

Echoes

Experimental

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I. Smile

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-8 months-

James Meyer pushes himself off of the couch and pauses the movie. The ring of the wall phone echoes through the house. As James approaches, he squints to see the name on the tiny glowing screen. He reaches out, grabbing the phone and pulling it to his right ear.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Charlie with Wide Smile Dental and Orthodontic, may I speak with Charlotte Meyer?"

James tenses up, his knuckles growing white. "She's," he pauses, searching for words, "Charlotte can't make it to the phone. I'm her husband, I can give her the message."

"Alright, well this is just a courtesy call to remind her that she's got an appointment at 10:00 tomorrow."

James takes a breath, feeling the air pass over his upper lip as it exits his nose.

"Are you still there?" the man on the phone asks.

"Yeah, I'm here. I think we're going to have to cancel that appointment. She's out of town," James finally says and presses his left palm into the wall to support himself.

"Alright, sir. There is a \$30 cancellation fee since it's within three days of the appointment. If you'd like, though, I can reschedule it for free instead, will she be back in town by next week? We have a few openings on Thursday."

"No, I'm alright with the fee. Just cancel it."

"Alright, sir. Just call us back whenever you're ready to make that appointment."

He closes his eyes. "Yeah."

"And have a smiley day, sir."

He hangs up the phone, placing it back in its holder as the words echo in his mind.

"Yeah."

II. Head of the Table

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-1 year, 4 months-

Oliver pulls the glass pan of lasagna out of the oven with thick oven mitts. He places it on the stove and moves past his older sister, who washes her hands in the sink. He sees his grandmother moving around the table with a handful of silverware, placing a few at each of the six plates.

"Um, gram," he starts.

"What is it, Liv?" She looks up and places the last knife at the head of the table.

Oliver bites his upper lip uncomfortably. "You set six places."

His grandmother looks down at the task she has just completed. "Oh, so I did. Will you put these ones away for me?"

He takes the plate and silverware and takes them back into the kitchen. He opens the cabinet and puts the plate away, then sorts the rest into a nearby drawer.

"I just forget sometimes, I suppose," she coos.

"I know, I do too." The pair hug each

other.

III. Happy Holidays

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-11 months-

"Will you please talk to me, Luke?" James asks, looking in the mirror at the sobbing lump of his youngest son who sits in the back seat. "What's wrong?"

He sniffles hard. "Mrs. Lewis sent me to the principal's office."

"And why did she do that?"

Luke sobs harder. "Because I-I-I" He stops, wiping snot on his sleeve.

"It's okay, deep breaths," James says, false calmness in his voice. "Deep breaths, buddy."

Luke sniffs harder and wipes again. "I-I was crying in class," he finally says.

"Why were you crying?" James asks.

"Mrs. Lewis said we were gonna do a art project for Mother's Day and I asked if I can sit in the hall and she said why," Luke begins sobbing anew. "And-and Ben said I don't have a mommy and then they were laughing." His breath catches in his throat as his face turns a brighter shade of red.

James hides his own face as it turns red with anger. His grip tightens on the wheel and he takes a breath. "Aw buddy, I'm sorry. They were jerks. I know, it's gonna be hard for a while. If you want, we can still celebrate Mother's Day together this year. I can get your sisters to decorate and everything. How about that?" He gazes into the mirror,

searching for any reaction.

A few coughs erupt from the back seat.
“Maybe.”

“We can figure it out, alright, bud?” James sighs and looks at the scrunched face of his now quiet child. “Now, do you want some McDonalds?”

Luke nods his head slowly.

IV. Wednesday Nights

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-6 years-

The doorbell rings. Emma waddles toward the door as a thick red blanket drapes over her shoulders. She pulls back on the handle and it swings open, revealing her boyfriend on the other side.

“Thank you for coming.” She smiles, “Sorry I’m all emotional.”

“What else am I good for,” Noah says, laughing “I got you something.” He holds up a Rite-Aid bag.

Emma lets him in and he places the bag on the kitchen counter. He reveals the contents of the bag, two 1.75 quart containers of Thrifty Chocolate Malted Crunch ice cream.

“It’s your favorite!” Noah says with a smile.

Emma laughs.

“What is it? Did I screw up? Isn’t this the one you would always get?”

“No you got it right,” Emma confirms. “It’s just that I don’t think I ever told you why I actually got it.”

“Because you like it, right?” Noah asks.

“Sort of. The ice cream itself is garbage honestly.” Emma laughs again.

“Aw shit, I just got you two whole-ass things of it. Why did you always get it then?”

Noah sits at the counter as Emma grabs

the ice cream and takes it to the freezer.

“Well, back before we met, before Luke was born, the recession hit us pretty hard.”

“The housing market thing? I remember we were hurting too. We almost had to give up our house.”

