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Rice Kit Dinners

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About the Contributor

Heidie Raine is a sophomore English major at Cedarville University ('23). She loves studying theology, writing letters, and perusing local thrift stores.

RICE KIT DINNERS

HEIDIE RAINE

I am sliding my right big toe back and forth over the slight divot in the vinyl tile of the kitchen floor. The cushion of my wool sock lessens the depth of the miniature canyon, but I can tell where each square starts and stops by familiarity. Back and forth, feeling for the crevice as my foot swiftly passes over it. Each movement is small, but enough; as soon as I sense the dip, I move my foot back rhythmically. My eyes stare vacuously ahead, across the table and through the balusters that separate the kitchen from the dusty family room half a level below. They half-heartedly focus on the dormant fireplace and dance over to the lumpy cream pullout couch painted with the foreign stains of childhood sleepovers and Superbowl parties. I squint through the slits in the wall to trace the silhouettes of the old stereo and our crooked-hung stockings, yet never commit enough to solidify the images. My foot is still softly swinging, back and forth, over the subtle dents in the floor.

His muffled voice drones on in the background, sharing stories of Wednesday night's dinner at The Wooden Nickel with Mark and Brenda. He speaks with a delightful disjointedness, like a child stumbling over the words to a story that you patiently and intently wait for them to finish. Our backs are turned to each other as he stirs the Knorr's Chicken Rice on the stove, and I pick at my fingers in my lap and sway my foot under the table. I inhale remnants of the fake chicken seasoning that screams of sodium and masks whatever it is added to; it melts into the must of the stale and distant air that otherwise claims the house. I turn my head slightly to the right to examine his chair which is significantly more worn than any of the others. The already faded walnut wood looks nearly unfinished under the slits of light cheating through the sliding glass door's blinds. I turn slightly more over my shoulder to face him as he breaks his murmurs with

a question:

"What time are you coming over Thursday night for dinner?"

I mechanically reach for my backpack that occupies the habitually empty seat next to my own. As I unzip my bag to look for my calendar, I bump over one of the stacks of paper whose home is the latter half of the kitchen table. My hands reach to straighten askew documents, but I am interrupted by the heavy thuds of his bare feet against the kitchen vinyl.

"Don't put those back. They all have a specific order. I'll fix it later."

He grabs the slanted pile from my hands and places it carefully on the counter, next to the two plates, two cups, two forks, and two knives that I should have placed on the table thirty minutes ago.

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart. Mistakes happen."

I resume the search for my calendar as he ambles back to the black stove, caked with old Aldi mac and cheese. I slip my calendar out from between my chemistry folder and calculus notebook, forgetting to re-zip the bag. My fingers search for the binder clip and carefully open the calendar to this week. Monday is mostly scribbled over, except for Dinner @ Dad's 5-8, which is still in progress. I look to Thursday as the clink of my father's spoon against the rice pot resumes.

"Uh, I forgot to tell you, but after speech practice on Thursday, I have to meet Jillian and Blake to study for our calc final. I'm really sorry, they just told me yesterday and I forgot to tell you."

His heavy breaths replace the clinking of the spoon. For a moment, they keep time in the gap of our conversation.

"But Thursdays are my days. We do

dinner Thursdays."

"I know dad, like I said I'm really sorry. I didn't think to text you yesterday when-

"Can't you reschedule?"

"Not really, I mean, the final is Friday."

"Why can't you study Wednesday when you're at mom's?"

"I would, but I'm already babysitting Wednesday after speech and then I'm tutoring when I get back from that."

"But Thursday is my day."

"Could we do lunch on Saturday instead?"

"Yeah, in addition to Thursday. But you're coming over Thursday. It's my day."

"I have to study for calc Thursday. I'm not coming over. Sorry."

For another moment, his breath keeps time. Deep inhaled, and deep exhaled. I can feel his face radiating into the back of my neck as I turn away to face the shadows of his unvisited family room. Like clockwork, heavy steps carry him over to the table where he swings out his ashen chair and sits to my right. His glowing eyes turn to me, expecting to meet my gaze, but I stare ahead. I can feel my shoulders narrow and my stomach tighten as my foot swings back and forth over that homely dent in the vinyl.

