

21 - The Zoo

One by one the plates made touchdown on the table as their heavenly aromas followed. Like in every scenario, Emily was the last in the rotation, but it was wonderful to finally have something to eat! Though, if she forgot, the smiley face illustrated with strawberries, bananas and blueberries topped with a whipped cream smile was more than enough as a reminder for which menu her meal came from.

“Kids menu or not, I still think you made out like a bandit, Emily,” Mary commented, and Emily who was briefly caught in a fluffy, syrupy trance, reluctantly agreed. Maybe the belittlement was almost worth it, considering the tradeoff...

Frank, Mary, and Joyce’s meals all looked equally as delicious in their own right. Frank tried to look away when his wife put ketchup on her sandwich though... You’d think he was watching her kick a puppy.

“Oh will you stop?” She gave him a playful hit on the shoulder.

“Ow! Ow!” feigning his injury, he pleaded with his eyes. “Don’t you see what she does to me?” Even Mary found his reaction funny, and everyone seemed to be enjoying Emily’s laugh.

Emily was almost ready to ask for a real knife, rather than a butter one, but it was a pleasant surprise to see that it sliced through the fluffy cakes like a machete. She nearly squealed as soon as she lifted her knife out of the stack, seeing it’d struck oil, as the blade was covered in melted chocolate.

“Hey,” Joyce warned. “Don’t forget to leave me a bite.”

Emily simply nodded her head as she sectioned off her first bite. Everyone was equally as content with their own meal.

“How is it, hon?” Frank asked in between bites.

“Fine, thank you very much!” Acting all prim and proper, it was obvious Mary had a sneaking suspicion of what was to come.

“That’s good. But you know, it’d be even better if you’d-” He paused as with his hands occupied with his burger, he was helpless to watch as one of his fries was stolen by his wife. “I’m married to a monster...”

Both Joyce and Emily struggled not to choke on their food as they laughed, pleased to be treated both to a dinner and a show. And as much as Emily resented the food illustration, she still swabbed some of the fruit and whipped cream with a finger...

“Are your mom and dad always like this?” She kept sneaking glances back to them, hoping not to miss the next humorous event.

“On some level, yeah, but I think ever since my brother and I left the house, they’ve only had more time to drive each other insane.”

Ahem In an obvious noise, Mary cleared her throat as she stared at Joyce with a strange sense of graveness. “What were you telling her about us?”

“...How you two are wonderful parents?”

“You may be an entrepreneur, but you’re not a liar, missy.” Maybe to her own mom, she wasn’t. It wasn’t exactly a skill Joyce took pride in, but she knew how to pull the wool over someone’s eyes. She looked at the glowing girl beside her, reasoning it as a necessary evil. “So I have a question: what does an ordinary night look like for you two?”

It was Joyce and Emily’s turn to look at each other.

“Umm...” Emily started first. “By the time I finish up work and get back, Joyce is usually up to something.” She paused to think of the next part.

Instead Joyce picked right up after her though. “And then she strolls into my office and practically pushes everything off my desk!”

“That is *not* true!” Emily spat to her. “She’s the one who drops everything to spend the rest of the night together.”

“Fine, fine, maybe I embellished it a little...” Joyce smirked right before taking a bite of her toast.

“I think Emily’s the better storyteller,” Frank admitted it like a tough, yet factual truth.

“I think so, too,” Mary solemnly agreed.

“Me three,” Emily contently spoke, giving herself a pat on the back. Then with a Cheshire grin she snickered.

“Will you three quit bullying me?” Joyce pretended to be offended, but really nothing made her happier than something like this. If it was at the expense of her imaginary reputation, then she’d give it all away tenfold if that meant Emily could finally feel comfortable. Joyce couldn’t feel the same reluctance Emily had from this morning, and she was starting to let go of her imaginary pressures.

Emily looked at her expectantly, but Joyce fired back. “Well, go on! Finish the story! Apparently I’m not so good at it...” Funnily enough, she thought of last night when Emmy was asking for her to do ‘the voices.’

“Joyce usually starts cooking something when I get back. I *try* to help here and there,” she put a lot of emphasis on the ‘try’ bit, because even then she was stretching it. “Then we probably relax on the couch?” She looked to the pouting Joyce for confirmation.

“Now you want my input?”

Disregarding her feigned annoyance, Emily simply nodded her head. Frank and Mary meanwhile gave a few chuckles as the scene unfolded. Joyce dropped the act as she picked up where her partner left off.

“That’s pretty much it, really. I mean, we’ve had plenty of nights where we go out and do something; milkshakes, a movie, a restaurant, stuff like that. We’ll have to do some more stuff down the line, though!”

“That’s good to hear,” Marry nodded her head. “But I don’t think you ever told me, has business ever kept you away for a whole night? I know you used to have a dinner every now and then. Maybe a party or social thing?”

Much more plainly, Joyce nodded her head. “Thankfully nothing’s come up lately, but I can’t imagine that’s going to last forever. I’m pretty sure Sheila already has a few things in the calendar already.”

Business dinners? Now that Emily thought about it, it sort of made sense for a CEO to be attending those. Had she been doing those at all since she came? She wasn’t getting in the way, was she? She looked at Joyce with concern, trying to decipher what she might be thinking... And that was the worst part: trying to figure out Joyce’s thoughts. Emily knew Joyce would never tell

her something if she was going to feel bad about it, and she certainly would feel bad. The last thing she wanted to be was a burden and a nuisance. She knew Joyce would never think of her as that, but that didn't mean Emily wasn't, objectively speaking...

"Well, you never know," Mary spoke with a slight tease of suspense, as she reeled in the bigger catch. "Maybe you could use one of them to show Emily off?"

