

Nonprofit Girl

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*“Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing
and right-doing there is a field.*

I’ll meet you there”

~ Rumi

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Liv searched the pharmacy shelves for the pregnancy tests. She hadn't known where to look or what the brands were so had inquired in a low voice. The intensity in her eyes coupled with the grim expression on her face conveyed to the pharmacist behind the counter that this was a young woman who had missed her period and was concerned.

The reply was unnecessarily loud: "Look for e.p.t. over on aisle ten after the tampex."

A mumbled thanks came from a face surrounded by a volume of long, curly hair reminiscent of the sixties. *Shit. Let it not be true.* She paid avoiding the cashier's gaze. Stepping out into the damp chill of a Seattle March day, she was tempted to return to the flat near Seattle U that she shared with her boyfriend and take the test right away. But she needed to go back to the refugee office first to complete her volunteer project.

Walking quickly towards a sandwich shop, the tactile fold of the bag curled into her fingertips moved her worry towards a possible new reality: *what if I've made the first big mistake of my life?* Her porous confidence that she was doing a reasonably good job of beginning her life stretched thinner as people in line simply looked at her. *Can they tell? Do they still see me as a normal looking college girl or do I look screwed up?* Self-absorbed she grabbed her sandwich bag and forgot to pay until the guy at the counter called after her. Fumbling to get her wallet, she placed the drugstore bag on the counter, noticing you could vaguely see the bold product name through the plastic. Exiting hastily onto the street, she bumped into a child lagging behind his mother. "Watch where you're going!" was the parental reprimand.

Yes, watch where I'm going. Had she dramatically altered the direction of her life by what happened in India? She intended to hurt no one, and especially not Devin whom she had been with for what seemed like forever. An alter ego, a different Liv, she was

the one who succumbed. *Mumbai. Rama. The pregnancy test. Let it not be so.*

Her gait slowed under the gloomy sky as the mental black hole was claiming her. Then she thought of her teammate from last semester, Amy. *Abortion. Right. That's what Amy did. There's a way out. Don't panic.*

Entering a brick rehabbed building, Liv took the stairs up three floors to create a slower reentry into the situation she had left: a refugee mother of two who didn't speak English and needed a job. How tantalizing the future was when Liv interviewed for this internship to assist refugees who were being re-settled here. The faces and tales of Somalis, Sudanese, Ethiopians, and others began to populate her inner territory letting her color herself a multi-cultural global citizen. This spring internship at the International Rescue Committee – unpaid work as her dad would remind her – followed her substantial full quarter winter internship in a Mumbai sustainable agriculture nonprofit. The two experiences combined to provide an impressive set of experiences for her summer post-graduation launch into nonprofit work. Perhaps the IRC would extend her refugee work into the summer, while she searched for her first big job? Her confidence in her skills had been growing. But now this.

As though shouldering a forty-pound backpack Liv climbed to the third floor office, struggling to bring her attention to her task as one might grab for a tether in space. *Finding a job for a refugee from Somalia, I can do this.* There were phone calls to make. Often the big hotels were willing to employ people with limited English language skills. If luck struck in the form of an interview, she would accompany the woman to the hotel.

How am I going to take this test without Dev knowing?

That was a real concern. Maybe she could take it after work in the office bathroom? Or did she need to be with someone, maybe Elyse, with whom she could share anything? Not that Liv had said anything to anyone so far about what happened with Rama in India. But if she could talk to anyone, yes, it was Elyse.

As Liv opened the door to the office, she was holding her hand against a hard emotional lump in her chest. *Please, no.* A face of fear turning to her brought her focus outside herself. Intense eyes stared at her from a tiny boy's thin body. His chocolate colored hands disappeared into the long skirt of his mother, Iffah, the woman needing work. Her older child, a girl, also stood close to them, but she appeared more at ease and managed a timid smile. While that counterbalanced the suspicious look of the toddler, the mother's own anxiety was apparent. Liv smiled, and bowed her head slightly, a gesture she'd adopted while in India.

"Hello again." No point in trying to say more given the language barrier. She turned instead to her assigned cubicle area to begin calling different hotels to find a place that would consider hiring Iffah. Liv was learning that not all hotels would consider a Muslim room cleaner who would wear her headscarf on the job, and a long skirt instead of pants. Larger hotel chains often insisted on the rigor of a standard uniform, but some managers had discretion. She wondered if boutique hotels might be the better option thinking that they cater to a more culturally knowledgeable and diverse clientele who wouldn't mind Muslim garb.

