

The light bulb flickered to life. He stared into the dingy mirror of the Men's Restroom, looking for something to answer all his questions. *How did this happen? When? Why me? Why now? Is it my fault?* The room was deadly silent and he wanted to scream at nothing and everything. Instead he let go of the porcelain sink and shook his hands to get the blood flowing again. Raking his fingers through his perfectly messy hair, he moved to leave the stale air of the cramped room behind. It held no answers for him anyway.

The door opened as he pushed on it, its old hinges squeaking softly. He dragged his feet along the waxed and bleached floor of the hallway. The old tiles were a sickly yellow-white color. His eyes didn't focus on anything as he navigated his way back through the pale, sterile walls, and it seemed too monumental and worthless an effort to try and make them. Instead he continued his steady trudge to the waiting room.

“Rob?”

His head jerked up and he was suddenly all too focused. A young woman stood in front of him, her head tilted sideways in concern. Unsure how to respond, he remained still until a soft hiccup interrupted his distracted state. A little boy, no more than three years old clutched the hand of the woman – his mother – with tears in his eyes and on his puffy cheeks. He looked up at her again?

“Marie? What are you doing here? Is everything alright?” He searched her face as though the answer was hidden there.

“Oh, yes. We're fine. Benny here wasn't feeling too good, but turns out it was just a tummy-ache. He'll be fine. What are you doing here?”

“Just a check-up is all. I'm right as rain.” A cough interrupted him, and he rushed to compensate. “Just a little cold, it's fine.” His face lit up. “So, I've been thinking, you're working long hours constantly, wouldn't you like to go on a vacation? You've certainly earned it with all the time you put in. Clear your calendar for the next month. We'll go everywhere; do everything we always wanted to as kids.”

She glanced between Benny who still clutched her hand and hid behind her and Rob's eager face. She bit her lip.

“Well, I'd love to, but—”

“Great! We'll leave tomorrow.”

“Robby—”

“Don't worry about packing, I'll buy anything you need, and—”

“Robert.” She put a hand on his chest, and spoke as if to Benny when he wouldn’t stop asking for candy in the store. She sighed when she saw how taken-aback he seemed at her sudden firmness. “I’d love to, but you know I can’t. I have a child now. I have responsibilities. I can’t afford to get fired from my first stable job in months,” She smiled up at him apologetically, trying to make up for her hard words, but it did nothing to soothe him.

“Just give me one month. We’ll go somewhere wonderful. I promise you won’t regret it. We can bring Benny with us. I’ll pay for everything,” He pleaded.

But she was already shaking her head. “I’m sorry Rob, I can’t.” The look on his face broke her heart, like he was the toddler, and someone told him that Santa died. He pasted on an artificial smile and hoped he hadn’t made her feel guilty. He even forced out a laugh.

“You’re right, you’re right. Even as kids, you were always right. I’m sorry for being inconsiderate,” She smiled that bright, kind smile that she had always saved for him, when she knew he needed it.

“Maybe next month? I think I have a break in my work then,”

He smiled so painfully, so completely devoid of hope that she had to look away.

“Maybe next month,” he mumbled. He excused himself quietly, and tried to maneuver around her and the little boy – who had stopped crying and begun sucking on his thumb – only to walk right into a tall, brunet doctor he recognized. The man rested his arm on Rob’s shoulder and spoke quietly.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

Rob froze. He had not spoken so softly that Marie would not be able to hear his words. Shrugging out of the man’s grasp, he jogged past Marie and out into the street. Marie turned to the doctor, alarmed.

“What’s wrong?”