

From "You Said Yes or You Said No"

On the day I would learn that Ryan's father had died, I woke up to find Lindsey attempting a headstand on the living room carpet of the apartment we shared, one leg extended, her pastel pants drooping past the knee. She crashed back to the floor. I put my coat on. The apartment was freezing.

"What's with the acrobatics?" I asked.

"Preparing for a new yoga pose," she said. "How's Ryan?"

"Ryan's Ryan," I said.

Lindsey crouched on the floor, hugging her knees to her chest, and stared at me. "Isn't this the third time you've seen him this week?" she asked. She was referring to her rules about courtship that I was never following.

"You're keeping track?" I pictured her marking the days on her calendar with black lines, coloring a pie chart of monthly percentages.

"It gets lonely around here."

I snorted. "You wouldn't mind if you thought Ryan was worth my time."

She stretched out her legs in front of her, reaching for her toes. "You know him. I don't."

"It's only been two months," I said. "I guess I don't know him that well."

"But you know enough to stay," she said as she folded her fingers against the soles of her feet, her knees locked.

“Of course,” I said, although if pressed, I didn’t think I could articulate what I knew that made me stay. Lindsey held her stretch as if waiting for me to elaborate. Instead, I glanced through the mail. Eventually she drew her knees up to her chest and tipped forward into another headstand. The fair skin on her cheeks burned pink almost immediately as she balanced her knees on her elbows in a tripod pose, her blond hair ribboned across the carpet.

“I know I keep saying this, but you guys seem so different,” she said.

I didn’t mind her being vague because it meant I could pretend to be ignorant. Ryan grew up in a tiny Ohio town where his mother answered telephones at a Napa auto parts store and his father owned a printing company. They had divorced when he was seven. Ryan and his mother had moved out and lived in an apartment over a donut shop for a few years. My parents were devout Catholics, a history professor and a librarian still living in the same suburban house. While he was playing football in high school, I was writing poetry. He’d moved to Cleveland, worked at a warehouse, and had started taking classes at Cuyahoga Community College. I had graduated from Case Western Reserve less than a year ago and started teaching English as a second language.

“Different how?” I asked Lindsey. “Are you referring to our castes?” It irritated me that someone who could be so open-minded would insist I should only date college-educated, middle class boys.

Lindsey lowered her knees back to the carpet and lifted her head up to look

at me. Her hair hung in front of her eyes. "I'm talking about values. Belief systems."

I knew she was referring to the first night that she'd met Ryan, when I brought him to one of the dinner parties that she threw. He'd remained silent up until his third glass of wine when one of Lindsey's friends mentioned that she had a younger brother who'd enlisted in the military instead of going to college. The woman said something about him being brainwashed by the recruiter when Ryan spoke up. He said his father had been in the military and he'd thought about it, too. "What's so wrong with it?" he asked her, his voice suddenly louder, aggressive. She didn't respond, just shifted her gaze to the table. These were Lindsey's friends, a social worker and a counselor who worked at Planned Parenthood. It might not have been so bad if it hadn't been the only thing he'd said all night.

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That evening Ryan's mother Sandy drove us to the funeral home for the viewing. Ryan sat up front in silence and I sat in the back seat, staring out the window as the Main Street stores slid past, packed next to each other in a tight row of quaint, carved buildings that didn't even resemble the clapboard and cinderblock boxes that housed the rest of the town's livelihood. On the corner a lone barbershop pole turned slowly in the cold under a neon sign that advertised a shave and haircut. Sandy pointed out spots of interest, the library, the elementary school, the grocery

store parking lot that turned into a flea market during warm months. The town dwindled to a White Castle, a Dunkin Donuts where a few teenagers in hooded sweatshirts clustered around an SUV, and the glass-fronted auto parts store where Sandy worked, looking stranded like islands on the flat, featureless landscape.

