



All in the Family

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Ellen met her mother for coffee once a month. They met at a McCafé exactly halfway between the women’s two homes. Ellen glided past the buzzing and clanking fast-food machinery to find her mother with her legs crossed at the ankles and her head tilted over her phone. Diane was always finding new word-puzzle games to play at doctors’ offices or before bed.

When Diane noticed Ellen a few feet from their booth, she waved. It was cute, actually—her hand flinging back and forth like a clumsy child. Ellen breathed, counting each inhale and exhale three times over before sitting down.

They chatted about the mundane at first—the family dog, Ellen’s job, her boyfriend Jack—but her mother quickly shifted to interrogation. Ellen knew it came from a place of love, that her mother wasn’t just trying to grill her for information and keep tabs on every detail of her life, but it didn’t feel that way, especially not when she caught her mother’s focus fading as she rambled on about the book she was reading or the new workout she had tried.

When the tenor of the meeting shifted, her mother leaned forward in her chair, reaching her elbows onto the table to signal the upcoming spew of questions.

The table was too tall for Diane, and her shoulders lifted towards her ears as if she’d gotten stuck mid-shrug. “How’s your brother?”

“What do you think? Same as ever. Still won’t take his medicine, still thinks he needs a rib removed.”

“Hmm,” she said.

Ellen didn’t blame her for not saying more. There wasn’t anything more to say on the matter. Her twin brother, Collin, had been in and out of therapy and psychiatry appointments since he and Ellen were

five years old. Bipolar with a tendency towards paranoia, they said. Then a few years later they took that back, and now had no diagnosis for him at all. “Anyway,” her mother continued, “what else is new? Any new plans?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Ellen hated this question. She already covered all the bases. “I’m thinking about selling my car.”

“Any,” Diane sucked in her cheeks, pulling in the words she was looking for, “long-term plans?”

“Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she feigned, “kids maybe?”

“No.” Ellen wanted to stop her right there. “Not anytime soon.”

“But Ellen,” her mom started, and Ellen imagined her mom as a whiny child. “Do you want to be one of those moms who’s already mid-sixties when their kid graduates high school?”

“I don’t want to be a mom at all. Besides, I’m only thirty-one.”

Her mom sat back against the booth. Her elbows clung to her sides, and those shoulders that had been paused at the top of a shrug came down. *Hmph*, she seemed to say. Of all the backwards compliments and offhanded critiques, this was the reminder—brought up again and again—her mother was built in conflict with Ellen. Her mother was far from the person Ellen wanted her to be.

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Jack leaned over the counter kneading dough while Ellen bent over the washing machine. She hit the start button three times before she heard the lock click into place. “She wants you to come next time.”

“Does she?”

“Probably to get you on her side.” Ellen had dropped the softener and slid behind Jack for a paper towel.

“Maybe to get to know me better.”

“She knows you.” Ellen watched as he pressed the palm of his hand into the dough and flattened it against the countertop. He wasn’t doing it right, but she held her tongue.

"Does she? I can count on one hand the number of times you've brought me to your mother's over three years."

His voice sounded funny for a moment. Ellen thought she heard something accusatory in it, a harder d-sound at the beginning of the question. But when she looked, he was the same as before: consistent in his pressing of the dough, a steady roll.

To double down on her point, Ellen reminded Jack of how when she was thirteen, her mother caught her in bed with a laptop on her stomach and told her not to do that because she could be damaging her womb.

"I mean, who the fuck says that to a child?" she said.

The rest of their night was normal. Ellen noticed nothing else. They watched horror films and Jack told her about the coworker who spilt cranberry juice all down his shirt. When they had sex, she got no indication that he held any resentment towards her whatsoever. But she couldn't rid herself of the icky feeling that he wasn't telling her something. Then again, it could just be in her head.



When she met her mom the following month, she didn't bring Jack. She was already stopping by Collin's beforehand, and because she knew Jack thought it uncomfortable to visit Collin, she figured it best to leave him behind.

Collin's apartment faced the 7-Eleven parking lot where the kids of the complex got picked up and dropped off by the school bus. He knew this, he had told her, because he smoked around the same time in the afternoons.

He opened the door after the fifth knock and the two of them stood there a moment before moving, the open door the only thing between them. The stubble on his face pricked outwards, and though he'd had a beard since they were twenty years old, it freaked Ellen out all the same. There was something about facial hair on her brother that made her realize something about herself. He moved aside to the couch on his

left. The door opened to a kitchen on the right, a small living room on the left, and a door to the bedroom directly in front of them. When the front door shut, an untied garbage bag revealed itself. A browned banana peel lay on top, only the tip of it inside the black plastic.

“What is this?” Ellen brushed a layer of greenish-brown crumbs into a pile at the edge of the table.

