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THE CRYING CARD

It was always the same. Their weekends followed the same downward spiral. Eve got a headache just thinking about them. Her stepdaughters must have felt it too, the dread, and yet Jack, their dad, positively brimmed with optimism. He said one day it would get better; one day they would all get along. He had an expression for it: smooth sailing. Eve figured Jack was crazy. Given their history, the sea would never be flat; the sky would never be clear; the wind would never kick up.

Eve had met Jack when he was still living in the house with Cecile and the two girls, then four and six. Jack and Cecile had already decided to separate—Cecile had already brought home the trainer from the gym—but Jack had stayed so the kids wouldn't get freaked out. They were going to have the good divorce.

This was ten years ago. Eve would describe the in-between time as misery shot through with radiance. Every once in a while, she would connect with either Scarlet or Olive, never both at once, and it was like a door swung open to the kind of relationship that might be possible, but then something would happen to slam it closed. Five years in, despite Jack saying, "I don't see why you can't just borrow mine," their child, their Lucy came along. Lucy was good. Lucy was sweet. Lucy was someone everyone agreed on.

Without the usual fog, Tomales Bay looked tired and washed out. The wild green parrots made listless loops through the eucalyptus trees. The horses seemed to hang their heads in the paddocks. A kayaker tried to sidle through a too-small hole in a barbed wire fence.

“Are we there yet?” Lucy said.

“If you ask one more time,” Scarlet said.

“Are we there yet?” Lucy said, oblivious.

And Scarlet mussed her hair. See, they loved each other. Eve checked out the back seat. There they were, barricaded behind an assortment of electronic stonewalls—texters, gamers, iPads—as Jack piloted their rented SUV to the battlefield. This was the annual trip he enforced, the one where they were all supposed to blend. Scarlet, now sixteen, was a sleek and shiny package that argued about everything. Olive, at fourteen, was big like her grandfather and just wrapping her brain around how all the boys were going for Scarlet of the shimmering hair and tiny waist. And then there was five-year-old Lucy. Asthmatic, she often gasped for breath, and Eve sometimes thought this was her fault; she had done this, cursing her child to a family without enough oxygen.

“Let’s play ‘Say Something Interesting,’” Olive said.

“Oh, good, another icebreaker,” Scarlet said.

Still, pause here for pride. Eve had taught them this game, and it had been a good day when they all realized they shared the geek gene.

“No two zebras’ stripes are the same,” Olive said.

“Reindeers fill up on moss,” Jack said. “It has some kind of chemical that makes them warm.”

“I can’t sneeze with my eyes open,” Lucy said.

“You know what the freeway exits say in Germany?” Scarlet said, “Ausfart.”

“I read this article about drug cartels in Mexico,” Eve said.

“A boss sent his wife to the beauty parlor of the other bad guy’s mistress. The wife paid the hairdresser to shave the mistress’ head.” There was a pause. There often was when Eve piped up.

“I saw 60 on the garbage can,” Jack said. “60’s the address, right?”

The wind whirled drifts of pee-smelling leaves. Twigs scratched the side of the SUV like fingernails. Jack angled it down the sharp

driveway. The open carport was crowded with split logs. Wasps buzzed the cans. Someone had abandoned a trike. The house itself was splotchy with lichen, the paint peeling like old bark; nothing like the peppy pictures on the website.

“This is it,” Olive said.

“I told you not to touch me,” Scarlet said.

“I didn’t touch you.”

“You frigging did.”

“This is great,” Jack said. “A real cabin in the woods.”

Scarlet popped a bubble and smiled at her dad. “I think it’s great. Like camping.”

“I want to go home,” Lucy said.

“Don’t play the crying card,” Scarlet said.

The two older girls bumped their suitcases inside. Olive and Scarlet were fresh from their Hawaii trip with Cecile and the new boyfriend. The girls pulled their bags across the living room, the wheels catching area rugs and scattering dust bunnies. The space was musty and dim. There were black scrape marks on the walls and lamps leaned out at broken angles. Someone had left an elaborate puzzle on the table, everything done but the sky.

