

Better Than Before

by Tori Bissonette

“You’re still a missing person in the police database,” he says in lieu of a greeting as he slides into the seat next to her. “I don’t know if you knew that or not.” He waves down the bartender as he unwinds his scarf and orders a whiskey. Neat.

Some things never change.

And yet, this month has been kinder to him than the ones before. His bones don’t poke at the corners of his button down so much and the thumbprint bruises under his eyes could almost pass for shadows.

“Checking up on me?” She snorts and he smirks and it’s enough. Looking down at her drink, she swirls the thin red straw. The ice has gone soft at the edges, leaving little trails of clarity on top of the alcohol. “Not like anyone’s still investigating anyway.”

“Not like anyone investigated back then either.”

It doesn’t hurt to hear. Five years ago, everyone thought she was just a runaway. They weren’t wrong.

She barely remembers that girl. Back then she was Daphne, who couldn’t handle anything harder than strawberry champagne and still choked on the first drag of a cigarette every time.

Beside her, Ian swirls his drink and downs half of it in one go. She isn’t the only one who’s grown.

“Work’s been good?” she asks. It’s always hard, at first. The spaces between them are unfamiliar and filled with a fresh year of living. They have a decade and a half between them, but half of that has been spent here, meeting up in this bar the second Friday of every month. So much can change in that time. A parent can die. A new job can be scored. A car crashed, a dog adopted.

She doesn’t know what she’ll do if the day ever comes that Ian doesn’t walk through the door, the unzipped tips of his jacket flapping at his knees and a bird’s nest of hair on his head courtesy of the wind.

“It’s the same old, same old,” he whines, snagging a plastic menu from the tabletop display. He peruses it seriously, even though they both know he’s going to order chicken wings. What else do you order at a bar? Dee will tell him she isn’t hungry, but he’ll turn the plastic basket so she has unfiltered access to his fries. It’s been the same song and dance for the last few years.

It’s too early in the night for anything interesting, but it’s always just a matter of waiting it out and moving through the small talk. The after work crowd is still milling around, filling the bar with complaints of deadlines and cheers to goals accomplished. Many of them are regulars. They move around the space like a second house, waving at people and weaving in and out of conversations without missing a beat.

It’s very possible, probable even, that she’s seen the same face more than once. People are creatures of habit. The time in between is too long for her to recognize anyone, but it comforts her to think that even the hustle and bustle around her has some sort of pattern. A routine.

“How’s your wife?” she asks next, mentally ticking through the requisite questions.

It took Ian until the second year of meeting up to admit he’d married someone, some girl from college who was also a communications major. It took until the third year of meeting up for him to not look at her with surprise whenever she asked after his wife.

There was a time in her life, in both of their lives, when they’d been certain she would wear the title of Ian’s wife. It’s not like she didn’t know what she was leaving behind all those years ago. She can’t hold it against him and she certainly won’t hold it against some woman she’s never met, some woman she’ll never meet.

She doesn’t know what excuse Ian gives his wife for disappearing all night once a month, but Dee likes to imagine she’s understanding. People come with baggage. That’s just how it is. Sometimes she constructs Ian’s wife in her head. It changes every time. A head full of bright red curls. A short, athletic body. A slight accent. She’s never asked for a picture, nor will she. It’s easier to keep her peace if Ian only exists here, in this one night. If he exists the rest of the month, surrounded by family and friends, she’ll drown in her loneliness.

Caught in her thoughts as she is, it takes her a moment to notice Ian’s hesitation. When she looks over, he’s glancing at the bar, fingernail picking at a crack in the vinyl finish. There are only two options for his hesitance and she

doubts Ian would have made it this far into the conversation if his wife had died. She'd seen him like this once before.

“She’s pregnant again?”

Ian nods. His hair is longer in the back than the last time she'd seen it. It's messy and a bit matted in a few small spots. He must still rub the back of his neck when he's stressed.

“Congratulations,” she says, and means it. Even as her saliva turns to acid in the back of her throat, she means it. Nothing but happiness for him. He still doesn't look at her, head hanging low like his fried poultry holds the clues if he can only stick his face far enough in. Anywhere else, with anyone else, she knows he'd be bouncing on his toes that way he always does when he's excited. He loves being a father. It's only her presence that stirs guilt instead of joy. She swallows the acid and reaches out just enough to brush her pinkie along his. “Really, congratulations. I hear the second pregnancy is easier.”

“Yeah, I heard that too. Laura's excited.”

As he reaches for the ketchup bottle, she lets her hand drift over her stomach. It's always been flat. The human that lived there once was gone before her stomach had time to show it.

She'd been so certain back then that she was making the right choice. That thing inside her was no baby. It was a parasite. A scar. How could anything created out of such fear and pain be anything but a monster? She was willing to throw away every connection she'd ever made on that certainty.