His volume climbs as his mouth shoots tiny bullets of spit against the side of my face, yet his actual words seem to fade into the inarticulate droning from earlier in the evening. He shifts his weight to his toes and leans heavily against the table, demanding something. He doesn't seem to notice the smell of the burning rice. Moment by moment, I am allowing a handful of his words into my fortress.

"Mine...You will...I don't care if..."

They may be another language for all I know. As he draws closer to me, though, I feel my

chest jump and my breath catch. I croak out an imperative with a certain coldness:

"Stop."

"Stop? Me? You're the one abandoning me when you said we would get together. You know this is my day."

"It's not your day. My time doesn't belong to you"

"I'm not arguing this again. Your day, my day, either way, you'll be here on Thursday."

"No."

"You're being really heartless right now, Heidis Lou. Don't you feel bad, knowing I'll be all alone?"

I turn to him stiffly. My face is blank, analyzing the sweat dripping from his forehead and shade of rage priming his face. There is something about this ascribed responsibility that seems to slither around my neck and claim a part of me that I am not willing to give up this time. Turned down sleepovers, denied babysitting jobs, shortened coffee-dates, they flood my mind. All for him, all to feed his needs. I look deep into his dark eyes that barter for love in the form of Thursday night rice-kit-dinners and exhale.

"No."

"No? What do you mean 'no'? What do you mean..."

He begins his loud, emotional ascent in search of the answer he wants and I will not give. I, resuming my blank forward stare, close my eyes. I feel for the divots in the cheap, lonesome, unswept, unkempt, familiar yet foreign floor, and inhale sharply as I hear his favorite empty threat.

"I'll call the lawyer. You're breaking custody, you know. I don't even make you spend the night over here anymore. You're supposed to sleep here two nights a week and all I ask is two dinners and you won't even do that. They'll

side with me. You and your mom and your sister abandoned me. You'll have to stay the nights here and come here after school. It'll be legal."

He knows this game, and how for years the looming lawyer has squashed Thursday night invitations. He is not mourning; he is strategizing. His thunderous breaths shake the table and his towers of documents fall to the floor in disheveled heaps. The heat of his breath, the fluttering of the papers, and haze of burned rice - they all poke at me. I cannot exist as a ragdoll of appeasement every Thursday for the rest of my life, and if it makes me heartless, so be it.

"Do it."

He sits back in his seat, silent. Even his breaths seem muted, sharper.

"Excuse me?"

"I said do it. I dare you. I'm not going to sit around here and have you threaten me every time you want me to cancel something for you. And I'm not coming over Thursday."

His eyes exchange a cocktail of terror, fragility, and rage with my own. My gaze swells with a fire of culmination, ready to spit back at him:

Do it. I will come to your house and sit on the edge of your driveway until I am legally allowed to leave. I will not speak to you. I will not look at you. I will not acknowledge you. I will come, serve my time, and leave. If you touch me, I will scream. If you try to force me inside, I'll cite your force as my reason for leaving. I will park on the side of the road so you have no control over my car. And you will be able to soak up every moment of me sitting silently at the foot of your driveway staring out into the street until 7:30 hits, and then I will go. You will have each of those precious moments until I turn 18, and then you will never see me again. I don't care if you don't pay for college or insurance or my wedding. I'll figure it out. But I will not sit around

and be subdued by your hollow threats. So do it. I dare you.

He does not speak back to me, though. He sits, still, unsure of what to say. I steady my foot and plant it on the ground, reaching to the left for my backpack to cram my open calendar inside. As I step to leave, he looks at me with crystal eyes, preparing to shatter. I pretend not to see, pushing past him to the entryway to put on my shoes and grab my keys. As I look up from the outdated pile of sneakers, all too small but the ones my mother had bought me, I see the picture of him holding me on my first birthday plastered on the wall. He still has his wedding ring in the picture, and he is wearing his gray "Awesome Dad" shirt. I am giggling in the old photograph, smiling into his warm eyes with toddler slobber all over my face.

I do not look back to him, frozen at the kitchen table. Rather, I throw open the creaking and rusting screen door with crystal eyes that mirror his own.