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### Broken Reflection

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# Broken Reflection

## Fiction

“B, grab me my napkin, why don’t you,” Jim says, leaning back into the plush, bloodred chair at Spanky’s. Spanky’s is hardly a dinner date—I mean, it’s a sandwich place.

But it’s what Jim wants. And what he wants, he gets.

Still, I hesitate, thinking about telling him to just snatch it up off the ground himself. I’m not his slave. The napkin’s right in front of him.

His eyes smile, sweet and cold. They’re gray, beautiful, full of storms.

My arms suddenly get chilled; my hands are sweaty. I glance around. Spanky’s is a public place, and I catch the eye of an elderly couple seated at the table next to us.

I’m okay; I’m safe here.

“I’m waiting.” He slaps on his playful smirk that I want to smack, and then kiss.

No way will I get that napkin.

Except then, cold sweat starts gathering under my arms, pooling and dripping down my shirt. I silently curse; he can probably see the sweat stains streaking down my white blouse. My hands start getting wet and clammy and I wipe them on my skirt, but the skirt’s too short and soon the sweat’s getting onto my legs and I can’t get it off—it’s everywhere, and Jim’s going to see it, and when he does see it, what’s he going to think of me? He’ll think I’m disgusting; he won’t kiss me.

“Beatrice.” He raises his eyebrows, his voice stern like my dad’s. “What’re your thoughts coming up with this time? I know that look on your face.”

“Nothing.” I snap on a smile. Quickly, I reach down to get the napkin and fold it, put it on his plate.

I’m not going to tell Jim my real thoughts.

See, I’ve told Jim about what it’s like in the past, worrying about things like sweat stains and a number on a bathroom scale, fretting that he probably wonders about my weight, that he thinks my snorting laugh is annoying.

Thinking every day that he hates me and his lack of responses to texts are just because he's really going out with someone else, someone more beautiful than me.

Every time I tell him about my thoughts, he just rolls his eyes.

So now, even though I want to talk about my sweat stains, about how much Jim stains my brain with worry—I'm quiet.

Because Jim gets what he wants.

But maybe he shouldn't always get what he wants—and maybe I need to tell him what I want. What I need.

He senses my sweat, like he's a wild animal that can smell fear. "Beatrice," he narrows his eyes. "What's your brain making you believe?"

It's making me believe that you aren't safe, that I should be scared.

"Nothing," I say with a tight smile.

His eyes tell me that it isn't nothing—that I'm lying to myself and to him.

You need to be punished for lying, they whisper.

His eyes remind me of my favorite book in high school: *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. In it, one of the main characters is in an abusive relationship. She talks to her friend about it, about how she doesn't understand why she's placed herself in such a situation.

He tells her, "We accept the love we think we deserve."

See, I deserve what Jim does to me, because he perfectly balances justice and mercy. I deserve every comment he makes about my clothes, because with snide comments come sweet smiles. Even when he would push me further than I would like, prompting me to take off my shirt, my bra—Jim gets what he wants because no one ever touches me as tenderly as he does, and no one else hints that I'm beautiful enough to kiss. Any criticism is deserved, is meant for me to become a better girlfriend.

But still ... I'm a human being. I deserve to be treated like one, and not like his object of criticism. Not like his plaything of pleasure.

"So, B, how's the sandwich?" His eyes smile, and my stomach flips.

Shrugging, I look down at the Philly steak. I've eaten one small bite off the corner.

"It's good."

"It looks like you need some help on deciding whether it's good or not." He laughs, snatching up my sandwich.

"Wait, I—" I start. Even though I'm not eating it, I paid for that lunch.

"You should probably not finish it. I mean, look at yourself!" Jim chuckles. He's right. I do need to eat less.

I've been afraid of Jim saying something like that, which is why I didn't eat anything today. I also didn't eat because fear makes me nauseous, and the fear I'll throw up from being fat makes me almost retch. Still, my stomach rumbles.

Dad knows that I haven't been eating a lot, and he knows that I haven't been sleeping lately. He told me that I need to do something about it.

"I'll try," I told him, swallowing. "I promise."

I need to try, even if keeping a promise to take care of myself means breaking a promise to Jim, breaking an already broken relationship.

So, every day this week, I've gone through what I would say to him in front of my mirror. Every night, from 10:00 to 10:10. I couldn't do more than ten minutes; any more practicing had me sobbing as I realized that if I truly ended things, I would no longer have someone to hold me when I'm cold, no longer have someone there to listen to me cry and then tell me that it's stupid to cry—and no longer would I realize that he was right, that I just needed to reign in my thoughts, like they were a wild animal that I'd kept loose for too long.

Still, I said, to my trembling reflection, "Jim. I want to talk to you about something."