“No TV!” Lucy cried.

“But a real record player,” Eve said. There were albums in the crate—Janis, Billy Joel, Grateful Dead, Talking Heads. Lucy stared at the whole contraption as if it were a time machine. Olive and Scarlet thundered downstairs, then up again.

“Daddy, there are spiders down there,” Scarlet said.

“Kids, calm down,” Jack said.

“I’m sleeping up here,” Scarlet said.

“You girls are downstairs,” Eve said, but too quickly.

A casual listener might have glazed over how loaded this comment was, but Scarlet did not miss a thing. “Why are you like this?” she said.

“That’s a very good question.” Now Eve was trembling.

“Control her,” Scarlet said to Jack. “Please.”

Then another pause, longer now. “They don’t have to if they don’t want to,” Jack finally said to Eve.

It had only taken them half an hour to get here.

“What do you like about him?” Eve’s therapist had asked her early in her relationship with Jack.

“Our cat had her kittens on his chest. It was a mess but he didn’t care. He just lay there, watching it.”

“Oh,” her therapist had said.

And there were other things. Jack built a room off the house so Eve could paint. On rainy nights, he sang her to sleep. He said “There you go, Eve, being complicated again” when she wailed about being unable to cook the simplest thing. “If you think I care about food when there’s this,” he said, taking her by the hips and pulling her to him. He ran his big hands through her dark curly hair. Here was another thing she liked: Jack said she had a classical shape. It meant that she didn’t have to try to be smaller when she was with him; she could be herself. And there were also the curls. Eve spent a lot of time trying and giving up on taming them, but he didn’t like it straight.

As Eve went into the bedroom and shut the door, she remembered how just yesterday they’d spent the morning in bed, Jack had made his signature eggs, they’d played with their cat, though now all that seemed so far away. She and Jack only worked when they were with Lucy or alone. With his girls, there was a new set of rules that Eve could never get right. She was expected to be loving, but was not allowed to correct. Once she pointed out to Jack—she didn’t think it was a conscious thing—but Scarlet *flirted* with him. His reaction was immediate and outraged. Scarlet was just trying to stay close; she was a girl who’d suffered through a rough divorce.

“I thought the divorce was *good*,” Eve had said.

No sheets on the bed. Of course. The mattress was a boat with a leak in it, sagging in the heat. The metal window lever broke off in her hand. With the flat of her palm she pushed open the glass. A cloud of midges was silhouetted in a ray of sun; a mosquito catcher barged in.

Olive's voice sailed up the stairs—*Don't hurry love, no, you just have to wait. Love don't come easy*—before Scarlet cut her off. "No, it's not that way, Olive. It's *Love's a game of give and take*."

"Where are the sheets?" Jack said, coming in.

"I ordered some. They didn't leave them."

"What kind of a vacation rental doesn't have sheets?"

"The kind I got. Obviously."

"It's not the place," he said. "The place is great. I'm happy here."

"How can you be so happy when I'm so unhappy?"

"Because you can't even sleep on the same floor as my kids?"

"I'm not perfect. No one is."

"Everything's great until they come along."

"Everything's great for *them* until *I* come along."

"It's that you're trying to separate us," Jack said. "They're my kids. I abandoned them."

"Again. Not my fault," Eve said, though she felt bad for this. Too late: when Eve passed Jack in the door, he shrank back so no part of him touched any part of her.

With fresh desperation, Eve went downstairs. She opened a closet to find linens, balled up, but clean. She carried them to Olive and Scarlet's room. "Look what I found," she said.

"They're all messed up, like somebody else's," Scarlet said.

"That is so deeply gross."

Eve let herself dump the sheets on the floor. "But washed."

"In Hawaii we stayed in a mansion," Scarlet said. "Mommy said it was a thousand dollars a night."