Within an hour she let her manager Chuck know that the Eden Hotel, a relatively new eco-travel place in the Regrade, would be willing to consider Iffah. They hosted international visitors from abroad and already had Muslim women employed there who would be helpful for Iffah as she settled into a new job cleaning rooms. Hardly the dental hygiene work she had trained for in Somalia, but lacking English and uncertified by the state, professional work was out of the question.

Chuck looked at his watch: "It's far enough that I better take her over there in my car and talk to the manager myself. I'd like to take you along Liv, but someone needs to watch her kids."

"Sure." That was Liv's automatic response, but in a flash it sunk in. *Why of all days - when I haven't babysat in years - am I suddenly in this situation?*

Chuck used one of the office interpreters to explain the situation to Iffah. When it came to Chuck saying, "I'll be driving you there and Liv will stay here with your children," Iffah looked worried, staring hard at Liv, and searching her eyes for assurance. Iffah turned to the interpreter: "I can't go with a man who is not my husband in the car alone. And I'm worried about my children." As further office conversation freed up another staff person to accompany Chuck, Liv sat down on the lumpy sofa in the waiting area and fingered the fraying fabric. *Come on, hold yourself together, you can do this.* She remembered the intake sheet for Iffah said that her husband was dead, killed in Mogadishu. Iffah fled with her children to the Dadaab camp in northern Kenya, and after two years had become part of the IRC's allocation for resettlement. Had she been pregnant in the camp, Liv wondered, giving birth in some tent with no husband? Her own emotional unsettledness began to morph into tears for Iffah – or were they for herself as she confronted her own possible journey into the foreign territory of being a single mom? Not helpful, interjected her developing professional voice. Focus on the kids.

"What is your name?" Liv asked, and pointing to herself said, "My name is L-I-V," drawing it out. After two months of being in this country and playing in the refugee housing provided by the IRC, the girl of perhaps four whispered tentatively, "Shaima." Smiles broke out and now the younger boy was intrigued. Shaima whispered to him, and he buried his head in his mother's skirt. Then he peeked out and when Liv and Shaima giggled, he did too. Rather suddenly, in a burst of courage, he took a step towards Liv and said loudly, "Mohammed."

"Mohammed, how old are you?" Overcome by his own boldness, he backed into his mother's body again, clutching her skirt with only one hand now and still facing Liv. Shaima said something in Somali, and after consideration, he put up two fingers.

"Two years old!" Liv responded in an amazed voice that seemed to relax him in his accomplishment of communication.

“And you?” she said turning to his sister.

Shaima came out with an understandable version of “four years.” Liv raised her hand and started counting fingers: “one, two, three, four....” Iffah looked down with a more relaxed expression.

Soon Chuck and Asmara, another IRC staffer who knew a little Somali, were donning coats, and Iffah was bent over talking to her children. She looked at Liv who assured her, “I’ll take good care of them for you.” Iffah nodded as though she understood.

Mohammed looked frightened as his mother walked out the door. Shaima had her arms around him. Liv herself felt a moment of internal panic that brought up some photos she’d seen of bodies lying dead on a desert road. Trying to really grasp human tragedy was still a rational experience for her, something she forced herself to think about, but many times eluding her viscerally. Refugee children who lost a parent in violence, a sundering of the most basic human relationship, today they confronted her. Facing them, dueling emotions arose: deep sadness that Mohammed had come into the world with no father and now had to grow up here, countered by the optimism that came with his being rescued.

Mohammed started to cry. Liv sat closer to them and moved slowly to wrap her arms around this tableau of abandonment. All that could come of course were English words: “Don’t cry, I’m here for you, let’s be close together.” Liv spied some books for children on the lobby table and reached for one with cute animals on the cover. She arranged the children together in the sofa’s corner and sat next to them with the book, a version of *Old McDonald’s Farm*. Liv started pointing and making animal sounds. Mohammed and Shaima eventually began to laugh when she snorted like a pig. They liked the chicken and goat too. Liv called up her best childcare exaggerations from teen babysitting and soon the kids were making animal noises too and laughing.

Time disappeared as they lapsed into a more natural connection where one thing led to another, animal sounds to

counting on fingers, and practicing English words. At one point Mohammed slowly reached out to her hair, wanting to feel the texture and entwine his finger in the waves of auburn highlighted hair, so different from his mother's. He wasn't the first boy to do that with Liv's hair. Some in high school had followed it with a kiss. Mohammed was more interested in pulling on it though.

When Iffah, Chuck, and Asmara returned, the children looked happy. Iffah's concerned face erupted into a big smile. Chuck was looking pleased too. "One for the good guys – she got the job." Liv felt like she had really helped that day. As she pulled her jacket on to go back towards campus, she was pleased with how the time with the children had been so much fun.