“Oh, shit, yeah, I guess I haven’t picked up in a while.”

He went on for a while about how his job was killing his back, the neighbors who disliked him because he went in and out at odd hours of the night, and his faulty dishwasher that hadn’t been fixed because he refused to put in a maintenance request. Over the course of his monologue, Ellen sank deeper and deeper into the folds of the couch, waiting for something she could respond to. No matter what she did, whether or not she visited or spoke with him, Collin gnawed at her gut. She hated to see him like this, but she knew if she broke away, there’d be nothing steady in his life. Each time she saw him, new names filled the space of his cramped apartment, people she knew would be out of his life the next time she returned. After she’d had enough, she made her excuse to leave and slipped out the door with him still slumped on the couch, staring at the crumbs she’d swept into a pile.

These visits, always the same, ate away at her each time. In the back of her mind she worried the little seed of crazy that ran in her family would sprout and weave its way through her brain, slowly and without her knowledge.



Later, Ellen and Jack played gin rummy at the kitchen table. He had eighty-seven points to her seventy-four and would probably win the game within the next couple of hands. They went round and round turning over new cards and discarding the old.

“Do you want kids?” She asked point-blank. In their three years together, she hadn’t asked because she had already so adamantly revealed her own.

“Probably not.” He knocked on the table and they each revealed their cards. Five points to Jack.

“She brought it up again. It’s getting worse.” Ellen shuffled the deck, the cards dropping one by one, overlapping beneath her thumbs. She was watching him carefully to see his response. Over the past month, she’d noticed with increasing frequency how his shoulders tensed and his jaw locked when she brought up her family.

“You let it get to you too much.” He grabbed the deck and began dealing, mouthing his counting.

“How could I not?”

“Try seeing it from her perspective.” Jack shifted his gaze from her to the cards. “It’s your turn.”

Ellen knew she should move on, that this was his signal to change subjects, but she couldn’t bring herself to stop.

“From her perspective? Sad old woman wants something more in her life and the only way to get that is by pressuring her daughter into the last thing she wants?” Ellen almost accidentally discarded the four of hearts she needed.

“Really?”

“Really what?”

Jack looked at her, square on, before shaking his head and laying down gin.



A few days later over a Caesar salad with hard-boiled eggs that tasted like rubber, Jack told her he didn’t want to do this anymore.

When she asked him why, he told her she had tunnel vision with all matters concerning her family that sprawled out into their lives like a virus. Ellen called him an asshole with no empathy, which she didn’t mean at all but was the most hurtful thing she could think of to say. The corners of his lip pulled up across his face into a sad little smile which only made her angrier. Then it was over.



She considered calling Jack. She stared at his contact on her phone's screen over her Corn Flakes earlier that same morning. She considered apologizing, telling him how sorry she was, that she wouldn't drag him into her mess anymore. She knew she was twisting what he asked of her, but she also didn't want to admit to herself she had been cruel. Letting him only into the bad, keeping him away from her family out of fear that he wouldn't see it for what it was, having him think she was overreacting. Ellen combed through the scattered pieces of memory. She distracted herself by flipping over the cardstock to reveal the time and place someone had written on the back. She was the only one of her friends who still ordered prints off her phone from Walgreens. The digital had a tendency to disappear in the vacuum and the physical brought the pixels into existence: time frozen on paper. As a kid, she spent afternoons listing the people in the photographs and the month and year on the back. Collin had asked her once what she was doing from the hall and she shrugged him off.

"Won't you remember those people?" he said.

But the dates and names weren't for her. She imagined a future where hands of generations after her would pick through relics, just as she'd done, imagining an existence they had not experienced.

One picture of her mother stood out above the rest. Diane's hair was in a bun and she sank her neck back into the folds of a green couch. She was pregnant with Ellen and Collin, and her belly ballooned out. A bowl of ice cream balanced on her stomach as she took a bite. Diane was laughing as she ate, she looked happy. Ellen stacked the photos one by one, placing them in neat rows along the edges of the box. She tucked the picture of Diane beneath all the rest.



Diane came to Ellen's apartment a few days later. Ellen had texted her that she didn't want to meet, and her mother replied that she was on her way over.

Wiping up the counters, nausea rose within Ellen. She hadn't eaten

all day and her vision moved in and out of focus. She forced herself to unwrap a granola bar but couldn't swallow more than a quarter before it tasted like chalk in her mouth.

"I don't remember the last time I was here."

Ellen did. The last time Diane had been to her apartment she'd complained about the dishes in the sink and had thrown Ellen's blankets in the washing machine, even though Ellen had washed them three days before.

"No more Jack, then."

Ellen's back was turned from her mother and she forced back the heat from her face, squeezing shut her eyes to hold in the pooling tear.

"Right," Ellen said when she could, "want some coffee?"

