

I have one rule on Valentine's Day: don't talk to me. Simple, right? Not for the women of my office. I managed to avoid most human contact by keeping my earbuds jammed in my ears and throwing myself into the newsletter I was ghost writing for a local non-profit, but it was hard to ignore the parade of delivery men or the bouquets of flowers massing on desks all around me.

Then there was Kendra, who insisted on stopping by to show me the bouquet of pink lilies and tulips from her boyfriend back home in Jamaica. She mistook my polite murmur of acknowledgement for an invitation to tell me all about how he was flying in for the weekend and she was hoping he would propose.

Miles rescued me with an offer to treat me to lunch, but I was in no mood to see all the happy couples meeting for a quick tête-à-tête before scurrying back to their respective jobs. By five p.m. all I wanted to do was drown my sorrows in a bottle of wine and wait for the day to end.

When I arrived home, a package was waiting on my doorstep. After unlocking the door, I set it on the kitchen counter, unwrapping it quickly. Underneath the clear cellophane and green tissue paper was a small vase the size of highball glass. Its base was filled with Lucite carved to look like diamonds with a single blue hydrangea bloom floating in water above. I smiled, not needing to look at the card to know who it was from, but I glanced at it anyway.

*Happy Valentine's Day to my baby girl. Remember, there's always one man who loves you. Love, Dad.*

Every year, without fail, he sent me a blue hydrangea, a flower we both lovingly tended in his garden year after year. Some of my earliest memories were of playing in the dirt while he pruned and planted, or as I got older, learning how to test the soil to make sure it was acidic enough to maintain the precise bright hue he so carefully cultivated. Every year, as I fingered the

delicate petals, Frenchie's line from *Grease* about a girl only being able to depend on her daddy went through my head. I really did have one of the best. Even from 600 miles away, he was still thinking of me and knew when I needed him.

I hit the speed dial on my cell, suddenly needing to hear his voice. Listening to the phone ring in their living room back home, I kicked off my shoes and reached for a bottle of Shiraz. To my surprise, when he answered, I could barely speak. My voice cracked and my throat felt thick. "Hi, Daddy."

"Hey, Kitten. How are you?"

I brushed a tear from my cheek. "Fine. I got your gift. Thank you."

"Oh, you're welcome. It was the least I could do. I wish I could be there in person to give you a big hug."

"I wish you could, too."

"Do you want to say hi to your mom?" My dad was never one to stay on the phone long.

"Sure."

He called my mother's name across the house. "She's coming. I love you."

"I love you, too, Daddy. Thanks again."

While the line was quiet, I put the phone on speaker and wrested the cork out of the bottle. I was just pouring a glass when my mom came on the line.

"Annabeth, dear, how are you?"

"I'm fine mom. Just pouring a glass of wine."

"Good idea. I'll join you." The line went silent again and then I could hear her clinking around in the glass cabinet. "Did you get your father's present? You've always been his favorite, ever since you first wrapped those little newborn fingers around his and squeezed."

“I know, mom. I’m very lucky. How have you guys been?”

“Oh, just fine. Two old retired folks with not much else to do than watch television. But I want to hear about that event you organized. How did it go?”

I filled her in on the night, leaving no detail out, from Mia’s dress to Alex and his gallant, but disappointing, sendoff.

“Wasn’t meant to be,” she said without missing a beat. “I know it’s hard to hear, but it’s true. What does that old song say? You can’t force love, or something like that?”

“I think it’s ‘hurry love.’” I took a large gulp of wine. We had this conversation many times before and she had repeated the same advice on several different occasions. “But I’m thirty four. Isn’t it about time? What if he doesn’t really exist?”

“Maybe he doesn’t.”

I gritted my teeth. Those words were meant to shock me. It was a technique she’d been using since I was a teenager. Pretend she didn’t care and say the exact opposite of what I wanted to hear. It was only jarring the first time. Ever since it’s just been annoying.

