

“No, you should wear the green tie. You look good in green, it makes your eyes stand out.”

My boyfriend stopped fidgeting with his collar in the bathroom mirror and stared at me from where I was sprawled on the bed scrolling through my phone. “What?”

I looked up at him. “Hm? What?”

“Why would a green tie make my eyes stand out?” he asked.

I blinked at him, trying to figure out what kind of joke he was trying to make. “Because your eyes are green...?” I prompted cautiously. We stared at each other in silence for a long beat of awkward silence.

“Rachel... My eyes are brown.”

“What? No they're not.”

“I mean, I'm pretty sure they are, but let me double check,” he laughed awkwardly. I could hear an edge to his voice, like he was concerned and slightly offended that I could have forgotten such a basic detail. He leaned closer to the mirror and opened his eyes wide. “Yep. Still brown.”

“No they're *not*,” I insisted, rolling off the bed and moving beside him. I placed my hands on his shoulders and squinted into his face, studying his eyes. They were as brown as mine.

“What? Did you get brown contacts? They're *green*. They're supposed to be *green*.”

Nick winced and reached up to grab my arms and pull me off of him. I hadn't realized my hands had tensed, digging my nails into his shoulders through his suit jacket. “Look, if you aren't feeling good, we don't have to go to the party tonight—”

“No, no, I'm fine, but—” I rubbed my face and backed away from him. “Your eyes are *green*. I *know* they are.” I turned back to the bed and snatched my phone off the comforter,

opening up my photos. “Look, see? They’re—” I frantically scrolled through every selfie I had ever taken with my boyfriend. Two sets of brown eyes stared back at me in each one. I checked my phone’s wallpaper which was a selfie we had taken together a week earlier when we rented out that little cabin. We were sitting on the edge of the small pond we had spent the trip swimming in, and I remembered loving how his green eyes shined like emeralds when the sun hit them just right. Now they were a dull muddy brown.

“Look, honey, you really shouldn’t be stressing out over this,” Nick insisted, taking my phone from my hand and tilting my face up to look at his face. At his brown eyes full of concern. “Maybe we shouldn’t go to the party tonight. You haven’t been feeling too well for the past few days.”

“I’m *fine*,” I grumbled, pushing him away gently and rising from the bed. As I stood, blood rushed from my head and my vision went spotty for a few seconds. I willed myself to keep my balance and not let Nick see me sway, as he’d probably use it as another reason for us to stay home. “Come on, get your shoes on,” I told him as I tried to push the eye color conundrum to the back of my mind. It was just a minor lapse of memory that I’d have to sort out later. “We’re gonna be late.”

Raindrops splattered against the windshield much to the dismay of the wipers pumping back and forth as we drove. I rummaged through the glovebox violently, flinging napkins and straws out onto the floor of the pristine prius and earning me a side-eye from Nick. “You okay?”

“Where the hell is the aspirin?” I grumbled. My headache had been a constant presence for the past few days, and it was getting worse by the second.

“Aspirin?” he echoed. “There’s no aspirin in the glovebox.”

“What?” I snapped.

Nick squinted through the watery blur of the windshield and clicked his blinker on. “We’ve never had aspirin in the glovebox.”

“I took some on the way back from our camping trip, remember?”

He sat in silence for a moment. “Nnnno you didn’t,” he said slowly.

I slammed the glovebox shut. “What are you doing?”

“What?”

“First the eye color thing, now this? You’re doing something, I know you are.”

“Rachel, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he insisted.

“It’s not funny, Nick,” I huffed, closing my eyes and leaning my uncomfortably warm skin against the cool window. “Just stop it please.”

He gave no response. We drove on without a word.

My umbrella sprung open as I stepped out onto the sidewalk. Nick was quick to sidle up beside me under its cover while tying the lanyard he kept his car keys on around one of his belt loops. I squinted at the house we were walking towards. “This is the place?” I said skeptically. “There aren’t any lights on...”

“I’m pretty sure it’s the place,” Nick said with an exaggerated shrug, but his goofy grin gave away that he knew we were indeed at the right place, and probably more than that. I rolled my eyes and reached out to ring the doorbell. No one answered. “Maybe we should step inside...?” he proposed, again with that poorly concealed excitement. He had never had a good poker face. I huffed and tried the handle. The door swung open. “Well?” Nick said. “Step on in.”

I shook my head and crossed the threshold, my shoes squeaking on the wood floor. My umbrella snapped shut and I set it aside. "Hello?" I called.

A sudden burst of noise made me cry out and the lights came on all at once. People leapt out from behind the several pieces of furniture and confetti spiraled down from party poppers set off. The roar of over a dozen voices screamed "*Surprise!*" I stood frozen in place as the brightly colored scraps of plastic fell through the air and settled to the floor. The chuckling of the crowd slowly tapered off as I said nothing, staring blankly at the people around me. Some of them I recognized: my older sister and her husband, a few of my cousins, my aunt. But others, maybe half of the ones in the room, I had no recollection of ever seeing before in my life.

I felt Nick's hand on my shoulder. "Hey," he said gently. "Are you alright?"

I turned my head to look at him. "Nick... What is this?"

His face went still, his expression grave. "This is your birthday party."

I took a step away from the silent crowd of familiar and unfamiliar faces. "But today isn't my birthday..."

Nick shook his head in bewilderment, his eyebrows creased with disbelief. "What are you *talking* about?" he demanded. "May fifth. Your birthday. Today is your birthday."

