

Weighing the Odds

The three dice land on a rooster and two fish.

Casey smirks as she collects her twenty dollars from my cousin Danny. She makes sure I'm watching as pretends to lick the bills – furtively but sensuously, as if we're not packed in a living room with half of my extended family. Most of them are too engrossed in their own conversations to notice, but Danny's eyes widen comically, as if I hadn't caught him and his last girlfriend going at it in the bathroom of Uncle Minh's wedding.

My face heats up. Anyone could've seen her do that – aunts, uncles, my *mom*. I try to mask it with a roll of my eyes, but not before a flash of hurt crosses Casey's face.

My cheeks burn, and my gaze drops to the dark screen of my phone. Casey's never been afraid of anything, much less her scrawny beanpole cousin who'd once lost an arm wrestling match with a ten-year-old. Danny is harmless, especially since the journal I'd stolen from him in high school holds a lifetime's worth of blackmail. That thought somehow doesn't slow down my heartbeat.

When I gather the courage to lift my head, Casey has already gone back to *bau cua ca* cop, with no sign that anything had happened at all. She must be winning again, if her growing pile of cash is anything to go by. On top of that, she's already charmed my cousins, who had interrogated her for only ten minutes before embracing her into their fold. Casey's even halfway to convincing Michelle to depart from her kale smoothie diet to try Casey's. Michelle's been on that eating plan for three years, since she'd gotten her yoga instructor certification. This may be the first time I've seen Michelle in a year, but it's hard to miss out on her life given her near constant Instagram updates.

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My cousins are more or less acting normal, but the rest of my family has turned into pod people. Normally, they wouldn't have looked at me twice, but Casey and I have been offered che dau at least twenty times. It would've been easier if they'd just asked me where I'd been for the past year, and *is this girl really your girlfriend because goodness, I had no idea you were gay*. Some of the excitement has died down since, but I can still see them sneaking peeks.

I settle back on the couch. Danny had offered to make room in the game for me, but it had been at least ten years since I'd last played. At ten, bau cua ca cop had seemed wildly complicated, even if all I had to do was bet on an animal, place my bets on the board, and wait to see if the dealer's dice landed on my picks. I realize now bau cua ca cop is just luck, but old habits die hard. It's just luck, and a lot of faith, which is somehow scarier.

Watching Casey win round after round gets a little boring, so I look around the living room instead. My parents haven't done too much with the place, except for a new coat of pastel blue paint that Mom's been admiring for years anyway. There are still too many chairs here – convenient for guests, but not so much when I'm trying to walk from one end of the room to another without tripping. The portrait of the Buddha still hangs right above the fireplace, along with old photographs of my great-grandparents. My parents had bought a new TV in the past year, and the kids are avidly watching the first Avengers movie, though the sound is so low I doubt they can hear anything. There's no wall between the living room and kitchen, so I can see right into the heart of the chaos – the stove overflowing with pots and pans, the oven filled to the brim with pastries.

I hadn't noticed Casey abandoning the game, but before I know it, she's sliding next to me on the couch. She smells like the expensive Chanel perfume her mom had gotten her for her birthday. I'm wearing the same spray I have for ten years – Bed, Bath, and Beyond's Japanese

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Cherry Blossom. I should have grown out of it years ago, but outgrowing things is harder than it looks.

I scoot over to make room for her. "I thought you were winning."

Casey waves the wad of cash. "Thought I would quit while I was ahead. Maybe I'll take you to a nice Chili's." When she smiles at me, I breathe out a sigh of relief. She must've forgiven the tension from earlier, and the tension in the car, and the tension from the entire last month, which had started as soon as my mom invited me home for Tet. Casey had insisted we eat out with her parents every week since then. Pam and Tim are two very harmless white people, with the perfect marriage and the perfect loving relationship with their daughter. Casey is obviously making a point, but fighting her isn't worth the energy, especially since Pam and Tim are paying for dinner.

"Yeah, Chili's will really sweep me off my feet," I say, but the sarcasm is half-hearted.

Casey wiggles her eyebrows. "Are you telling me their dinner for two options aren't a turn-on? What'll it take? Olive Garden? Applebee's?"

In spite of myself, the corners of my mouth twitch upwards. "Taco Bell, maybe."