Caught off guard for just a few moments, Joyce registered the idea with a small bit of apprehension. Bringing Emily to her business stuff? There were a *lot* of factors to consider, and Joyce was honestly a little scared to imagine the possible outcome.

What? What was Joyce's mom thinking?! Emily could already see it now. Standing in front of a large crowd, watching Emily's each and every step, seeing what a "commoner" acted like, and be amused as she try and assimilate among the social elite. Worst of all, when she did inevitably mess up, it would of course be at the expense of Joyce's very real reputation. Not even taking the reality into account, the thought alone was crippling enough.

"Maybe...maybe we can talk about it later," Joyce tried to laugh it off, and Emily didn't know how to react at all. "I'd honestly never thought about it, so I think we should table that one." She looked over to Emily, who seemed to be drowning yet again in her worrisome thoughts.

What snapped her out of it though was a plump stack of cake, fruit, and chocolate laced with cream entering her mouth. Blushingly, she looked over to Joyce who'd slipped the fork into her mouth.

Mumbling through the food, Emily whined, "Joyce!"

"Sorry," Joyce chuckled. "You looked like you needed it. And also," she took the fork yet again and grabbed another section. "I think you promised me my own bite?" Without waiting for an answer, Joyce popped the food into her own mouth. She couldn't handle as much as Emily, but every once and awhile it was always a pleasant taste.

"Ooh Joyce, I think you made her a little grumpy," Mary teased, which then had Emily wide-eyed as she retreated into a blush.

As quickly as it came, so did it go... Joyce sighed through her nose.

"Mary, Frank," *Or maybe it didn't?* "you guys are always so funny!" Emily didn't know why she was saying it, and knew she had no real prompt to, but for some reason she oddly just felt like

saying it anyways. Regardless of whether anyone asked her or not, she didn't feel scared to unload her thoughts for once. "You guys remind me of a young, married couple."

"Did you hear that, hon?" Frank with enthusiasm looked to Mary. "She said we're young!"

"Wrong," Mary said. The timing reminded Emily of a cartoon where a mischievous coyote might get an anvil dropped on his head. "She *thinks* we're young. Nevertheless, she knows how to get on our good side."

"I didn't mean to call you ol-"

"Wait!" Frank stopped her. The deepness of his voice made it seem like an unyielding command. "Don't say the 'o' word. It's our kryptonite!"

"Old." Mary finished for her, and in a spastic motion Frank put a hand to his chest, right where his heart was.

Frank slowly let go of his chest and looked with worry to his wife. "Are you trying to kill us?"

"Quit it with your jokes! The only reason she hasn't gone running yet is that Joyce is blocking her in the booth!"

"Mom? Dad?" Joyce interrupted their silly feud, once again unnerved by the topic. Soon after normal conversation resumed, and so did the eating.

At some point Emily ran out of coffee, and as much as she didn't want to acknowledge its usefulness, Emily with extreme reluctance drank from her glass of milk. She had half a mind to order another coffee, but she could do without the likely comment from their waitress about needing to finish her milk. The milk tasted fine, but the connotations with it were bitter. It almost felt like admitting defeat.

When Joyce took a bite from her egg, she looked up to say something to her mom, then after giving it a few moments she looked back down to her food for another bite. But wait. Something, something wasn't right? Nothing seemed out of place, but, something did at the same time? Awkwardly hung up on the weirdness, she took another bite and went back to the conversation.

And then it happened again. Only more so this time. Whatever it was, it felt more glaring this time, and still she was struggling to find out what it was. Then something seemingly insignificant tipped her off.

Wasn't there less bacon on her plate now?

With only one logical culprit, she slowly turned her gaze to the girl running low on pancake. She could see the smallest bit of syrup on the corner of her mouth, but there was something else there too... Small, tiny bits of something. Licking her thumb, Joyce swabbed the corner of her mouth before Emily could protest and gave the sample a taste. Syrup, sure enough. And...bacon.

“Something you want to own up to, buster?”

“...No idea what you're talking about.”

“Oh? So the bacon disappeared on its own, then?”

Damn! How did she know? Emily made extra sure to be sneaky about it! Well, as sneaky as she could be... Mary and Frank probably saw the whole thing unfold. Though, of course no good captain wouldn't go down with their ship, so Emily sought to see it till the end.

“...Yes?”

“Alright then,” Joyce gave a small breath. Then, before Emily could react, an innocent blueberry was taken from its home on her pancakes, and was thrown into the merciless torture chamber of Joyce's mouth, shredding it into pieces with her teeth.

“What was that for?”

“What do you mean?” Joyce laughed. “You started it!”

“I did no such thing!” Even if it was a bad lie, Emily still wouldn't let it die. “He had a home, you know?”

“The blueberry?”

“Who else?”

Their small charade paused when they could hear Frank and Mary cracking up. Emily wasn't feeling so playful anymore with an audience, and suddenly realized that she may have been getting too caught up in the moment. That was starting to feel dangerously close to the 'Emmy' side...

The meal did eventually come to an end, and everyone by then was more than satisfied.

“Everyone have a good meal?” Abigail, their waitress, had returned.

“Absolutely delicious!” Frank complimented. “You’re a great cook!”

The waitress laughed over the joke as she was collecting plates. She leaned closer to Mary. “You know, I hope at least one of you keeps this guy on a leash!”

“Oh trust me, I try,” Mary sighed as if it were her lifelong struggle. And maybe to a certain degree it was.

“Course, at least you’ve got your daughter to give a hand,” she made a notion towards Joyce.

“Years of practice!” Joyce laughed.

The waitress continued to make small talk as she built up a stack of cleared plates. “So what’s the plan for you guys today?”

“Well once we finish things up here I think we’re gonna go check out the zoo. My parents are visiting and they’ve never been.”

