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The Keukenhof Gardens

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About the Contributor

Theatre major learning about humans and their complex interactions with each other. Thankful for stories and the power we all have to empathize with each other.

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THE KEUKENHOF GARDENS

FICTION BY EMMA KOWATCH

“I don’t want to be married anymore.”

The words walk straight out of Alayna’s mouth and into my brain, like a door-to-door salesman walks straight into your house to clean your perfectly fine carpet with his over-priced, better-than-life vacuum cleaner. Even though we’re in the Keukenhof Gardens, I feel like everyone in the park knows what has just been said. As those seven words, one for each year of our marriage, reach my ears, I experience a slow-rewind of VHS fuzz. A blur of angry reds, shocked pinks, and confused yellows flash across my eyes. Dutch tulips, the only witnesses to my humiliation, surround me. The colors rewind: Technicolor unplugged. Her delicate, soft shoulders suddenly feel rigid and brittle in my hands. I retract my fingers and drop my arms.

I’m not on vacation in the Netherlands but sitting on the couch in Lucy and Ricky Ricardo’s apartment living room. Except here, the jokes don’t sound funny. They come out familiar and stupid. Ricky’s loud laugh is cruel and Lucy’s just an awkward fool. Marriage is comical.

Tourists muck around. Pamphlets gossip in the wind. A wasted clear sky averts its eyes. Our new Adrië drools on my shoulder. Her exhaustion organizes into a deep rhythm of exhales and inhales. A fly zooms in and out of her inherited dark curls. The second she entered this world, we could tell she looked more like me. Unlike our first creation, Michelle, who parades ahead. Her four-year-old fingers bless each member of the tulip mob, even her awkward stride resembles her mother. Ten seconds ago, my day was beautiful. Ten seconds ago, this spontaneous vacation was comfort-

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able. Now it is painful and pathetic.

“I don’t want you anymore.” The words sounded harsher as I mentally push replay. I mute the furious questions. I skip over my wounded ego. I can fix this. Yeah, I can fix this. I just need to find the loop whole, the plot twist, the solution. I look up to Alayna for visual aid.

She’s picked up her pace. She walks about a foot in front of me on the sidewalk path. I stare at the back of her head, champagne pouring out in shiny soft locks. Her pale skin, softer and fuller from carrying two children, is dotted with goose bumps. Is it colder? I’m sweating. With each step, Alayna’s retro black skirt swishes in beat with the nervously shifting blossoms. She turns to look at me. It wakes me from a hypnotic daze.

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Her freckles crowd, her blue eyes shove, and her eyebrows cross their arms. This is not the look I get when I’ve forgotten to text when I’m coming home. It’s not the look I get when I don’t compliment her new dress. It’s not the look I get when I go off on the interesting details of the making of Casablanca. Those looks I can fix with a kiss on the neck, an “I’m sorry,” or a dip into a slow dance.

No, I’ve never seen this face directed at me before. This face barges in when the family room suddenly doesn’t “look right” and a garage sale is held in our front yard a couple hours later. This face smirks as Alayna hangs up on her boss and declares, “I’m quitting publishing to focus more on my painting!” This face comes when Alayna wants to leave city life to move back to easy-going Huntington Beach.

“Dad, can I run to the tree?”

I look away from my wife and see Michelle point to a tree fifteen feet away. Her face is decorated with her mother’s determination. I want to vomit. The words have morphed again: “I don’t love you anymore.”

“Yeah, don’t go any further and come right back.” The answer leaves my mouth. I realize I’m the

mismatched couch. I'm the boring job. I'm cramped New York City. And my wife doesn't want to be married to me anymore.

Adrie looks peaceful with her small body glued to Graham's shoulder. Her little feet bob in beat to Graham's stride. She sleeps so hard. She doesn't have a care in the world. I'm going to have to feed her soon. And Michelle will be hungry too. Do I even have any snacks left? It's ten in the morning and I've already said "No" to Michelle a million times. Goodness, are we always butting heads? She walks so confidently ahead. It's like she doesn't even need us. Was that how I walked from my parents years ago?

Adrie makes a noise. It's amazing how calm Michelle and Adrie look when they're fast asleep. Their lives are filled with more rest than anything else. I am so tired. I feel numb to all this...Aughh, we're in the Netherlands I should be the happiest girl in the world. I tuck my hair behind my ears and rub my pointer finger and thumb back and forth across my head.

I should dye my hair blue. I've always wanted to do that.

Graham sees Michelle twirl around in three circles then fall on her bum. He acts like this is the most entertaining thing to ever happen to him. He bursts into chuckles and points. I push a soft smile. How does he do it? How does he get so excited for every little thing? I mean it was thrilling at first, but now we're just doing the same thing every day.

My life goes through patterned motions of making messes and then cleaning them up. Over and over and over again. I put the kids in clean clothes only to have throw-up, dirt, food, and crap decorate them in a matter of minutes. Then I wash the clothes, wash the kids and start over again the next day. I make a mess cooking then have to clean it up. I make a mess with toys, trying to distract Michelle for forty-minutes so that I can have a few minutes to myself, then I have to gather them all up. I've become a dried paint brush. If I'm put through one more mess and one more clean-up, I'll snap.

Graham tries so hard. So. Hard. Graham says "the messes are part of the beauty." But he doesn't have to clean most of those "works of art." He treads lightly around me. I feel like he's always trying to depict what's wrong with me so that he can fix it, like one of his floor plans. And the other night,

when I was stressed about the art gallery, I blew up in his face about something stupid like dinner or bedtime. I can't even remember why.