"The air conditioner didn't work," Olive said. "Mommy hated it." She was reading a book minus its slipcover, the damp kind you

find stacked in corners in vacation rentals, orphaned by past guests. “You’d like this, Eve,” she went on, holding it up. *The Beauty Myth*.

Five minutes later, Olive and Lucy bent over the missing puzzle sky upstairs. Scarlet, who watched a lot of *Iron Chef*, unpacked groceries and clanged pots in the tiny kitchen. She was on a Thai kick: she had made them stop in Chinatown on the way out of the city so she could get lemongrass. “I’m cooking dinner. Not that anybody cares.”

The master had a tiny bathroom at the head of the bed. The wall reverberated with the sound of Scarlet chopping. Jack lay on the naked mattress, staring at the ceiling, arms by his side. Eve sat down beside him, determined to try again.

“The Farallon Islands are right offshore,” she said. “It has the densest concentration of great white sharks that come back every year. They come to these inlets to mate and have pups, but no one has ever seen it or really understands how. This whole area is a mating ground. I read it in Nat Geo, that’s how I know.”

“I need some space,” Jack said. “I think it’s better if we don’t talk right now.”

“I’m sorry I snapped at Scarlet,” Eve said. “And you.” Then at great cost, she touched his arm and gave him her hand. He took it for a moment, then gave it back as if it was a present he needed to return.

Now Eve was pissed off. And miserable. And unlovely. And ready to punish him and herself. He was being bad, but she was worse. After all, *she* was the one who couldn’t get past the smell of Cecile on her cubs, *he* was the guy trying to reconcile two halves of his life. But then Eve reminded herself that they’d been here before. They *would* get through. Jack couldn’t help it: when he got hurt he withdrew, but he would remember himself.

It was cooler in the spare bedroom. Spiders had staked out space. The synthetic blanket rasped Eve’s skin. A half hour passed and she tried making a cave, but the cover was too short and her legs stuck

out. By now Eve would have taken any kind of ceasefire, or even a conk on the head with a chemical cast iron frying pan. She was thinking of just this, actually, a dirty Ambien in the bottom of her purse, when Lucy materialized.

“Dinner’s ready,” she said. “Please come up. We set a special place for you.”

In the dining room, Eve made a point to avoid Jack, looking instead through the picture window at the pigeon-stained deck, the railings patched with chicken wire. The bay was dazzling, a glorious glittering blue that looked almost opaque. And here was something hopeful: the mood at the table felt good; Lucy, Olive and Scarlet were acting nice.

Scarlet put the noodle dish in the center of the table. “It’s got coconut milk. Justine gave me the recipe.”

“Justine who?” Eve said.

“Only my best friend for the past five years.”

“I thought it was what’s-her-name,” Jack said.

Lucy spooned some onto Eve’s plate. Cubes of tofu bobbed in a watery rice paddy of noodles and peppers, white and emerald green.

“Ten points for presentation,” Olive said. “Plating is so important.”

“And creative use of ingredients,” Jack said. “Let’s not forget that.”

“And it tastes good,” Eve said. Jack looked at her quickly, and Eve allowed herself a hopeful smile.

“Tell us about the gangster lady again,” Scarlet said. “The one who had that woman’s head shaved?”

“That’s all I know, but I heard another one,” Eve said. “This girl was mad at her boyfriend so, every night, she put Nair on his hairline. He thought he was going nuts.”

“That is so evil,” Scarlet said.

“I heard lipstick contains fish scales,” Olive said.

“More people are killed every year by donkeys than planes,” Lucy said.

“Venus is the only planet that turns clockwise,” Jack said.

“Skip me,” Eve said. “I can’t think of anything.”

But Olive and Lucy turned to look at Jack. The moment stretched and he said, “Yes, you can. Try sharks maybe.”

And now Eve felt good; yes, she did. Though Scarlet seemed bleak. Eve was surprised at this—did she want her dad to be mad at Eve?