“Ohh, that sounds like fun. I’m sure your daughter’s looking forward to it, too?” Unfortunately, it was too obvious who she was referring to.

Joyce briefly looked to Emily, who partly hiding behind Joyce’s shoulder clearly looked mortified. Frank and Mary seemed a bit caught off guard too. Everyone in their own mind was realizing just how far they let this woman’s understanding spiral out of control. Though, Joyce’d be lying if she said the comment didn’t tickle her in the slightest...even if right now wasn’t an appropriate moment for such words.

“...Yes, actually.” Emily had to nearly bite down on her tongue. She gripped dearly onto the past words of comfort, trying her best to understand it was in some twisted way better than calling her out on her very dumb mistake. “She’s excited to see the sea otters.”

“Well, I won’t keep you guys waiting. I’ll be right back with the bill.” She walked away, and Emily did not look pleased, and Joyce could feel the frustration radiating from her.

“You’re not mad at me, right?”

Emily sighed, and like a deflating balloon the bulk of the tension drained from her as well. “No. I just hate being called a kid, that’s all.”

“Don’t forget you promised to make it up to her?” Frank added.

“Yes. Yes I did.” Even if it looked childish, Joyce patted her on the head.

Joyce politely stole the rights to the bill, as she handled everything accordingly. Her parents tried to at least chip in, but for once Joyce wasn’t budging. Still, Emily admired how they tried to fight tooth and nail. It somewhat reminded her of herself. Nowadays, Joyce need only give her a look, and like a well-trained pet Emily would cease her attempts.

“Alright, let’s get this show on the road,” Joyce slipped out of the booth and waited for Emily. When everyone stood, you wouldn’t think anything of it; just a simple action from a simple person with nothing special about it. Emily, however, couldn’t help but feel critical of herself once her own footwear hit the ground. Unlike everyone else, her sandals had a tough material to them, which is why they made the clashing noises they did once the wooden blocks to her heels hit the tiled floor. Even when she was out of diapers she couldn’t help but make countless, loud noises.

Mary and Frank were leading the way, but Mary turned her head back to Joyce and somewhat Emily. “Were you being serious about the otter bit?”

“Kind of? Emily’s never seen one in real life before.”

“That should be fun then, huh?” Mary looked to Emily, who was finding it harder and harder to look forward to this outing. She didn’t know whether she was being seen as a kid or an adult. No matter how Mary acted, Emily didn’t feel like she could sense a definitive answer.

The receptionist bid them farewell, and the quartet were soon back in the car and pulling out. The drive there was filled with plenty of small talk, and even though Emily tried her best, she obviously started to doze off once she exceeded her 15-minute limit.

“Maybe you’re the one that’s tired, hon?” Mary chuckled as she looked over. With a natural rhythm stuck on repeat, Emily’s eyelids would slowly drift downwards, then suddenly rise with a start, but once again find themselves closing over and over again.

“I’m fine, really.” Emily blinked, desperately trying to hold onto her alert and awakened consciousness. And as Mary watched her, she more and more looked like the kettle to Emily’s pot. It felt a bit rude to mentally check out on the people who might actually *have* a reason to fall asleep, unlike herself. Nevertheless, conversation felt exactly like what she needed right now. Anything that stimulated the senses was enough to keep her alert.

Joyce knew exactly why she wouldn’t go to sleep, because, of course, the thought of how she’d look in front of her parents worried her. She wanted to speak up, but something told her Emily wouldn’t appreciate the extra attention... She glanced at the console GPS and could see they had a decent drive ahead of themselves. A single look at the rearview told her Emily was certainly putting herself through the ringer.

Joyce simply sighed the smallest bit. *How are you gonna have fun if you won’t cut yourself some slack?* And suddenly Joyce was starting to feel a little selfish, and of course she decided to indulge herself.

“Hey mom, so how’s the wedding plans for Jack and Hannah going?” Even the greatest plans required the greatest sacrifices. She may as well have just opened Pandora’s Box, all for Emily’s sake.

“Oh, that’s right, I forgot!” The topic certainly seemed to excite her, and the beast had been stirred awake. “You wouldn’t believe the flower arrangements they’re using for the table centerpieces, they look beautiful! Oh! And the location! You’ve never seen it, have you? There’s going to be so many people. The band they’re looking at seems like a real good one, too. Did I mention the theme they’re going for? It’s...” And on and on she went. Of course, that was the intention. While Mary focused her attention on Joyce, it left Emily with none, and once again she was left to her own devices, which is exactly what had her fading away in the first place.

Emily knew it wasn’t intentional (though it was), but she wished Joyce wasn’t hogging all the spotlight. At this rate she really was going to fall asleep! But she wouldn’t. No, of course not. Not in a million years. She needed to be active and alert.

Though, being outside of the city didn’t really afford her much scenery to marvel at. Trees, trees, and trees. At least in the city the buildings knew how to change things up a little. Brick, marble, cement, stone? You’d think mother nature would take some notes. The blur of bark and leaves passing by the window played like a track on repeat. A stroke of brilliance hit her however. Maybe if she closed her eyes for a few seconds, something would change when she opened them? Making an obviously level-headed decision, her vision went black for a few moments. Or, maybe for a few minutes... Regardless, when she opened them, the outside looked no different.

Damn.

Her brilliant idea that she thought was certain to work had failed her, and she knew it probably wouldn't work if she tried again. That being said, the one part she didn't mind was the eye closing bit... But it wasn't sleeping. No. Sleeping was the last thing she wanted to be caught doing right now.

Emily proceeded to "rest her eyes," while Joyce entertained her mom by throwing in passive comments, the kind that was just enough to indicate there was a listener. It wasn't even really a conversation when a single person did the talking, but either neither one noticed or cared. Mary likely the former, and Joyce certainly the latter.