After a mile or so of empty fields and dark houses, the Monroe Funeral Home appeared like a mirage, tall and fronted by thick columns like an old tobacco plantation. A scalloped, green awning flapped in the wind. Sandy parked and shut the car off.

“We’ll only stay for an hour or so,” she said. “Pay our respects and go. There aren’t that many people I need to be socializing with.”

Ryan cleared his throat as if he were about to speak but remained quiet.

We draped our coats on top of a full coat rack and walked into the hushed conversation of a parlor with thick carpet and velvet curtains. Low chords of organ music came through speakers in the ceiling. I slipped my arm around Ryan’s elbow and placed my hand on his arm. We huddled near the podium with the reception book while Sandy signed her name and picked up a prayer card. Ryan stared at the floor. A placard on an easel bore a large, smiling photograph of Ryan’s father, with the words “In Loving Memory, Jack Dawes” printed above. I stared at the photograph, startled by how much his long nose and thin lips reminded me of Ryan. The receiving line snaked through the room, men in suits and women in dark dresses standing like shadows in front of the coffin. My stomach started to turn at

the idea of seeing the body.

Sandy glanced around the room and turned back toward the door for a moment. Her eyes squeezed shut and she shook her head. "Sometimes it doesn't hit until you're right there," she said and took a breath. I waited, then placed my hand on her shoulder. "Part of life," she said. We walked into the room together.

Sandy sounded tired. "We'll go up and see Brenda and her two grown daughters. She's Jack's wife. They were married, what, two years ago?" she said, looking at Ryan. He was still staring at the floor. "She had those kids young. Different fathers. So those girls have got to be more than thirty now."

I nodded. Ryan had never mentioned a stepmother. He spent hours telling me about the restaurant he wanted to open once he had his associates degree in marketing and had worked a few years for other places. "The restaurant will need a theme, something to distinguish it." He tossed around several options. Maybe a travel theme with international foods or else name it for a place in a classic novel, like Nighttown, that restaurant just before Cedar Road dipped into Cleveland proper. Whenever we had a few extra dollars, we went to Nighttown, drank mojitos and ordered bangers and mash. Ryan liked to chat with the bartender about his prospects. "It isn't easy," he would tell me. "Nine out of ten small businesses fail in the first year."

Sandy glanced around the room. "Most of these people probably knew him through the business," she said. "He was some salesman," Sandy said. Ryan pushed

his glasses up his nose and cleared his throat again.

We waded through the crowd while women approached Sandy and clasped her hands, patted Ryan's arm. "This is Ryan's girlfriend, Sara," his mother said. The word twisted somewhere in me.

Once we reached Brenda, I could see the open casket. Compared to the photograph, Ryan's father looked artificial, his cheeks bloated, the color painted on his lips, the skin on his face too smooth, like wax. Ryan grimaced when he saw his father. Sandy and Brenda leaned into one another in a polite hug, exchanged murmurs I could not hear. Brenda was tall and bony, her long limbs accentuated by the angular cut of her black pantsuit. Her white blond hair was curled stiffly around her crumpled face. She sniffed and dabbed at her nose with a tattered Kleenex. Brenda embraced Ryan, patted his back gently, whispered that she was sorry. He said he was sorry for her, the first words he'd spoken since we'd arrived. I stood back awkwardly, waiting to be introduced. No one bothered.

Sandy lowered herself onto the kneeler and made the sign of the cross, closed her eyes and covered her face in prayer. Ryan lingered before his father's body, but I tugged at his arm, led him to a free couch along the wall. He stared at his mother.

"You know she left him," he said. "I was seven. She was seeing someone else. We moved out and into that apartment over the donut place. She'd be upstairs with this guy and I'd be downstairs at the counter, eating donuts."

"I didn't know," I said.

"We never talk about it."

"Maybe you'll be able to talk about it now," I said.

Ryan closed his eyes. "What for?"

I was thinking of what Sandy had said about Ryan's father, how mean he could be and how Ryan still looked up to him. "She must have had her reasons."