That night Eve was passing back to the spare room when she stopped in the hall. Lemon light pooled around the girls, as Olive carefully braided Scarlet’s hair. Eve could almost feel the weight of it, thick and gorgeous, down to Scarlet’s perfect ass. Olive alternated the switches while her sister sliced ads out of a gossip magazine.

On the first floor, the choreography had changed. Jack wasn’t quite ready to sleep in her bed. Curled and fetal, his forehead was slammed into the couch cushion. Lucy, legs flung out, made a starfish on the bed. When she was a baby, Eve would find her in this pose after play-dates that lasted too long, or that one time the cat wandered off for two days.

Lucy’s breath sounded like a door creaking. Eve fished out her inhaler, then attempted to put it in her mouth, but Lucy’s teeth were clamped shut.

“Open up, you’re wheezing,” Eve said. Asleep, Lucy’s head lolled. Her finger went up her nose. “No, honey, your mouth.” Lucy reflexively pushed her away with the flat of her hand. Eve wrestled in the inhaler and counted 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 breaths.

Back downstairs, Eve polished off a pint of coffee ice cream and swallowed the Ambien dry. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust. Darkness reduced the furniture to shapes. A moth whirled by her ear as she waited for the dumb slide to sleep.

Eve dreamt of a young man pursuing her, his face and chest smooth as a soap carving. Somehow she lay on the upstairs couch. Somehow he pulled up her skirt. Somehow she came in a lapping of little waves. The medicine red eye of the digital clock blinked.

Seven hours later, the wind whipped the curtains and woke Eve up. She lay there, taking in the lime green parrots camped in the eucalyptus trees, the horses clomping through the grass.

Jack stuck his head in the room. He let his eyes graze over Eve in a measured manner—she could have been an apple, an eggplant, a piece of driftwood—but then he leaned towards her, and for a second they were Jack and Eve again, and he was sorry, and so was she, before Jack caught himself.

“I’ll take Lucy to breakfast,” she said.

Jack nodded. “Scarlet and Olive are asleep anyway. Be home by ten, though. I want to take the kids to the boat place.”

The Point Reyes hamlet had an entire gift shack devoted to faery lore, a bait shop with buckets of squirming worms and rows of fierce hooks, a general store with miniature lifeguard towers, and a wall covered with stuffed replicas of native Californian wildlife. Lucy chose a mountain lion from among the fluffy condors, otters, quails, red-tailed hawks and great white sharks. They got playing cards for Scarlet and Olive, stood in line for hot quiche and Italian sodas, and Eve finally relaxed.

“I have a surprise for you, little bear,” Eve said.

Lucy licked the crumbs off her fingers. “Show me.”

Eve led her to a bush by the side of the road. Blackberries hung in clusters in the thorns. “You can pick them. Just be careful of the stickies.”

They pulled the berries off, each one plump and tart with juice. Eve told Lucy a long story about the time in Canada when her cousin beat up some boys who stole her blackberry basket. Lucy’s teeth were stained blue. She listened as if everything was important information. Eve thought she had never loved anyone so much.

They returned full of hope and good feelings, but the house was too quiet when they came in. Eve sensed no one was asleep. A sound, unidentifiable at first, gelled to unmistakable: someone was crying.

The puzzle had been swept off the table and, in its place, was a severed ponytail, its thousand strands bound in a pink scrunchie for ballet class or a day at the beach. Except it was not attached to Scarlet.

The family gathered in the living room, but no one sat too close. Scarlet sobbed, big mucous-y gulps, a pink hat jammed down over her chin-length locks, only rousing herself to point at Eve.

“She did it last night,” Scarlet said. “Ask her, daddy.”

The act itself was so brutal, something out of Noh drama, that it was hard to stay in the room. A bird with a red beak pecked at something on the deck. Scarlet’s weeping got worse. Eve’s first thought was dismay. And then horror—was she capable of doing such a thing? In some druggy fog? Seriously fucked when she—But how could she not remember? There was only the soap carved man in her dream, and the amazing hairlessness of his chest.