There was finally a pause in Mary's spiel, as she suddenly switched tracks. "You've got her all figured out, don't you?"

"What do you mean?" Joyce jokingly feigned innocence. She glanced in the mirror to see her sound asleep. "I hardly even noticed when she dozed off?"

"You weren't kidding when you said vehicles make her go out like a light," Frank chimed in.

"Oh yeah," Joyce nodded with firm certainty. "I'm surprised she lasted for as long as she did," in a hushed laugh she finally turned her full focus back to the other two and the road. "So? What do you two think?" She gripped the steering wheel a little tighter.

"Think about what?"

"Come on..." Joyce sounded a little less confident now too, "You know what I mean."

"Joyce, hon," her dad decided to take this one. "You're our daughter, but you're your own person. The last thing you need is your parent's approval."

"I know, but..."

"I like her." Mary said simply and absolutely. "But, are you sure it's okay to talk like this? I know she's asleep, but she's not exactly in another room."

"It'll be fine. I bet she could sleep through an earthquake if she tried hard enough, and compared to how she is now, it wouldn't take much."

“Well, I can envy that,” Frank turned his head back at an awkward angle to see, oddly enough seeming impressed. “And I like her too. I mean, we both have a lot to learn about each other, considering all we’ve done is have lunch together, but she seems nice.”

It wasn’t intentional, but a small breath of relief escaped Joyce.

“Though, I guess there’s one small thing?”

“...And what’s that?”

“She seems...reserved?” Mary sounded as if she weren’t even sure herself. “She definitely strikes me as the shy type.”

It was unfortunately a glaring quality of hers right now. They had probably been thinking it from the start but were too polite to speak on it. It didn’t make Emily any less perfect to Joyce, rather, it only made her sorrowful to think her special girl was inhibited by something only time and exposure could solve. Everyone in the car that was conscious knew there was no ill intent behind the words, but rather saw it as an unfortunate observation.

“Truthfully, I think this whole visit caught her off guard. I know it did for me, at least.” Without even needing to look, the culprit in question was obviously feeling the brunt of targeted words. She softened her voice again. “Just don’t think too badly of her? She still has some nerves...” Again, Joyce felt guilty for confiding in her parents like this, secretly behind Emily’s back, but a face to face conversation always made her resolve weak...

Mary was the first to dismiss Joyce’s worries though. “Joyce, we’d never do that to her, or you. Maybe we did come a little early... I’ll take some responsibility for that.”

More like all of it, which was likely passing through Joyce’s head, and maybe even her dad’s...

Speak of the devil, he was the next to speak. “Why don’t we give them a breather, hon? We could meander for a little bit while they spend some time together?”

“What?” Joyce slightly turned her head, then back to the road. “You’re kidding, right? You guys just got here!”

“We wouldn’t mind, Joyce,” her mom agreed. “Why don’t you two take an hour together when we get there?”

Already willing to part ways just when they got here, Joyce could only remain stupefied over how unusual her mom was being right now. Never in a million years could she imagine the woman actually *giving* someone personal space. Emily didn't realize it, but she truly could move mountains...

"I appreciate it, and I'm sure Emily would too, but really, it's fine."

"We don't want to impose..."

As nicely as Joyce could possibly say it, her mom definitely was imposing, somewhat.

"You're fine!" Joyce reassured anyways. "You're not imposing, and Emily wouldn't want us split from you either. She really does want to get to know you guys better." Even if her nerves won't make it easy... On top of that, she'd probably feel even worse if she knew she was the reason why she and Joyce were alone together. "There'll be plenty of time for us to do our own thing together. For now it'll be the four of us."

"If you're sure..." Mary reluctantly conceded, while her husband equally if not more left it at that. "But do you have any pointers?"

"Pointers?"

"Her likes? Dislikes? Something to help us get started on the right foot?"

"Mom, she's not a kid." Truly it did scare her how much they managed to toe that line when Emily wasn't around. Trying to imagine how Emily might feel secondhand was terrifying enough. "We're all adults? Just please be patient. She really did want to make a good first impression."

"I know that, sweetheart, and that's why I want to try and help." Just when she was willing to keep her distance, yet again was her mother becoming emotionally involved.

"Help her by not helping," Joyce said her piece simply. "I'm already blowing this out of proportion, so forget we even talked about this, okay?" For once she hoped her mom would listen. On her watch, Joyce never could seem to jump to a clean slate. It was always unfinished business with her.

“Fine.” You’d almost think she was annoyed. The ride was silent for a few minutes longer until the tension seemed to have dissipated. In a still slightly serious tone she added, “You two look very adorable together, though.”

Joyce was as equally as firm. “Thank you.”

Of course her cheeks wouldn’t be not warm after hearing that.

“Emily? Hellooo...you in there?” A finger kept gingerly prodding her cheek. “You know, I never knew your cheeks were so squishy...” The voice sounded inquisitive and curious. “You’d never think, you know? What with you being so slim...” The poking didn’t stop, and even still half-asleep Emily knew the entire exchange was silly enough to laugh at.

“...Joyce?” Rubbing her eyes, she called out to the almost certain evil-doer.

“Bingo!” Emily could feel the cool skin press against her own, intermittent with the wavy strands of hair coming from both women. “Honestly, I can’t tell what had the bigger effect: your little food coma or the car ride itself.”

“Car...? What are you talking about?” Emily finally blinked enough to go without needing to shut them again for a decent while. Leaning through the open doorway Joyce slightly loomed over her with patches of sunlight bleeding all around her. As the sun itself, she looked strangely symbolic.

Joyce giggled as she moved her hand and Emily suddenly felt her seatbelt unstrap itself. “The zoo? Did you forget already?”