"Yeah," he said, chewing his tongue. "Bill, this guy from the RV dealership."

"That's not what I meant," I said. "Her life couldn't have been easy."

Ryan turned and stared at me, the skin between his eyebrows crinkled.

"What does that mean?" His voice was low, but sharp.

Before I could answer, a heavy man approached us and patted Ryan on the arm. "How you doing, kiddo?" he said. Ryan looked up and shook hands, then introduced me to his Uncle Neil, his father's brother. Neil leaned close, kissed me, wet, on the cheek and lingered a second too long. "You do pretty well for yourself, kid." Sweat prickled his pink face and he panted, as if the suit and tie he wore were so tight that they squeezed the air out of him. Alcohol was on his breath. Ryan stared at his shoes. Neil clapped Ryan on the back once more and waddled off.

Sandy crossed herself again and stood, leaning on the edge of the kneeler for support. She tottered toward us and smiled. "You meet Uncle Sleaze?" she said.

"Makes you squirm, don't he?" Ryan said nothing. "We'll mingle a few minutes longer but then we should head home. Long day tomorrow."

Sandy drifted around the room between groups, patting arms and whispering. Ryan and I sat on the sofa, watching the receiving line slowly dwindle. He didn't bring up what I'd said about his mother, and I was afraid of making him angry, again. I looked up at his profile and tried to decipher his blank expression. He had always been difficult to read. When he claimed he was just tired, he looked depressed. When he slept, a crease appeared between his eyebrows as if he were concentrating. I couldn't remember ever seeing his face severely changed by anything. Only once had I seen him angry enough to raise his voice. We were driving back from a party one of his friends had thrown and he'd been quiet most of the night. Some car had cut him off and he'd punched the dashboard so hard he cut his knuckles on the air vent. He shouted "fuck" nearly twenty times before he calmed down. I'd slumped against the door and gripped the seat, afraid he might lose control of the car. Still, even then his face had hardly changed. Later he told me he'd had a lousy day, had gotten a D on an exam because he'd stayed up all night to write a paper. When we came back to his apartment I wrapped bandaids around his fingers and rubbed his forehead, my hands still trembling a little.

As we drove home from the wake, Ryan lowered a window and smoked a cigarette, the plumes of his breath sucked out at once, the still lit ashes whipping past my back seat window. Sandy gave us the rundown of every insult she had suffered. "You know what Brenda said to me? 'I didn't know if you'd make it out,'" she said in a mincing tone. "Does she think I live in a cave?" She pointed at Ryan.

“That woman always acted like we don’t have the right to be alive.” I reached around from the back and took his hand, squeezed it.

Once we arrived home, Sandy told us she was going to bed. We were welcome to stay up, she said, as she showed us where to find extra blankets and towels. After Sandy closed her bedroom door, I sat down on the living room couch next to Ryan and leaned my body against his.

“You should go to bed,” he said. “You look tired.”

I pulled my feet onto the couch and rubbed my toes through the nylons. Knowing he was trying to get rid of me, I said, “I’d rather stay with you.”

We sat like that for a moment, Ryan staring straight ahead, his arms limp in his lap. Then he announced he needed a cigarette.

“Can I join you?” I asked.

Ryan shrugged and grabbed his coat from where he’d slung it over the back of a kitchen chair.

On the front stoop, I tapped a cigarette against the pack and put it between my lips, waiting for Ryan to light it from the tip of his, like he usually did. He didn’t offer. “Can I have a light?” I asked, and he passed me his lighter.

There were no streetlights. A lamp over the door cast us in a ring of harsh light, beyond which I could only see the windows of a house across the street and the chlorine glow of a television inside. We smoked in silence until I thought I

couldn't stand it anymore. "I wish you would talk to me."

Ryan flicked ashes onto the cement. "What do you want me to talk about?"

I couldn't answer that question. What did I want him to talk about? How he felt? How did I think he felt? "You're suffering. I can't reach you. I don't know what else to do."