“I didn’t do it,” Eve said, but she sounded so guilty.

No one replied. Scarlet continued to sob. Lucy watched as if she were at a tennis match, only the balls were grenades.

Olive touched the ponytail with tremulous wonder. “I bet you could sell that for a lot,” she said.

“There’s that wig place for cancer kids,” Lucy said.

“But it’s my hair. I didn’t want to give it away. And that bitch, that stepwitch—”

“Stop,” Jack said, with great force, and Eve could barely look at him. “We’re all going to take a minute here.” Scarlet made a strangled sound and flipped open her phone. “Didn’t you hear what I said? What are you doing?”

Scarlet shrank back. Everyone, including Jack, flinched. “Calling mommy. What else?”

“Give it to me now,” Jack said. Eve could hear the phone ringing, and Cecile’s disembodied “Hello?”

“She’ll take me away from here,” Scarlet said. “You know she will.”

“Hang up and calm yourself.”

“You try calm,” Scarlet said, but she clicked it closed on Cecile.

“Olive, tell me what happened.” Jack’s voice was so low Eve had to strain to hear.

“Me!” The girl looked at the ponytail as if it could leap up and bite her. “How should I know? I was asleep.”

Jack turned to Eve as if this was something they all needed to see. Eve tried to stay in the room, but she saw them all from a great distance. Outside seemed the brightest of all. The bird with the red beak hopped around on one yellow leg in the pine needles. Its beak was very red, tomato red, crimson. Eve decided to paint this bird, if she ever got out of here alive. She could see it now—a splotch of red on what? Black. And then she realized she could not locate ever wanting to cut off Scarlet’s hair, but she *did* want the ponytail. She coveted it. And what would it have been to snip it off like that? She could so clearly summon the satisfying way the scissors severed the fibers, how easily they came away.

“I didn’t do it,” she said again, but her voice sounded guilty again.

“Yes, you did,” Scarlet said. “You told the story, remember? About the woman who shaved that girl’s head?”

“Jack, do something,” Eve said. “Please.”

“Oh, you can bet I will.” Then a pause, the longest of all. It seemed porous, the weight of their marriage absorbed. “Come away, girls.”

They left, even Lucy, bundled away from her crazy mother. Eve stood by herself in the center of the house, too stunned to do anything. The sun tracked across the floor from the table leg to the bookcase. When she had recovered enough to move, she cleaned. There were dirty dishes and crumbs in the pan at the bottom of the toaster oven and butter smears on the counter and beds to make and trash to take out.

When Eve had finished, she took the ponytail and went outside. She laid it on the deck. The ponytail lay inert and defenseless with a matte quality, a density to its blackness. It was strange and

outlandish and yet, somehow, the perfect expression of what was broken about all of them. Eve watched the bird with the red beak land on the deck. The bird, her bird, dragged the ponytail a few inches. Eve lunged for the hair, as if it could somehow be reattached, but it couldn't, and so she let the bird drag it a little. Better to let it go. Better it should line someone else's nest. But no, she couldn't let it just disappear.

Eve ran at the bird. It dropped the ponytail. The bird danced at the edge of the deck as she picked up the hair. A squawk of outrage, and then it flew away. Smooth sailing, maybe she'd wanted to believe in it as much as Jack. And how foolish that was, how impossible. The ponytail felt smooth and glossy and dry in her hand, not a reproach, but a thing of vacant loveliness. Especially in light of what she'd found in the trash.

It was Jack who said they should go to the boat place later that afternoon because everything was already fucked so why not? Eve was surprised the girls went along; maybe they were relieved to have something else to focus on other than themselves. Jack had not invited Eve, but he didn't stop her from sliding into the front seat. He stared at the road and jerked the brakes at stop signs as if he wanted to punish them all with whiplash.