Well, every connection except one.

* * *

There's only a dusting of snow on the ground, but the wind won't let anyone lucky enough to be caught outside forget that it's February. With only the moon and stars above, the cold lathers across her skin, sinking in deep until it seems to emanate not from around her, but from within her. The burning stone of alcohol in her stomach is the only thing that keeps her from dropping to her knees to curl up.

“I worry about you,” he says. It's after midnight, so it's an acceptable time for such sappiness. She can't recall the moment it happened, but she finds her elbow looped through his. The boundaries are always blurry so late at night.

It's precisely because she knows Ian would never let things go too far that she lets her own hesitance wash away.

"Don't." The words are physical for just a moment before her breath trails up and away. The world is asleep. There are no passing cars, no scurrying squirrels or chirping birds. It's just them moving through this paused world.

"You don't have any friends."

"I have you, don't I?" She smiles at him, but he's looking the other way, one gloved hand trailing along the banister of the boardwalk and knocking the snow there to the ground. She lets her smile fall off. "I have Susan."

"You told me Susan smelled like marinara sauce."

"So? There are worse things to smell like. Doesn't mean she can't be a friend."

She doubts Susan would quantify it that way. They don't even see each other that much anymore now that Susan's office got moved upstairs. It's not the kind of workplace where people go out for drinks after work or pal around in the breakroom. It's just a physical space where a small bundle of ants spend most of the day before clocking out and going their separate ways. It's what attracted her to the job in the first place. More and more of her colleagues are working remotely nowadays, but the only thing that makes her heart hurt more than the grey fabric walls of her cubicle are the grey plaster walls of her apartment.

Ian rubs at the back of his neck. "You should call your dad. Tell him you're alive."

The image she has of her father is that of a man glued to a worn brown recliner, face bathed in the blue light of a TV, the skin of his jowls the only thing baggier than his gut. Dee doubts the image will change, even if she does see him again. "He knows I'm alive and he knows I don't want to be found."

"Still," he kicks at the snow along the edge of the walkway, releasing a brief cloud over some dead dandelions. "He's getting up there in years. You might run out of time."

"He's what? Sixty? That's hardly one foot in the grave."

"He's the one who filed the report."

That stops her, little black boots skidding slightly as she turns to face him. The shadows from the distant streetlight make his nose look abnormally long. "I thought you did it?" It'd taken her nearly a month to get up the courage

to call him, another four months to agree to meet up on that first January Friday. She told herself it was guilt at leaving without a word that had her buying the burner phone and punching in his number, but truthfully it was a much less noble desire. Her stomach churned with emptiness and there was only one person she'd left behind who could fill it.

She'd been certain it was him that had filed the report, a report he didn't know how to take back without revealing where she was.

"Just because he thought you left by yourself didn't mean he didn't want you back. He probably thought you wouldn't make it on your own. Most seventeen-year-olds wouldn't."

Of course he thought she'd run away. She'd emptied both his wallet and the emergency funds they stored on the fireplace mantel. Even then it was barely enough for the procedure.

The frigid air pours into her lungs like water as she takes a deep breath and turns back to the empty boardwalk. "He hasn't looked very hard if all these years he never found me."

"It's like you said, he realized you didn't want to be found." Ian's tone is light, free of any condemnation. He keeps pace with her, unbothered by the stops and starts. She lets his words trail away without response.

The shops on the left are closed, sandwich boards tucked in the doors and street seating chained up. There's faint lighting from the back of the shops, a security light to remind would-be thieves the emptiness is only temporary. The shop is still cared for, even if the owners have stepped out. To their right is an endless void of spilled ink. It's far too large of a body of water to freeze over other than a few wrinkly patches at the very edges and she can hear the sound of small waves crashing in the distance. The sound is the only thing to say it's even there at all.

Maybe it's that lack of sight that the night brings that helps turn the eyes inward. That's the best part of the night, when the small talk is done and the evening allows for the perfect combination of alcohol-loosened tongues and late night introspection. Those are the good conversations. That's why she's here, month after month and year after year.

She and Susan talk about the slew of slushy weather and how the construction on the highway makes traffic a mess getting to and from the office. She even talks to Henry or Mike sometimes, whoever's there heating

up their food when she is, about the benefits of eating more leafy greens or when in the day you should stop drinking caffeine.

That's enough to sustain her through the in-between weeks.

The way he glances at the ground before speaking tells her she won't like what he has to say. "I mean, it's a bit selfish, isn't it? Running away and hiding?"

She stops, pulling her arm out of his. "What's happening? Why're you being like this all of a sudden?" Her eyes skate over the familiar planes of his face but she can't find answers there. He keeps his gaze downward, looking smaller than he has all evening.