He squinted, rubbing his temple with the same hand that held his cigarette.

"What am I supposed to do? Talk my father back to life?"

"I just want to help."

"You walk around all the time like you can fix anything," he said and dropped his cigarette into the grass. "Like you know something I don't."

I looked up at the sky where the red lights of an airplane glided silently overhead. "What have I done to make you think that?"

Ryan stared into the dark. "You came here," he said. "Act like my mother is some kind of saint."

"I just meant that if you haven't talked to her about it, then you don't really know why she did what she did, or if she regrets it." I dropped my cigarette, took his hand in mine and started rubbing the heel of his palm, trying to create some kind of affection between us. Ryan didn't pull his hand away, but left it limp in my grasp.

"What you said is that her life must have been hard."

My thumbs kept kneading the tough skin of his hand. "All I meant was that there might have been things about their marriage you didn't know because you

were so young.” I wanted to drop the topic of what I’d said and what I’d meant. We should have been talking about his father. I should have been helping him.

“Why do you think her life was hard?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know why I put it that way,” I said. “I told you what I meant.”

“You put it that way because you think you know better than me,” he said, his voice suddenly louder, almost theatrical.

I stared at the line of shadow that cut across his jaw, the way it shifted, swallowing his face when he looked down. “Why are you angry with me?”

Ryan took out another cigarette and put it between his lips without lighting it. “You think you’re going to help me,” he said, the cigarette bobbing.

“Help you what?” I asked, although I knew. How could I admit that he was right? I was guilty of a certain kind of egotism. I wouldn’t have to say it. He already knew. Lindsey knew. But what she didn’t understand was that acceptance at a distance was so much easier than enmeshing your lives. At a distance you didn’t have to do anything other than think. But when it was your life, too, you had to be different. I could do the right thing. I pulled my hands out of his lap and wrapped my arms around my bent legs, pressing my knees against my forehead.

For a while Ryan said nothing. I heard the click of his lighter, the soft sigh of his breath between his teeth. When he spoke, he was nearly whispering. “I’m sorry. All I meant was that you’re acting like you can make this better, and you can’t.”

I looked up at him. If he was troubled by my selfishness, he wasn't going to admit it. "What do you want me to do?"

Ryan shrugged. "Don't do anything," he said. "Let's go to bed."

I said, "okay."

Ryan drove us to the funeral the next morning because his mother's car wouldn't turn over in the cold. The church was modern, a commotion of overlapping angles with a slanted roof that made it seem as if it were sinking partway into the ground. An enormous window formed the back wall and the white ceiling loomed, stretching over our heads like a giant clamshell. Ryan stayed in the back to serve as a pallbearer while Sandy and I sat together, a few rows from the front.

Organ chords throbbed and the group of men slowly wheeled the casket down the carpeted aisle. Ryan's shoulders trembled and as he passed by me I could see his cheeks were wet with tears. At the sight of him my throat tightened. I looked down at the wrinkles in my skirt and started to cry. Sandy pulled a worn tissue packet from her purse and placed it on the pew between us. She sniffled, shook her head, and rubbed her hands over her thighs.

I tried to focus on the funeral rites, tried to listen as the priest spoke vaguely about Jack Dawes' compassion and concern for his fellow man. "His friends tell me he was always willing to help out," the priest said, swaying in his cassock. "His

business associates say he was a hard man to know, but that everyone liked him.”

Ahead, in the front pew, Ryan dipped his head, removed his glasses, and buried his face in his hands.

Uncle Neil offered the eulogy after communion. He clutched the sides of the stone pulpit and wheezed as he sobbed. “Many of you might not have known what a humanitarian my brother was,” he said. “He was real private about his business practices, but he would donate a percentage of his revenue to the community every year and he was always doing pro-bono printing jobs for the scouts and the school groups.” Beside me, Sandy bobbed her head slowly. “He will live on though,” Neil said. “Brenda says she’s going to keep that company running in his name for as long as she can.” Sandy lifted her head then, turned her ear toward the front of the church and listened. Neil never mentioned Ryan.