It wasn't until she reached for her drugstore package that her mood sunk. The test. *Am I pregnant?* As she stood at the bus stop among what her dad once called 'the flotsam and jetsam of life' referring to the homeless Pioneer Square denizens who rode the buses in the free zone or hung out in the public libraries, her mind was less anxious of experiencing weird behaviors from people who had mental illness, and more focused on her own mental state and unsettled emotions and fears. A list came quickly: fear of a future out of her control if she were pregnant, fear of the medical procedure of an abortion, fear of giving up a child and never knowing what became of that life, and fear of losing the vision of herself she so much wanted in the world. Oh, and fear of what might happen to her relationship with Devin. And then she sensed a deeper fear that embarrassed her, the fear of an attraction perhaps born of her afternoon proximity to the children, offering an unspeakable thought for now, of being a mother of a biracial child, having a ready entry to worlds were she was only a tourist now, experiencing life in some deeper, more profound way. *How might this change me in ways that were good? Is there any way I would even let Rama know? How might I be a more complete person with a child depending on me like Iffah?* Her friend Elyse called it her counter-productive urge to self-destruct. Her boyfriend Devin had heard Liv's complaints about

her lack of depth long enough to turn a deaf ear to what he called “her aspirations to suffer as others do.”

Following what seemed like an interminable ride to campus, she knew she had to go to Elyse’s place first to do the test. Using her brand-new cellphone, Liv was relieved to connect, and hear her friend’s, “What’s up?”

“I’m on my way over so you’ll know soon enough.” With that Liv left a message letting Devin know that she’d finished work and was going to Elyse’s. When Liv arrived at the brick four storied apartment building that had sheltered more than its share of human dramas over the past fifty years, she felt the safety and comfort of having reached her friend. Devin called back just then and promised to have dinner ready by seven. She entered the lobby wondering, do I really deserve this guy?

The door on the second floor was already cracked open. As Liv entered and called out, her friend came around the kitchen corner into the living room quickly: “So what’s up, girlfriend?” Elyse used “girlfriend” as though she were speaking in her native Spanish and addressing her best friend using *amiga*.

While she and Liv talked regularly, met for lunches throughout the week, and occasionally went out on an evening together with Devin and whomever Elyse was dating, it was unusual for Liv to come to the apartment. Devin and Liv shared a place in a slightly higher rent block closer to Broadway, while Elyse had found a cheap rental in the other direction towards the Central District. The apartment walls needed paint and the furniture was all hand-me-downs from her family in Yakima. Mexican rugs and serapes were nailed up on the walls to add a splash of color to the drab abode. Elyse hated wide brimmed Mexican dance hats, but had a smallish one on the kitchen wall to go with her straw baskets. At least it was clean and tidy. Elyse did not like messes.

Liv valued Elyse’s directness in all matters. They were a pair of opposites. Elyse was a non-flagging extrovert ready with

quick, decisive answers. She had grown up on the east side of the Cascade Mountains in Yakima, in poor migrant circumstances. She knew her dad but not because he lived with them. Street smart about guys for sure, but she had an in-born intelligence that had, as she liked to say, saved her. High grades in high school led to her college scholarships. She was on the rise and proud of it, and yet not eager to leave her life experiences behind. She was going to make things better for disadvantaged Latina girls and women. Staying close to Elyse meant that Liv too would find a way to make the world better.

For Elyse's part, she admired Liv's steadiness, her calm, and her reflective qualities. She was good at stepping back and seeing the big picture and not rushing off to do stupid things based on rashly made decisions. Elyse attributed Liv's coolness to being an introvert and to her Swedish dad. Thank god for the Irish mom who gave Liv some spunk that would come out in the most opportune moments to save the day. Like that time a half-drunk date started manhandling Elyse, and Liv had pushed back at him too yelling "don't fuck with us," until the guy got the picture. Somewhere deep within Liv there was dry kindling that a match could quickly transform to flame. It just didn't happen very often.

Despite their similarity in age, Elyse enjoyed the role of older sister, more knowledgeable about the pain in the world, and more experienced in confronting the messes people were making of their lives. And she just plain liked being around Liv's angelic kind of beauty, that abundant curly hair, and those curious green eyes that changed colors. Not that she loved Liv in a romantic way – Elyse did not have an iota of lesbian genetic coding in her body. What she loved was the being and existence of Liv in the way girlfriends sometimes do, mutually enjoying their contrasting looks and demeanors while being what later would be called "best friends forever." Elyse held the pole for earthy: her generous proportions turned guys on especially when her dark eyes made a sparkling invitation. When her budget permitted, she highlighted her hair to brighten an otherwise dull picture. Thank

goodness, Liv wasn't perfect either with her primitive goddess figure of small breasts and wide hips. Elyse urged her to consider breast implants, but Liv saw no reason to bother given her live-in boyfriend who valued everything natural and would object to any falsity. And while she did present an imperfect figure by current standards, if she kept the weight off, the broad pelvic area did not seem to be a disincentive for men either as she would catch them watching her from behind.

