

Everything's Fine

It started as a joke.

It's Friday night and they're binge-watching old tv reruns, and there's that one where the couple make a list of the five celebrities they can sleep with, without the other one getting angry. It's silly, and she'd never actually do it of course, but her mind idles over a few possibilities - that guy who played a mechanic in that thriller they'd been watching the other week, or the "nobility fallen on hard times" guy in the period drama she's been meaning to look at. There's something about a man in tights.

She stretches, knocking stray popcorn kernels onto the floor, and looks at Jack. The last daylight creeps in around the curtains, a dust-speckled ray painting a circle on his left arm. He's slouched in the Jack-shaped indent in their old sofa, the neighbour's cat, Mervin, sprawling across his knees. They call him the neighbour's cat, even though Merv spends most of his time on their sofa, or waiting for them on their front doorstep. Jack doesn't want a cat. He reminds her of this every morning when he's pouring cat biscuits into Merv's bowl - expensive biscuits, the 99% real fish, hairball-reducing kind that always seem to fall into Jack's basket at the supermarket.

"Who would you choose?" she asks Jack.

"What?" His eyes are half-closed, sleep squinty, and she knows he dozed off for some of the last

episode.

“The show. If you could sleep with anyone, and knew they’d be into it and I wouldn’t mind.”

She thinks he’ll go for one of those Hollywood girls who’ve just moved from playing ingenue, 20-something characters into mum roles or teacher-mentor figures. Maybe he’ll surprise her by going younger. Or older. He doesn’t really have a “type” as far as she can tell. She’s certainly nothing like his ex. Thank god.

He blinks at her and crinkles his nose in the way he’s been doing so long that even when he’s stopped crinkling she can see spiderweb creases. There are photos of him as a freckled 6-year old with the same crinkle. His mum used to haul the albums out every Christmas. Jack would sigh and make an excuse to leave the room, but she didn’t mind looking at them.

He clears his throat but still has a sleep croak when he speaks.

“I dunno. Maybe your friend Jane?”

Her heart seems to stop and beat harder at the same time, which shouldn’t be possible, and she feels as if all the moisture has been sucked from her mouth. It must be plain on her face; she sees panic etch across him and he searches for the threads of his words to pull them back, undo the damage.

“That’s not what you meant, is it?”

“No, no, it’s fine, that’s your answer. It’s just a joke. A game. I meant, you know, like celebrities, or whatever, but, it’s fine. It’s fine. Really.”

“You know I wouldn’t...”

“Of course.”

“Sh*t.”

“It’s fine.”

They clear up the living room and clean their teeth and she washes her face and he gets the coffee ready for the morning and puts Merv outside and they go to bed. She doesn’t roll over to be spooned. He keeps his arms tight against his side. She lies awake listening to his breathing and knows he is awake listening to her breathing but they don’t say anything and she must fall asleep, eventually, because she wakes up and it’s morning and she can’t remember her dreams.

Jack makes coffee. She makes breakfast. He opens the door for Merv and gets the paper and reads out bits of interesting stories. She takes the cryptic crossword into the lounge with a second cup of coffee. He says he should probably mow the lawn and when he goes outside she breathes as if her lungs can finally get enough air. He mows the lawn with extra care, using the shears to do the edges, and oils and wipes all the tools before he puts them away.

Jane calls and she lets it go to voicemail.

It’s lunchtime before he comes in from the garden, and she makes sandwiches while he takes a shower and they sit in porcelain silence at the dining room table and the air feels thin.

“Look, I really didn’t mean...”

“I know. It’s fine.”

“But you’re angry.”

“Not angry.”

“Sad?”

“No. Not sad. Just... I don’t know. Really, it’s nothing. It’s fine.”

The landline rings. They stare at it for a moment. No-one rings the landline since Jack’s mum died last year other than the occasional scammer. She’s going to leave it but Jack stands, his chair scraping the floor with an ear-scratching screech.

“Hello? Oh, hi...”

His voice is thick and he glances at her quick and low and she knows it’s Jane. She picks up her mobile, which she’s switched to silent - seven missed calls and four text messages.

“Yes, she’s here, I’ll just...”

Her frantic head shake comes moments too late. There’s no way he can back out of it plausibly, so she sighs, lifts her own chair back silently with a pointed look at Jack that he misses, as usual, and takes the receiver from his hand.

“Jane.”

“Hi, are you ok? I’ve been calling but your mobile must be playing up or something. It keeps going to voicemail.”

“Oh really? I haven’t heard it,” she lies, crossing her fingers behind her back. “I’ll have a look. Thanks for letting me know.”

She tries to place the phone back in its cradle but Jane jumps in before she can.

“Yes, but that’s not why I’m calling. We’re meeting for lunch today, remember? Have a look for something for Megan’s birthday next month?”

She remembers, of course she does.

“Oh, yes. Look, I might have to raincheck. I’m, uh, not feeling very well. Headache. Migraine.”

“I didn’t know you got migraines.”

“I don’t. Often. But today.”

“Ok...”

“I’ll ring you later in the week.”

“Are you sure everything’s ok? Have you and Jack had a fight or something?”

Jane is always annoyingly intuitive.

"No. It's fine. Really. I'll call you later. Bye"

This time she hangs up before Jane can say another word. The silence rings in her ears and she wonders if she might really be getting a migraine. Karma. Jack is sitting at the table again. His sandwich has been abandoned mid-bite. His head is pressed into his hands and when he raises his eyes to hers she can see the red imprints on his cheeks.

"It's not Jane's fault, this, whatever this is."

"I know."

"So why are you blowing her off?"

"I don't know."

"How can I fix this?"

"I don't know."

"Oh for christ's sake it was your stupid game!"

"I know."

He's standing now, his face pressing closer towards hers. She can see the stress vein in his forehead pulsing. Merv slinks under the sofa.

"Can't you say any other damn thing?"

"I don't..."

"Stop! Stop, just stop! This is stupid, this is so goddamn stupid, I haven't done anything, Jane

hasn't done anything, it was your stupid question and now you're... punishing me like I've done something and I haven't and I never would! It's not like I even fancy her, it was just a stupid game and I was half asleep when I answered! So what are we doing? How do we fix this?"

She looks at him. She wants to give him the words that will fix this but she doesn't know what they are. The silence lengthens, and his anger drains away. His shoulders sag. Merv comes out and weaves around his ankles.

"I don't know. It's fine. I don't know." Her voice is so quiet she can barely hear herself.

"Do you want to leave?" His voice catches on the last word.

"No."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No."

He sighs. "Do you want to... sleep with Sam to get back at me?"

She feels the edges of a smile. "Not today, no."

"Do you want me to... do the dishes and the laundry and the vacuuming on my own for the rest of the month?"

She's smiling for definite now. "That sounds like a good start."

"Do you... want me to be your sex slave for the rest of the month?"

"Ha. You wish"

"Worth a try."

"Come here you goon."

The air melts around them as she pulls him to her. She takes his face in her hands and looks at him for a moment till his nose crinkles in a question, and then she kisses him. It's quite a while before she comes up for air.

"We ok?"

"Yeah, we're ok. But, next time you think one of my friends is hot, don't tell me, ok?"

"Deal. The rest of them are dogs anyway."

She punches him on the arm, a little harder than perhaps she means to, and picks up her phone.

"I'd better call Jane."