At the cemetery we clustered around the open grave. The polished casket sat on a strip of cheap, plastic grass, beside a mound of dirt. Light snowflakes had begun to whirl in the air, drifting toward the ground and spotting the coffin. My limbs ached and I could barely concentrate on the priest’s mumbled prayers. All at once Ryan dropped to his knees, as if pins had been pulled from his joints. I stooped beside him and clutched his shoulders, pressing my lips against his ear.

“You’re okay,” I said.

“I just got dizzy,” he told me. “I’m fine.”

Sandy knelt at his other side and we lifted him back to his feet. “Hasn’t eaten

a thing in two days," she said.

Once the priest had shut his prayer book between his gloved hands, people drifted away in pairs and groups. The men would come later to lower the casket into the grave. I didn't let go of Ryan's arm until we reached the car.

"Are you sure you should drive?" I said.

Ryan shook his head. "I'm fine."

We climbed into the car and Sandy patted Ryan's arm.

"Maybe we should skip the gathering, take him home," I said.

"No, he wants to be there," she said. "He should be there."

All of the mourners gathered at the home Brenda and Ryan's father had purchased the year before, a house in a development so new that mounds of dirt instead of grass rose from between the cement driveways. Cars lined the cul-de-sac. On neighboring lots, identical houses stood in various stages of construction and Brenda's home appeared at the end of the street like the finished product in a chart of assembly steps. Despite the brass lamp and sunburst windows, it looked plain. An enormous garage door made the house seem wider than it was.

The three of us stood awkwardly in Brenda's dining room beside a spread of rolled lunchmeat and cheese, two boxes of white zinfandel and paper plates. Ryan bumped his head on one of the polished loops of a chandelier. The walls were painted a deep blue, thick, floral curtains shrouded the windows, and ceramic dogs

and painted dolls lined the mantles and shelves, making the room seem too small and too precious for the crowd of mourners.

“Let’s get some food into this one before he passes out again,” Sandy said as she lined a slice of white bread with ham and mayonnaise. Ryan filled a plastic cup with wine. We sat together around a corner of the coffee table, chewed our sandwiches and watched two little girls in velvet dresses stare wistfully at one of the china dolls on the mantle, their hands poised in the air. Ryan set his plate on the end table, his sandwich nearly untouched, and maneuvered through the crowd with his empty cup.

Sandy leaned toward me conspiratorially. “He died in this house, you know.” I stopped chewing. “Not in this room, in the den. Laying back in his recliner. Had a heart attack with a beer in his hand. Not a bad way to go, I suppose.”

“Really?” I said, looking around as if I expected to see him among the mourners.

“I’ll give it to Brenda,” Sandy said. “She called me first because of Ryan. It was decent. She was real calm, though.”

I realized I’d drained my plastic cup of wine. My stomach felt warm and my muscles seemed to vibrate. I attributed it to an empty stomach. “When was the last time you saw him?”

Sandy looked down at her plate. “Can’t quite remember, but I was thinking about it. With Ryan gone, it wasn’t like I ever really meant to see him. Must have

been that time at the Krogers, right near Thanksgiving. You know we weren't really moving in the same circles anymore."

"What about Ryan?" I said.

"He did double duty on holidays, come over to see me and my sister's kids and then head to his dad's place. It was probably Christmas last time they spoke." She paused, rubbing her hand against the arm of the chair. "He'll always be mad at me about the divorce, but he never saw enough of that man to know what I know. He cared about nothing until he was mad, and then he was in your face or worse."

I nodded. "I don't think I could live like that."

Sandy put her plate down on an end table and leaned closer to me. "You're quiet," she said, "but you've got a lot more sense than the other girls he's brought home.."

I smiled at her. Feeling the warmth of wine in my stomach and seeing Ryan across the room, for a moment I thought that this was what I wanted, to be the sensible girl, the one he could rely on.