"No, no it's not!" I yelled, aches buzzing in my skull.

"I woke you up singing Happy Birthday," he yelled back. "I made you chocolate cake for breakfast, and then you threw up in the toilet after eating it, and I said we should go to the doctor, but you refused. Don't you remember any of that?"

"None of that happened!" I cried desperately. "Today isn't my birthday!"

Nick stepped toward me. "Rachel—"

But I'd had enough. I grabbed at his lanyard and yanked it free, tearing the belt loop it was wrapped around. The keys jingled on it like Christmas bells. I remembered the scene from the Polar Express, where the boy couldn't hear the ringing like everyone else could. How he was the outlier, the weird one for being logical and not believing in a made up fairy tale like Santa Claus.

Nick grabbed for me, but I pushed him away. I gripped the keys, silencing the metal chiming, and swung them like a knife. Nick screamed as the stainless steel teeth chewed into his stomach. I yanked them back out, turned, and ran, ignoring the crimson stains blooming through the fabric of his shirt. Voices I didn't recognize called my name as my feet pounded against the asphalt on the way back to where we had parked. I didn't see Nick's car anywhere near where I remembered stepping out onto the sidewalk, so I pressed the lock button on the keys. I jumped as the large pickup truck in front of me dutifully honked once as if called to attention.

I stared at it. This wasn't Nick's small, clean electric car. This wasn't the vehicle we had taken to get here. But then why did the keys on his lanyard unlock it?

The front door burst open as several angry partygoers hurried out to look for me. With no other choice, I dove into the driver's seat and started the engine. The truck roared down the road with a belch of bluish smoke. I fought back sobs and wiped my eyes as I tried to figure out what the next course of action was.

*Mom, I thought. Mom will listen to me. Mom will understand.* I punched her address into my phone's GPS.

This was not my mother's address.

The wrought iron fence of the cemetery loomed before me. I had been staring at it through the windshield for the past half hour, trying to make sense of it. Her house should be here. This was the only address that came to mind when I tried recalling where she lived. But why? Everything else could more or less be explained by Nick gaslighting me, or some practical joke that fell flat. But this? My own mind failing me?

I couldn't trust anybody anymore. Could I even trust myself?

I squeezed my trembling hands into fists. No, I couldn't think like that. I was the *only* one I could trust. I had to believe that my senses were not leaving me, that my mind wasn't failing me. Because if it was... I couldn't bear the thought of it, so I pushed it back and trudged forward through the muddy cemetery. There had to be an answer here somewhere. There had to be a reason I had thought of this place instead of my mother's home. Trying my best not to think, I let my feet carry me where they pleased. I trudged along, face and mind blank.

I *did* recognize this graveyard. My mother would take me here to visit the graves of my grandparents. We would have picnics out here on the lush grass, gray slabs protruding from the earth like teeth poking through gums. I smiled at the memories as I realized where my feet were taking me — back there, to visit my family. I stopped before the familiar headstones. The wind whipped my hair around and I paused to inhale deeply, trying to capture the world in my lungs. I released the breath and looked down at the stones again.

The air caught in my throat and I let out a strangled cry. The engravings on the slab were still sharp and clear, clearer than what should have been possible given the fact that my grandparents died a decade before I was born. The words stood out, and they were only things I could think of as if they were carved into my brain as well.

*Monica Vernon*

*1965-2003*

*Beloved wife and mother. Surpassed by her husband, George Vernon, and her daughter, Rachel Vernon.*

I hadn't misremembered. This was my mother's home.

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I sighed and shook my head, closing the door behind me quietly as if I feared waking the patient when in reality that was the exact thing we'd been trying to do for days. I remembered when they had first brought her in, writhing on the stretcher, foaming at the mouth, screaming incoherencies. The pain, the anger, the confusion in her eyes. I still shivered whenever I thought about them for a moment too long. They had found her at a nearby cemetery, digging up the dirt of her mother's grave with her bare hands. "She's not dead!" she had been screaming as they dragged her from where her mother lay. "She's still alive! My mom is still alive!"

The young woman's boyfriend sat on a small bench in the hall, wringing his hands together anxiously. The moment he saw me walking in his direction, he leapt to his feet.

"How is she, doctor?" Nick asked in a tight, trembling voice. "Any improvements? Any changes at all?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Andrews," I said. "Her condition is only declining."

The young man flinched at the words and tears welled in his brown eyes. "It's my fault," he whispered. "It's all my fault. I knew something was wrong. If I had just taken her here sooner--"

“You can't blame yourself for this,” I affirmed, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. “It’s an extremely rare case. You couldn't have known what was happening.” He didn't seem to comprehend my words — he was in denial. We stood in silent remorse for a long while.

It really was an unorthodox occurrence, and one that was becoming concerning more common in the U.S. “You couldn't have known,” I repeated. “How could you have? You couldn't recognize the symptoms — severe headache, fever, nausea, and vomiting. Those are the early signs, easily dismissed as a cold or flu. Then come the more severe ones: confusion, lack of attention to surroundings, loss of balance, and hallucinations. You were on a relaxing trip in a small cabin with the woman you loved and not a care in the world. By then it was too late, and you couldn't have known at that moment. You never in a million years would’ve wondered whether or not the lake you and her were swimming in was harboring a species of brain-eating amoebas.”