“I...no, but,” she turned her head to the other side of the car, seeing it was empty, and also there wasn’t a head in front of her in the passenger seat. As bashful as she was for not making good on her personal resolve, she didn’t want to let any potential eavesdroppers in on her shame.

“Where’s Frank and Mary?”

“They said they needed to take a lap,” Joyce chuckled. “Sitting for too long isn’t great for the joints, in my dad’s words, at least. Think you wanna go see some animals with us? Or should I tell them you have a few more z’s to catch?”

“That’s not funny,” Emily pouted, though she of course couldn’t hide her smile. The next thing on her mind she knew what was likely the answer, but Joyce somehow made it feel okay for once to act naive. “Did they see me sleeping?”

Joyce cocked a brow as she tilted her head. “I mean, I guess?” She slightly laughed over the oddity. “Why does it matter?”

“...It’s nothing.”

Her brows then slightly furrowed. “No, it is not,” Joyce excused herself into the seat as she slid Emily further in for space. “You wouldn’t be asking something like that if it wasn’t.”

“Nevermind. I’m just worrying about stuff I shouldn’t be,” Emily plainly spoke as she was already looking to get out of the car, but Joyce wasn’t budging.

“Oh no, you don’t get to drop it that easily,” Joyce guided Emily’s cheeks into her hands as they locked eyes. “Talk to me, won’t you? When has there ever been a problem that us talking couldn’t solve, or at least make better?”

Emily was quiet, and Joyce had fastly come to her own conclusion.

“It’s okay to be yourself around my parents, you know? You’re the only one making this hard on yourself.” Even after all the pep-talks they’d already had, still she couldn’t seem to get through to her. “You promised me we’d have fun today, right? Being gloomy is the same as breaking your promise, you know?” She hoped some lighthearted humor would put some pep back into her mood, and it looked like it did somewhat, at least.

“I don’t know why I can’t let it go,” Emily sounded pained and distressed. “I’ve just, I’ve never been in a situation like this before.” The words felt harder and harder to find. “Everything just feels so...so fast.”

“...Because you’re with another woman?”

“N, no, that’s not...” Emily tried to dismiss the idea, but when looking directly at Joyce, her voice trembled and her eyes became glossy. Could that really be it? No! She tried to deny it, but deep down the way her body was reacting was telling enough. It only made her feel worse to look back into her sympathetic smile.

She'd been vulnerable to Joyce so many times, and had never been engaged with someone so intimately, ever, and especially not with the same sex. Nothing in her life right now felt old, generic, or usual. Everything was fresh, new, raw, and sensitive. The last thing she wanted to do though was admit her hesitation; admit her fear and apprehensions associated with Joyce. She loved her with all her heart, but that didn't change the outward fears she held despite Joyce accepting her wholeheartedly, and for that reason she felt like scum.

"It's okay, alright?"

"No it isn't; it's being rude to you!" As hated as Emily felt, she still threw herself into Joyce. "There's nothing wrong with you, or your parents. It's just because I'm so bad at accepting this! But I want to! I do! So why?"

Yet, Joyce's voice never wavered. "You've never been in a relationship like this before, right? Didn't you say it yourself?" She stroked the girl's hair. "Emily, I'd never be mad at you for something like that. In fact, I'm surprised you've been able to handle it this well so far." If the shoe were on the other foot, Joyce would likely be in the same boat as Emily. Regardless of being a perfect match for each other, there were more factors to a relationship than just one-on-one intimacy, and now was a clear testament to that. "You have every right in the world to be scared, and I want to do everything in my power to keep you from feeling that way, but I *need* you to trust me if you want things to get better."

Joyce's acceptance and understanding was beyond relieving, but Emily knew she shouldn't expect anything less from her. "So, so you're not mad?"

"I could never be mad! Everything that's happening now is new and different for us both. I can only imagine all the different odds and ends going on inside of your head right now; inside your heart. But I don't want you to worry, because I know you love me; you've made that clear. Anything secondary to that is something I can handle, and if it's something you want me to, I can help you work through."

"...I don't deserve you."

"But I guess you're still stuck with me," Joyce snickered as she hugged Emily for just a moment. "I'm the one that doesn't deserve you."

Emily was still nestled against her. "Can you help me?"

Joyce answered her question with another. "That depends. Can you trust me?"

“You know I do,” Emily mumbled, and Joyce silently agreed.

The two exchanged looks once more. “Then try letting go today. *Really* try. And by that I mean don’t try.” Emily looked like a gear in her head had just been popped loose. Chuckling, Joyce tried to explain. “I mean that you should just go with the flow; have fun and don’t worry about your surroundings.”

That sounded a lot like her alter ego. “But isn’t that like--?” Her question was quickly silenced.

“And what’s wrong with borrowing a little from a more carefree mindset?” She smiled, knowing exactly who she was alluding to. “It won’t make you look like a baby, I promise. It’ll be a cure for all those butterflies in your stomach.” And as if on cue, a hand was suddenly tickling Emily’s stomach through the fabric of her dress. Just as she tried to push away Joyce’s other free arm was wrapped around her waist.

“Okay! Okay!” Somehow she managed to plea between her helpless giggles. “Just let me go! You win!”

“*This*, is the Emily I wanted to see today. And just so you know, my parents are practically in love with you already, so you can only do yourself a favor by enjoying yourself.” She helped her out of the car.

“Thank you, Joyce. I think I feel better now.”

“Good,” Joyce nodded approvingly. “If you were any gloomier, I would’ve had us skip the otters.”

“*You’re* the one that wants to see them, not me,” Emily giggled.

