

*A man with a bowl of half-cooked rice rarely declines an offer of roast duck*

My mailbox reeks of oregano.

Three parts oregano to one part rosemary and basil, to be exact. I realize this as I unlock the narrow metal door, and suddenly Mom’s ulterior motive in offering to get my mail on Friday is clear. For a split second, her protective herbal blend, bound in a makeshift cheesecloth sachet and secured with a garbage bag tie, teeters on the ledge. But then, it succumbs to the weight of the mail resting on top of it and bursts. The contents of my mailbox tumble down in an avalanche of herbs, letters, and catalogs. Oregano clings to my sweater, dusts the mailboxes below, and lands on the drab beige carpet in clumps and sprinkles.

The mail room is empty, thank God. Not surprising for a Sunday night—I’m only here because I didn’t have a chance to come by yesterday, due to the hectic Thanksgiving weekend. Mom and Dad flew all the way from California to Massachusetts to spend the holiday with Owen and me “just because,” which is Mom-speak for “My grandson will *not* be scarred by his first postdivorce holiday.”

I peek through the half-open door into the lobby. No one milling around. I shut the door with my foot while wiping my shirt clean as best I can, then scoop the herbs into a Dustbuster-ready pile. I’ve got to clean up this mess before someone from management walks in. What possible excuse could I offer? That I’ve decided to bake artisanal pizza in the mail room?

Now that I think about it, there's no way to explain it, *unless you know my sister*.

It was absolutely essential, Lindsay told me in August, that I “clear all stagnant energy” and “reclaim the space with intention” prior to moving in with Owen, but I had a few other things on my mind. Trivial things, like avoiding eviction, ensuring child support and visitation were in place, and helping Owen adjust to the fallout of divorce as well as kindergarten in a new school and town. There was no time for burning dried sage—number one on the list Lindsay emailed me. Even if there had been, setting off smoke detectors didn't strike me as the best way to ingratiate myself with the new neighbors. Putting a large black tourmaline stone in my five-year-old's pocket to absorb negative energy seemed dangerous, and making my own room spray required that I buy witch hazel as well as patchouli, lemon, and cedarwood essential oils.

Owen caught me scrolling through Lindsay's email, smirking, and he climbed into my lap and tried to read along when I refused. He put his finger on item number six—“play 528 Hz chakra cleansing music”—his attention focused on the unpronounceable *hz* consonant cluster. I explained the letters stood for hertz, a measurement of frequency, which was a fancy word for *sound*. He pointed to the text, so I gave in and read, “This healing music will cleanse your home of stagnant energy, and rejuvenate your mind, body, and soul.” Then I noticed this gem in the next paragraph: “Stagnant energy that is unable to raise its frequency may transform into a negative spirit, or ghost.” I tried to scroll past, but it was too late. Owen spotted the word *ghost*. Terrified, he said we should go back home to Nick's condo in Boston, where we all used to live together, since we'd never had to worry about the energy there. At which point I cursed my sister under my breath, and told Owen

that while Aunt Lindsay was trying to be helpful, sometimes her ideas were a bit silly, and our new apartment in Natick would soon be home, too.

Mom found out about Lindsay's email after Thanksgiving dinner, when Owen assured her that my room—which she and Dad were about to unpack in—wasn't haunted, even though we never had time to clean the “stag-uh-nut” energy. Mom looked at me, straight-faced in front of Owen, and raised an eyebrow while I shoed him into the living room with Dad.

“Take a look at this list,” I said on my way to the kitchen, pulling up the email and handing her my phone. I busied myself putting leftover turkey into plastic containers while Mom read. “Did you see what she wrote next to ‘black tourmaline stone’?” I asked, when she looked up. “‘Don't buy new for this venture. Listen to your collection. A stone will speak to you.’” I used my best whispery yoga instructor voice. “She is *ridiculous*. Maybe her L.A. spa clients have collections of stones they converse with daily, but that's not a big thing around here.”

“What's this one?” Mom pointed to number nine on Lindsay's list. “An herbal blend. Basil, rosemary, yarrow, juniper, and anise. That must smell lovely.”

“I'm sure it does. You know what else smells great? Febreze. But that doesn't mean it's a ‘spiritual protectant against harmful forces.’”

“Well, it can't hurt,” Mom said, poking through my alphabetized spice rack. “And it looks like you have most of these items already.”

“That’s not remotely true. I’ve never even heard of yarrow. I don’t have anise. And juniper is a tree. I don’t know if the recipe calls for crushed-up leaves or essential oils, but whatever it is, I don’t—”

“So you substitute,” Mom said, waving away my concerns. “Just like cooking. Let’s see . . . looks like we’ll have enough rosemary and basil left over from the roast, and I’ll put in extra oregano for the ingredients we don’t have. Perfect!”