Have I changed Adrie's diaper recently?

He looks happy. Like he was made to do this: carry Adrie, keep an eye on Michelle, walk in step by my side, enjoy this vacation, then return to the normal pace of repeated messes. He could keep doing this and be content. Even in this new, foreign environment, it feels like an average day because we're doing the same thing we always do at home. Same routines. I wasn't made for this. My body aches for something different. My curious feet stumble out of patterned walk, and suddenly I stub my toe. It cuts and begins to bleed, the red looks the same as the group of tulips to my right. Before I can even feel the pain, Graham reaches out to steady me. My shoulders expect his familiar touch. But this physical contact itches, feels cold.

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I stop, bracing against his palms. The words are released with surprised ease.

"I don't want to be married anymore."

"I don't want to be married anymore."

"Dad, can I run to the tree?"

"Yeah, don't go any further and come right back."

"Graham? Graham. Talk to me. What are you thinking right now?"

Adrie yawns.

"Please, just say something."

"I don't...I don't know what to say."

A few feet behind Alayna and Graham, a family of six laughs as they snap a group picture. Alayna

glances behind. This confrontation halts their sightseeing.

“Alayna, I love you. Don’t you—”

“Graham. I’m not try—”

“How long have you felt this way?”

Alayna pushes ahead. “I hadn’t really thought much about it till this point, but...a while.”

“You just decided right now?”

“No, Graham, I uh...I think I decided a long time ago, but I’m just now—”

“What are you talking about?” Graham takes three long strides and matches Alayna’s determined pace.

“I mean, I think I’ve felt this way for a while, but I’ve been covering it up with...other things.”

“And so you want a divorce? That doesn’t make sense.”

“I mean, is this all it’s going to be? Really? For the rest of our lives? I need different. I need something different, to go away or to discover something else. I—”

“Okay.” Graham stops, realizing they’re about to pass the tree Michelle’s running to. He watches her strawberry blonde head bounce closer to the tree.

“Okay?” Alayna turns back to Graham.

“Okay.”

“You mean, you agree? You think I should—”

“Obviously you need some time to breathe. I’ve been working too much. We talked about that, and you seemed fine about it, but you’re tired. You need to get away. We can figure out what’s wrong.”

“What’s wrong? Graham, nothing’s wrong. We’re getting away right now. Nothing needs to be fixed.”

“No, something is clearly wrong if you just want to leave a family, a marriage of seven years. Just explain it to me so I can help.”

“Nine years.”

“What?”

“We’ve been together nine years. Married for seven. Do those two years before not count?”

“No, of course they count, but we were just living together, this is—”

“What? A promise? I took those two years seriously. Neither of us wanted to commit, but we moved in anyway. That was a big step for me.”

“I know.”

“But that wasn’t enough. You wanted to make sure everything was planned out.”

“You’re making it sound like I forced you to marry me.”

The wind seems to take a hint from the subject and begins to pick up. The tulips bend with the wind, trying to catch a glimpse of the chipped, wearing relationship.

“No, I’m not saying that.”

“You wanted to marry me. You were excited. You’re not Holly from Breakfast at Tiffany’s.”

“What does that even mean?”

“This is us! You said it was a “new adventure.” And then Michelle happened and we were doing so good. I mean, I thought we were doing good! You seemed happy. You were happy! I know it’s getting a little crazier with Adrie, but it’s worth it, isn’t it? Your daughters, aren’t they worth it?”

The family of six has caught up and awkwardly shuffles around Alayna and Graham.

“And me? What about me? I love you, Alayna. Alayna, look at me. Please, I—I need to know... I just—I want you to—”

“I’m sorry.”

“Please, Alayna.”

“Graham. I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be married anymore. There’s nothing to fix. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I love you.”

“I need to do this. I’ll still help with the girls of course. I love them. I love you.”

PROSE

“Alayna. Alayna, look at me.”

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“Hey, Mom, Dad, look how fast I run and run!” Michelle has passed the tree and is attempting a live-action-Monet-tulip-dance. She ducks and twirls through the reds, yellows, and pinks.

Alayna watches, a blank canvas.

Graham watches Alayna.

“Mom! Dad!”

“That was so fast, babe!” Graham turns Alayna towards him.

“What are we doing? This is crazy. I’m hearing you. I think I understand. But let’s just wait till we get home. We can talk about it. We can—”

“Fix it.”

“I love you.” Graham wilts. “That’s not enough is it?” He clutches Adrie tighter. “You’ve already decided. Just like that. In three minutes, you’ve decided. What about me? Do I

get an opinion?”

“Sure you do, but will it matter when you know how I am?”

“What are you saying? Because I thought you were my wife, their mom.”

“Well that’s part of it. I want to be something else.”

“What do you want to be?”

“You never understood why I didn’t want to move in or get married at first either. But you came around.”

“I thought it was you who came around to sticking it out with me.”

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Alayna reaches toward Graham’s face, leans in, and kisses him softly.

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“We’re so different. I think...I do think I love you. But I need to figure this out.”

“What if you can’t?”

“You have to let me try.”

“Do I have a choice?”

Michelle runs up. “Mommy, I’m hungry. Dad, carry me now? When are we going home?” She’s red-faced and panting. Dirt and something sticky covers her hands and chest.

“What a mess,” Graham says, staring at Alayna.

“Give me Adrie, I’m going to feed her. You take Michelle back to the hotel and give her something to eat. We can talk about it later.”

“I love you.”

“We’ll talk later, Graham. Michelle’s got something all over her shirt. Here, I think I have a Wet One in my bag.”