“You’re such a bad liar,” Joyce joked, sticking to her fabricated story. “I know you’re excited, so there’s no need to pretend.” Joyce happily took Emily’s hand as they strolled through the parking lot. Emily looked from side to side, seeing the few pockets of pedestrians navigate themselves from their cars to the guiding signs.

“How big is this place?” Emily kept catching glances of endless cars between the cracks of many.

“Decently sized, I think. Wanna ride on my shoulders and see?” Joyce smirked.

Emily feigned a ‘hmmf.’ “I think I like my feet on the ground, thank you very much. How are we gonna find your mom and dad?”

“My guess is they’re already waiting at the entrance.” The pair banked a left, thanks to the helpful lemur plastered to a giant, wooden arrow. “They’re probably talking about the ticket prices right now. You know how they are when it comes to money...” Joyce nearly rolled her eyes, but of course it was in good fun.

“How much are they gonna be?” At the other end of the asphalt stretch, they could see the roofed ticket booth serving as the barrier between the outside lot and all the attractions. Thankfully it was warmer here than in the city, because they left behind their jackets.

“Not sure? Not that you should be worrying about it, though,” she looked judgmentally to Emily, who kept her eyes looking forward.

Sure enough, the elderly couple were sat on a bench a decent distance away from the booth, a place that wasn’t submerged in passing people.

“All rested up?” Frank chuckled as they rose from their seat to meet the two. There was a slight pause from Emily, but with a recent reminder in the back of her head, she tried her best to laugh as well.

“Sorry about that... Maybe Joyce sorta does have a point about me and cars...”

“Well I was saying earlier how impressive that is!”

Emily only laughed.

“You think I’m kidding, but really. I’d pay anything for a power like that!” He leaned in closer with a lower voice. “Heck, not sure how you did it with this one sitting next to you...” With an obvious gesture, he pointed to his wife, who looked equally as happy to see Emily cheerful, but also annoyed that it was at the expense of being her husband’s joke.

“Would you quit it, will you? She’s gonna think we fight like cats and dogs when we’re alone!”

“We don’t?” Mary didn’t seem to appreciate that comment. He looked to Emily worriedly. “I don’t think she liked that one...”

While Emily served as Frank's middleman, Joyce became one for Mary. "Joyce, you better keep Emily away from this guy. He's always been a bad influence on newcomers to the family..."

"Instead of these two animals right out here, how about we go watch some inside?" Joyce cheekily added. Emily tried to stifle a giggle, whilst Joyce's parents gave her a look but inevitably a smirk.

By the time they got in line they caught a spot that gave them express access to the teller. A teenage girl behind a glass window was happy to receive them, speaking through the multiple holes in the barrier.

"Hi, welcome! Are you guys having a good day today?"

"It's been going well," Joyce pleasantly replied. "Could I get four tickets, please?"

"Sure thing. Just for the four of you, you said?" In her chair she spun to her left where she interacted with something they couldn't see from the other side. Absentmindedly she counted off to herself. "One, two, three...and...one! That'll be \$55, please."

Everyone but Joyce quietly minded their personal gripes about the tall order, meanwhile she produced a card without a thought. After the transaction was made the tickets were given to each and every person. Thus far the moment was relatively mundane and neutral, but Emily frowned once she saw her ticket. For the most part it was normal, though the bold, printed text was a little bit too cruel than Emily would have liked.

'1 CHILD ADMISSION'

She narrowed her brows just from looking at it. Not like it would fix anything, but Emily wordlessly flashed the print to Joyce as they were walking further in. She gave it a curious glance then with a smile quietly said, "No restraints today, right?" Pondering for just a few more moments, the ticket was back by her side as the steam factory died off early. Joyce suddenly started to giggle. "Besides, good going on saving us \$5!"

Like five dollars meant anything, though maybe the trivialness of it all was what had the corners of her mouth being tugged at.

They deposited their tickets into the machines and passed through the rotating bars, now inside the animal kingdom. Already among the noises of people Emily could hear the faint chirps,

squawks and squeaks of the avian wildlife, well, wild, sort of. And speaking of people, the place seemed to be a bit crowded, leaving little real estate for the individual.

“Wow, there sure are a lot of people, huh?” Mary commented as they already gravitated to the side for refuge.

“Mmm...” Joyce pensively agreed.

“I’ll say. Why don’t I go grab us a map?” Frank suggested. He already started weaving himself back into the crowd. Seeing him with some distance also forced the imagination to consider him a beacon, seeing how his head stood well-above most of the passerby. Her eyes panned the sight, watching countless, indistinguishable heads of hair. They all looked to be around her height...

“Remember girls, if you get lost, Frank the walking lighthouse will steer you to shore.” Joyce quietly watched him walk away, though still managing to track his head that stood just enough above the many others.

It had gotten to the point where he was too far for Emily to see, unfortunately. The immediate crowd was too tall for even Frank’s exceptional footage to overcome. For some reason she felt like Mary’s little tip didn’t apply so well to her... Then, it took her a second to register that a hand took hold of hers. Spinning her head, she could see it was Joyce’s.

“Why’d you do that?” Just to be clear, Emily held their interlocked fingers in front of them as physical proof.

“...Because I felt like it,” Joyce said with a smile. Though, what she wasn’t letting on about was the odd feeling in her chest when she watched her dad walk away. Something about the massive numbers in the park, then looking over to Emm-ily... The tides of people seemed awfully unforgiving, and with her dad struggling to look like a sore thumb, that only meant it was even worse for the other end of the spectrum. Finding the average person in itself would be a challenge, and anything less than that... Whatever the reason, it oddly put her at ease to have a hand as proof of Emily’s whereabouts. She could already feel her inklings of anxiety drying up.