Blue Water Kayaking was one of those places that advertised fun. There was a boy surfer behind the desk, the one you expected. Blonde fur on his muscled calves, biceps bunched, bleached hair and blue eyes, blue as a blue water kayak. The effect this guy, Danny, had on Scarlet was at once calming and electric. Watching them, Eve had the faraway sensation again, as if she were seeing them all in slow motion, time sprinting past. She had shown up because she had something to say, though, in their vivid presence, she wasn't entirely sure when or how to do it now.

Eve trooped with the rest of them down to the beach. The evidence—her vindication—bounced in a small bag against her leg.

Danny demonstrated the kayaking strokes, mainly to Scarlet in her tight wet suit. "Bend from the waist, like this," he said. The hard little boats slapped the water in the inlet. Scarlet turned her torso from side to side and her chopped hair swung in a triangular shape. "Dip the oar like a spoon in a bowl of ice cream, that's good."

"I get the front, Scarlet. I called it," Olive said.

"No, you don't," Scarlet said. "You heard what Danny said, the heaviest person goes in the back."

Olive's long toes flexed in the sand. She wore a tee shirt that said *Everybody loves a Jewish girl*, which was so obviously not true. "Daddy, I want to go with you."

"You can't," Eve said. "I need him because we have Lucy in the middle."

"Olive," Jack said. "Just sit in the back."

Danny waved from the shore as the bright boats slid into the mirrored bay. Flashes of mica caught the light in the bottom silt. The water was cold, ice cube clear. Small gray fish darted around.

"I'm not scared," Lucy said.

"Brave girl," Eve said.

Scarlet and Olive rocked their kayak behind.

"Olive! You're hitting me with the oar," Scarlet said.

"Let me steer! I have the rudder," Olive said.

"No, you'll mess it up," Scarlet said. Their boat veered left and right. Olive's oar hit Scarlet's. "Daddy, it's not fair. She's such a cunt."

Jack put his oars down, his face darker than ever before. "That's it. I'm through."

"Oh great," Scarlet said. "First you leave mommy. Then you leave Eve. Now you leave us. Nice going, Dad."

"She's right," Olive said. "*You're* what's wrong. You never stop us until it's too late."

"Don't say that to Daddy," Lucy said. "He's good."

"Everybody shut up," Eve said.

The oars were still in their laps, the boats stalled, and Eve

thought again of what she'd found: the magazine in the trash with the picture of the girl bent at the waist with her head upside down as she clipped off her ponytail in one swipe. "How to Cut Your Own Hair," it said. And who had put it there? Olive? Scarlet? Did they want it to be found? Eve got a clear view of her stepdaughter's face, pinched and miserable, the oars sticking out from her lap. She looked young, adrift and mother-less, sister-less, father-less. She was a child. But so was Jack. And Eve was too. Maybe most of all. She felt ashamed for all of them.

Eve took the magazine from her bag and launched it. "Hey, Scarlet. Look what I found." It spun once, then took on water, as Eve had known it would.

"What's that?" Jack said.

The newsprint darkened and bled, the magazine creasing at the center before it sank. "Nothing now."

Scarlet stared right back at Eve, but Eve could see the girl was weakening. It made Eve feel sadder still.

"I'm so confused," Lucy said. "I always am."

"It gets worse when you're older," Olive said.

Then to Eve's surprise, Scarlet tipped her head back and sang, "Row, row, row your boat."

"Gently down the stream," Olive sang.

"Merrily, merrily, merrily," Lucy sang, and clapped her hands.

Impossible that this day would end in song, but sing they did. The girls harmonized a round, Olive taking bass, Scarlet's voice soaring over the high notes, the boat obeying and straightening, pulling forward and running parallel with the other kayak, the gray rocks in sharp relief against the stone beach, the light so bright Eve had to look away. And there they were, or almost or maybe were—two great white sharks in the water, rubbing their raspy bodies against each other, engrossed and oblivious as the kayaks slipped over their heads. **f**