Their friendship went back to the early days of college when a dorm buddy was accused in class of cheating. "That's bullshit!" Elyse had called out nearly causing her ouster from class along with the fellow Latino in the neighboring seat who had leant over only to whisper that he desperately needed to go to the bathroom. Whenever Liv saw injustice now, her friend's voice crying 'bullshit' would echo inside. That incident began a relationship built steadily on truthfulness and mutual admiration, growing trust. Liv knew she could tell Elyse anything, she would always keep a secret from Devin, and she would get advice in no uncertain terms.

"I might be pregnant," Liv got out, knowing Elyse would be on the case immediately.

"Are you telling me that you have been so stupid as to have unprotected sex with that runner-up for a real man you call your boyfriend?" Elyse liked bawdy, brawny, sports-loving, big laugh types and always found Devin's thoughtful ways in demonstrating devotion to Liv a wimpy stand-in for a more robust relationship that kept you on edge. Devin was just not sexy and Elyse thought Liv was settling for good, but not holding out for great.

Liv centered herself and looked directly into Elyse's eyes. "No. I'm telling you that the guy I had a crush on in India...well, it was more than that." Elyse's eyes were getting bigger. Liv took a deep breath before expelling, "I actually had sex with him."

Elyse looked agitated and hurt. "You had sex with the hot guy and didn't tell me? Is that what I'm hearing? My best friend

spends hours telling me about her time in Mumbai, and never comes clean on an affair?"

Liv deliberately had low-keyed the matter of Rama with Elyse knowing she would use it to up the volume on her running critique of Devin. Liv wanted to sort out her own feelings about their evolving relationship without being unduly influenced by her strong-minded friend; she wanted 'to claim her own voice' as she enjoyed saying and practiced in discussions with Elyse. Withholding inflammatory information on Rama had been just such an exercise. Liv wanted to know how she felt about what she'd done, what reactions she had to coming home and sleeping with Devin after having experienced – she struggled with what to call it, erotic? spiritual? intense? - a very different lovemaking with Rama. Liv was still trying to absorb it all when it dawned on her that her period was late. Initially, her return from India had been so confusing that she hadn't paid attention to her cycle at all. As she'd slowly overcome the urge to sleep during the day and be awake at night, and returned to familiar morning patterns, she realized that taking the pill was missing from that pattern. By the time she got a new prescription, picked it up, and opened the packet the other morning, she awoke to the fact that she had missed her period. That was a few days ago, and when she looked at the dates she realized she was two weeks late.

Liv flopped down in the dilapidated denim armchair, finding comfort in its surrounding shape. "I needed some time to have my own thoughts on what happened. You know we've talked about this before, how you come on so strong that it crowds out my ability to have confidence in my own thinking."

Elyse looked at her hard but didn't say anything at first. Then her affect changed and became softer, as she sank into the cushion of the blanket covered sofa across from Liv. "Okay so what happened that you are ready to tell me about, and what are your own thoughts about it?"

Liv didn't know where to start and she had no interest in getting into the details right now of what transpired over the course of eight weeks in India with Rama. She'd been conflicted

about it at the time, and sleeping with Devin only generated more circular thinking that went nowhere, and challenged her own sense of who she was. Beginning with that conversation would take hours and keep her from resolving the critical issue of the moment: am I pregnant?

“Right now what I’m willing to share is that the night I was leaving on the red eye for Mumbai, when I was packing my toothbrush and make-up, and birth control pills – which by the way I thought of not even taking since Devin and I would be apart for over two months – I went to my top drawer and realized there was only one more pack left. I was facing a month without protection. So, okay I thought, I’ll just go a month without and deal with it when I get back.” Liv paused to choose the most direct entry point and shortest account of Rama.

“And?” came the demand.

“And then this thing with the guy...”

“Does the guy have a name?”

Liv sensed Elyse’s latent irritation. “Look, get over it. What’s important is that I’m turning to you, my absolute best friend, for help now.” Liv paused. “So?”

“Okay, go on. I’m over it – for now.”

“Well, this thing with – his name is Rama...” Liv watched Elyse’s reaction to the name, mouthing it, trying it on in a way that teetered on mocking it. “The thing with Rama got more and more interesting, and then enticing, and then, well – I promise I’ll tell you everything another time – we went away for several days from Mumbai on a planting trip. And when it came to it, I was torn between being safe and loyal to Devin, and breaking out and experiencing something new.” Actually, truth be told, she didn’t recall being focused on Devin at all.