"Cantina?"

"You really know how to woo a girl."

"What would we without fake lime flavoring and shitty tequila?" Casey carefully flips through the bills, counting them. "I'm estimating that we can order a grand total of four margs?"

I snort. "Set for life, then."

Casey flashes me a smile, but it suddenly falters. I look over my shoulder to see what caught her attention, and my stomach drops.

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Mom is shuffling back into the kitchen now, holding a tray of eggrolls. She steadfastly avoids looking over to the living room, but I can't keep my eyes off of her. As soon as she sets her tray down, she inspects the plates of banh tet with disapproval. I can hear her all the way from here. She should've made them herself, should've known better than to trust a place that's so popular with white people. In another world, Casey and Mom would've liked each other.

It's weird, really, how time works. Mom looks exactly the same as she did two years ago. Same faded jeans that never fit right. They always made her seem shorter than she already is. Same statement necklace that stuck out against her plain sweaters. She's wearing the one I bought her in the Macy's Thanksgiving sale after getting my first paycheck from the tutoring place where I'd worked, the last Black Friday we'd spent together. It used to be such a thing, Dad waking up at three in the morning to catch the Best Buy sales, Mom and I scrounging the outlets for deals.

Casey places her hand over mine, and I let her. She whispers, "Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Your mom – "

"I'm fine." I can't decide who I'm trying to convince.

Casey stares at me for another second, and I can tell she's getting ready to argue, but in the end, she says, "Your family seems nice."

I pick at a loose thread at the bottom of my sweater. "Are they?" I say with deliberate ambiguity.

"Danny's been telling me about his comic book collection."

"Cool."

"Did you know he's cosplaying Wolverine at a con this weekend?"

The last time he'd tried that for senior theme day, he'd forced me to help make the origami claws. It had taken us five hours. He must have upgraded since then. "That's nice."

"He said you used to collect comic books too."

"X-Men," I say. I'd always liked the idea of special powers woven into my DNA. Emma Frost was my personal favorite, the evil White Queen of the Hellfire Club who eventually defects to the good guys, sort of. Everyone loves a good redemption arc. I'd left all those issues and books at home after high school. They had seemed too unwieldy at a time when I wanted to leave everything behind. Last semester, in a fit of stress, I'd ended up pirating my old comics onto a portable hard drive anyway.

Casey frowns. "You never told me about that."

"You never asked."

"We saw that last movie together, the really confusing one with the dude who wanted to kill everyone – "

"Apocalypse."

"Right. You never said anything."

I shrug again. "Why does it matter?"

"Because I had to find out from your cousin, who I didn't even know existed before today."

"I'm glad you two met, then."

Casey huffs out a frustrated breath. "Is that really all you're going to say?"

"What do you want me to say?" I can't help but feel a rush of satisfaction when Casey presses her lips into a thin line. For once, she's the one tip-toeing. After two years of second-

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guessing myself, trying to figure out some rhyme or reason to her moods, our roles have reversed.

Last month, Casey had laughed when I showed her the emailed invitation from my mom, but went abruptly silent when I admitted I wanted to come. Casey spent that entire day at the 24-hour coffeeshop that makes the best vanilla lattes in town. God knows why she even bothered. She always orders black coffee anyway. I had watched *The Office* for hours, waiting. She finally came back around midnight, armed with articles on cutting off manipulative relationships. I ignored them when she wordlessly set them down on the kitchen table, but hadn't been able to avoid the temptation after she went to bed. I only caught a glimpse before I shoved them in the trash, heart racing. Such ugly words – *emotionally abusive, toxic*. I still wear Mom's Buddha necklace, for God's sake.

In my place, Casey would've confronted Mom by now, would've made a scene as soon as she walked through our front doors. In my place, she wouldn't crawl back to this at all. That's all too clear.

"I just want you to be okay," Casey says.

I stare down at my hands. "It's not that easy."

"Then what did you come here for?"

I shake my head.

Casey sighs. "I can talk to her if you want –"

"No," I hiss.

"Then *do* something."

"It's not that fucking easy."

"Why not? She fucked you over, and she's right there."

I jerk myself backwards. “Will you stop it? You just don’t get it.”