"You could always do it yourself, you know."

Ellen didn't realize what Diane was referring to at first.

"You don't have to wait on a partner."

"Stop that."

"Stop what?"

Ellen left her place at the coffeemaker to take a seat in front of her mother. She crossed her legs at the ankles and placed her hands in her lap. All tension and frustration had been replaced with a sense of dread.

"I think this should be our last month of coffee for a while." There. She'd thrown it out into the space between them.

"What?" Diane fiddled with the dishware in front of her, shuffling the spoon between her fingers.

"Why should we continue when every conversation is the same?"

Diane picked at the hangnail on her thumb.

"And enough with the talk of children. I'm sorry none of your kids gave you grandchildren, but I mean look at us. Collin is never having kids. And I don't want a repeat of our childhood. I don't want to spend the night at the mental hospital because my 11-year-old son choked himself. And I don't want to be sixty-eight years old and have nothing else in life. A stay-at-home mom minus the kids." Her ears rang with the thumping of her chest and a wave of panting passed through. "I'm not

only good for motherhood.”

A small line of red collected at the edge of Diane’s nailbed, where the hangnail had been pulled loose. “I didn’t know you felt that way.”

That wasn’t how she was supposed to respond. Ellen wanted her to push back. She wanted her to cut to the core, to go for the neck. That was the way it worked in their family: you prod and poke the nerves until you say something you can’t take back. She wanted Diane to regret something she said, too.

But she didn’t. Instead, Diane collected her purse without a word. On her way to the front door, she picked up a throw pillow that’d fallen on the floor, brushed it off, and placed it back on the sofa.

When Diane’s hand reached for the doorknob, she turned back towards Ellen. Her face was flushed, and her posture sagged. Her colorless hand gripped the door and Ellen thought it might get stuck, left behind when the rest of her hobbled outside, that there’d be a withered hand forever gripping the interior door handle.

“It took us two years to learn we needed it and another three years to afford IVF. During that two week wait, I cried over the toilet every time I flushed any spot of blood. I wanted to be a mom more than anything. I didn’t want you to realize you wanted that too when it wasn’t as easy anymore.”

Then she left with only the sound of her feet pattering away.



When Ellen was eleven, Collin went to an inpatient program for a week and a half. At the start of the afternoon, she knew they were at it again because it broke through the layer of sound in her room. When she took off her headphones and heard Collin screaming all sorts of nasty things at their mother, things she didn’t want to remember, like how he told Diane she was a fucking cunt because she put him on medicine he no longer took that ruined any chance of him being normal. As if it were the medicine that did that.

Ellen slipped out the backdoor when breaking glass and slamming

doors joined the chorus of screams. The dog followed her out and they sat together on the porch. Julep, the dog, pressed her butt up against Ellen's thigh, and Ellen wondered what she thought of all this. These moments were theirs, Ellen and Julep's. It was their time. When the stew boiled over, Ellen felt like Julep was the only one who understood that this was not how it was supposed to be. That this wasn't normal. That your brother wasn't supposed to spend hours on end compulsively asking whether his head looked like it was morphing or eating behind a cardboard box shield because he saw you chewing.

But Julep was there and that was okay. It didn't matter that Julep couldn't understand why, but that she knew something was wrong. Ellen wrapped her arms around Julep's grimy fur and thought about how that dog slept in Collin's room every night without fail, no matter how much she shook when he had an episode like this. As Ellen breathed in her fur, she hoped some of the dog's unconditional love would brush off onto her.



Ellen hadn't realized how badly Diane had wanted kids. They barely spoke over the month, and Ellen had the nagging effect that she was forgetting to do something. But she checked her lists and emails, and there was nothing that hadn't been accounted for. Her life hadn't changed in any significant way, and she found herself craving the sickly-sweet coffee that became too much if she had it more than once a month.



Ellen's apartment was messy. The windows were cloudy, and the shelves were cluttered with things she should've already thrown away. Jack hadn't reached out and neither had she. Ellen thought again of her childhood and her mother's last set of words before leaving her place. A guilt she wished she could push away lined her stomach. The image of Diane she held in her head changed that day. Diane became, in Ellen's

mind, a naïve person corrupted by a life that took and took. She wished she didn't know how much her mother had wanted kids because then it wouldn't be so bad when Ellen thought of how poorly they turned out. It didn't change the fact that Ellen would never have children, but the mirror through which she'd seen her own life had momentarily been replaced by her mother's, and through it she saw herself: a woman incapable of recognizing a mother hollowed out by that which she wanted most of all. There was something wrong in the way Diane pushed Ellen so frantically towards what only Diane wanted for her, but the recognition of a deeper, more empathetic pain, convoluted as it was, allowed Ellen to reach back and dial the number for the woman she'd known all her life. 