One of the little girls must have reached for a doll too quickly and sent it to the floor, smashing its face on the brick stoop in front of the fireplace. A woman fiercely snatched the girl's wrist and she started to cry. Brenda swayed into the room and, leaning on the mantle for support, stared at the mosaic of shards. Then she waved her hand, patted the little girl's head a bit too fiercely and stumbled toward Sandy.

“How’s your boy doing? Thought we were going to lose him there for a minute.”

Sandy nodded. “He’s better.”

“He’s not going to lose it, is he?” Brenda’s voice dipped sarcastically.

Sandy shook her head.

“No one to bail him out anymore.”

Sandy looked up at her. “We don’t really need this here.”

“You know what I think?” Brenda said. “Your kid caused an awful lot of trouble to a man with a bad heart.”

Sandy pursed her lips. “A man who ate whatever he felt like when I knew him, no matter what the doctors said.”

Brenda shook her head furiously. “He was too busy to deal with police and lawyers and court dates.”

“Too busy for anything, really,” Sandy said.

Brenda must have seen my mouth open, as if I’d started to speak and found I had nothing to say. She pointed at me. “That kid beat up another boy so bad he put him in the hospital, beat his head into the ground, nearly killed him. And who paid for the lawyer? Who got him off with probation?”

I looked at Sandy, but she was staring down at the half-eaten sandwich in her lap. I searched the crowd and found Ryan a few feet away, sidelined by his Uncle Neil, staring at me. Almost everyone was staring at us now, or else politely avoiding

it by staring at the floor or their food. The first thought I had was that it couldn't be true, except that Sandy hadn't denied it. Ryan was too awkward, I thought. In his glasses and his suit, the image of him fighting, throwing a punch, pinning someone to the floor was comical.

Brenda wobbled in her heels as she left the room. Ryan disappeared and I heard the front door close. I stood. Sandy looked up at me and offered a tight smile.

I found Ryan in his car, his hands clamped to the steering wheel as if he were a little boy pretending to drive. It had grown dark and the only light came from the house, a spotlight at the point of the garage roof, throwing a bright circle onto the driveway. My skin bristled in the cold. I wasn't sure whether or not he would let me into the car, but I knocked on the window anyway. He reached over and unlocked the door and I climbed in beside him. For a while we just stared ahead at the dark sedan parked in front of us, our breath escaping our lips in curls like smoke. When Ryan spoke his voice was low.

"It's not something I'm proud of. It's not like I would've bragged to you about it."

"I know," I said. "I just don't know how to react."

He shifted in his seat. My fingers played with the cracked heating vent, the one he'd smashed when he'd punched the dashboard a month before.

"It was over three years ago. She wasn't even there. All she knows is what she heard," Ryan told me, his fingers squeezing the steering wheel.

“Did you do it?”

Ryan sighed. His hands fell into his lap. “Here’s my rap sheet. Underage drinking. Possession of marijuana. Assault.”

I wanted to ask him what sort of assault. The details mattered. I needed to know the place and the surroundings, draw a picture in my head, interview every witness and every bystander, before I could understand how it happened.

“Didn’t you ever do anything you weren’t proud of?” he said.

“I never hurt anyone,” I said.

“That you know of.”

“Not on purpose.”

The front door to the house opened and I could see someone silhouetted against the yellow light, watching us.

“It’s not like I meant to do it,” Ryan said.

“It doesn’t matter anyway.”

“It *does* matter.” His voice was suddenly intense. Then he turned his head and spoke to the window, his breath blooming in a cloud on the glass. “If I’m in love with you.”

My stomach seized. Once, Lindsey and I decided that love wasn’t a feeling, something that hit you all at once. Love was a choice. You knew what you were getting and you said yes or you said no.

Ryan stared at his hands, waiting for me to answer. I studied the landscape

of his face, the slope of his nose, the crook of his chin. In the dark, he looked beautiful.

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