“You’ve been back, what two or three weeks. How long since you should have had your period?”

“I should have had it right about the time I came back, the end of the month. It was mid-February when I had sex with him. But there was so much with coming back, seeing everyone, hiding my thoughts from Devin, I just didn’t even think about it until a

few days ago. Every day I was hoping my period would come. Finally today I went to the drugstore and bought this pregnancy test. I need you to let me take it in your bathroom.”

Elyse wanted more information but was practical. “Okay, have you done one of these before?”

“No, I never needed to. I’ve been on birth control forever.”

“Me too. So take the damn thing out and let’s get on with it. If nothing else this will be educational.”

Liv pulled the test kit from the plastic bag and they rose together and headed for the bathroom. Liv read the instructions out loud, which said testing in the morning was better. “Damn. I want to know now.”

“If it’s not positive for being pregnant, buy another one tonight or tomorrow and double check. But neither of us is up for waiting right now.”

Liv read more about how you tested the stick in your urine. “I can just pee on it. And then I wait two minutes for a plus or minus.” She looked at Elyse, and with a softly spoken “Here I go,” she shut the door.

“You mean I don’t get to see you pee?”

As the urine flowed, Liv thought, God this feels like a hugely important moment in my life. “I’m nervous Elyse.”

“Just do it.”

A minute later. “I peed on it. But now I’m afraid to look at it.”

“Do I need to open this door and do it for you?”

“No. It says to give it two minutes. I’m counting to 120.”

Liv was looking at a plus sign on the tester and rereading the instructions for the third time.

“Liv?”

“I think it says I’m pregnant.”

With that Elyse opened the door and grabbed the stick from Liv. She looked at the instructions again too. “Shit, you’re pregnant.”

Liv was numb. She pulled up her pants, zipped her fly, and looked at Elyse, but really through her into a void. At some point a flood of emotions would come and re-enliven her deadened senses. But at this moment she entered a prolonged state between her breaths where there was only emptiness, no thoughts, no feelings, dead space.

Elyse was watching her face. "Let's have something to eat."

I'm pregnant. I'm going to have a baby. A few hours ago I was Liv with a future I was excited about and now I'm pregnant. She closed her eyes. She saw Mohammed's fearful eyes and his body clinging to his mother. *Is what's inside me afraid too?*

Elyse brought hot chocolate, their favorite afternoon comfort food, to the table with some cookies. "I could ask you what you're thinking but I know it will take you time to collect your own thoughts." Elyse paused. She hated waiting to talk. "So I'm just going to launch and tell you what I think." Liv was used to Elyse's "launches," their high volume, in both words and sometimes tone. "First of all, you cannot tell Devin about this today. You need time to finish sorting out your thoughts. Second, I will start researching abortion clinics and options. We'll get together tomorrow. I'll figure out how it works, what it costs, possible use of your parents' insurance, and of course, the timing. Third, once we know what we're doing and when, I will be with you every step of the way. You'll just need to come up with a story for Devin about needing to be someplace else for a few days. Lastly, over time, you can sort out your relationship with him, what you want to tell him, and how you really feel about staying with him."

Liv was still staring at the table. Elyse paused. "But not tonight. Tonight, you just have to say you need some down-time, and go to bed. Mr. Sweetie will respect that as he always does."

And as always, Liv felt comforted by the superficial clarity of Elyse's analysis and plan. *Just get though tonight, I can do that.* "Okay."

“So let’s go through this Liv. What are you going to say when you get back to the apartment?”

Liv was chewing on the shortbread cookie now. She took another sip of hot chocolate. “Well, I can be honest about my state which is that I’m overwhelmed and distressed. So I could blame that on being at the Rescue Committee and getting into one of my empathic connections with the Somali woman. And just tell Devin that I need to work through it, that I need a little time and space for myself.”

“And if he presses you about visiting me tomorrow too?”

Elyse knew that Devin bridled at her influence.

“Maybe I can say you wanted my opinion on something?”

“Tell him I just broke up with Sam and wanted to talk about it.”

“Oh my God, is that true?”

“Yes. And I did want to talk about it. But not now. Just say that given what Sam did to me I was singing praises about Devin.” Elyse smiled. “He’ll be surprised, and like that. It will make him feel good. He’ll of course want to know what happened but tell him you’re in no mood to share the details, but will when you’re not depressed.”

Liv finished the cookie. She put her hand across the table to Elyse, whispering “I love you, sister.” She rose, picked up her jacket and turned to say goodbye.

“Back at you, girlfriend.” They hugged.