Casey throws her hands up in surrender. “Fine, I don’t get it. You win. So I’m going to go back to the game, since you obviously don’t want my advice.”

I open my mouth to speak – to say what, I don’t know – but Casey has already left. The circle has grown in the past fifteen minutes, but Casey still manages to slip in beside Danny, who beams when she places a hand on his shoulder. She flips her blonde hair and whispers something in his ear, and he blushes hard. He looks at her like she hung the moon, and she doesn’t even notice. If that’s anything like the way I look at her at all, no wonder I was screwed the moment I met her.

After another five minutes, I finally will myself to go. I walk out of the room, grabbing a bottle of Heineken on my way. Casey doesn’t look up once.

I’m rolling one of Casey’s cigarettes over and over in my hand when I see Mom slowly making her way over from the back door. Casey had left her pack of Marlboros in the pocket my denim jacket – deliberately or accidentally, I don’t know. The smoking used to annoy me. Now, the annoyance just makes me tired. The beer lies at my feet, unopened. I need a drink, but the official beer of deadbeat Vietnamese husbands seems like an unwise choice.

“Don’t tell me you’ve started smoking too,” Mom says in Vietnamese. She leans against the metal frame of the swing set next to me, crossing her arms over her chest. I’ve got two inches on her, but she towers over me when I’m sitting down like this. She towers over me even when we’re standing, if we’re being honest. The twist of disapproval on her mouth brings back memories of late nights spent poring over my Calculus textbook until my head swam with

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numbers, hours spent at the piano until my fingers could play concertos from muscle memory.
It's almost comforting.

"Of course not," I say in English. I let the cigarette slip from my hands, and press it against the damp ground with my shoe. I'm hit with the urge to dump the rest of them out too, just to see what Casey would say.

"It's not yours?" Mom asks.

"It's Casey's."

Mom's frown deepens, but she screws her face into a neutral expression just as quickly.
"I met your friend."

I kick off against the ground, but I rise only two feet before my feet drag against the dirt, slowing me to a halt. The entire swing set threatens to collapse if I go any higher. Why my parents refuse to take away the swing set, especially during Dad's lawn beautification phase, is a miracle. In spite of myself, I can't help but wonder what my Mom thinks of Casey, with her nose stud and plaid skirt and Converse. The first time I'd heard her argue with the TA in our Survey of Art History Class, I'd thought her effortlessly attractive. I hadn't even known there was enough to Hellenistic art for people to argue over.

"I think Danny likes her," Mom continues.

"Danny just likes boobs."

Mom purses her lips. "Don't be crude."

"What else am I supposed to be when you come out here to tell me that my cousin has a crush on my girlfriend?"

Mom flinches, and for once, she looks just as small as her four feet eleven inches. "I didn't come to tell you that."

I snort. “Then why go through all the trouble when you obviously don’t want to see me?”

“That’s not true.”

“In case I’m the only one who’s noticed, you haven’t said a word to me all day.”

Mom’s eyes flash with repressed annoyance. “You try talking to your daughter after not seeing her for a year, see how easy it is.”

“And whose fault is that?”

Mom exhales slowly, but she comes to sit on the swing next to me. The swings groan ominously with a noise straight out of a horror movie, but they somehow stay standing. With her neatly pressed sweater and no-nonsense bun, Mom looks entirely out of place on the hot pink swing set, an artifact of childhood whimsy. “I didn’t come out here to fight,” she says.

I raise my eyebrows wordlessly. It’s Casey’s move, and Mom and I must be more similar than I thought, because it actually works. “Believe it or not, we really did miss you,” Mom says.

“Then where’s Dad?” I ask, in Vietnamese this time.

“He’s on a business trip.”

“On Tet?”

Han’s lips press into a line. “Your father works very hard.” Dad had managed to stop working hard every other year, even during the recession when we lived in constant fear that his pipeline company would lay him off. No matter what America did to us, the new year was sacred. My parents had picked up the job of hosting our family potlucks before I was even born, and they haven’t relinquished that responsibility since. It’s the one time of year our family is willing to ignore their petty family drama. Uncle Hung’s three ex-wives are even cordial to each other.

I refuse to look at her, and Mom sighs again. When I sneak a peek at her, her hand is clenched so hard around the rusty metal chain that her knuckles are white. “He just needs time.”

