**Mixed Messages**

Ellie cracked her knuckles so often they swelled, and her wedding ring refused to slip off - a particular tragedy because she wasn't married anymore. Not by divorce, but by disaster, although the end result was exactly the same.

She inspected her pink fingers over the bathroom sink and realized the water and soap weren't helping. In fact she might have been imagining it, but she felt like her fingers were actually absorbing the water. Tender balloons tethered to her palms. When she pressed them against one another, each turned white momentarily until the blood seeped back in.

"They can cut the ring off and weld it back together. If you want to hang onto it." Her brother had tried to dislodge the jewelry for nearly an hour and refused to pull any harder. Ugly memories of Ellie insisting he yank out a snarled baby tooth haunted him.

"It won't ever look the same. I'll know it's been cut," she said.

"Want me to buy you a new one?" It was a silly proposition considering her late husband's life insurance had officially kicked her across the line from middle to upper class while he and his wife kept their financial heads barely above water. "We'll pretend it's the original," he offered. "You used to pretend I was a wizard."

"You used to pretend I was a urinal, and you peed on me," she scolded.

"I was six and I hated you because you were four and gorgeous. I looked like a bundle of tan branches bound together with twine. Mom and Dad loved you more," he challenged. Saying the word *love* tasted like chalk considering recent developments.

"They did." Ellie had learned in the past two weeks to stop lying. The last words she'd said to her husband were lies, and she'd resigned herself to the fact that she would never forgive herself. Never forget.

"Oil? Butter? I'll Google." Wade's own fingers, capped with nails chewed down to the cusps, tapped away at his iPhone.

"You need to drive home tomorrow. Nothing's changing here." She tried to hide the pillow and blanket on the sofa. It felt right to shrink her world down to one or two rooms. Selfish to use the entire house. Her brother didn't know it, but she'd already queued all the movies on being a widow to educate herself at twenty-four what to do next. She was as prepared as could be expected.

"No, you need me here." Wade moved to the kitchen and frowned when she didn't follow.

"Toast and tea, please," she called.

"This isn't room service. You have to come in." He knew the kitchen was his deceased brother-in-law's signature room. That it was a dangerous place for Ellie to venture, but he was hell-bent on making himself useful to her.

"I insist you come in here. You're being afraid."

"Go home!" she hollered and suddenly they were six and four again.

"I don't want to," he sighed. The copper tea kettle shivering on the stovetop was their grandmother's, a remnant of another lost soul in their family and suddenly the room felt like a graveyard. Egg shells cracked and emptied. Toast shards burned in odd dots along the grill.

Wade couldn't go home even if he wanted to. Something had died there, too, but he didn't have the heart to share that with Ellie just yet. It might fracture her into more pieces than she'd already splintered into.

Ellie stood in the doorway holding the frame like an exercise bar. Leaning in a few inches until her shoulders and her heart started to buckle and then pulling herself back out.

"I can't feel normal anymore." Her long blonde hair had been braided over one shoulder for a week. "It doesn't hurt. It aches. Slow and steady. I want an alien attack, or a blizzard, to distract me." She looked hopefully to the window but still refused to enter the kitchen.

"It's June, Ellie. Not happening."

"Aliens don't discriminate against the summer months," she battled. The most fight she'd offered in thirteen days.

"It's not happening," Wade repeated like a chant. He felt cruel and kind simultaneously.

"Jay dying wasn't supposed to happen." Ellie knew how to shut down a conversation with her tragedy. She'd done it twice with her nosy neighbor Kathy and once with the postman. A parlor trick really.

She retreated to the sofa, blanket cocooning her, and she was asleep before he could respond. The grief had gifted her with superpowers. She could will herself to sleep in an instant and not taste a thing she ate which enabled her to suddenly consume all of the *good for her* foods that Jay had constantly championed. A snarky voice in her head made light of the situation. *A lot of good it did him*, it snickered, *to eat healthy* when a coked-up truck driver drank Drano and then plowed into his very energy efficient car. She'd told him that night, as he headed out the door, that she would eat the dinner he'd made for her when Ellie fully intended to swing by the Chinese takeout around the corner and then duplicitously disposal his meal of whole wheat pasta and some sort of berry that wasn't a berry at all but a grain.

"Ellie, wake up," Wade said in a disingenuous tone.

She deserved the rest, and he enjoyed not having to *do* anything. He was lying to Ellie in letting her believe he'd raced to her side to be the supportive older brother. Instead, hours before he received her text, words jumbled as if she was screaming at him through the phone, he'd told his own wife that he was leaving her. For good.

"I won't see you tomorrow," he'd said callously. "I'm not cut out for this."

His wife had locked herself in the bedroom, and like a lifesaver tossed to him, Ellie had needed him at precisely that moment. He escaped to Connecticut.

"Go home," Ellie piped up from under the blanket. Awake for a moment. "I don't want to see you tomorrow." And then she sobbed into the afghan and shook. "Wade, I'm not cut out for this."

They weren't exactly those words but he heard them like a curse. He wondered somehow in the karmic world if taking love away would cost, and cost perversely. He might as well have been hit by the truck and then his wife would have been vindicated and Ellie and her husband restored.

"Let me stay a few more days to take care of you." He knew his parents would arrive soon, flying in from India after the first wave of sorrow had passed. They may have loved her more, but they loved themselves most.

"Only if you apologize to Megan," Ellie blinked from beneath the tent. Her breathing had slowed and Wade was worried for a moment she could stop it. Disappear. "Call your wife and tell her you're sorry you've been away for so long."

He nodded and returned to the kitchen to clean the counters and tidy up the egg shells and crumbs. He made mountains of toast and carefully coated them with layers of honey and cinnamon the way she liked it. Ellie's words formed a rhythm in his head, and he cleaned to that rhythm. He breathed to that rhythm until it was all he could hear.

When he returned to the sofa, she invited him into her blanket cave and the two sat in the dark listening to the dishwasher sway water back and forth. The cars pulsed behind them on the adjacent highway. Wade's phone vibrated against his chest in his shirt pocket, and Ellie rested her hand against it.

"You can stay but only if you tell Megan you're sorry. You'll be home soon."

He answered the phone.

"I'm sorry. I'm coming home soon," he repeated, as his sister had instructed. There was no noise on the other side but instead a sigh, as if all the sadness had been expelled from her body and Wade felt a wave of relief too. His decision had been hasty, because he thought he knew what exhaustion was until he saw it in Ellie's face.

"Better," Ellie remarked once he'd hung up, nibbling at the toast. "Tomorrow we'll go into the kitchen," she promised. "I'll make progress."

Wade nodded and smiled, amazed at how the world could be righted so easily at random, just as easily as it could be turned upside-down. He slept well for the first time in weeks and Ellie took a turn sitting vigil over her brother. Her trick to sleeping in the day was to stay up at nights and read, read anything. Books, stories, labels on household cleaners.

And texts.

Her favorite were texts from a woman thousands of miles away begging her husband not to disappear. And Ellie was happy to help Wade find his way back to her, even if he didn't know how.

**Bio:** Sarah Clayville’s fiction and poetry have appeared in *The Threepenny Review, StoryChord, Literary Orphans*, and a number of other journals. She is a high school teacher and freelance editor as well as a poetry and nonfiction editor for the online journal, *Mothers Always Write*. For more of her work, visit her website, SarahSaysWrite.com.

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