“Alrighty, let’s see what we have here!” Frank’s voice snapped Joyce out of her mental jargon as he came back with a pamphlet in hand. “Needless to say, there’s plenty of attractions to keep us busy. What are we thinking about for the big stuff? Lions, bears, lynx, sphynx, pterodactyl, minotaur, dragon?” With each creature that deviated one step further from reality, the female trio looked at him with more and more confusion.

As if her dad never rambled off his fantasy list to begin with, Joyce said, “My vote is the giraffes.” The passion she had in her expression made it hard for Emily not to laugh.

Still facilitating their little democracy, Frank took a survey. “One for the giraffes. Any objections?”

“None from me.” Emily shrugged.

“Nope!”

“Then...” Frank started chipperly, then quickly diverted his eyes back to the map. “...Away we go!” Suddenly with a direction in mind, he led the line with Emily and Joyce at the caboose, still linked by their local chain; hand to hand. Again, to Emily it felt that there was something strange going on, but trying to keep her promise, she kept pushing her needless concerns to the back of her mind.

They knew they’d found them when giant, yellow brown-spotted necks carefully and artfully angling themselves to the hanging branches and leaves came into view. Even with the people blocking the display in front of them, Emily could still see the living skyscrapers and their complacent, calm looks that made them all the more majestic as they roamed their miniature habitat.

“Whoa...that’s, really tall.” Emily didn’t really have anything intelligent to say, though that didn’t stop her from unloading her stream of consciousness. She looked up to Joyce who had the slight advantage. “Can you see if there are any more in there?”

“That’s a good question...” Joyce answered, but was admittedly a little captivated by the larger than life creatures. She leaned forward the slightest bit on her toes. “Dad, can you see anything?”

“Ah...let’s see...Yep! Think I do. See by that rock over there? There’s a little speck of yellow moving?”

“Oh, you’re right!” Mary jumped in. “It must still be a baby, it’s so tiny! Well, tiny to the parents, I suppose.”

The mere sight of its adorably frail and clumsy body made Joyce’s heart flutter. It reminded her so much of any newborn of any species; young, innocent, naive, and silly. “It’s so cute!” The other spectators seemed to agree, because it was apparently doing something that had everyone giving it ‘coos’ and ‘awws.’

Meanwhile, Emily managed to slip herself by a few people and politely excuse herself between the congestion to reach the high glass wall. Now that the other side was clear as day, she could understand what had everyone so captivated. On four shaky legs, a newborn struggled to support itself as it shakily scurried about. Whether it be the mother or father, it seemed to gravitate to either one as it looked to and fro, completely and amusingly oblivious to its surroundings and watchers.

She couldn't take her eyes off of it as her heart swayed and jumped with each suspenseful moment it looked as if the baby would fall over. At some point he was trying to hone in on a bush, and also at some point Emily decided in her head he was a 'he' He just managed his way over and helped himself to a few leaves, and Emily let out a small breath of relief.

Where Mary, Joyce, and Frank were closer together, they were all soaking in the sight for a few moments longer.

"Did you know their tongues are black?" Mary said, throwing in a little fun fact.

"I suppose that would make sense," Joyce thought for a second. "They're mostly from Africa, so it's because of the sun, right?"

"Makes sense to me. And those things are miles long!" Frank seemingly awestruck said. "We should go on a safari sometime, hon..."

"Maybe we should sometime. We'll have to get the whole family to go," Mary said, then with an increasingly alluding tone, looked to Joyce. Then she looked a little past her with a curious look. "Speaking of which, where did Emily go off to?"

"Where? She's right..." Joyce turned her head to where she expected her to be, but was a little dumbfounded when she wasn't. It was against her better judgement, but an uncomfortable feeling gripped her. "Dad? Can you see her?" She was already moving from her spot, hoping she knew where to find her. All she saw were people that weren't Emily, and further obstacles to her discovery. She could call her, but... "Emily?" Joyce already started to call her name out. "Emily? You out there?"

"Emily? Hon, where'd ya go?" Frank in his much deeper, unintentionally commanding voice called, causing a few heads to turn.

Emily suddenly heard her name twice over, and froze up a little over the sound of being called out. Did they really think she was lost? No, it wasn't their fault. It felt more to *Emily* that she was

lost. Though, after a few more seconds left to her own devices she found a devious idea lurking in the shadows of her head. Keeping close to the display glass, she walked along the side, reaching the outside edge of the crowd of spectators with a neverending smirk, anticipating the big reveal.

“Emily?” Joyce tried to raise her voice, and there was an unmistakable tinge of shakiness to it. Why was she getting so worried? Emily, her partner, her girlfriend, was a fully fledged adult. She could take care of herself, so why was there that awkward sense of responsibility tethered to Joyce’s fears?

“Have you tried calling her phone yet?” Mary suggested.

“I’m gonna try right now...” She already had her phone in hand and was calling her. She tapped her foot impatiently. Couldn’t these things ring any faster?

Emily could feel her phone vibrating in the pocket of her shorts, and she likely knew who it was. She felt unusually cruel doing this, though she was hoping the humorous factor would outweigh the panic she hoped there was little of right now.

It went to voicemail, and her heart sank. “She didn’t pick up...” Joyce kept looking around. Was she playing a trick? For a joke, this annoyed her to no end. Then again, how could Emily know she was feeling this way? There were two different voices inside her head, fighting for emotional control, and one seemed to be much more passionate than the other. “Dad, please? Do you see anything?”

Emily was thinking back to the kitchen as she slowly crept up behind a familiar back. Clad in her diaper, somehow Joyce knew she was coming and in fact got the jump on her. Something told her now though that the tables weren’t going to be turned at the last minute. With a smirk, and a slight opening to make her pounce, she leaped forward, shouting, “Boo!”