My mother took my silence as a sign her maneuver worked. “I’m just saying that even if you don’t find someone – and I hope you do – you’ll be fine. You’re smart, you’re strong and you’ve got a great career. You don’t actually *need* a man. I know you get lonely, but there are a lot of complications you don’t have to deal with this way. Think about it. You can do what you want, when you want, without thinking about anyone else. And you don’t have to worry about getting pregnant or having a disease.”

I couldn’t believe she just said that. “Mom!” I drew the word out into three syllables as I had when I was a teenager.

My dad must have been listening to her end of the conversation because he picked up the extension just then. “What your mother is trying to say is whoever he is, he’s out there looking for you, too. He’s getting closer every day and is getting to you as fast as he can.”

“You, on the other hand,” my mom scolded, “need to get out more. You live in Chicago for Pete’s sake! It’s not like there isn’t anything to do. Or what about online? Have you looked up any of your old friends from college on Facebook? I can think of one in particular who would be thrilled to hear from you again.”

Nick was the last person I wanted to think about right now. I finished the rest of the glass in a single swallow. “Mom, we are not having this conversation.”

“I’m just trying to help.”

“I know you are. Look, it’s getting late and I need to eat and head off to bed. Early meeting tomorrow.” I knew I shouldn’t lie to my parents, but my mom was on my last nerve and this was not the night to cross me.

“Okay, honey. Have a good evening. We love you.”

“Love you, too, Mom.”

“Goodnight, Kitten.”

I smiled. “Goodnight, Dad.”

I pressed the “End” button on the phone and flung it down on the countertop. After refilling my glass, I tottered a little unsteadily to the couch and lay down, pulling a blanket over me. Back in went the earbuds and I pressed play on my playlist of lonely songs.

As I sank ever deeper into the crimson velvet of the wine, my dad’s words kept playing in a loop in my head. “He’s getting to you as fast as he can.” But it was so hard to wait. Again, the tears came. I was so sick and tired of crying over being lonely. But I felt like I was dying inside,

drying up from lack of love. I couldn't even remember the last time I kissed someone, let alone did anything more. I read somewhere that babies who weren't cuddled and touched early on failed to thrive in life. But what about later on? Was it possible to die as an adult from lack of human touch?

Involuntarily, my thoughts drifted back to Alex and the feeling of his hand wrapped around mine. I held on to that memory as long as I could, rationing it like a refugee with a handful of rice, unsure of when the next meal would come. What would have happened if I had taken the initiative and asked for his number? Would I be alone now, or would I be lying in his arms? In my imagination, that's exactly where I was, drinking in his heat, basking in the affection I so desperately needed.

Eventually, my eyes grew heavy and I fell into a fitful sleep, dreams mixing with memories until I couldn't tell which was which. They came in flashes, snippets of long repressed memory jumbled together. I was back in Rome, my senior year of college, with my best friend, a lanky boy with gorgeous baby blues and James Dean looks.

One minute I'm kissing him passionately, intent on crossing the line between friends and lovers. Nick's lips, the heat between us, are all I know. Then there's the soft rumble of his voice as he whispers into my ear, "All this time you were writing those letters and I was right in front of you. You could have just told me." My stomach muscles seize up as I realize he is wrong; those letters aren't for him. The hard muscle of his chest as I push him away, babbling about him not being "the one." His fingertips digging into my arm as I seek to free myself. Now I'm trembling, naked, on the bathroom floor, as he hurls an alternating string of curses and apologies at me through the door. A hole punched in the hotel wall. Dust motes floating through a golden sunrise as I peek out, relieved he is gone. Waiting in vain on the steps of a fountain in my yellow

sundress for him to return. Nick's final words to me when we meet again weeks later, "I never want to see you again. You deserve to die alone."

I woke with a start, sitting upright far too fast. The room began to spin around me. Oh, not good. My stomach roiled. I barely made it to the kitchen sink in time, stubbing my toe on the corner of the island dividing the two rooms in my haste. As I stood gripping the countertop to keep the world steady, my head resting on the ledge of the cool stainless steel sink, my mind swam with memories of loves come and gone, my heart full of regret and what ifs.

I hated Valentine's Day.