**Settled**

Restaurants are always cold.  Have you ever noticed that?  I shivered, then ran my hands up and down my bare arms.  My mother sat across from me, sipping her wine and gazing at the passersby on the street.  No doubt she wished she were one of them:  like that lady in the red Sunday hat, walking briskly with the little girl skipping at her side.  The girl’s red curls bounced in stride with the swinging motion of the mother and daughter’s clasped hands.

“So how is he?” My mom watched the same pair as she said this.

“He’s fine,” I said.  “Mom, look at me.”  She put her glass down and looked.  The tears in her eyes, struggling to break a dam, caught me off guard.  Sniffling, she dabbed at them with her napkin.  I couldn’t say anything.  When I looked back out the window, the skipping little girl and her mother were gone.

It was a small Italian restaurant, on the corner of a long block in a big city, with red tablecloths and candles that the wait staff would light for the dinner crowd.  The waiter arrived with my pasta and my mother’s salad.

“Anything--” a tightening in the waiter’s facial muscles and the short halt in his voice meant he recognized our tension.  “Else?” he finished.

“Water, please.”  He nodded and left.

My mom snatched my cell phone, which I’d placed beside my plate.

“Mom?”

She flipped it opened and searched through the phonebook.  Speed dial one.  She pressed one.

“Mom.”  I reached across the table and attempted to snatch the phone away.  She jerked to the left, out of my reach.  “Mom, what are you doing?”

“Calling him.  I have a few things to say that he needs to hear.”

“Mom.”  I reached again for the phone.  I held my hand extended like I expected she would just hand it over.  It was ringing now.  I could hear the rings from across the table.  As I leaned forward, my mother stood up.

“Billy?” Her voice rose as she shouted into the phone.  “Oh Charlie, this is Mrs. Kent.  Will you get Billy for me?  Thank you, dear.”

An older couple, two tables over, stopped eating and stared.  The man held his fork frozen in his spaghetti, with the noodles only partially twisted around it.  The chatter from the surrounding tables slowed and finally ceased.  “Mom.”  I considered dropping to my knees, pleading with her not to do this now.  Instead I remained in my seat and hoped that my eyes conveyed my urgency.  I lowered my voice but could not stop it from trembling.  “Mom, don’t make a scene.”  Her foot tapped against the tile floor, up and down, tap-a-tap-tap.  I could hear Billy say “Hello” on the other end.  My mother didn’t speak, though her lips curled as if she might.  I watched her, now visibly shaking, until my mother’s open palm came crashing down against the table.  I jolted.  The table rocked off balance.  I could see the pain on my mother’s face, hear it in her wince.  Without saying another word, she flipped the phone shut.

Then she sat back down.

“Mom.” I took a breath.  “You want to say a few things?  Say them to me.”

“You’re just a child.”  Full tears came now.  Red, veiny clouds dripped salt drops down her cheeks.  She feigned a smile when the waiter returned with my water.  He placed it and quickly departed.  Neither of us had touched our lunches.

“Mom.”  Part of me wanted to comfort her, to hold her, to console her.  “Mom.”  It was the only word I seemed able to find.  Her tears were drying, and she began to pick at her salad.  She flicked a crouton with her fork and shoved aside the tomato underneath.  Finally she pierced a piece of lettuce and let it linger in the air, inches away from her mouth.  “I’m not a child, Mom.  I’m nineteen years old.”

“You haven’t finished college.”

“And I will.  One day.  I will, Mom.”

“You say that now, Annabelle, but in nine months…”

“Seven, Mom.”

“...It’ll all be different.”  My mother snatched the wine glass and dumped what was left down her throat.  I sat still.  People were watching again.  I looked to the window, hoping and expecting to see the little redheaded girl and her mother in the Sunday hat.  Women don’t wear Sunday hats like that anymore.  And little girls don’t skip.

When I turned my attention back to my mother, she had regained her composure.

“Here’s the plan.”

I sighed.  “What plan, mother?”

“I’ll make you an appointment with the clinic tomorrow.”

It took everything in me to keep from screaming at her.  My fingers gripped the legs of the table for support.  My lips clenched together as air surged in and out my nostrils.  One…  Two…  Three…  “No, mother.”

“Excuse me?”  Her eyebrows arched.  She would do it, my mother would.  She would schedule that appointment without so much as one afterthought about my own wishes.  That kind of thing was not beyond her.  She would do it unless I was firm.

I took another deep breath and allowed my muscles to relax.  Every one of my next words came out slowly and clearly, leaving no chance for misunderstanding.  “I said, ‘No.  I’m not going to a clinic. Tomorrow or any day in the future.”

“Oh, yes you are.  Yes, you are.”

“No, mother.”

“Dear--”

“No.”

She stopped.  Something in her clicked.  She shifted in her chair.  Tentatively, not really looking at me but somewhere beyond me, she said, “You’re keeping it?”

I nodded.

My mother blinked.  I had gotten through.  She inhaled, then exhaled in what can only be described as a whimper.  Her voice shook as she struggled to keep composure.  She looked ready to cry again, but did not let one tear fall free.  “You know that this will change everything?”

“Yes, mother.”

“And still?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Well, then, that settles it.”  My mother rose.  She pushed in her chair.  And she left.

I watched her swing the door shut and disappear in the direction of the little girl and her Sunday-hat mother.  Then I drew my eyes upon her empty seat.

“It’s settled,” I whispered.  A shiver ran up my spine.  Restaurants are always cold.

Emily Neeves