Elyse closed the door. She thought about clearing the table, but threw herself into the sofa instead. She actually felt like crying. *Why did Liv not tell me about the affair? Was her best friend slipping away? Was she really too dominant over her?* Liv had been an anchor for her. Ever since that time freshman year when she coached Elyse through the first time she got seriously dumped by a guy. Liv had always been there. *And now she’s hiding stuff from me?* Elyse felt deflated. She noted that of course, as usual, she had taken charge again this afternoon about the abortion. *But Liv needs that right now.* At least in the next twenty-four hours. But after that? Liv always praised Devin for listening

to her, getting into her mental space and understanding what she was thinking. Elyse seriously wondered what he was going to do with this. Liv might be able to trick him about the timing. But then what, what if he wanted to keep the baby and it came out a little Buddha baby? Jesus. Not a path to go down.

No, Devin can't be here for her on this. It's got to be me.

And Liv had just let her know with a punch to the gut that she needs to work with her own feelings and not be overwhelmed by other people's ideas. Elyse stared out the window at the tree top, moving into a mindless place, then surfacing. She snapped to her role in helping with this research thing, and went online to Planned Parenthood.

Liv decided to walk from Elyse's apartment to have quiet time. With the droop of her head and the sag of her shoulders, from a distance she looked to be twice her age. Her brain was in tumult, working on several pathways at once: how do I feel about being pregnant? Who can help me think about this in addition to Elyse? Can I trust Mom? Should I see a counselor at school? Amy who had an abortion? *Clearly, Elyse already has decided I should have an abortion. I don't even know what I think about me getting an abortion.* A memory flashed of a women's rights march downtown they'd joined, even making their own pro-choice signs. Liv had no doubt about any one's right to have an abortion. It was just that this was personal.

What was clear though was that she wouldn't be talking to Devin about it anytime soon. She knew how she was: she hated lying to anyone, and most of all to him. He was too good a person to be dealt with by lies.

So as usual, Elyse at least had the first step right. Buy time. Get more time to think. Liv put all her divergent strands on temporary hold, and focused, rehearsing dinner, after dinner diversions, things she could say, excuses she could make. Of course, she would be honest in what she said. But not complete.

The front steps of the funky, subdivided house where they lived showed its age in the layers of paint chipping off. Liv laid her hand on a peeling post, and pulled another strip off, while resonating in her own sense of becoming a layered person. *Tonight, I'm hiding something.* Entering, she found comfort in the domesticity of the décor she and Dev had patched together: her upscale parents' hand-me-down furniture accented by Dev's poster art choices of scenes from nature and his own enlarged photographs. And the coffee table curio box with something special from memorable outings they shared. Being in her own space felt right, yet her immediate goal was to retreat to the bedroom. She heard Devin setting the table in the kitchen at the back of the apartment. "Hey Dev, I'm back."

He came out from the kitchen with a wide smile that was a sure sign he was feeling up. "You'll never guess what I decided to make!"

Liv paused, sniffing. "Hmm, smells Italian – spaghetti and meatballs?"

"No, even better. Lasagna!"

Liv forced a smile as she grimaced internally sensing the challenge of the evening. "Dev, that's a lot of work. You must have had to shop."

"Yep. But I had the time and anyway I wanted us to have a special night." He began to wrap his arms around her waist, and bent to kiss her cheek. "It's been a little off between us since you came back and I just want us to get back on track with the way we were."

Liv let herself be held for a minute. Then she delicately pulled away. "I get what you're saying, and please don't hate me, but I had a really rough day at the Rescue Committee and I'm...well, I just feel so down right now."

Devin's smile faded. But he was determined not to let her slip away. He regrouped internally: okay this isn't going to be as easy as I hoped, just take it one step at a time. "I'm sorry to hear that. Do you want to talk about it?"

“Not right now. Is there time before the lasagna is done for me to have some down-time by myself?”

“Would a glass of cheap red wine help?”

Liv rarely refused a glass of wine. But no alcohol during pregnancy was her first thought, and so she fielded a “not right now, maybe later with dinner?”

“Sure. Is a half hour good?”

“Yes, that’s perfect.” Her eyes conveyed true appreciation.

Devin returned to the kitchen. He placed his hands on each side of the old range, extended one leg back and leaned on his long arms toward the stovetop. So much for a sweet evening. But he was determined to pull this off. One step in front of the other. He focused on getting his special meal on the table, moving on to make the garlic bread. As he chopped the cloves and sautéed them in butter, it occurred to him that you never get to have all of life’s pieces working well at the same time.