I knew him, and I knew that his response would be something like, "Beatrice, if it's about those thoughts again—"

"No, Jim," I told the mirror. "This is something more. When I first met you, you treated me like a person. You told me I was beautiful; you let me know that I was loved. But now I'm living in constant fear of the thought that you don't love me. I feel like I'm more of a thing, a pleasure, rather than a person to you. And I can't be with someone who treats me like that."

He would then reply with his eyes, the storm clouds that lied with their love. The beauty that was so believable. "Oh, Beatrice," his voice would get all croaky, then. Choked with emotion.

I think Jim took acting before we started our relationship.

"Beatrice, I don't just love you—I need you."

And that would be the point at which I would stop, would stare at my bloodshot eyes in the reflection—would watch as my chin trembled and witness the sob that broke the whole routine, and I would just stand there, sobbing in front of emotionless glass.

But with that routine, every night, I managed to believe that the mirror was more than glass. I saw Jim there—and I saw him as a reflection of me. A mirror of my desperate love.

I can't break it off, because if I do, I would be selfish. Last time I had tried ending things, he threatened that he would kill himself.

We had been at the kitchen table, and I was grasping his hands, anchoring him to the world. Stopping him from reaching across the table towards the bottle of pills.

His eyes blankly stared at the bottle, and I couldn't stop crying, couldn't tear myself away from those eyes. I nearly vomited, right there—all over his glossy glass table.

Then, he looked up at me. "I need you, B," he croaked. "I'll stay if you do."

Sobbing with relief, I just held him and nodded that of course I would, I would never leave him. Ever.

"Hell-O! Earth to Beatrice." Jim laughs. I blink and look up from my plate, just now realizing how empty it is.

He's eaten my entire sandwich—which is fine; he's probably hungrier than I am.

"Sorry." I squeeze out a chuckle.

Jim raises his eyebrows, and his eyes seem to tell me, I know that you're scared. I know what you're going to do.

My heart starts racing, and I look away, changing the subject. "How was the game last night?"

This distracts him, and he starts prattling on about football plays and blitzes—things that I'll never relate to.

Just say it. Just start speaking.

Maybe it's because he's distracted, and maybe it's because my stomach feels like it'll spill before I spill out my thoughts—maybe it's because I know that if I wait any longer, I'll stay silent.

But I start the "We Need to Talk" conversation.

"Hey, Jim." I cut him off mid-sentence, and I can tell that this already sets him off. I mean, why shouldn't I start the entire "Putting Off Jim Talk" by offending him right from the get-go?

I wipe my palms on the slick surface of the chair.

"What's up?"

"I . . ." Another wave of sweat comes back, sticky, cold, suffocating, surrounding me, making it hard for me to breathe. Oh, damn, he's looking at me. Oh, oh, oh . . .

"I . . . I think that . . ."

"What is it?" Jim narrows his eyes. "Just spit it out, already."

I want to perfectly articulate my feelings, spit back every insult he's given to me, or just pause, make him fear for what I'll say and then make fun of him for being scared—but everything I want to say is choked in my chest.

“I-I think that we need ...” I can’t even finish the sentence, because my tongue feels too thick, and so I just shut my mouth and keep staring down.

“Need what?” His words are sharp, slicing down the power of my phrases, and even though it’s a question, it’s more of a challenge for me to keep talking. Keep speaking your mind and see where you end up, he seems to snap.

The next moment is silent. The quiet feels like bricks building onto my back, breaking me until all the breath I gained is lost and now my chest starts heaving up, down, up, down, trying to shove off the bricks but they just press harder.

“Break up.” The moment I say it, relief lifts the weight off—even still, I mispronounce “break,” as “brick,” because my tongue’s still terrified.

Another silence—and then, it’s not just bricks on my back. It’s cement in my chest, closing around it, choking me. I breathe faster, trying desperately to get oxygen into my lungs. Calm down, B. Breathe in for seven counts, out for eight. One, two—

B, what’ve you done you’ve screwed everything up now you’re alone and now he’s alone and don’t you realize what you’ve just said? He’ll commit suicide now, he’ll die, all because you were selfish enough to want to be treated better.

My vision starts swimming, but I quickly swipe away any tears before they streak down my face.

Suddenly, Jim laughs. Not a nice laugh, but one of those little condescending chuckles that makes me not want to look at him. I play with the plastic utensils, bending the spoon back and forth.

It snaps in half. I’ve bent it too hard.

“Oh, Beatrice,” he says. “You’re joking, aren’t you.”

I’m far from joking—my entire world’s far from any joking manner.

Still, I laugh too, but it just sounds more like sobbing as I scream at him in my head.

Yes, Jim, I’m joking about the times you laugh when I cry. I’m joking about how you tell me that my thoughts are stupid, that my fears are fake, how you tell me that I should just “get over it,” and how you’ve treated me like an object and guilted me into staying with you so that you stay alive!