I shook my head. “You have lost your mind. You can’t replace three of the five ingredients with oregano. It will mess up the proportions. That’s not how . . .” I stopped short as the flaw in my argument became apparent. Mom knew I had no idea how this nonsense worked, so who was I to tell her the rules? I changed tactics. “What are you going to put all the herbs *into*, anyway? Ziplocs don’t breathe, and isn’t that the whole point of this absurd exercise? To cleanse negative energy with scent? Do you really think you’re visiting the daughter who happens to have empty sachets hanging around her apartment?”

Mom scanned my spartan kitchen, which was devoid of clutter or knickknacks that might be of help. Finally, she rested her gaze on the cheesecloth we’d used to cook the turkey, which was on the far side of the countertop.

“Mom, *no!*”

“Come on, Marissa, indulge your poor mother. It’s no different than knocking on wood. What’s wrong with wanting my daughter to have better luck?”

“Fine. I give up.” I pounded the lid down over the bursting turkey container. “You can make one for Owen’s room.”

But Mom made a second one while I was busy scrubbing pans and loading the dishwasher, I realize now. And she decided to use one in my mailbox to ward off whatever negativity might come to me in the form of bills.

I scoop up the Stop & Shop circular, Val-Pak coupons, and Gap catalog. Hiding underneath are three pieces of actual mail, addressed to me rather than RESIDENT or CURRENT OCCUPANT.

All bills. Verizon. Visa. Eversource.

“Ha!” I hear myself say out loud as I rummage through my bag for my phone. I place the bills in a semicircle around the pile of herbs, open the camera, and line up the shot.

But I don’t take the picture. Because whose behavior is the most ludicrous in this sorry chain of events? Not Lindsay’s. She has no idea that one of her recommended negative-energy-cleansing techniques has been hijacked. Not Mom’s, either. Her actions may be sorely misguided, but they’re born of love. That leaves me. I’m the pathetic one attempting to document that Italian spices do not, in fact, have the power to stave off monthly bills.

My throat constricts, and then I feel the tears, and I look up at the ceiling and blink quickly. I was supposed to make something of myself. Yet here I am, working three jobs and still in debt, because three years at Yale is no better than zero when it comes to checking off *college graduate* on work applications.

Heat is pulsing through me now, traveling from my cheeks to my earlobes, across the base of my neck, and under my arms. I’m familiar with this humiliation-to-anger

evolution, because my thoughts have turned to Nick, and what started all of this but his delightful Fourth of July surprise? When he told me his new boss was a jerk and would only let him take off the first three days of our annual week-long vacation to Cape Cod, I believed him without a second thought. Turns out he needed time to meet with his divorce attorney, so having a gullible idiot of a wife came in handy. A day after Owen and I returned, I got served.

I look at the time. 5:32. Nick will be back with Owen in an hour and a half. Which means I can't put off telling him about the Great Lunchroom Escape any longer. I got the call Tuesday: Owen told the lunch monitor he had to go to the bathroom and took off instead. He was found, after a panicked hunt, in the music room. Which means that my sweet, rule-abiding child *lied*. To a grown-up. It's totally out of character. I think I've figured out what's going on, but Nick isn't going to like my solution to the problem. I've been using Thanksgiving excuses to put off an inevitable fight over money, and those end tonight.

But one crisis at a time. Right now I need a Dustbuster.

I crack the door and peek into the hallway again. Still clear. As I pull it open, I spot a slim blond woman down the hall to my left, her back to me. She's in an elegant black sheath dress with a bateau neck and matching black suede pumps. She takes a couple steps and peers around the corner of the hallway, the red soles of her shoes visible as she walks. It's a dead giveaway. Red soles are the hallmark of Christian Louboutins—designer shoes that cost nearly triple my weekly child support. She takes a few more tentative steps down the corridor until we both hear the opening of a door, the exchange of pleasantries, and the

steady hum of conversation. Then she spins back and strides down the hallway, head bowed. She brushes past me, veers left into the lobby toward the main doors, and stops. She turns around and regards me curiously, eyeing the mail key in my hand.

“Are you lost?” I ask as she approaches me. “I, uh, I’m not supposed to let nontenants in the mail room, but if you tell me the name of the person you’re looking for, I can find the apartment number on the mailbox.”