While Liv had been away in India, Devin had used his time admirably working on his own part-time job. He’d stepped up his game at Earth Stewards by taking on more responsibilities, and now it was looking like they might offer him a full-time job when he graduated this May. He’d also aced two challenging finals ensuring a “with honors” degree. He’d even made time to help his mom with her downsizing move. That definitely had sent the message that he was on his own now and not to think about moving back in for any reason after graduation. She had said - well everybody pretty much thought - he and Liv would be living together a long time.

For over a year now they’d been in this place. At first, it had been the culmination of his high school dream. He’d wanted Liv as long as he could remember, at least back to junior high when she didn’t know he existed. Even then she had an air about her that attracted him. His buddies thought he was nuts to go after a “classy” girl who looked stuck up to them. By high school though they got it too, what Devin’s mom called Liv’s Ingrid Bergman ways: when Liv smiled it was like standing in the sun.

But she wasn't the type to just hang out with anybody. There was this self-confidence that was beyond her years, or so it seemed in his college freshman, self-doubting stage. No, his friends said, she's just acting aloof because she's insecure too, she's faking it. Now Devin saw that aspect of her too, as she would confide her uncertainties about her relationships with others, while they saw only her casual confidence.

His mom had raised him on her own since he was eight. She'd taught him how to cook beyond his friends' ability to put pop tarts in the microwave, and enforced simplicity and tidiness which he was predisposed towards anyway. He hated some of his buddies' messy rooms. And the dorm life! Yeah, the comraderie was fun, but he didn't like living like an animal. As a kid, he hadn't resisted the outfits from his grandma, the sixty dollar Nordstrom's sweater or a nice pair of cords. Fast forward, and he didn't care at all for large, droopy, basketball shorts showing his underwear, or neon tennis shoes. He stuck to khakis and shirts for school, and jeans and tees in the field work he did with Earth Stewards. While he liked looking at a woman who was nicely dressed the way his mom had been, he also liked the clothes that Liv wore with understated class. She was a special girl. And she was his.

The last few weeks had been difficult though. She'd been so distant, returning from India less happy in general, and definitely more tense around him, more somber. When he thought back it had started even before she returned, short emails and then fewer coming. But email wasn't his thing so he hadn't paid much mind. She talked less to him and he was sure she was hiding thoughts from him. He would think it was her who had changed, and then, no, he'd think he wasn't trying hard enough to break through and reconnect. She just didn't seem like she was present.

The garlic bread was done as was the lasagna. He took the salad he'd made earlier from the fridge and opened the Chianti. He put candles on the table. "Liv, dinner's ready."

Liv had sat on the bed staring at the chest of drawers. Stunned, that described it best. But she kept telling herself, not now. Tomorrow. I need to focus on this moment and dealing with Devin. She changed into her least attractive sweats to communicate an unspoken message to him not to come on strong.

Not so long ago she would have fussed to have her hair right, refresh her make-up, put on a sexier top, and otherwise do her best to please him. He'd been her idea of the 'right guy' for so long: she'd always liked what her mother called his 'clean cut' look. While Elyse criticized his 'dainty good looks,' Liv did not find his smallish features, the slightly upturned nose and thin lips, to be so lacking in strength as to be a turn-off. She focused on his fair skin that together with dark, hard-to-tame hair made a startling contrast with his translucent sweet and playful eyes. His face was animated by every emotion that passed through him, so he was an easy read and a fun companion. His sexuality while boyishly displayed, was slowing growing into more interesting moves that had turned her on. Watching erotic movies together had helped.

And not the least of his attractions was how much he not only tolerated her inner private debates, but also provided an outer collective space for her repetitive soul-searching conversations. How many times had she gone through her mental agonies with him: "I'm tired of being white, of having white privileges. Everyone else seems to have more fascinating backgrounds. I'm tired of not being able to do anything adventurous on my own, I'm such a wimp." And Dev's personal favorite lament: "I haven't suffered enough. I feel so pathetic when I learn of the suffering of others." He'd tried countering with "You're just too self-absorbed about all this," but that made it worse. Then she had to confront her own contradictions, and lashed out: "At least I care about people and not just trees."

Tonight culminated weeks of her holding back and discouraging all sexual overtures from the get go. When she came into the kitchen and saw the effort he'd made, her resolve weakened. Encircling her arms around his waist, she looked up, and said thank you as though she meant it. Actually, she did.

He wasn't sure where to start the conversation, so he didn't. Then the silence was awkward, so he brought up her visit to Elyse. "What's up with my greatest fan?"

"Oh, she's broken up with Sam and wanted to talk about it, although I'm not sure she really told me the whole story."

"Sam, is he the one who wants to be a pro hockey player? The guy we went to the Will Ferrell movie with a while back?"