A pair of arms wrapped around her waist as the sudden force from behind made her take a step forward. She easily undid the girl’s grip, then spun around to look at her. Emily, expecting a laugh and typical Joyce-like comment, instead found a distressed look on the verge of tears. “Where were you? I tried calling you!”

Taken aback, Emily awkwardly said, “I thought it would be funny if...”

It seems Joyce’s idea about the trick was right on the nose, and it bothered her to no end on a personal level that she herself couldn’t see it that way. “It wasn’t...” Joyce paused for a moment to

rub her eyes and take a breath. “Just please, don’t do it again?” She could go on as to why it shook her so much, but her personal gripes didn’t matter nearly as much as Emily’s wellbeing.

Emily, now looking remorseful, didn’t feel so worthy of physical affection nor a lighthearted laugh anymore. “Joyce, I didn’t mean...” Emily’s voice was thick. She wanted to think that she was following Joyce’s instructions from the car, but now it didn’t feel so much as a carefree attitude. She never considered that the idea of actually being gone might terrify her lover.

Joyce was the first to initiate the hug, who more than either one was craving the physical affection. “I’m not mad, I promise. You just scared me a little, that’s all...” Feeling all the familiar parts of her beloved was a welcomed comfort.

“Oh, you found her?” Mary found the pair hugging, and Frank soon followed after. “Where did you go, Emily?”

“I needed to get a little closer to see the giraffes,” she sounded a little sheepish. “Sorry if you guys thought I was lost...”

“I think you may have given our daughter a scare...” Frank said, noting the now calmer-looking Joyce. Emily looked a little lower to the ground.

“I think I overreacted,” Joyce laughed it off, and Emily could feel the spear run through her chest from the mere sound of her words. She knew she was pretending now that her parents were here, and now there lay a problem that was swept under the rug, to which Emily sat at the root of. “But I’ve got her now.” Joyce’s arms wrapped around her shoulders, the kind of contact Emily didn’t feel so deserving of.

Mary looked over to her husband. “How about we go see another pen? We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

“Sounds good to me. You ever see a black bear before, Emily?”

“No... Well, once, I think.” Much to everyone’s dismay by varying degrees, she sounded reserved again.

“Not in the wild, I hope?”

“No,” Emily forced a smile. “At a sanctuary.”

Frank and Mary took the lead once more, and Emily was waiting for Joyce to let go of her hand, but she didn't.

"Joyce, I'm sorry about what I did... I wasn't thinking that you might be scared."

"No, I'm the one in the wrong. I should've been clear with you from the start..."

"About what?"

"There's just a lot of people here, that's all..." Joyce seemed a bit nervous. "I don't want us to get separated."

"...But, you know I'm not Emmy right now, right?"

"...I do."

"So, then, don't you think you're being a little overprotective right now?"

"I am, but..."

"But why not trust me a little? Aren't we equals?"

"We are, but that doesn't change how you're vulnerable!" Her reasoning was sudden and came from the wrong place.

"Then what about in the city? When you took me to get a phone? You didn't feel the need to hold my hand constantly then?"

"Wouldn't you agree that things are different now?" Joyce knew better than to ramble off like this, but she wanted to make her point clean and clear. "You're *my* responsibility, Emily, just as much as I am yours."

"Well I don't think I need to hold your hand to make sure you don't get lost, Joyce."

"Emily, please, I don't want to argue, that's not what I mean..."

"So do I have a point, then? Joyce, I know you're telling me to be carefree, but I'm already getting treated like a child everywhere we go by every stranger we meet! Aren't you supposed to

be on my side?" She didn't mean it, but the implication of betrayal cut deep into her partner. "Please? Just put a little faith in me?"

Emily could feel her grip go limp and soon her hand was back by her own side. It was a victory, somewhat, but it didn't feel like one. She looked at Joyce's back, which felt incredibly cold now.

Emily was right. Joyce should know better than to belittle her like that. Looking back on it, not once has she been there for her today. It's been countless compromise after compromise, slowly inching towards a field out of Emily's favor. She didn't have a right to be angry or sad with Emily. She was able to leave their secret relationship behind closed doors, so why couldn't Joyce? Even with that all in mind, it felt like she was severing a limb to let go of Emily's hand. All those worries and fears she talked herself into from earlier were coming back in full swing. Totally unfounded, baseless, and likely untrue, yet loud and rambunctious nonetheless. She didn't feel this terrible since the night of Emily's recovery dinner.

"J...Joyce?" Emily weakly called. Freedom had been achieved, but at what cost?

"...I'm fine. I just need some time to think." She didn't sound fine, and it made Emily's chest ache with a horrible throb.

"Please, can we talk? I don't want to leave it like this," Emily sounded a bit desperate. More than anything she didn't want to upset the one person who could accept and reciprocate her so wholeheartedly. She couldn't bear the thought of screwing up the paradise she'd discovered in the ashes of misery and despair. How could the scales have tipped so quickly?

Emily could already hear Frank and Mary's voices ahead. There wouldn't be time for discussion, and thus the sour mood would linger, and that was a thought she couldn't stand. She ruined everything with her stupid and selfish ideas. Joyce had every right to be disappointed in her. She provides so much, so why couldn't Emily give her a simple gesture as peace of mind? How inconsiderate could she be? She was an ungrateful backstabber.

"Joyce, look at the size of this thing!" Frank called to her, stealing glances back through the glass. "It's as big as me!"

"I'm sure he has better humor than yours," Mary jabbed.

"Well, I don't think I'd be able to *bear* the thought of that."

Mary sighed while her husband laughed at himself. Joyce smiled as she joined the duo.

“Did you lose her again?” Mary smirked.

“You ought to keep her on a leash, sweetie.”

She felt cold hearing the words. Turning around, there was no fourth member on their way.

She was gone.