And then Jim, the devil on my shoulder, desperate for love after falling from heaven—he tells me that even though he’s laughing right now, he’s now hurting because of what I said.

I have the strongest urge to grab his shirt and yank him toward me, to kiss him hard and make my mistakes better—and then run away, never seeing him again.

His eyes seem to be storming, plotting, and I can't look at them. They're planning how he can hurt me for my thoughts, so I try to make the thoughts stop, and I distract myself by staring at the plate, my fingers shaking as they fiddle with the broken spoon.

"Beatrice." Jim's concerned voice hooks my eyes, drawing me up to stare at him. I can't look away now. Once he's got his fish, the fish will stay on the hook, because if it squirms more, it'll just impale itself.

His eyebrows are arched up, almost worried. Still, I can't believe he's feeling anything more than anger. "Beatrice, you do realize that you want to break up because of your insecurities. Your unreasonable thoughts put a filter over all my actions. Everything I do—" He reaches across the table, takes my sweaty hand. It's probably disgusting, and he probably wants to let go—but he doesn't. "Everything I do, I do because I want to help you."

My chin starts trembling, and it's like I'm staring into the bedroom mirror again, watching my blue eyes become bloodshot, staring at the sobs that disfigure my face. And I'm disgusted by it.

"How could you want to help me?" I whisper, my voice choked.

His eyes smile. How can his eyes lie like that?

Jim's telling the truth—it is all just me, all my thoughts putting a delusional filter over him.

But it isn't. All the jokes he's made about me, all the ways he's shoved down my gaze with his words, the ways he's grabbed me ...

I still can't stop looking into his eyes.

"Beatrice, remember what I said when I almost died?"

He doesn't say, "When I almost killed myself." Instead, he says, "died," like someone else was the cause for his almost-death.

This puts me over the edge, and the tears start freely flowing, and I start crying so hard that I start coughing. Couples from other tables look at me, but I don't care, because now my thoughts have taken over and Jim sees them and the sweat is now exposed, and I just want to hide, so I bury my head in my hands.

He reaches across the table, prying my fingers from my face so he can set his palm onto my cheek.

Jim's eyes, once filled with storms, now are soft, matching my mourning. But he doesn't know the real reason for why I'm crying. He thinks it's just the stupid, fear-filled thoughts.

But really, I'm mourning the loss of him if I break up—and mourning the loss of me if I stay.

“Beatrice. You are everything keeping me alive. You give me oxygen when I can’t breathe, motivation when there is none—”

“B-but,” I shove the words past the prison of my lips. “You make me s-stop breathing. You take away m-my motivation, and I-I can’t anymore.” The blub-bering is so embarrassing that Jim takes his hand away. He probably doesn’t want to be seen with me.

I don’t deserve him—I don’t understand why I would be the one keeping him alive.

But I don’t want him, I don’t need him, and I need to get up and run and leave the one person who’s shaped me, I—

Suddenly, I see him reach across the table and feel his cold hand on the back of my neck. He pulls me towards him. My insides squirm and I want to flinch away, but I lean myself into him, into our kiss, and his lips meeting against mine tell me that he loves me, that he needs me and that I’m wanted and loved, and the least thing I can do is show him the same kind of love.

My body inches closer, wanting more—but my brain is screaming for me to stop.

C’mon, remember the time he took your shirt off when you didn’t want him to, remember the time when he told you that the dress you’d spent \$200 on made you look like a slut, remember how he wants to have sex with you, even though you don’t want it. Pull away, pull away now.

Slowly, my lips fall away from his, and he cups my cheek, pressing for more—but I lean back before he can kiss me any further.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. The tears are still coming. “I’m sorry, Jim, but I’m done.” Then, I gather my purse, my jacket. I stand up, but my legs feel like they’ll collapse any minute.

“Wait—B, wait!” Jim snatches my arm, and I force myself to match his gaze.

“I’ll die if you leave,” he says, his voice now choked.

I look away from his eyes, from the reflection of desperate love.

You can’t leave him, you can’t just get up and go because he’ll go back to the pills, he’ll down the bottle tonight, and then you’ll have to speak at his funeral and it’ll be your fault, your fault, your—

But it’s not your fault. It’s his. It’s all of him.

Maybe it isn’t. You need this relationship, and so does he. Both of you are to blame.

You aren’t to blame for the abuse he’s created.

But you are to blame for dealing with it.

You have no other choice.

I have no other choice.



So I sit back down, and he grasps my hand, whispers a thank you, tells me that we'll go somewhere special tonight, that he'll get me my favorite flavor of ice cream and we'll see my favorite movie, and that he loves me, and he'll help me work through these thoughts.

I don't mention how he's the cause of most of those thoughts—I just let him kiss me.

And even though I want to pull away, his lips on mine just make me sink deeper into him.