"Yeah, that's Sam. And the movie you didn't like much. Anyway, she just needed a sounding board."

"So why did she break it off? He seemed like the type she likes."

"Kind of a long story and honestly it's not making much sense to me now, which makes me think she left out some big details. Anyway, it's not what we want to talk about over this beautiful dinner. I'll tell you another time."

"Well, I'm a little bit on eggshells. What would you like to talk about then? I assume not the work thing that got you down."

"No, actually, I'd like to tell you about it. I wound up babysitting these two little kids while Chuck took the Somali mom off to a hotel to find a job. The little boy, Mohammed, two years old, has the roundest, deepest brown eyes. And they were such windows to all his emotions, fear when his mom left, happiness when we played."

"So what got you so down?"

"Not the being with him, but then thinking about him, about his dad being killed, about their time in a refugee camp before coming here. And now, what the mom was going through. Some of the same feelings I had in India, like how can I be happy when so many people are having miserable lives. I feel shallow, and spoiled, and like I'm a spectator of others' misfortunes."

Devin looked down at his next bite of lasagna. He put his fork down. Where could he go with this? He understood what she was saying, they'd talked about this till it made his heart ache too with tiredness. He didn't know what to do.

"I know Dev, there's no good response. I'm sorry for being like this. I don't know what to do about it." Liv honestly

meant all of this. And it was the territory she had chosen to exploit in order to get through this night, something she could be honest about without getting near their personal relationship.

Devin felt tense, as though an internal rubber band was about to snap. His throat tightened. He got up from the table and turned toward the stove, trying to think before he spoke. Liv stared at him. Turning back, "Look, I don't doubt for a moment the sincerity of what you're saying, or that you're genuinely in some mental pain over this. But life is more than the miseries out there – it's also about you and me and how we are together. And I'm at a loss how to deal with you ever since you got back from India." He paused, sensing his own strength gathering. His voice got very low, but more forceful. "Liv, I'm trying to be the best I can be for you and you're just not here. I need you to put at least one foot on the same ground with me, to care about making our way together like you used to, to be in the same life with me. I hate how lonely it's become when I'm with you."

Liv lowered her eyes. *Buy time. Hold things in place for just a bit longer.* She looked up. "Dev, you're right. I know you're right. And it makes me mad at myself that I'm causing you pain. I can't fix it tonight, but I can at least promise that (*what do I say now?*), I can promise that I will work really hard on myself this coming week to improve things (*God, how would that be possible?*)"

"And how will you do that? You've said this before."

Liv was looking at him but not really seeing him. *Can I get an abortion in a week and recover? Can I spend time at my mom's? Buy time.* "I don't know right this minute honestly... but I do want to make things better. Please accept that. I'm going to think about this tonight and tomorrow and I'll come up with something. So bear with me tonight, and we'll talk some more soon, okay?"

Devin turned and looked out the window to the backyard. He identified with some trampled daffodils that he'd accidentally stepped on in the dark last night taking out the trash. It felt like he had no right moves left. *I have no choice.*

“Well, good then.” He looked at the food, sat down again, and changed his tone. “I’m not letting all this delicious food go to waste. So you can stay here and eat too or I’ll understand if you want some space.”

Liv smiled genuinely. “Thank you, Dev. I want to eat it too. How about you tell me about something at work?”

And so the evening passed. She heard about the latest projects going on at Earth Stewards where he worked a couple of afternoons setting up planting projects for the weekends. They watched TV and then went to bed, locking into their usual curled up position together. Devin embraced her and squeezed really hard. “Liv, I love you. So much.”

Liv took refuge in their usual script: “Love you too, Dev.” As she shifted to move his arms from around her painful breasts to her waist, the explanation for that symptom came into focus. With relief she could now dispose of the concern about breast cancer. She lay awake, experiencing the warmth of his body close to hers, but recalling the warmth of another embrace, an embrace in a field in India. The memory awakened her senses, seeing his eyes, touching his hands, smelling the earth around them. The frogs were so loud. That first taste of his lips where spiciness from their meal still lingered.

This was what happened every night now, the call of the echoes from what she had done. She opened her eyes to be in the present. If I let it come, then I feel like making love, and then I’m using Dev. And it only makes me feel worse. I can’t use him like that.

She decided not to go there, not to go to the field that night. *Pregnant by Rama. No, I’m not going there either. I just want to rest.* She desperately needed another focus and came back to little Mohammed’s eyes, wondering what future he would have. She drifted off, sad that his becoming an Americanized boy would likely make him see his mother as stuck in the old ways. He would leave her, hang out more and more with the guys, maybe get into trouble. Iffah would end up alone, a burden on her daughter, no husband, no son. Mothers always suffered the most.