"It's just...I mean, I'm about to have a kid—"

"You already have a kid."

"The novelty has worn off, you know? It's like, oh, okay, this is really my life now. And I'd like it if you could get to know my kids. Maybe even be a godmother?"

She sniffs, ignoring the way the cold air in her sinuses nearly brings her to tears, and looks away. "Do people even have godparents anymore?"

She won't have children of her own, she knows that for certain. Marriage is on the table, but first she'd have to find someone willing to accept her barricaded past. Chances are slim. She doesn't go out anyway—where would she even meet someone?

It's tempting, what Ian is offering. Not a family, per se, but something family-adjacent.

"When I left," she says, moving to lean on the banister and letting the elbows of her jacket soak through with snow, "I thought things would fall back into place eventually. Like I could just pick up and replant myself somewhere. But it's so much harder than that." Ian comes up next to her, leaning on the banister as well and staring out over the water. She doubts they see the same things in the blankness yawning before them. "Anyone at work willing to talk to me thinks I'm boring at best, dodgy at worst because I don't talk about my family or where I come from. In the movies, people always make friends at college, but fuck, I don't even have my GED. I'm lucky to have a job at all."

"You mean to tell me managing customer complaints at an office supply company isn't the dream job?"

She elbows him hard enough to send him stumbling. He squawks in outrage and makes a show of righting his coat and tucking his scarf back under

his chin. There's a delicate fluttering in her chest at the sight. Truly, some things don't change.

She's lucky to be able to count Ian as a friend.

He tugs her arm until he can loop his elbow through hers again and they set back off walking. In the distance an airplane warning light blinks, drawing them forward like moths, and Dee lets it smooth the wrinkles building at the edges of her mind. She bides her time, knowing what's coming. They always end up here at some point.

"Do you regret it?"

Her answer is always the same: "No." It's still true, especially on nights when she awakes in a panicked sweat, fighting off phantom hands and reliving the burning pains of her past. She couldn't stay. But tonight she adds on the newest layers, "I just never thought waiting to start again would take so long."

The problem with going back is the same as it always is, yet it only compounds year after year. There'll be questions that she can't answer. Her dad would take a bat to Caleb Henning's face if he knew what the man had done as a boy. She might win a few sympathies for that, but not once they realized what she'd done after. She had to travel almost two hundred miles to even find a place that'd terminate her nightmares.

"It doesn't have to be all or nothing," he says, throwing her off guard. Seeing her blank look, he amends, "I mean, you can visit my family and stuff without having to see everyone. It's been so long, I doubt anyone around town would even recognize you now."

"How can you still live in that place?" She reaches up to brush aside a branch in danger of snagging their hats. The tree is thin, planted by the town in its cubicle of dirt only a few years ago, and it's not yet prepared for even the slightest touch of snow. "It's so stuffy. Everyone knows everyone."

"Having community can be a good thing, you know."

She exhales noisily, just to make sure he hears it. "You're not going to give up on this, are you?" It's not like they don't have some iteration of this same conversation each month, but normally he lets it go early in the evening and their illusion of normalcy can remain intact. Maybe being a father really is changing him.

His hand slips down from her elbow and takes her gloved hand in his. "You deserve friends. Happiness."

There's too much in that sentence, so she ignores it. Ahead is the only shop in the strip that's ever open late, the glow of its windows cutting through the night and spilling onto the sidewalk. She tugs him towards it, ignoring his usual protests about how irritated his wife would be to find out he was eating Chinese takeout, especially at this time of night.

"I think she'd rather you and I were having an affair," he says. The shop is tiny, with two round tables, which could never be simultaneously occupied unless you wished to have someone else's elbow in your dish. There are only three chairs between the two tables. The occupant of the solo chair at the second table is treated to a side view of the standing cooler across from them.

She orders fried rice and boneless ribs and treats herself to an orange soda from the cooler. The woman behind the counter is the same one as always, but if she recognizes them, she doesn't give any indication. Dee doubts there are many others who come this late and eat in, but who was she to assume they're memorable? The sense of anonymity is nice, as though this is their first adventure of this kind and not a monthly reminder of how brutish all the other nights of the year felt.

"Eating in," she had told Ian the first time they'd come, when he protested being directed to one of the chairs, "is the secret to getting more."

When the containers arrive, they're heaped beyond the point of being able to close. The ribs are a reddish brown with juicy bits of fat clinging on the corners and the fried rice is the good kind, with scrambled egg and tiny shrimps mixed in. Perfect.

"Eat up," she says. They don't bother with plates, instead duking it out with their chopsticks for prime cuts and the little shrimps in the rice. It hasn't been that long since the chicken and fries, but they both eat like they might never again. The world outside the window is awash in pitch blackness, making it feel like they're eating in space, all by themselves.

