants while 'Amazing Grace' played in the background. She told me that once she started, she couldn't go back. She helped to get a soup kitchen together, started a teen parenting program, and put a mentoring program in effect for the poorest elementary school in their district. Whenever I read the article about her, the quote that I always remember is: "Sometimes when people start doing things for others, they do it so much that they forget the faces." She never forgets the faces, which, the article argued, was what made her such a movingly unique role model.

I am always tempted to drop an ethnic slur when I am with her, just to see if she will lower her voice and respond, "You know, I've always wanted to say that."

She also teaches Sunday school and spent two months in Africa with Jake's father after his youngest brother went to college. They lived in a village and helped build a well. Jake's father is an engineer, silent in a way that puts me at ease.

This is how I know it is not true when Jake says he inherited his cleanliness from his mother.

Laura and I take advantage of Friday. When we are in Times Square, Laura starts laughing and reminds me of the weekend we came down during our senior year in college. It was before either of us met either of them; before Laura fell madly in love with a man who doesn't believe in marriage; before I met Jake, who knows nothing besides the nuclear family. In the years since we've met them, Laura and I have grown understandably apart. And in fact, it is only on this day, in this moment, that I realize how much Laura wishes she could marry Eric. "Would you ever leave him?" I ask her abruptly, as we are looking in the window of a fabric store, admiring a particular burgundy pattern with gold swirls placed haphazardly around the edges.

"Eric?"

"Yes, Eric."

"Why?"

"For not marrying you?" Laura stops looking at the fabric and turns to face me.

"Not marrying Eric is significantly less complicated than some of the alternatives." I feel my face flush, but it starts in my back, between my shoulder blades, then floods up my neck and finally into my cheeks. Laura gently puts her hand on my forearm and we move along, looking in other shop windows and making awkward conversation.

Before we turn in early, we eat dinner at a generic pizza parlor that is half-empty, which seems strange to me on a Friday night. Our paper plates are drenched with pools of grease, and we pick around the cheese, sip on our bottled water.

Laura sits in the taxi with me after the procedure. It didn't take as long as I had thought, but I do not feel connected to anything. The air around me is not touching my skin; my head is not attached to my neck. I am afraid that my eyes will roll in different directions, and I hold onto Laura's hand as tightly as I am able until I realize I am not touching her at all.

When we get to the hotel, she pays the cabdriver with the wad of bills I handed her before the surgery. The bellhop insists on helping me up to the room, one arm around my waist and the other holding my hand, guiding me to the room and asking several times if there's anything we would like. I wonder, as I stumble over to the bed, if he knows what happened. Maybe, I think, he just assumes I have the flu.

Laura is confident, smiling and pushing pillows around me to make me more comfortable. She brings me water and the television remote, all smiles and cheerfulness so I don't worry. After I am settled, half-asleep, she walks out to the porch and smokes several cigarettes. I hear her talking on her cell phone to Eric, clipped phrases and laughter: "No, I think she's fine . . . general anesthetic . . . went well . . ."

After the first time Jake met Eric, Jake said he was a self-righteous

prick. "How could Laura be with someone like that?"

"Like what?" I asked, pouring myself a glass of wine.

"Someone who won't even make a commitment to her? Who pretends to stand for all this . . . morality, and then not even marry her?"

"He's still making a commitment to her, Jake," I reminded him. "Do you want some?"

"No thanks. He could just leave her at any time. He could just walk out the door."

"You could just walk out the door at any time, too."

"It's different."

I took a long sip of the wine and sighed deeply. "How is it so different?" Twisted the ring around my finger.

"There's nothing substantive in their relationship. There's no adherence to the idea of family. He's just a guy who wants to sleep with a girl and take no responsibility for it," Jake concluded, as worked up as I'd ever seen him. He is usually the epitome of calmness and reason when it comes to matters of life. Sporting events are another issue entirely.

Laura's voice feels farther and farther away, until I can't hear it anymore, I can only hear my own breathing.

My father met my sister and me outside our mother's house every other Sunday until he moved to Baltimore for his job. My mother laughed when he told her this and, after he had driven out of sight, told us not to get our hopes up.

He was a cellist, but the closest he ever came to a stage was as a part-time usher for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. By day he worked as a taxi driver in a cab that disappointed my sister for its lack of checkered decoration, by night he guided patrons to their box seats. When my sister and I went to visit him the summer I was thirteen, he promised us VIP seats—folding chairs outside the doors of a matinee performance, where Jessie fell asleep while our father went back to his post outside the center terrace. At intermission he let us take two unoccupied seats. As he guided us down the aisle, he smiled at me with a masked look of apology and self-loathing. I hated him.