“No, no, no, I’m fine. I know where they’re . . . thank you anyway,” she says with an embarrassed laugh. Now that we’re close up, I can see she’s much older than her figure suggests. Her makeup is expertly applied, but her foundation has settled into the lines around her eyes and mouth, drawing attention to the very imperfections she’s attempting to disguise. “Do you live here?”

“Yeah.”

“So you know Rose Klein?”

“No, sorry. I just moved in last August with my son. I’m still meeting people, but I haven’t—”

“You have a little boy?” She clasps her hands together. “You *must* have known Bernie, then. Rose’s husband? He loved children. The only man I’ve ever known who kept lollipops on him at all times. He was probably responsible for the rotting of hundreds of children’s teeth.”

“There’s a man my son and I have bumped into a couple of times. Bald, usually wears a bow tie? We call him the Candy Grandpa.”

“That’s him. What a character. He was a wonderful man. They’re sitting shiva for him right now.”

“Oh,” I say, uncertain what she means.

She offers a kind smile. “A Jewish condolence call.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I say automatically. But how deep of a loss can it be for this woman, who knows where the gathering is but is choosing not to join it?

I wait for the reflexive “thank you,” but instead the woman says, “I’m worried about Rose. Bernie took care of everything for her, always has. No sisters or brothers, and Bernie’s brother lives in Florida.”

“She doesn’t have any other family?”

“Bernie’s nephew is coming in, but he can’t get here until next Saturday. Some big psychiatry conference in London that he’s presenting at this week. So in the meantime, she’s going to need some dinners, and someone has to check in on her until a more permanent arrangement is set up. She doesn’t drive.”

“She’s lucky to have you, then.” I smile politely. That should do for a sympathetic closer, shouldn’t it? I don’t want to be rude, but—

“Yes, well, that’s the problem. I came in for the funeral, but I live in New York. Even if I were closer by . . .” She stops, clears her throat. “I didn’t speak to Rose today. After all these years, you’d think things would be different, but, well . . . seeing me would probably be too complicated. I doubt she knew I was there, at the graveside. I made sure to stay in the back.” She sighs, then fishes her wallet out of her handbag, cobalt blue with the gold Prada logo on the magnetic snap, and pulls out three crisp one-hundred-dollar bills.

“Would you help? Just drop off dinner once a day, see if she needs to run any errands, maybe get her out for a little fresh air? You can keep the rest of the money for yourself.”

“*Me?* But I don’t even know her. I mean, she might recognize me from around the building, but we’ve never spoken. Doesn’t she have any friends?”

“I’m sure she does, but they all seem pretty frail. From what I saw at the funeral, at least. And I don’t know where they live or if they even drive at this point.”

“Listen, I’d like to help.” I try not to stare at the bills in her outstretched hand. Three hundred dollars. Almost a week’s worth of take-home pay from my part-time admin job at Allerton Veterinary Care.

“Not enough?” the woman asks, catching my gaze. “That’s all I have for cash, but I could write you a check. How about that?” She drops her wallet into her handbag, holds on to the bills with her left hand, and digs through the inner pockets of her bag with her right. She fishes out her checkbook, cloaked in cobalt blue Prada as well, and a pen.

“No, no, it’s not that. It’s . . . well, won’t she—Rose, you said, right? Won’t she be suspicious if I start showing up every day? If I can’t tell her that you’ve asked me to help out, she’s going to wonder why some stranger is bringing her meals.”

“Good catch,” she says, nodding at me with approval. “I should’ve thought of that.” She tilts her head, stares at the ceiling for a moment. “I know! Why don’t you tell her that management sent an email to all tenants, and a bunch of people wanted to help out. Say you’re the coordinator.”

“But . . .” I pause, try to figure out how to point out the risk she’s taking without painting myself as a criminal, but there’s no tactful way to say it. “I could just pocket the money and not do anything to help.”

“You could. But people who steal don’t often confess beforehand. And at least I’ll know I tried.” She opens her checkbook, folds the bills in half, and stuffs them inside the empty slip pocket for the transaction register. Then she stabilizes the checkbook against the wall with her palm. “My phone number is on the check,” she says over her shoulder as she fills it out. “Feel free to call if you have any questions. I’m Lena, by the way. The check says Darlene, but no one calls me that.”

“I’m Marissa.”

“Marissa . . . ?” She turns her head and looks at me expectantly, points to the payee line on the check.

“Oh! Marissa Karalis.”

She writes as I spell it out loud for her, then tears the check out of the book and holds it up for me to see. Another fifty dollars. “Nice to meet you, Marissa,” she says, as she coaxes the three bills out from underneath the leather slip pocket and piles them on top of the check. “Do we have a deal?”