After a few moments of silence, he begins, "I just think," and drags her back to Earth.

"Why is this such a big deal all of a sudden?" She tries to keep the heat out of her voice. She won't be able to make up for it for another four weeks if she says something she regrets.

“Laura wants to meet you. And I want you to meet her. I think you two would get along well. And, I already told you, I want you to be a part of my kids’ lives.”

She almost asks why, but stops herself. She knows it’d make him frown in that sympathetic way of his.

“Don’t do it for your sake, then,” he says, startling her with his forceful tone. Distantly, she wonders if the man and the woman who run the restaurant can hear them, if they’re listening in. How much of Dee and Ian’s lives have they pieced together from one conversation each month? “Don’t do it because you’re lonely and depressed. Don’t give a shit about yourself, fine. Do it for me. Do it because I’m your friend and I’m asking this as a favor. It’s important to me.”

“Ian—”

“You’ve been selfish all these years.” It pains him to say it, she can tell by the way his nose flares and the corners of his eyes pinch slightly. But he’s determined, regardless of how much his words might hurt either of them. It hits her then, the realization that he’s been waiting all night for this little speech. Knowing him, he probably practiced it in the mirror, bouncing on his toes to hype himself up before getting in his car to come out tonight. He takes a fortifying breath and continues, “I let you run away and I didn’t tell anyone where you were, even when all those rumors started that you were murdered by a serial killer. I let you set up these stupid and elaborate rules for us to meet up once a month and I let you do it because I wanted to see you. I was desperate for your scraps. But, but...we’re too old for this. I’m married and I’ve got a kid and another on the way and this?” He gestures between them as if to encompass their late night snack. “This is silly. I’m not saying you have to move back. I’m not saying you need to be who you were before. But I am asking you, as your friend, to do this favor, for me. Meet my family. Pretend you actually like me.”

“I do like—”

“And don’t leave my messages on read all month. Are you worried I’m going to lure you back if you show me too much human decency? I mean, Christ, Dee. Haven’t you punished yourself enough?”

Her mouth hangs open, half a bite of un-chewed rib sitting between her molars. The rest of her bite dangles from her chopsticks for a few seconds before falling and landing with a flat splat on the rice.

It's...easier to justify doing something if it isn't for herself. It isn't letting herself off the hook if it's what Ian wants, right? In fact, shouldn't doing what Ian wants be part of the reparations she owes? She'd upended more than just her life when she left.

She lets it spin out before her, a fantasy world building faster than she can reel it in. A world in which she might be called on to babysit for date night. A world in which she stops by those street carts peddling odds and ends and buys paper butterflies or brightly colored pinwheels just because she knows it'll make Ian's kids happy.

To think of a world where she could make someone happy, even for just a passing moment, is the cruelest temptation her mind could conjure. It's been so long, she's not sure what satisfaction tastes like on the tongue anymore.

But. There are memories that lurk in those streets she once knew, memories that threaten to unravel the fragile peace she's constructed. Would it make all of her pain and suffering for nothing if she goes back?

Ian pokes her nose with his chopsticks. She goes cross-eyed for a moment tracking them as he pulls back. "It's not going back, it's going forward. You have to, eventually."

She pats at her nose with a napkin and pulls the pieces of herself back together from where they'd been splayed across the table between them. "If you think I'm going to be anything but the worst influence, and I mean a real pushover, you've got another thing coming." She doesn't look at him as she says it. She doesn't want to make any promises and she doesn't want to see any hope on his face. "I'm talking ice cream every time we go out, movies past bedtimes, embarrassing stories from your childhood. The whole nine yards."

"I'm looking forward to it."

He lets it drop after and for that, she's grateful. Their silence is comfortable, like an old sweater tugged out from the back of the closet.

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By the time they turn towards the park and ride, the sky has gone grey with the impending sunrise. Their cars are parked only a few spots from each other, two of only a handful that remain.

"This you?" she asks as he stops besides a small van she's never seen before.

“Yeah. Two car seats won’t fit in the old sedan.”

“Nice,” she says, looking at her car, purchased a little over six years ago. It’s almost as old as her and far more prone to tantrums in the cold than she is. Maybe she could shop around a bit, get an idea of what’s out there nowadays. Her job isn’t the highest paying, but other than rent and groceries, she spends nothing. She has no one to spend it on. A little splurge might not hurt.

He hugs her tight, pressing a kiss to the side of her hair, before stepping back. “I miss you already.”

She bites her lip. She doesn’t want to make promises. Instead of the same “see you next month,” she always offers, she shoves some new words around her mouth and finally says, “Maybe I’ll text you next week.”

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