Jake is about to leave for a run when Laura drops me off outside of the apartment building on Sunday afternoon. He is surprised to see me, and an effortless grin takes over his face. "Hey!" he cries as I get out of the car, taking my overnight bag from me. "Hey, Laura! How are you?"

"Good," she responds shortly, uneasily. "So. . ." Laura begins, looking straight at me through the rolled down car window. "Call me if you need anything, okay? Anything."

"Okay," I reply, and nod. Jake embraces me, kisses my forehead, and we begin walking into the building.

"How was your weekend? Did you guys have fun? Did you get everything you needed at NYU?"

"Yeah," I say, followed by silence. I force a smile and look up at him. "Yeah, it was good. Thanks for asking." The sunlight is oppressive and it makes me angry. My coat is too heavy for the temperature, and it feels disgustingly warm for October. I feel like I'm choking in my clothes, under Jake's arm, wrapped around my shoulder. "I'm kind of tired. Why don't you go for

your run, and I'll rest?"

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Let me bring your bag up for you, okay? I made reservations at Corelli's for seven."

"I can take the bag up myself. It's not heavy. Go for your run."

"It's okay, I'll bring it for you," he smiles and holds the door open for me, and I push my way past him, standing far enough away that he won't put his arm around me, blocking in the hideous heat. "You okay?" he asks, once we're in the stifling elevator.

"I'm fine. I'm just hot and tired."

"Do you feel okay? Do you think you're getting sick?"

"I'm not getting sick, Jake, it's just hot in this fucking elevator and I want to go lay down!" We are quiet until we get to the apartment, where Jake carefully says he'll see me later and leaves for his run.

I unpack the few articles of clothing I took with me and find the note Jake left on Friday morning. I do not know what to do with it, and I do not know why it stands out from the dozens of other notes he has written me, why it seems more important than the letter he wrote before we were apart for a summer after we met, or the letter he wrote on our first anniversary. Ultimately I fold it again and put it in the back pocket of a pair of jeans that sit in the bottom drawer of my dresser.

In college I briefly dated a guy who lived in a dream world. It was as if his life was a movie that needed to be reenacted, in all its tacky melodrama. He would capture me at midnight to lie out beneath the stars on the soccer field and show me constellations he knew nothing about. He spoke in whispers with tears in his eyes about how beautiful the world was, and looked to me in return, hoping that if my eyes locked on his in the right moment, it would be a sign that we were meant for each other. What I remember the most is that when he would leave me for a night or a weekend, he would embrace me tightly and hold me for a long time, and it was wonderful for a moment, to be wrapped up that closely with someone, to be so intensely connected. And then it would become uncomfortable, and my back would start to cramp, and I could hear him swallowing with my ear pressed awkwardly to his jugular. Even as it was happening I knew it was not real, even as he said he loved me I knew it was a lie.

When I tell Jake, we are sitting at the kitchen table. He is reading the newspaper, and I am half-heartedly flipping through the pages of Scientific American. "I don't think you should marry me."

"What?" Jake laughs. I take off the engagement ring and set it on the table. Ante up. "What are you doing?" he asks, and sets down the newspaper.

"I don't think we should go through with it."

"I think you're just getting cold feet," he informs me. He is trying to be stoic but his face is draining of color.

"No, I'm not."

"Where is this coming from?"

"I don't want to have your children," I tell him, matter-of-fact, and I do not feel a thing as the words come out of my mouth. He looks relieved and

smiles a little.

"I think that's a normal fear. But, we're young, we don't have to make any decisions like that now."

"I won't have your children," I say. "I can't have your children."

"What?" his face goes back to an expression of deep concern, and I think that he looks like his father. "You don't know that."

"I do know that. I can't get pregnant."

"I don't understand," he says seriously, and goes back and forth between looking directly in my eyes and not looking at me at all.

"You didn't really think I was doing research this weekend, did you?"

"What?"

"I wasn't at the library, Jake, I was having surgery. Tubal ligation. I can't have children now."

Jake, whom I do not think looks that upset, suddenly lets a tear slide down his face. He stands up and walks to the sink and presses his palms against the countertop.

"Those things are reversible, though, right?"

"No."

"I thought . . . they wouldn't do that . . . for women without children." He doesn't expect a response, and becomes silent.

I look out the window, and I realize I have forgotten its fall. It seems like it was just summer. I always thought that fall was the most beautiful season, but it seemed morbid to appreciate something that was only death. It is more orange than red now.

Jake is trying very hard to maintain his composure, but water is still brimming in his eyes. I have never seen him cry before. He takes several deep breaths and seems to calm down before he says, "It doesn't matter if you marry me or not, if you leave me or not. I'll still be in love with you."

"I'm not in love with you, Jake." He does not flinch or even move.

"I know."