Emma nods, “I guess it hit us all pretty hard. We were really struggling, not quite food stamps struggling but we were counting out spare change and my mom had to sell her car.” Emma shuts the freezer and makes her way back to the counter, leaning over it to level with Noah. “We had to cut back on a lot of things that we weren’t really used to. Oliver and I were pretty young and we didn’t really understand it so we of course complained. We wanted sugary foods and lunchables and all that junk. So what my parents did to compromise was every Wednesday night, the four of us would go out to Rite Aid and get a scoop of ice cream.”

“I think you told me about that once, I never knew it was because of that though,” Noah says. He moves his chair to give Emma space to sit. She does.

“It was pretty cheap compared to most other places and felt like more of a special event than just getting a carton for the freezer. Usually, I’d get one and Oli would get one and my mom would get a two scoop to share with my dad. Eventually she started getting a single scoop, then nothing at all, just leaving my sibling and I.”

“Damn, that bad? Aren’t those things like a dollar?”

Emma looks to the side. “Yeah, I didn’t really appreciate what they were doing for us at the time. They knew the trips meant a lot to us so they made sure to do it every week. It was one thing they never argued about. Sometimes, if one of us didn’t finish ours or

we got a flavor we didn’t like, she’d eat it for us. One week, we went to the Rite Aid and my mom was counting out the change in the car. I almost always got cookie dough, every time. That day though, I decided to get a different flavor.”

“Chocolate malted crunch?” Noah asks, sensing the direction of the story.

“Shut up, don’t ruin it.” Emma smiles and slugs his shoulder playfully. “Anyway, every time we’d go before, my mom loved getting the chocolate malted crunch. I always thought it was chalky and artificial tasting but she loved it. Even back then I wasn’t a big fan. I decided to get it though. I took a few bites, then gave the rest to my mom. I think it was the first time it really clicked in my head that adults had feelings too, like when I was little, I used to just think that my parents were just these all-knowing, unfeeling entities that knew how life worked and this was the first time I really saw that she was just another kid at heart.”

“I know what you mean, I had a moment like that with my dad when I was little.” Noah smirks.

“Every time we went after that, I’d always get the same flavor and give her half.”

“Do you think she knew?”

Emma smiles, “I never told her what I was doing but I know she knew. She was too smart not to. I think she let me keep going because she knew it made me feel good.” She looks in his eyes, “I really wish you could have met her.”

“I do too,” Noah says. “So that’s why you get it now?”

“Yeah, I guess. It tastes like memories. It tastes like the times we knew we were going to be alright.”

V. Like a River Flows

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-8 days-

James sits at his desk and reads over an email from his coworker, Ted. Ted is complaining about the new software update “breaking Google” and James begins typing up a passive aggressive response. He is relieved to be working in the basement, as he is unsure that he can handle much direct human contact today.

James looks to his second monitor and continues his work, ensuring that the data transfer runs smoothly. A familiar tune interrupts his drifting thoughts.

Wise men say, only fools rush in, for I...

He scrambles for his phone and pulls it from his pocket. He sees Charlotte's face on the screen as it vibrates and the song continues. He feels his left pocket, then removes a second smartphone, looking at it carefully.

“What the fuck,” he mutters as his eyes water.

James slides his thumb across the bottom of the phone and brings it to his ear.

“Who is this? How did you get this number?”

“Dad, Emma keeps hogging the TV and she won't get up or watch any shows that I wanna watch and she told me to go away and she knows I wanted to watch tv but I-”

“Liv, honey. Sorry I didn't realize it was you. Where are you calling me from?”

James' heartbeat slows.

The chatter begins again. “I'm home, and Emma keeps watching inappropriate shows-”

“Are you calling from the house phone?”

“Yeah, can you tell Emma-”

“Yes, go ahead and put her on,” he says.

VI. My Name

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-2 years, 1 month-

“Okay, are you sure that's the one you want to go with?” Emma asks.

“I know it's the most obvious one, but it just feels right.”

“Alright, Oliver,” Emma says with a smile.

“See? That felt good. That was right.” He beams at her.

Emma scoots higher up on his bed for comfort. “It suits you really well. Can I call you Oli?”

“Sure, try whatever feels natural. Thank you so much for this.”

“For what, being supportive? I'm your big sister, that's why I'm here.”

Oliver slides forward to hug her. “Can you tell dad for me? I'm really scared.”

“Of course, if that's really what you want. I really do think he'll be supportive though. He may take a while for names but he's old. I wouldn't take it too personally.”

After the embrace, Oliver looks into her eyes. “Do you think mom would have been okay with me?”

Emma stares back. “Honestly yes, she one hundred percent would. If she could see you now, there wouldn't be a single person on Facebook that didn't know how proud she was of her son.”

“That's why I picked the name, actually. It's close to the one she gave me. I still wanted to keep that piece of her.”

Emma grins. “I actually wanted a little brother when I was younger, before Luke I mean. And she told me that if she had a boy, she'd name it Oliver, and Olivia if it was a girl.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah, see? It was fate really.” They

laugh.

“I guess that means you've got two brothers now, huh?”

“Oh shit, I'm outnumbered, now,” They both laugh again.

There is a pause and both of them smile.

“I know I was young, but I really miss her,” he says.

“I miss her too.”