“It’s been a year.”

“He raised you for eighteen before that. He thought he knew everything about you.”

Something pricks at the corners of my eyes, and when I hastily wipe at them, I realize they’re wet. “I’m not something to be ashamed of, you know.” My voice trembles.

Mom jerks her head in what might be a nod. After a moment of hesitation, she reaches into her pocket to pull out a red envelope decorated with ornate lanterns and shiny Chinese script. “You missed your li xi.”

I shake my head. “I’m not a kid anymore. I don’t need your money.”

“You’re not a kid, but you’re still my daughter.”

My throat goes tight. I wait for her to snatch it away, to laugh it off as a joke, but her hands remain steady. After another second, I carefully take the envelope. The paper feels heavy against my fingers. It’s still warm.

“What are you waiting for? Open it.”

I’d always preferred to wait, to count all my money at the end of the day. It always annoyed Mom, who wanted me to thank the adults one by one. But it had seemed safer that way. Less chances for me to let any bills slip through my fingers. It had seemed too easy for money to disappear.

I fumble with the flap, but finally manage to tear it open. My jaw drops when I see the \$5,000 check.

Before I can think it through, I shove it back at her. “I don’t need your charity.”

I try to snatch my hands away, but Mom wraps her hand around mine, curls my fingers back around the check. Her eyes soften. “Your father wanted you to have this.”

“Because he couldn’t bring himself to come home?” I say bitterly. My head spins. I’d been struggling to pay off rent for next month, and this could easily cover the next year.

Mom shakes her head. “It’s not charity. I know you want to be a teacher – “

“You can’t talk me out of it.”

“I wasn’t going to.” Mom breathes in deeply. “If you’re dead set on being a teacher, you shouldn’t start off with loans. That’s no way to start a life with someone.”

I glance at our back door, so quickly I expect Mom to miss it, but her gaze follows mine.

“When I left, she was waiting for you,” Mom says softly. Of course she had noticed our argument. “Do you love her?”

It’s so simple like that. *I love her, I love her not.* I gauge my words carefully. “I don’t like her very much sometimes. We don’t understand each other.”

Mom smiles wryly. “You don’t like me very much either.”

I nearly protest on instinct, but decide against it.

“You still came home,” Mom continues.

“That doesn’t have anything to do with whether I like you or not.”

“No,” Mom agrees, “You’re just family.”

I’m still clutching the envelope to my chest when she leaves. It still burns through the wool of my sweater, but the warmth comforts more than hurts. When she disappears inside the house, I finally kick off as hard as I can. My boots scrape a rock buried in the dirt, but it’s not enough to stop my momentum. Up, up, up, into the cloudy sky. At the peak of my swing, I jump.

When I come back inside, Casey's waiting by the plate of banh dau xanh in the empty dining room. She fiddles with one of the clear wrappers, but her head perks up when she sees me. Her smile is relieved.

"I saw you outside with your mom," Casey says breathlessly, pulling me into a hug. She smells of banh tet and the extra soy sauce she must've added. That's all our kitchen smells like these days, and I sometimes joke that I'm no longer Casey's favorite Asian export.

"Yeah, we were..." The weight of the envelope is heavy in my pocket, but now is not the time. "We were talking."

Casey peers intently at me to check for signs of mental scarring or repressed trauma. "Are you good?" she asks.

"I am," I say truthfully. Before Casey can ask again, to make really, really sure, I say, "I'm glad I came."

This time, when Casey looks at me, there's no unasked question behind it. She pulls me into another hug, and for the first time that day, her touch feels genuine. "Good," she breathes.

When she finally pulls away, I say, "Are my cousins still playing bau cua ca cop? Wanna see if they have room for two more?"

Casey makes a face. "I think Danny has a crush on me."

I laugh. "I think he does."

After we join the circle, Danny relinquishes dealing duties so I can roll the dice, because *you never hang out with us, who the hell are you and what have you done to angsty little Mai Pham?* I shake the bowl as hard as she can, careful to keep the lid clamped over the top. The dice beat against the sides of the bowl, the sound louder than I remember. To my right, Casey is

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waiting with baited breath. She bet everything on crab, and as much as I want her to win, there's nothing much she can do.